

EAST CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE IN THE MIDDLE AGES, 450-1450

Byzantium and Bulgaria, 775-831



Panos Sophoulis



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BRILL

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450–1450

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By

Panos Sophoulis



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PREFACE

This book stems from a doctoral thesis which I defended at the University of Oxford in July 2005. A project of this duration inevitably accumulates numerous debts of gratitude. I must begin by acknowledging the encouragement and help of James Howard-Johnston who first stimulated my interest in medieval Bulgarian history and supervised the thesis. Elizabeth Jeffreys and Jonathan Shepard, who examined the thesis, have been generous with advice and support. Jonathan Shepard, in particular, read drafts of papers reworked for the book and supplied me with bibliographical information and assistance. Special thanks are due to Florin Curta, who read the whole text in draft and made many helpful observations, all of which have significantly improved the final version. Tsvetelin Stepanov also read sections of the book and provided invaluable feedback. Taxiarchis Kolias, Natalija Ristovska, Stephan Nikolov, Panagiotis Antonopoulos, Marianne Noble and the late Rašo Rašev have all offered valuable advice, information and references. I should also like to add my profound gratitude to Kiril Nenov who contributed in many ways to this book, both with practical assistance and with information and suggestions. Finally, I must thank Marcella Mulder at Brill for making the publication process so smooth.

In the course of writing the thesis and book I have enjoyed the support of a number of institutions. The Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation sponsored me during my study in Oxford. In addition, I received financial assistance from the University of Oxford, Exeter College and the Faculty of Modern History, to all of which I am very much indebted. I am also greatly obliged to the staff of the following libraries for all the assistance given me as a reader: the Bodleian and Sackler Libraries at Oxford, the British Library, the St Cyril and Methodius National Library of Bulgaria, the Archaeological Museum, Sofia, the Regional Museum of History at Šumen, the Varna Archaeological Museum, as well as the French and British Archaeological Schools at Athens.

I have been especially fortunate to teach in the Department of Slavic Studies of the University of Athens and should like to thank all my colleagues and staff for providing a fine environment in which to work and study at the highest level. Finally, I must thank my family for their constant support and encouragement, and particularly my father for all he has done for me.

Panos Sophoulis

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Greek personal names and place names have been transliterated directly from their Greek forms except where a Latinate or Anglicized version is well known: therefore Nikephoros, Arkadioupolis, Rhodope, but Constantine, Adrianople, Thrace. Bulgarian names and place names follow the “academic” system of transliteration, using *š*, *ž*, *č* and *ǎ* instead of *sh*, *zh*, *ch* and *u*. However, the consonant *щ* is rendered as *sht* (not *št*), and the short vowel *ѣ* as *j* (instead of *i*). Thus, I refer to I. Jordanov rather than Iordanov. The transliteration for Russian is the same as for Bulgarian, with the addition of *’*, *y* and *shch* for *ь*, *ы* and *щ*. Place names in Romania follow current Romanian usage. Arabic names follow a simplified version of that in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1960ff.). Armenian names follow the spelling adopted by R. Thomson, *A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD* (Turnhout, 1995).

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AASS *Acta Sanctorum* (Antwerp, 1643ff.)
AB *Analecta Bollandiana* (Brussels, 1882ff.)
ABul *Archaeologia Bulgarica* (Sofia, 1997ff.)
AEMA *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* (Lisse, 1975ff.)
Arheol *Arheologija* (Sofia, 1959ff.)
BA Byzantina Australiensia
BB *Byzantinobulgarica* (Sofia, 1962ff.)
BBA Berliner Byzantinische Arbeiten
BBOM Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs
BBS Berliner Byzantinistische Studien
BF *Byzantinische Forschungen* (Amsterdam, 1966ff.)
BHR *Bulgarian Historical Review* (Sofia, 1973ff.)
BMGS *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*
BS *Byzantinoslavica* (Prague, 1929ff.)
BSor Byzantina Sorbonensia
Byz *Byzantion* (Brussels, 1924ff.)
BZ *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* (Leipzig-Munich, Cologne, 1892ff.)
CFHB Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae (Series Washingtoniensis, Washington D.C., 1967ff.); (Series Berolinensis, Berlin/New York, 1967ff.); (Series Vindobonensis, Vienna, 1975); (Series Italica, Rome, 1975ff.); (Series Bruxellensis, Brussels, 1975ff.)
CIG *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecorum*, eds. E. Curtius and A. Kirchhoff, IV, pars XL: *Inscriptiones christianae* (Berlin, 1877)
CSCO Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (Paris, 1903ff.)
CSHB Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae (Bonn, 1828–1897)
DOP *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* (Washington D.C., 1941ff.)
DOS Dumbarton Oaks Studies
DOT Dumbarton Oaks Texts
EB *Études Balkaniques* (Sofia, 1964ff.)
EHB *The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, eds. Angeliki Laiou et al., 3 vols. (Washington D.C., 2002)
EHR *English Historical Review* (London, 1885ff.)

- GDA-NBU *Godišnik na Departament Arheologija—Nov Bălgarski Universitet* (Sofia, 1994ff.)
- GRBS *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* (Cambridge, Mass, 1958ff.)
- IAI *Izvestija na Arheologičeskija Institut* (Sofia, 1950ff.)
- IBAI *Izvestija na Bălgarskija Arheologičeskija Institut* (Sofia, 1924–1950)
- INMŠ *Izvestija na Narodnija Muzej-Šumen* (Šumen, 1968ff.)
- INMV *Izvestija na Narodnija Muzej-Varna* (Varna, 1965ff.)
- JHS *Journal of Hellenic Studies* (London, 1880ff.)
- JÖB *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* (Vienna, 1969ff.)
- MAIET *Materialy po Arheologii, Istorii i Etnografii Tavrii* (Simferopol, 1990ff.)
- MGH *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (Hannover/Berlin, 1826ff.)
- MGH (AA) *Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Auctores antiquissimi)*, (Berlin, 1877–1919)
- MGH (SGUS) *Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum)*, (Hannover, 1871–1965); n.s. (Berlin/Weimar, 1920–1967)
- MGH (SRL) *Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Scriptores regum langobardicarum et italicarum saec. VI–IX)*, (Hannover, 1898)
- MGH (SS) *Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Scriptores)*, (Hannover, 1826–1934)
- MGH, *Epp.* *Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Epistolae)*, (Berlin, 1887–1939)
- NCMH *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, II: c. 700–c. 900, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1995).—III: c. 900–c. 1024, ed. T. Reuter (Cambridge, 1999)
- ODB *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A. Kazdan et al., 3 vols. (Oxford/New York, 1991)
- PG *Patrologia Cursus completes, series Graeco-Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris, 1857–1866, 1880–1903)
- PmBZ *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit. Erste Abteilung (641–867)*, ed. R.-J. Lilie, C. Ludwig et al., 6 vols. (Berlin/New York, 1998–2002)
- Post-Roman Towns* *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium*, 2 vols., I: *The Heirs of the Roman*

	<i>West.—II: Byzantium, Pliska, and the Balkans</i> , ed. J. Henning (Berlin, 2007)
PO	<i>Patrologia Orientalis</i>
PP	<i>Pliska-Preslav</i> (Sofia/Šumen, 1979ff.)
REB	<i>Revue des études Byzantines</i> (Paris, 1944ff.)
<i>The Other Europe</i>	<i>The Other Europe in the Middle Ages. Avars, Bulgars, Khazars and Cumans</i> , ed. F. Curta (Leiden/Boston/New York, 2008)
TM	<i>Travaux et Mémoires</i> (Paris, 1965ff.)
Vyz	<i>Vyzantina</i> (Thessalonike, 1969ff.)
VV	<i>Vizantiiskii Vremmenik</i> , vols. 1–25 (St Petersburg, 1894–1927); n.s. (Moscow, 1947ff.)
ZRVI	<i>Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta</i> (Belgrade, 1952ff.)

INTRODUCTION

The later eighth and early ninth centuries constitute one of the most turbulent periods in the long history of Byzantine-Bulgar relations. By the time of Constantine V's death in 775 the nomad-led Bulgar state appeared to be on the brink of collapse. Taking advantage of the third civil war in the Caliphate (744–750), that emperor had diverted his military resources to the Balkans in a concerted effort to re-establish imperial power up to the Danube. Between *ca.* 760 and 775 he held at least nine campaigns against the Bulgars, winning a number of major victories which earned him a reputation as a triumphant military leader. Internecine strife further contributed to the weakening of the Bulgar polity, but, nonetheless, Constantine V was unable to deal the final blow and either conquer it or impose imperial suzerainty and a lasting peace.

The events of the years 760–775 led to a decisive turning point in the history of the Bulgar state and opened a new phase of extensive Byzantine involvement in the region. Constantine's immediate successors, particularly Irene (780–790, 797–802) and Nikephoros I (802–811), continued to regard the whole area south of the Lower Danube as an ancient part of the empire due for reconquest, and accordingly attempted to confine their neighbours north of the Haimos Mountains. Not only did the Bulgars succeed in repelling a massive imperial attempt at the reconquest of the northeastern Balkans, but after 811 made themselves masters of large parts of Thrace, eventually pushing as far as Constantinople and besieging the city.

These events made a strong impression in Byzantium, as indicated by the accounts of contemporary or near contemporary writers, not least because they provided the context for important political, ideological and social change. Certainly, apart from being one of the factors contributing to the political instability which engulfed the empire at this time, the repeated defeats at the hands of the Bulgars played a central role in the re-establishment of iconoclasm as an imperially sanctioned doctrine by Leo V (813–820).

Byzantium's relations with Bulgaria during this period have received considerable scholarly attention, yet the need for a new analytical investigation could hardly be clearer. Most surveys on this subject were written in the first half of twentieth century. Since then, a great deal of archaeological research, which provides us with insights into a great range of aspects of medieval life in the Balkans, as well as historiographical work on the Byzantine sources

which are relevant for the period with which we are concerned, has been published. However, an essential task, the integration of the written account with the material record, in other words, a synthesis and deeper analysis of the period in question, has not yet been undertaken. The ultimate ambition of this monograph is to fill this gap, and so produce a closely argued, fresh interpretation of events.

Among the older works devoted to the subject, the most comprehensive is the *Istoriija na Bălgarskata dăržava prez srednite vekove* (Sofia, 1918–40) by Vasil Zlatarski. Given his broad chronological scope, Zlatarski was inevitably restricted to providing a narrowly political account on which all subsequent studies depend. Steven Runciman¹ and Petăr Mutafčiev² present a lively and lucid picture, although, like Zlatarski, they seem uninterested in the organizational structure and institutions of the Bulgar state. The best study of early Bulgarian history published so far is Veselin Beševliev's *Die protobulgarische Periode der bulgarischen Geschichte* (Amsterdam, 1981). Beševliev devotes sections of his book to the basic structures of the *khanate* and makes adequate use of archaeological and epigraphic evidence to illustrate his narrative, but when it comes to Byzantine-Bulgar relations adds little that is new. Recent contributions in the field include I. Božilov's and V. Gjuzelev's comprehensive three-volume history of Bulgaria³ and D. Ziemann's work on the Bulgarian early Middle Ages.⁴

The historiography relating to the period in question is dominated by the *Chronographia* of Theophanes. As well as C. Mango and R. Scott's translation of the text, especially helpful is Ilse Rochow's excellent commentary on the period 715–813.⁵ In the field of archaeology, the works of Ž. Vážarova, D. Dimitrov, M. Comşa, R. Rašev, I. Jordanov, U. Fiedler and J. Henning (who directed a joint German-Bulgarian research programme in Pliska's "Outer Town" between 1997 and 2003), to mention but a few, have enriched our understanding of early Bulgar society and culture. In terms of the geographical context, the sixth volume of the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* series, focusing on Thrace, is an essential reference work which can be supplemented by Krasimira Gagova's survey⁶ and the still useful volumes of the *Geographical Handbook Series (Naval Intelligence Division)* on Bulgaria and Romania.

¹ Runciman 1930.

² Mutafčiev 1986.

³ Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999.

⁴ Ziemann 2007.

⁵ Rochow 1991.

⁶ Gagova 1995.

This book will make extensive use of the growing, albeit diverse, body of material now available to scholars to produce the first synthetic narrative political history of Byzantine-Bulgar relations for this period written in English. The hope is that by the end of the volume a number of important problems that scholars have so far failed to address, let alone resolve, will at least have been clearly stated and our knowledge and appreciation of the early medieval Balkans will have been improved considerably.

This study is predicated on the understanding that the historical record must be at the heart of the construction of any modern narrative of Byzantine-Bulgar relations. I have therefore begun my investigation by submitting the historiography of the period in question to thorough, critical scrutiny. Although this book will primarily draw upon written sources, most—but not all—Byzantine, the material record (inscriptions, coins, lead seals etc.) will also be of crucial importance. As well as re-evaluating the primary sources and considering a substantial amount of secondary literature on the subject, I have also benefited from travelling extensively and visiting archaeological sites throughout the region with which this study is concerned.

If the relations between the Byzantine empire and Bulgaria during the late eighth and early ninth centuries are to be meaningfully analysed, attention first needs to be paid to the geographical and historical context in which they developed. The scene is set in Chapter 2 which begins by outlining the relief, climate, and urban and communications network of Byzantine Thrace and Bulgaria. The second part of the chapter is principally aimed at unravelling and understanding the steppe character of the Bulgar state—a character which some scholars, contrary to the growing body of evidence, continue to challenge. It describes its basic structures and institutions, and specifically its social, political and military organization, with special emphasis placed on the spiritual life and ideology of the Turkic-speaking ruling elite. It then goes on to provide a synopsis of Byzantine-Bulgar relations from *ca.* 680 until the death of Constantine V.

Chapter 3 is primarily concerned with Bulgaria's relations with the sedentary and nomadic peoples living beyond the frontier region (in Wallachia, the Carpathian basin, Transylvania, Crimea and the steppes north of the Black Sea) in the seventh to ninth centuries, thereby shedding important light on the political history of southeastern Europe in the early Middle Ages. It also provides a brief historical background to Asparuch's migration to the Balkans following the Khazar conquest of the south Russian steppes.

The scene is then set for the next four chapters which investigate the Byzantine-Bulgar rivalry for political mastery over the Slavic tribes of the southern Balkans between 775 and 816. A significant portion of each of these chapters

deals with developments inside the empire itself. I have done this because I do not believe that Byzantium's relations with the Bulgars can be understood without a basic appreciation of these events. Equally important is a basic knowledge of events on the empire's eastern and western borders. For, as I will be arguing below, the aggressive policy against the Bulgars in the late eighth and early ninth centuries may be partly explained as a response to the strong pressures, both military and diplomatic, exerted on the empire by its Abbāsid and Carolingian neighbours during that period.

The final chapter of this book offers a short account Omurtag's reign, which is often said to have marked a turning point in the history of early medieval Bulgaria. It is in the course of this discussion that the key characteristics of Omurtag's political power are identified. The chapter investigates the mechanisms through which the *khan* was able to check the influence of the warrior aristocracy and establish a virtual monopoly on the exercise of political power in the Bulgar state. It then goes on to consider the episode from Omurtag's reign which is most fully represented by the surviving Byzantine sources: the revolt of Thomas the Slav. Finally, brief mention is made of Omurtag's attempt to create a sense of group identity among his diverse subjects (Bulgars, Christians, Slavs), an identity that looked beyond the pre-existing ethnic or religious boundaries. Within this analysis, what is offered is not a conventional political narrative of the reign of Omurtag so much as an analysis of changing political structures and the key elements in their evolution.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SOURCES

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the historiography relating to the period in question. The subject is dominated by the *Chronographia* of Theophanes, a contemporary but extremely tendentious source, which must be used with great caution. The so-called *Chronicle of 811* and the *Scriptor incertus de Leone Armenio* represent two extremely important near contemporary texts for the history of Byzantine-Bulgar relations from 811–816. Their accounts can be supplemented by a series of later chronicles known collectively as the *Scriptores post Theophanem*.

There are a number of subsidiary primary sources which provide important corroborative information on Byzantine relations with foreign powers, but also on developments within the empire itself during this period. In addition to narrative histories and chronicles written in the periphery of the Byzantine world (in Syria, Armenia, the Caliphate and the Carolingian empire), there is a range of other material which is useful to us, including hagiographical texts. The literary sources can be supplemented by archaeological and epigraphic evidence, most notably the proto-bulgarian inscriptions, which deal with a wide range of subjects and express the official ideology and policy of the Bulgar ruling elite.

1.1 THE *CHRONOGRAPHIA*

1.1.1 *Authorship and Date of Composition*

The chronicle that goes under the name of Theophanes the Confessor is the only written source for the history of the Byzantine empire, and particularly its relations with the Bulgars, for much of the period under consideration. The *Chronographia* represents the continuation of the chronicle of George Synkellos, the *Ecloga Chronographica*, which covered the period from the Creation to the accession of Diocletian (AD 284).¹ George was a monk who served as *synkellos* to the patriarch of Constantinople Tarasios (784–806) and

¹ From several statements in his chronicle, it has been conjectured that George commenced the project *ca.* 808 and completed it two years later (*ca.* 810); Synkellos, 2.32, 6.12. For the

thus stood very high in the ecclesiastical establishment.² He was still alive in 810 (he himself gives the date on the *Ecloga*), but was dead when Theophanes was writing his introduction, around 814.³

Concerning the Confessor himself, we have two main sources for his biography: an *Enkomion* by Theodore of Stoudios, probably delivered in 822 (on the occasion of the deposition of the Confessor's body in his monastery);⁴ and a *Vita* produced by Methodios, the future patriarch of Constantinople (843–847), between 823 and 832.⁵ Theophanes was born *ca.* 760 to a noble and wealthy family. His father held the office of *drungarios* of the Aegean Sea under Constantine V, while the Confessor was appointed as a *strator* (a middle-ranking courtier) by Leo IV.⁶ He married Megalo, the daughter of an influential *patrikios*, but the marriage was short-lived: early in the reign of Irene, the couple separated and settled in different monasteries. Megalo was placed in a convent on the island of Prinkipo, while Theophanes chose to withdraw to the island of Kalonymos. Later he established his own monastery at Mt. Sigriane (mod. Karadäg), the Megas Agros.⁷ The Confessor was an iconophile and is said to have attended the Council of 787, although his name is not included among the signatories of the proceedings.⁸ In his fiftieth year, he fell ill with kidney stones and remained bedridden to the end of his life.⁹ About five years later, not long after the nativity of St John the Baptist (24 June 815), he was summoned to Constantinople by Leo V, who kept him in confinement for more than two years on account of his iconophilism.¹⁰

Ecloga, see Adler and Tuffin 2002, xxix–lxxxviii, esp. xxix n. 1, and 3 n. 3 (for the date); Kazhdan 1999, 206–208; Huxley 1981, 207–217.

² Theoph., 3.9–10; Anastasius Biblioth., 2.34; Mango and Scott 1997, xliii; *PmbZ*, #2180. The office of *synkellos* was that of a special advisor to the patriarch; see Ševčenko 1987, 463–464; Oikonomidès, *Listes*, 47, 308.

³ *Synkellos*, 244.31; Theoph., 3.23–24. For the date of Theophanes' introduction, see below.

⁴ Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Theoph.*, 259–290 (text: 268–284); Mango and Scott 1997, xlv.

⁵ *Vita Theophanis A*, 1–44 (text: 1–40). For the date of its composition, see Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Theoph.*, 260 n. 7 with lit. A number of other *Vitae*, which seem to depend on Methodios, convey little or no additional information of any significance.

⁶ *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 4–5, 10. For the office of *strator*, see Oikonomidès, *Listes*, 298; for his father Isaakios, see *PmbZ*, #3471.

⁷ *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 20–24; Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Theoph.*, c. 4–6; *Vita Theophanis B*, 4.29. For Kalonymos (mod. Imrali adasi), see Mango and Scott 1997, xlv. For Megas Agros, see Mango and Ševčenko 1973, 248ff.

⁸ *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 27.

⁹ *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 43–44; Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Theoph.*, c. 12.

¹⁰ *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 46–48; Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Theoph.*, c. 13–15. He was reportedly kept for a time in the monastery of Hosmidas, and was then transferred to a cell in the palace of St Eleutherios, for which see Janin 1964, 131, 348; for Hosmidas (where John Grammatikos was the abbot), see Janin 1975, 451–454.

In February 818, the emperor exiled him to the island of Samothrake where he died twenty-three days after his arrival, on 12 March 818.¹¹

Very little is known about Theophanes' education. His anonymous biographer stresses that from childhood he had learned both the Holy Writ and "external" (i.e. secular) "wisdom", while Methodios refers to his study of calligraphy.¹² Furthermore, in a letter addressed to Megalo, Theodore of Stoudios praises him as a man of great reason and, specifically, as possessing a mind desirous of scholarship and full of divine knowledge.¹³ Here it should be stressed that after conferring on him the rank of *strator*, Leo IV dispatched Theophanes to supervise the fortification of Kyzikos, a task that must have required considerable organizational skills.¹⁴ In the light of this evidence, the claim that the Confessor had no or little formal education must be disregarded.¹⁵ On the other hand, one could argue, with some justification, that his learning was actually inferior to that of Theodore of Stoudios or George Synkellos.¹⁶ Theophanes has sometimes been credited with the composition of a satirical poem directed against Leo V; however, the most likely author of this work was the ninth-century poet and hymnographer Theophanes Graptos.¹⁷

It is generally and reasonably believed that Theophanes laid down his pen in late 813 or 814, not long after the fall of Adrianople, the last event described in the chronicle; for in his final entry, he praises Leo V (who early in 815 reintroduced iconoclasm and, a few months later, summoned the Confessor to Constantinople and subjected him to confinement) by calling him "pious" and "extremely courageous".¹⁸ Assuming that George completed his *Ecloga*

¹¹ *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 50–55; Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Theoph.*, c. 16; Mango and Scott 1997, 1–li; Howard-Johnston 2010, 269–271; *PmbZ*, #8107.

¹² *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 22; *Vita Theophanis B*, 4.19–19.

¹³ ...ὁ φιλομάθῃς νοῦς, ὁ θεῖα γνώσει πεπλουτισμένος; Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, II, no. 323; Kazhdan 1999, 217.

¹⁴ *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 15.

¹⁵ See Mango 1978, 11ff.

¹⁶ See specifically Ševčenko 1992a, 287, who compares the Preface of the *Chronographia* to that of the *Ecloga*, the latter being written in a language which is closer to the classical norms; see also Kazhdan 1999, 218.

¹⁷ Genesisios, 11.57–58; Kourouses 1979–1980, 436–437; Rochow 1991, 38. It is hardly surprising that Theophanes' biographers make no allusion to his literary activity, as this was not strictly relevant to the traditional concerns of hagiography; for a discussion, see Kazhdan 1999, 217–218. Note here that according to Speck 1994, 431–483, the chronicle was compiled by another Theophanes, an abbot of Megas Agros in the ninth century.

¹⁸ Theoph., 502.3–5; Mango and Scott 1997, lvii. It is very unlikely that Theophanes could have continued his research at the Palace of St Eleutherios (where he was kept under guard for two years), not least because it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to have access to the necessary bibliographic resources; for a different view, see Čičurov 1981, 79.

ca. 810, Theophanes, who quite possibly began his work soon after the *Ecloga* was completed, had only a few years to produce a history on the period from 284 to 813. However, if we believe his biographers, the Confessor was in these years afflicted with a kidney disease which left him bed-ridden for the rest of his life.¹⁹ Under such constraints, the task of writing the entire chronicle would have been an extremely difficult one.

The solution to this puzzle can perhaps be found in the Preface of the *Chronographia*. There the Confessor says that when George Synkellos felt the end of his life approaching he entrusted to him the book that he had composed (the *Ecloga*) and gave him ἀφορμάς so as to complete it. Theophanes was unwilling to undertake such a task, but since George had begged him most earnestly to do so, he had no choice but to obey.²⁰ Thus the Confessor went to considerable trouble in seeking out many books for his research and continued the work down to the reign of Michael I (813); he also tells us that he drew all his material from ancient historians and arranged them chronologically year by year, but did not compose anything of his own.²¹

The Preface, taken literally, would imply that Theophanes did no original writing on his own part. Certainly, the *Chronographia* encompasses the events of more than five centuries and, naturally, its compiler had to turn to earlier sources, applying the technique of “scissors-and-paste”.²² For the period 284–ca. 780 some twenty sources have been identified, among them a Constantinopolitan chronicle of iconophile tendency, which has also been used by the patriarch Nikephoros in his *Breviarium*, the latter terminating in AD 769.²³ If the word ἀφορμαί is interpreted as “materials” (and it must be

¹⁹ Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Theoph.*, c. 12; *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 43–44, 46.

²⁰ ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸ τέλος τοῦ βίου τοῦτον κατέλαβε καὶ εἰς πέρας ἀγαγεῖν τὸν ἑαυτοῦ σκοπὸν οὐκ ἴσχυσεν, ἀλλὰ....μέχρι Διοκλητιανοῦ συγγραψάμενος τὸν τῆδε βίον κατέλιπε....ἡμῖν, ὡς γνησίους φίλοις, τὴν τε βίβλον ἣν συντάξαε καταλέλοιπε καὶ ἀφορμάς παρέσχε τὰ ἐλλείποντα ἀναπληρῶσαι. ἡμεῖς δὲ τὴν ἑαυτῶν ἀμαθίαν οὐκ ἀγνοοῦντες καὶ τὸ στενὸν τοῦ λόγου παρητούμεθα τοῦτο ποιῆσαι, ὡς ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς τὴν ἐγχείρησιν οὐσαν....διὸ καὶ ἀναγκασθέντες διὰ τὴν τοῦτου ὑπακοήν, εἰς τὰ ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς ἐγχειρήσαντες κόπον οὐ τὸν τυχόντα κατεβαλόμεθα; *Theoph.*, 3.23–4.8; Mango 1978, 9.

²¹ πολλὰς γὰρ βίβλους καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐκζητήσαντες κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν ἡμῖν καὶ ἐρευνήσαντες τὸδε τὸ χρονογραφεῖον ἀπὸ Διοκλητιανοῦ μέχρι βασιλείας Μιχαήλ....τὰς τε βασιλείας καὶ τοὺς πατριάρχας καὶ τὰς τοῦτων πράξεις σὺν τοῖς χρόνοις κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν ἡμῖν ἀκριβῶς συνεγραψάμεθα, οὐδὲν ἄφ' ἑαυτῶν συντάξαντες ἀλλ' ἐκ τῶν ἀρχαίων ιστοριογράφων τε καὶ λογογράφων ἀναλεξάμενοι ἐν τοῖς ἰδίους τόποις τετάχαμεν ἐκάστου χρόνου τὰς πράξεις, ἀσυγχύτως κατατάτοντες; *Theoph.*, 4.8–15.

²² Although, as Ševčenko 1992a, 287, notes, he did make adjustments inside his clippings. For the treatment of sources, see below.

²³ Mango and Scott 1997, lxxiv–xcī; Rochow 1991, 44–50. For the seventh century, see Proudfoot 1974, 367–439, and Speck 1988. For an overview, see Karpozelos 2002, 124–131

emphasized that a person with little scholarly training could hardly have used the word ἀφορμαί with this very specialized meaning), it would suggest that Theophanes inherited some of his books from George Synkellos. His important position in the ecclesiastical establishment should have enabled the latter to have access to a series of sources, some of which may have belonged to the patriarchal archives.²⁴ Moreover, the author of the *Chronographia* drew on an Eastern chronicle (a Greek translation of a source written in Syriac which extended at least to AD 780), and it is generally believed that this could only have been brought to Constantinople by George, who seems to have resided for a considerable time in Palestine.²⁵ To support their view, scholars point to textual evidence from several passages of the *Ecloga* in which the author adds what appears to be a personal recollection (told in the first person) of his travels to the East.²⁶

In this light, some scholars have suggested that George, who in the *Ecloga* states his intention to continue the narrative down to his own time, compiled a “bulky dossier” of documents on the period from Diocletian to Michael I, which, shortly before his death, he gave to Theophanes for editing and publication.²⁷ Theophanes’ task, they continue, was to fill in certain gaps or recalibrate the chronology.²⁸ If this hypothesis is accepted it would follow that the last part of the *Chronographia* reflects the voice of Synkellos rather than that of the Confessor. This presents one difficulty, however; there is no positive evidence George was writing after 810.

with lit. For the source shared with the *Breviarium*, Beševliev 1941, 290–293; Beševliev 1985, 47–53.

²⁴ Mango 1978, 16.

²⁵ This could explain the chronicler’s strong interest in events in the Arab world, especially Syria and Palestine; Mango and Scott 1997, lxxxii–lxxxvii. Brooks 1906, 578–587, suggested that this chronicle became available to George in Constantinople. On the other hand, Speck 1988, 516–517, believes that this work might have been composed by Synkellos himself. For the years *ca.* 640–750, the author of the *Chronographia* may have used the work of Theophilus of Edessa, which is reproduced by Agapios of Menbidj (see section 1.6 below).

²⁶ Synkellos, 114.12–13, 122.20–22, 123.15–17, 165.16–18, 257.24–25. Some of these passages may go back to Synkellos’ sources, particularly Sextus Iulius Africanus. However, Ševčenko 1992a, 289 n. 29, has convincingly argued that this is certainly not the case with Synkellos, 122.20–22: George’s statement about having seen the tomb of Rachel on frequent journeys to Bethlehem and the Old Lavra of St Chariton raises the likelihood of extended stays in this monastery. For the Old Lavra, see Mango and Scott 1997, xliii, with literature.

²⁷ Synkellos, 6.11–12; Mango 1978, 10–12; Huxley 1981, 216ff; Howard-Johnston 2010, 272. Speck 1988, 499–519, believes that both Theophanes and the patriarch Nikephoros drew from this very dossier.

²⁸ That is why, according to Mango 1978, 16, Theophanes went to considerable trouble in seeking out many books, as he points out in his Preface; see, however, Ševčenko 1992a, 287–288.

The last section of the chronicle, devoted to events that both men might have witnessed personally, provides few definite clues pointing to one or the other of the two collaborators. In two instances the author shares his personal reminiscences, but both passages could be attributed to either George or Theophanes.²⁹ Much the same is true about the political views offered in the chronicle; it is not easy to determine whether they point to Synkellos or the Confessor because both men appear to have held pretty much the same position.³⁰ The chronicler's hatred of the emperor Nikephoros I has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention. As far as Theophanes is concerned, no reason for this attitude can be discerned other than the emperor's attempts to restrict monastic property.³¹ The same argument may also apply to George (since Nikephoros' fiscal policy was equally disadvantageous to charitable institutions controlled by the Church), although it has been suggested that in his case a better motive can perhaps be found; for in February 808, when the conspiracy of the *patrikios* Arsaber was foiled, the emperor reportedly punished with flogging, banishment and confiscation many lay and ecclesiastical officers, among them the *chartophylax* and the *synkellos*.³² Nevertheless, there is a great likelihood that by that time George was no longer in office. This seems to be confirmed by Theophanes, who explicitly asserts in his Preface that George had served as a *synkellos* to the patriarch Tarasios (d. February 806) but not to his successor Nikephoros I (806–815).³³

One task that was clearly not carried out by Synkellos was the editing of the *Chronographia*. This is best attested by the fact that the format of the latter is more complex than that of the *Ecloga*. Such an example can be seen in the chronological skeleton of the two chronicles, expressed in rubrics: Theophanes provides full or abbreviated regnal dates for every entry

²⁹ Theoph., 434.23–24, 440.8–10; Rochow 1990, 195f; Mango and Scott 1997, lviii–lix. For a third passage (Theoph., 489.28–490.4), see chapter 5.

³⁰ As many scholars have already pointed out, the chronicler is extremely critical toward the iconoclastic emperors, particularly Constantine V. He praises Irene for her decision to restore icon-worship, but at the same time accuses her of being ambitious, cruel and devious, and gives concrete details about her repulsive treatment of Constantine VI, who appears in the chronicle in a generally positive light. By contrast, he portrays Nikephoros I as an evil tyrant who mistreated the whole population of the empire. His attitude towards Michael I is more sympathetic, though he admits that the latter was incapable of managing the affairs of the empire. For the author's attitude towards Leo V, see above. For a detailed discussion, see Mango and Scott 1997, lv–lviii; Kazhdan 1999, 230–232, and Ljubarskij 1992, 181–183.

³¹ Theoph., 486.29–487.2–5, 489.24; Mango and Scott 1997, lvi; see also 5.1 below.

³² Theoph., 483.23–484.2; Mango 1978, 15–16. Interestingly, the conspirators may have been discontented with Nikephoros' fiscal measures against ecclesiastical institutions; see Treadgold 1988, 153–154.

³³ Theoph., 3.9–10; Synkellos, 1.3–5.

of the *Chronographia*, though, as a rule, he omits the ordinal number of each incumbent. George had similar lists at his disposal but did not make a habit of breaking them down year by year. He does, however, always supply the ordinal number.³⁴ In addition, the sequence of patriarchs for Alexandria, Jerusalem and Antioch is placed in a different order in the two chronicles.³⁵

Crucially, the method by which Theophanes presents his material is completely different from that chosen by Synkellos. George, whose main objective was to establish correct chronological order (for which purpose he had to reach agreement between Biblical events and the events of Egyptian, Persian, Greek and Roman history), fills his *Ecloga* with lists of rulers and bishops, long discussions of chronological matters, and exchanges with his predecessors, querying, for example, the dates of events.³⁶ Theophanes does not share Synkellos' preoccupation with establishing chronological sequence scientifically, nor does he debate with ancient writers.³⁷ What is more, George presents his lists in batches interspersed with narrative, while Theophanes breaks them down into a year-by-year chronicle of events.³⁸ Further, George employed digressions in the form of long scholarly quotations from his sources and short comments, frequently polemical in nature.³⁹ Theophanes, on the other hand, digresses in historical "episodes" or short stories (which often include direct speech) that are integrated into his annalistic framework, and are completely different from Synkellos' scientific prose.⁴⁰

In view of the above considerations, one would be inclined to attribute the authorship of the *Chronographia* to Theophanes. There is every reason to believe, however, that he made extensive use of materials collected by George in both Palestine and Constantinople. These materials (which probably included files of extracts borrowed from earlier sources, in addition to finished notes) may have covered the period from the reign of Diocletian to George's own lifetime in the late eighth or early ninth century.⁴¹ Theophanes tampered with them and, thus, it is impossible to determine whether the account of recent and contemporary history actually reflects the voice of one or the other of the two collaborators. Equally difficult is determining

³⁴ Mango and Scott 1997, lxiii, lxvii; Howard-Johnston 2010, 273.

³⁵ The sequence for Theophanes is Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, and for George, Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem; Mango and Scott 1997, lxvii.

³⁶ Adler and Tuffin 2001, lvi–lvii.

³⁷ Kazhdan 1999, 225.

³⁸ Huxley 1981, 217.

³⁹ Adler and Tuffin 2002, lx.

⁴⁰ Kazhdan 1999, 226–228, with several examples; Ljubarskij 1995, 320ff.

⁴¹ For similar conclusions, see Čičurov 1981, 78–87; Rochow 1991, 40–41.

when Synkellos conveyed his documents to Theophanes. One must take into consideration the fact that the editing job alone (even if this is only taken to mean the arrangement of the chronological tables) would have been a particularly time-consuming task, especially for a man who appears to have been physically debilitated.⁴² Had they been bequeathed in the autumn of 813, Theophanes would hardly have had sufficient time to complete the work.⁴³ It might be more reasonable to suppose, therefore, that George handed over his materials to the Confessor somewhat earlier, perhaps *ca.* 811. It follows then that the last few entries of the chronicle (*ca.* 811–813) reflect Theophanes' own voice.⁴⁴ The statement that he did not introduce anything of his own, but only what he had found in the works of old writers should not be taken at face value, as it reflects the *topos* of humility and modesty typical of Byzantine literature in the eighth and ninth centuries.⁴⁵

Although no identifiable source can be detected in the last section of the *Chronographia* (*ca.* 780–813), there can be no doubt that written documents were being quarried for this period as they had been beforehand.⁴⁶ These may have included official or semi-official pronouncements, short annalistic notices and perhaps one or more apocalyptic pamphlets, recording natural

⁴² In order to calculate the *Annus Mundi*, Theophanes, just like George in his *Ecloga*, adopted the chronology of the Alexandrian chronographer Annianos, who assigned divine Incarnation to the end of the year 5500 BC. However, most of Theophanes' sources would have used the so-called Byzantine chronological system, which has a starting point of 1 September 5509 BC. Thus, the Confessor was faced with the huge task of adjusting his material to his own methods of calculating chronology. In the period under consideration (775–813), Theophanes also makes frequent use of indictions (a recurring cycle of fifteen years with the starting point of 1 September 312). For some of the problems encountered in the chronicle with respect to the chronology, see Mango and Scott 1997, lxiv–lxvi; Ostrogorsky 1930.

⁴³ A considerable number of inconsistencies and other signs of carelessness led Mango and Scott 1997, lxii–lxiii, to conclude that the chronicle was poorly edited. We do not know how much editorial tampering with it underwent between *ca.* 815 and the middle of the ninth century when it was probably circulated (an earlier date is unlikely in view of its strongly anti-iconoclastic stance). However, in his Preface, Theophanes explicitly asserts that he had already completed his work, that is, written down an account on the period from Diocletian to Michael I, and arranged the chronology. It may be argued, with some justification, that he had completed a preliminary draft awaiting further improvements, which were partly realized by later editors.

⁴⁴ It must be pointed out that Theophanes' biographers may have exaggerated the degree to which he was debilitated, and thus the Confessor could have had even more time to work on the text.

⁴⁵ Kazhdan 1999 149, 219, with some examples. To avoid confusion, I will always refer to the author of the chronicle as Theophanes, even if the entry or notice in question actually reflects the voice of George.

⁴⁶ An attempt to identify some of these sources is made by Speck 1978, 389–397; see also Ševčenko 1992a, 288; Lillie 1996, 315–408. Rochow 1991, 43ff., claims that the chronicle is based almost entirely on written sources.

phenomena and disasters.⁴⁷ George, who probably remained in office until 806, must have had easy access to official (mainly ecclesiastical) sources until that time. As for Theophanes, the fact that he did not reside in Constantinople was not necessarily a problem; for at his monastery he probably had a reputable library at his disposal.⁴⁸ Moreover, Megas Agros was not situated that far away, and even if he never visited the capital before his recall in 815, he surely had distinguished friends there who could have provided him with the necessary written information.

It has been shown that Theophanes tampers with his source material to suit his own ideological concerns, especially with respect to the iconoclast emperors. The best evidence comes from those sources that survive in full, including Prokopios' *Vandal* and *Persian Wars*, though his treatment of Malalas, who only survives in an abbreviated form, is equally instructive.⁴⁹ Theophanes for the most part follows the wording of his sources very closely, but on some occasions intervenes by substituting key words or phrases, by adding emotive qualifiers ("impious", "illegally" etc.) or by making more serious alterations (for example, selecting only those materials he deemed fit for his purpose), thus introducing bias into his work.⁵⁰ It is almost certain that he compiled the last section of the *Chronographia* by operating on a similar principle of editing or altering his sources in accordance with his views, although this is impossible to prove.⁵¹

One of the problems facing scholars studying the latter part of the chronicle is the double image of Constantine VI and Irene. The author seems at some times to favour Constantine at the expense of his mother, and at other

⁴⁷ For natural phenomena and disasters in the final section of the chronicle, see Theoph., 462.23–25, 464.25–28, 467.4–6, 470.7–10, 472.18–22. For the apocalyptic literature that may have been circulating in Constantinople in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, see Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 272–275. It is worth mentioning here that the two brief notices relating the deaths of the Caliphs al-Mahdī and al-Hadī (Theoph., 457.11–13; 461.9–11) are likely to have been based on material brought by George from Palestine; Speck 1978, 391, talks about an Oriental chronicle.

⁴⁸ Mango and Ševčenko 1973, 265–266, provide sufficient evidence supporting this hypothesis. By the thirteenth century, the library of Megas Agros possessed thirty-five volumes.

⁴⁹ Mango and Scott 1997, xci–xcv; Ševčenko 1992a, 287–288; Ljubarskij 1995, 317–322. For the treatment of Malalas, see Rochow 1983b.

⁵⁰ Mango and Scott 1997, xciv–xcv.

⁵¹ The language of the chronicle has been described as a cross-section of "fossilized" and vernacular Byzantine Greek. This is hardly surprising, bearing in mind that both George and Theophanes had turned to earlier sources, applying the technique of "scissors-and-paste". The last few entries of the *Chronographia* (as well as Theophanes' Preface) were written, as noted above, in a language remote from the classical idiom used by Synkellos; see Kazhdan 1999, 233f; Mango and Scott 1997, xcvi–c; Rochow 1987, 567–572.

times to be favourably disposed towards Irene and critical of the young emperor.⁵² Such an inconsistency of bias is difficult to explain. One possibility is that George's amalgamation of material was mechanical and that, as a result, he failed to avoid inconsistencies when moving from one source to another. Alternatively, one may see the chronicle's inconsistent approach towards mother and son as the author's own contribution to the neutral information of his sources.

1.1.2 *Theophanes and the Bulgars*

In the last section of the chronicle, Theophanes focuses on three themes that dominated Byzantine society in the eighth and early ninth centuries: the iconoclast controversy, the renewed Arab threat under the Abbāsīd Caliphs, and the brutal power struggle between the successors of Constantine V. By contrast, the chronicler pays relatively little attention to the Balkans, and particularly the Bulgars. His notices are usually brief and uninformative, and there are gaping holes in the coverage. Nothing, for example, is said about Byzantine-Bulgar relations between the years 796–807. On two occasions the coverage becomes more comprehensive, a fact that reflects a fundamental westward shift in the political interests of the empire, but also the great importance of events: the first is between the years 759–775, when Constantine V concentrated his resources against the *khanate*, and the second during the war of 811–813. But even in these cases the narrative is relatively patchy, and does not always inspire unquestioning confidence. Certainly, the chronicler gives a heavily biased account of the reign of Nikephoros I, who took spectacular steps to expand imperial authority into the Balkans. Theophanes either conceals his successes or refers to them in passing, editing or altering his material to suit his agenda. In view of these limitations, it is extremely difficult to create a detailed and balanced narrative account of these years.

The Confessor compiled the *Chronographia* at a time when the empire was shaken by Nikephoros' disastrous defeat in the *khanate* and Krum's subsequent attempt to conquer Constantinople.⁵³ As a result, an anti-Bulgarian

⁵² Favourable to Irene: 440.2–3, 454.6, 475.28, 476.5, 478.2 (“most pious”, “courageous” or “intelligent”). Critical of Irene: 454.20, 454.31–455.1, 464.15–16, 469.23–24, 472.18–22 (described as “cruel”, “ambitious” and “devious”; Constantine's aversion to his wife Maria is ascribed to her machinations; in addition, she is accused of plotting against her son, whose blinding is described as “cruel” and “wicked”). Favourable to Constantine: 454.6–12, 463.8–9 (shares the merit of restoring icons), 464.18. Critical of the emperor: 470.2–3 (his second marriage is called “illegal”), 467.9–11, 467.14–17, 467.30–468.6 (military failures); see Mango and Scott 1997, lv–lv1; Kazhdan 1999, 231–232.

⁵³ For these events, see chapters 4 and 5 below.

bias is apparent in the last part of the chronicle. This is best illustrated by comparing Theophanes' account with that given by the patriarch Nikephoros in his *Breviarium*: the Confessor sometimes omits incidents in which the Byzantines were forced to make concessions to the Bulgars, or is reluctant to speak of events that showed the empire as being indebted to them.⁵⁴ In Byzantine historiography, the alleged cupidity of the northern "barbarian" was a popular *topos* applied to the nomadic peoples who successively appeared on the border of the empire, among them the Bulgars.⁵⁵ Accordingly, Theophanes ascribes greed to several Bulgar *khans*, most notably Kardam and Krum.⁵⁶ The latter in particular is presented as a rabid tribesman, a view that was probably shared by most of Theophanes' contemporaries.⁵⁷

1.1.3 *The Bulgar Narrative*

a) *The Years 775–802*

Theophanes' coverage of affairs in the Balkans in the years 775–802 is selective and disjointed. Only nine short references are included. The first (451.5–9) records the flight of the Bulgar *khan* Telerig to the imperial court in 777; the next notice (452.1–2) briefly mentions Leo IV's resettlement of Monophysite Syrians in Thrace. The chronicler then refers to Staurakios' campaign against the *Sklaviniai* of Thessalonike and Hellas in 782/3 (456.25–457.2) and to Irene's tour of Thrace the following year (457.4–11). He also alludes to a large-scale Byzantine operation in Thrace shortly before or during the proceedings of what was designed to be the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in the summer of 786 (462.5–10). The last four notices offer information on the Byzantine-Bulgar war between 789 and 796. There is a brief reference to the Bulgar attack on the Thracian army operating in the Strymon River in 789 (463.28–464.2) and to a minor engagement near Probaton in April 791 (467.6–12). In addition, the author provides an account of Constantine VI's defeat at Markellai in the summer of 792 (466.27–468.7)

⁵⁴ For example, he fails to mention that in 705 Justinian II showed his gratitude to Tervel (who had helped him regain the throne) by conferring on him the title of *Caesar*, and says nothing about the peace treaty of 717; Theoph., 374.28–479.1; Nikeph., c. 42, 57; Mango and Scott 1997, xciv.

⁵⁵ Sinor 1978, 171–180, with several examples; Litavrin 1986, 103–105. For the way the Bulgars may have viewed the world of their sedentary neighbours and some of the *clichés* defining the image of "the other", see Stepanov 2010a, 40–41, 43–44.

⁵⁶ Theoph., 470.10–12. For a detailed discussion, see now Nikolaou 1996, 269–282.

⁵⁷ Theoph., 491.17–22, 503.5, 503.21. For the terrible tale of Nikephoros' skull, see my comments at 5.2.2 below.

and describes Kardam's request for a *pakta* in 796. On this occasion, Constantine VI is said to have marched to Versinikia and to have tried to force the Bulgars, who remained hidden in a forest, into a straight battle (470.10–20).

Though it would be fruitless to attempt to name George's sources, it is possible to establish that they were written accounts, to which he may have occasionally added his own comments. Two passages point to the use of official or semi-official documents, since they appear to reproduce imperial propaganda. The first concerns Irene's tour of Thrace in May 784, which is described in an exceptionally triumphal tone.⁵⁸ The second recounts Constantine VI's campaign against Kardam in 796. The chronicle conceals the fact that earlier the emperor had agreed to pay tribute to the Bulgars. When Constantine decided to stop payments, the *khan* threatened to devastate Thrace. The author of the *Chronographia* emphasizes Constantine's determined response (he replied with an insult, challenging the *khan* to come out and meet him at the border) and contrasts his courage with Kardam's incompetence and cowardice (the emperor is said to have defied the Bulgar ruler for seventeen days during which the latter remained hidden in a forest).⁵⁹ It would seem likely that the chronicle's account is based on information disseminated by the imperial government shortly after the campaign, apparently in order to magnify Constantine's achievement.⁶⁰

The lengthiest Balkan notice in this section of the chronicle is the one reporting Constantine's disastrous defeat at Markellai in July 792.⁶¹ The author gives the precise date of the battle (20 July), as well as a list of some of the fallen officers and dignitaries. This strongly suggests that he drew upon a well-informed, written source for his detail. Nonetheless, the story of the astrologer Pankratios, who is said to have persuaded Constantine VI to attack by prophesying victory, is fictitious and was probably circulated soon after the defeat. As far as the campaign of 791 is concerned, later sources contradict the information provided by the *Chronographia*, according to which both the emperor and the *khan* withdrew ingloriously following a brief engagement near Probaton.⁶² Specifically, Leo Grammatikos reports that Constantine returned to the capital having defeated the Bulgars, although his version of events needs to be treated cautiously since it appears to be based

⁵⁸ Theoph., 457.4–11. Speck 1978, 390–391, thinks it derives from a chronicle commissioned by Irene.

⁵⁹ Theoph., 470.12–20.

⁶⁰ Speck 1978, 274, 394–396, believes (on stylistic grounds) that George's source is a *Life* of Constantine; Rochow 1991, 264.

⁶¹ Theoph., 467.27–468.7.

⁶² Theoph., 467.6–12.

on a source that reproduces imperial propaganda (thus it omits to mention Constantine's defeat at Markellai entirely and turns his rather unsuccessful expedition against the Arabs, also in 791, into a Byzantine victory).⁶³ In this light, the account of the *Chronographia* must be preferred.

b) *The Years 802–810*

The *Chronographia* preserves no information on the Balkans for the first five years of the reign of Nikephoros I. Events of far greater importance were happening at the heart of the empire and on its eastern borders, above all the revolt of Bardanes Tourkos, the controversial election of the *asecretis* Nikephoros to the patriarchal throne, as well as the Arab offensive on Anatolia, and quite naturally the chronicler focused most of his attention there.⁶⁴ The first "Balkan" notice comes under the year 807, when an abortive campaign against the Bulgars is described. Thereafter, the coverage is more comprehensive. Though it is evident that the author had access to informed oral and written accounts, his material is distorted by the extremely hostile presentation of Nikephoros' actions. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that Theophanes was writing soon after the events for a contemporary or near contemporary audience, which could hardly be deceived beyond a certain point. Bearing this in mind, it would be reasonable to suppose that—at the very least—the basic facts of the narrative are fairly reliable.

The chronicle contains four notices for the years 807–810. The first (482.25–483.2) records a campaign against the Bulgars in 807. Nikephoros abandons this undertaking when he learns of a conspiracy against him by certain imperial officers and the *tagmata*, but before returning to the capital he instructs his men to convey to Thrace a large number of "refugees and aliens" (*panta proselyton kai paroikon*).⁶⁵ The next two notices come under the year 808/9. Although edited together, they clearly refer to two separate episodes of the war. The first records a Bulgar surprise attack on an expeditionary force at Strymon, in which the *strategos*, presumably of Macedonia, and many officers and soldiers from other *themes* are killed (484.29–485.4). The second recounts Krum's capture of Serdica shortly before Easter. The *khan* is said to have executed 6,000 soldiers, along with an unspecified number of civilians. In response, Nikephoros marches to Serdica, and wishing to use soldiers'

⁶³ Leo Gram., 197.19–20; Theodosios. Melit., 136.15–16. For the campaign against the Arabs, see Theoph., 467.14–17, and Leo Gram., 197.21–22.

⁶⁴ For the election of Nikephoros, see Alexander 1958, 65–71.

⁶⁵ Mango and Scott 1997, 663 n. 1, believe that the term *paroikos* is used here in a biblical sense, meaning "foreigner".

labour to rebuild it, unsuccessfully contrives to persuade them to volunteer. A mutiny begins, but eventually Nikephoros wins over most of the officers with gifts, and returns with the army to the capital where the mutineers are punished (485.4–486.8). The last notice concerns the resettlement of Thrace and Macedonia, the first of the so-called “ten vexations of Nikephoros”, comparable to the plagues of Egypt. Theophanes reports that between September 809 and Easter of 810 the emperor ordered *stratiotai* from all the *themes* to sell their possessions and migrate to the *Sklaviniai*, a decision that allegedly caused great grief (486.10–23).

The chronicler names one of his authorities. This is an official communiqué (*sacra*) announcing the capture of a Bulgar *aule* (lit. “court”, but here meaning “fortified encampment”) by Nikephoros’ forces.⁶⁶ The communiqué evidently noted the date of Nikephoros’ departure from the imperial capital (Maundy Tuesday, 3 April), but whether it also reported that he had celebrated Easter at the encampment, as the chronicler claims it did, is unknown. At least two other types of source material may be identified. The account of the mutiny in Serdica, superficially detailed, appears to be from an eyewitness.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the “ten vexations of Nikephoros” may represent an independently circulating tract, quite possibly a polemical pamphlet produced by either Theophanes or George Synkellos soon after Nikephoros’ death, which was eventually incorporated into the chronicle.⁶⁸ Dionysios of Tell-Mahré (d. 845), whose work was partially reproduced by Michael the Syrian, is likely to have had this particular tract in mind when he said that he made use of many Greek sources, including a Chalkedonian writer who levelled accusations at Nikephoros I.⁶⁹

c) *The Campaign of 811*

The *Chronographia* (489.22–492.5) provides one of the two main accounts of the disastrous Byzantine campaign in Bulgaria in the summer of 811. The narrative is highly polemical (as indeed is the entire section of the chronicle devoted to Nikephoros’ reign) and breaks down into a series of *clichés* designed to demonstrate how the emperor’s impiety and cruelty led the Byzantine army into disaster. Although there were certainly many veterans

⁶⁶ Theoph., 485.12–14.

⁶⁷ For instance, we are only told that the mutiny began at the sixth hour. The day or month, however, are not given; Mango and Scott 1997, 667 n. 18, think that the informant may have been Theodosios Salibaras, one of Nikephoros’ closest advisors; for him, see *PmbZ*, #7869.

⁶⁸ See also p. 41 n. 182 below.

⁶⁹ Michael Syr., III, 16; Abramowski 1940, 40. For Dionysios’ chronicle, see section 1.6 below.

from Nikephoros' army who could give their own personal account of these events, there is no evidence in the *Chronographia* that its author had searched at all diligently for such informants. George or Theophanes claims to have heard the *patrikios* Theodosios Salibaras criticizing Nikephoros' financial measures against dignitaries and rich ecclesiastical institutions as the imperial army was setting out for the *khanate*.⁷⁰ Some scholars have subsequently tried to show that Salibaras, who is listed among the dead, was not killed by the Bulgars but merely captured, and that, after his return to Byzantium, told the chronicler the whole story.⁷¹ This, however, is highly unlikely.⁷² It would seem more reasonable to suppose that the chronicler simply invented this episode in order to build a stronger case against Nikephoros.

This is not the only time the chronicler tampers with his material by distorting the facts. Later on he makes the extraordinary claim that, along with his regular troops, Nikephoros had summoned destitute peasants armed at their own expense with slings and sticks.⁷³ Elsewhere he reports that the imperial army entered Bulgaria just six days before Krum's assault, although the *Chronicle of 811* says twice that the Byzantines had spent at least fifteen days in the *khanate*.⁷⁴ In this case one might suspect the chronicler of trying to conceal Nikephoros' initial success to which he merely alludes. Another good example is the report that after capturing Pliska the emperor placed seals and locks on the *khan's* treasury in order to secure it for himself; in fact, we know from the *Chronicle of 811* that Nikephoros distributed the spoils to his troops.⁷⁵ The account also includes the clearly fictitious episode with the servant Byzantios, who is said to have fled to Krum having seized the imperial robes and 100 pounds of gold.⁷⁶ Equally far-fetched is the tale of Nikephoros' skull (Krum cut it off, reveted it on the outside with silver and made the archons of the *Sklaviniai* drink from it), though there is some

⁷⁰ ἐγκαλούμενος δὲ ὑπὸ τινος γνησίου θεράποντος, Θεοδοσίου φημί, τοῦ Σαλιβαρᾶ πατρικίου ὄντος, ὅτι “πάντες καταβοῶσιν ἡμῶν, δέσποτα, καὶ ἐν καιρῷ πειρασμοῦ πάντες ἐπιχαρήσονται τῇ πτώσει ἡμῶν.” ἔφη πρὸς αὐτόν . . . ταῦτα, κύριος οἶδεν, αὐτὸς ἐγὼ ζῶσῃ φωνῇ ὁ συγγραφόμενος ἀκήκοα παρὰ Θεοδοσίου; Theoph., 489.28–490.2–4.

⁷¹ *Chronicle of 811*, 222–223 n. 73, 243 (commentary). Dujčev also believes that the author was drawing upon Salibaras' testimony.

⁷² Mango and Scott 1997, lix–lx, have pointed out that even if Salibaras had actually survived, the chronicler still believed that he had perished. He even makes an appraisal of his career by reporting that Salibaras had caused much sorrow to Irene; Theoph., 491.7–8.

⁷³ Theoph., 490.5–7.

⁷⁴ Theoph., 490.11–12, 491.16–17; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.28, 212.44–45.

⁷⁵ Theoph., 490.23–26; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.16–21.

⁷⁶ Theoph., 490.14–16.

evidence to suggest that the practice of drinking from a human skull was, in fact, common among Eurasian nomads.⁷⁷

The *Chronographia* contains two important pieces of information not recorded by other sources. First, it reports Krum's overtures to Nikephoros (at Markellai and right after the sacking of Pliska).⁷⁸ Secondly, it supplies a long list of dignitaries and military commanders killed in Bulgaria. The list clearly originated from an informed, possibly official, document, which Theophanes may have abbreviated.⁷⁹ Whether he had more than one written source at his disposal cannot be known. It is significant to note that a large number of tracts connected in some way to the Bulgar debacle, including official or semi-official reports, veteran's memoirs and hagiographical stories, were available in the empire in the 810s, and could have been used by the chronicler.⁸⁰

d) *The Years 811–813*

The lengthy last entries of the chronicle are, quite naturally, dominated by the Bulgar war. Overall, five notices are included. The first (495.20–496.8) describes events in the summer of 812, when following an unsuccessful Byzantine expedition against the Bulgars, Krum's forces overrun Thrace and Macedonia, capturing several cities. The second notice relates Krum's peace proposal in the autumn of 812 (497.16–499.2). The chronicler describes in some detail the terms requested by the *khan*, one of which involved the fate of the Bulgar refugees in the empire.

Next comes a short passage reporting a successful operation against the Bulgars in Thrace in February 813 (500.2–6). The fourth notice records the events leading to the battle of Versinikia and Michael's subsequent abdication in June 813 (500.10–503.5). The emperor has summoned contingents from all the *themes* to Thrace, but takes no decisive action against the enemy. Leo of the *Anatolics* and John Aplakes, the *strategos* of Thrace, both want to attack, but Michael does not allow it. Finally, on June 22, the two armies meet at Versinikia, where the Byzantines are routed. Michael leaves Leo in

⁷⁷ Theoph., 491.17–22. For a discussion, see Beševliev 1962, 20–21; Sinor 1993, 447–452; Wortley 1980, 541–542.

⁷⁸ Theoph., 490.7–8; 490.27–29.

⁷⁹ Theoph., 491.5–12; *Chronicle of 811*, 241–242 (commentary); Mango and Scott 1997, lx, n. 49.

⁸⁰ Wortley 1980, 532–562. Grégoire's assertion that Theophanes draws on the *Chronicle of 811* has been refuted by Mango and Scott 1997, lx, n. 49, who claim that the shorthand reference to the "fire in the ditch" (Theoph., 491.27–28) may be due to the notoriety of this circumstance at the time; Grégoire 1936a, 422–423.

command of the army and returns to the capital. The army acclaims the *strategos* of the *Anatolics* who, seeing the Bulgars approaching Constantinople, reluctantly accepts. The last notice recounts the Bulgar siege of Constantinople and the operations in the suburban area of the capital (503.5–25). Krum arrives outside the Golden Gate on 18 June and makes a proposal for peace. Leo's men try to ambush him, but only manage to wound him. In response, the *khan* burns the palace of St Mamas and returns home after taking Adrianople.

Several extracts included in the last part of the *Chronographia* were apparently derived from official or semi-official sources, which provided Theophanes with very precise and detailed information on events in or near the capital, particularly on actions involving Michael I. The clearest example is the account of the diplomatic negotiations between Byzantium and Bulgaria in the autumn of 812, in which the chronicler describes, in considerable detail, the terms requested by the Bulgar *khan*, as well as the discussions held in Constantinople to decide the fate of the Bulgar refugees.⁸¹ Elsewhere he presents a list of Thracian and Macedonian cities abandoned by their inhabitants on the eve of the Bulgar invasion—information that presumably either derived from some public communiqué, or were supplied to him by close friends in the capital.⁸² His dependence on state records/pronouncements may further be deduced from the fact that he follows the official Byzantine position on the question of Charlemagne's title. Thus, after 812, he refers to Charlemagne as “βασιλέα”, whereas before the recognition of this title by the imperial authorities he designated him as “ῥήξ”.⁸³

There are clearer signs of the influence of an official source on Theophanes' attitude towards Leo V, then *strategos* of the *Anatolics*. In his description of the battle of Versinikia, the chronicler, who laid down his pen before the end of 814, when Leo V disclosed his attachment to iconoclasm, calls him pious and is highly favourable towards him personally and towards the need for his accession.⁸⁴ As a result, he mentions nothing suspicious concerning

⁸¹ Theoph., 497.16–499.2.

⁸² Theoph., 496.2–5.

⁸³ Theoph., 494.20–21; ῥήξ: 472.27–28, 475.11–12. For other examples of use of official sources, see Theoph., 493.32–33 and 494.31–32 (where he provides the precise amount donated by Michael to the clergy and the patriarch); 500.9–10 (where he reports that the emperor plated the tomb of St Tarasios with silver sheeting weighing 95 pounds; see here Rochow 1991, 304–305, 307). In addition, Theophanes is likely to have used an official or semi-official calendar of obits (which gives the exact length of reigns) to announce Staurakios' death (Theoph., 494.15–18); for the calendar, see Grierson 1962, 17–18, 55.

⁸⁴ ἐν οἷς καὶ Λέοντι, πατρικίῳ καὶ στρατηγῷ τῶν Ἀνατολικῶν, ὡς εὐσεβεῖ καὶ ἀνδρειοτάτῳ καὶ κατὰ πάντα πεποιμένῳ περὶ τοῦ κρατῆσαι τὴν βασιλείαν ἐκεινώσαντο; Theoph., 502.3–6;

his actions on the battlefield, although in later Byzantine historiography and hagiography Leo is portrayed as a usurper who engineered Michael's fall at Versinikia.⁸⁵ Despite the fact that these iconophile accounts are heavily biased, there is little doubt that the circumstances of Leo's elevation were at least suspicious. The *Chronographia* provides a sanitized version of these events, and it would be reasonable to suppose that its author has used an official communiqué delivering propaganda in favour of Leo. This communiqué contained all the standard themes of imperial propaganda (legitimacy, loyalty, divine approval etc.) and is likely to have been commissioned by the government soon after Leo's accession to the throne.⁸⁶ Indeed, Leo was probably not directly responsible for the defeat, but as several contradictory accounts of these events made their way to the imperial capital, many of his contemporaries must have either suspected him of conspiring against Michael I, or accused him of cowardice and desertion (*ethelokakesis*), ultimately questioning the legitimacy of his accession to the throne.⁸⁷ The new emperor had to convince his subjects that these accusations had no basis in fact, that—instead—he had fought bravely and did not usurp the throne, but accepted it in the face of the willing abdication of Michael. Thus, in the official communiqué, Leo was presented as having urged the attack together with the heroically fallen Aplakes, who probably deserves all the credit.⁸⁸ Genesisios and Theophanes continuatus, who indicate that the events at Versinikia were transmitted to them in several written accounts, some of which give credit to Leo for fighting valiantly, may have this particular source in mind.⁸⁹

Mango and Scott 1997, lvi–lvii, 685. I cannot agree with Kazhdan 1999, 217, who claims that Theophanes expresses the point of view of those who decided the destiny of the throne, rather than his own.

⁸⁵ According to Theophanes, Leo encourages Michael to attack, but his sound advice is frustrated by certain evil officers; he is extremely courageous on the battlefield and remains loyal to the emperor despite the defeat; in the end, he is—against his own wishes—raised to the imperial office; 500.32–501.3; 502.3–6; 502.12–19. The first extant accusation that Leo withheld his troops in order to cause Michael's downfall appears in Ignatios' *Life* of the patriarch Nikephoros and reappears in Genesisios and Theophanes continuatus; it was also included in hagiographical works such as the *Life* of Ioannikios by both Sabas and Peter, and that of Niketas of Medikeion; see Turner 1990, 192; Rochow 1991, 315–316.

⁸⁶ Speck 1978, 819 n. 33; see also Kazhdan 1983, 13–28.

⁸⁷ According to the *Tactica* of Leo VI (viii, 20), those accused of *ethelokakesis* received the death penalty; Zachopoulos 1993, 86.

⁸⁸ For a different interpretation, see Turner 1990, 191.

⁸⁹ ὡς δὲ τινες ἔφησαν ὅτι μόνος ὁ Λέων καθ' ἓν τι μέρος προσβαλὼν Βουλγάροις γενναίως κατηγωνίζετο, ὡς ἐνθῆδε μεγίστην ἀπίσασθαι εὐκλειαν; Genesisios, 4.28–32; Theoph. cont., 15.16–21. Both authors add a second version of events at Versinikia, according to which Leo engineered Michael's downfall; Genesisios, 3.21–4.27; Theoph. cont., 14.20–15.12.

1.2 THE *CHRONICLE OF 811* AND THE *SCRIPTOR INCERTUS DE LEONE ARMENIO*

The so-called *Chronicle of 811* and the *Scriptor incertus de Leone Armenio* represent two extremely important texts for the history of Byzantine-Bulgar relations in the early ninth century. The former relates in some detail the disastrous defeat of Nikephoros I at the hands of the Bulgars in the summer of 811, thus supplementing Theophanes' sketchy and biased account. It was discovered in a single Vatican manuscript (Vatic. gr. 2014· thirteenth c.) containing a variety of hagiographical and educational texts.⁹⁰ The *Chronicle of 811* supplies a vivid account of the Byzantine expedition, which seems to rely on oral testimony and personal recollection alone. The author, who may well have been a survivor of the Bulgar debacle, wrote his memoir in a rather elevated language inspired by classicizing models.⁹¹ His work, one may argue, is close in character to the biographical narratives which took the reigns of individual emperors as their basic structure.⁹² The anonymous author even includes in his account the "psychosomatic" portrait (*somatopsychogramma*) of Nikephoros, his protagonist.⁹³ Portraits of this kind appear repeatedly in Byzantine chronographical and historiographical works, and, as has been pointed out, are an almost indispensable ingredient in the historical compositions of other nations in the Middle Ages.⁹⁴

Although the information provided in the *Chronicle of 811* was from an eyewitness, the exact date and context of its composition present many puzzles.⁹⁵ Indeed, the reference to the Bulgars as "not being then baptized" (οὐπω τότε βαπτισθέντων), as well as the very last paragraph of the text which does not quite conform to the character and content of the rest of the account, are generally considered an interpolation by a later hand. The original text

⁹⁰ *Chronicle of 811*, 205–206 (commentary). For the description of the codex, see "Ad Codicum Hagiographicorum graecorum bibliotheca Vaticanae supplementum", in *AB* 21 (1902), 14–15.

⁹¹ Kazhdan 1999, 210.

⁹² Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 165–166.

⁹³ *Chronicle of 811*, 216.87–92.

⁹⁴ They occur, for example, in the compositions of George the Monk, Pseudo-Symeon, Leo the Deacon etc.; Ljubarskij 1992, 179–181. For Malalas' portraits, see Jeffreys and Jeffreys 1990; Hunger 1978, I, 322.

⁹⁵ Ševčenko 1992a, 288–289, thinks that it may have been an independent, polemical tract, while Markopoulos 1999, 255–262, argues that it was produced as a hagiographical composition after 864/5. For an overview of this debate, see now Stephenson 2006, 90–101.

was evidently modified after the Bulgar conversion to Christianity in 864.⁹⁶ The interpolated passage commemorates the Byzantine soldiers who were allegedly martyred after the 811 campaign.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, it is striking that although the main account informs us at length about the various manners in which Nikephoros' men died on the field of battle, there is no mention of prisoners being taken, who might later die in captivity.⁹⁸ Likewise, Theophanes, writing soon after these events, says nothing of any martyrdoms.⁹⁹ A tale of survivors escaping to forests and mountains, being taken alive and, eventually, put to death in a brutal fashion for refusing to denounce their faith only appears in the Constantinopolitan *Synaxarion*, where the martyrs are celebrated on both 23 and 26 July.¹⁰⁰ It should be stressed that these two notices each seem to be an abridged version of the *Chronicle of 811*.¹⁰¹ Less detailed commemorative entries also appear in the *Typicon* of the Great Church in Constantinople and the *Menologion* of Basil II.¹⁰² By the late tenth or early eleventh century, therefore, the story of the martyrs of 811 had found its way into the liturgical calendars. However, it has been shown that the data in these notices does not conform to hagiographical standards. Unlike most examples of "collective martyrdom" in Byzantine hagiographical tradition, they give neither the names of the principle martyrs nor the number of those

⁹⁶ *Chronicle of 811*, 216.93–97 and 248–249 (commentary); Grégoire 1936a, 425f; Hunger 1978, I, 333–334; Wortley 1980, 543–550.

⁹⁷ πολλοί τε τῶν ζωγηθέντων Ῥωμαίων, μετὰ τὸ καταλυθῆναι τὸν πόλεμον ἠναγκάσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀθέων Βουλγάρων, οὐπω τότε βαπτισθέντων, ἀρνήσασθαι τὸν Χριστὸν καὶ τῆς ἔθνικης καὶ Σκυθικῆς πλάνης μεταλαβεῖν; *Chronicle of 811*, 216.81–85 and 253–254 (commentary). For the Bulgar conversion in 864, see Theoph. cont., 163.13–165.10.

⁹⁸ Stephenson 2006, 101–102.

⁹⁹ Indeed, there is no evidence of violent persecutions in Bulgaria before 815, and even then the martyrs were not soldiers but, mainly, civilians captured in Thrace ca. 813; see chapter 7.1 above.

¹⁰⁰ The story of the survivors is contained in the notice for 26 July, the correct date of the battle; *Synaxarion CP*, 835–839, 846–848 (23 July). The initial text of the *Synaxarion* was commissioned by Constantine VII (945–959); Luzzi 1989, 183; Ševčenko 1992b, 188.

¹⁰¹ See particularly *Synaxarion CP*, 846–847. Much like the author of the *Chronicle of 811*, the hagiographer reports that the Byzantines initially defeated the Bulgars, that Nikephoros boasted of his success, and that he became absent-minded and neglected his duties, thereby giving the Bulgars the opportunity to destroy the army (συμβαλὸν τούτοις καὶ κατὰ κράτος ἠτήσας καὶ τροπώσαμενος νίκην κατ' αὐτῶν περιφανεστάτην ἤρατο. Ἐπὶ τῇ τοιαύτῃ οὖν νίκῃ τὴν φρένα κόυφην ἔχων, ἐπαρθεὶς ἐκάθητο τρυφαίς καὶ πότοις σχολάζων, τῶν πραγμάτων ἡμεληκῶς). Compare this with the *Chronicle of 811*, 210.2–212.43. In addition, there are also striking similarities in the vocabulary of the two texts (ἔταιρείαν, ἐπαρθεὶς, φρένας etc.).

¹⁰² *Typicon*, 350–351; *Menologion Basilii*, 517B. For another entry in a *synaxarion* thought to be a copy of that written for Basil II but not preserved in his *Menologion*, see Stephenson 2006, 94 n. 48.

who were thought to have perished at the hands of the Bulgars.¹⁰³ In this light, there is little wonder that the credibility of the story of the captivity and martyrdom of the survivors of 811 is generally considered to be illusory.

In all probability the story was not manufactured in the late tenth century but at an earlier date. A number of accounts detailing the torture and execution of Byzantine war prisoners in Bulgaria before 816, some of which were eventually incorporated into liturgical texts, had been produced in the first half of the ninth century, mainly at the monastery of *Stoudion* in Constantinople.¹⁰⁴ However, these accounts were written within a few years of the events they describe, and are therefore unlikely to stray far from the truth. Whoever invented the story of the martyrs of Nikephoros' campaign and then inserted a reference to them into the *Chronicle of 811* was evidently writing for an audience with little or no special knowledge of developments during the period in question. There can be no certainty about the date of the modification of the original text, but it remains conceivable that this was done in the early tenth century, at a time when Symeon (893–927) was trying to achieve the recognition of Bulgaria as an empire on an equal footing with the Byzantine empire.¹⁰⁵ In 917 the imperial army launched a totally unprovoked assault on Christian Bulgaria, though in the event it was heavily defeated beside the River Acheloos on the Black Sea coast.¹⁰⁶ In his correspondence with the Bulgar ruler, the patriarch Nikolaos Mystikos (901–907, 912–925) was unable to cite a single aggressive action of Symeon to justify the Byzantine invasion.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, the allegations made in near contemporary Byzantine chronicles of Bulgarian depredations in Thrace inspire little confidence.¹⁰⁸ Judging by the evidence, the story of the martyrs of 811 should rather be treated as a propagandistic product, presumably intended to remind contemporaries of the atrocities inflicted on the Byzantines by Symeon's predecessors. To prove its historicity, the imperial authorities needed an ancient and reputable document that asserted that there were martyrdoms, and it is

¹⁰³ Wortley 1980, 543, 545; Kazhdan 1999, 169–181, suggested a comparison of the *Chronicle of 811* with the anonymous *Martyrion of the Twenty Sabaites*, written ca. 800. In reality, the similarities between the two texts are superficial; see Stephenson 2006, 103.

¹⁰⁴ *Synaxarion CP*, 414–416 (Jan. 22); *Menologion Basilii*, 276D–277A; see also Theod. Stud., *Parva Catechesis*, 149; Tomadakes, *Akolouthia*, 333–351; Follieri and Dujčev, *Acoluthia*, 71–106.

¹⁰⁵ For these events, see Božilov and Gjuzev 1999, 234–262; Shepard 1997, 567–578; Stephenson 2000, 18–23.

¹⁰⁶ Theoph. cont., 388.13–389.19.

¹⁰⁷ Nicholas Myst., *Letters*, no. 9; Shepard 1997, 575–576.

¹⁰⁸ Theoph. cont., 386.23–387.1, 288.13–14; George cont., 879.12–14, 880.18–19; Leo Gram., 293.5–6, 294.10–11; Shepard 1997, 575.

likely that the interpolated section of the *Chronicle of 811* was deliberately prepared for that purpose. Thereafter, the memory of the martyrs, one may assume, was celebrated by a number of hagiographical works, among them possibly a *martyrion*. This would have drawn on the revised version of the *Chronicle of 811* for its detail, though with additional pieces of information (most notably the story of the soldiers' escape from the battlefield and the gruesome account of their death),¹⁰⁹ and at a later date it may have been included in the liturgical calendars.¹¹⁰

The *Scriptor incertus de Leone Armenio* survives in a single, eleventh-century manuscript, published by Bekker in the 1842 edition of Leo Grammatikos.¹¹¹ The work, which is marked by a strong anti-iconoclast sentiment and is specifically aimed at Leo V, consists of two sections. The first deals with the political history of the years 812–814 (reign of Michael I, Leo's elevation to the throne, Bulgar war), while the second focuses on the renewal of iconoclasm in 815.

The text itself provides two vague and contradictory clues with regard to the date of its composition. In the first instance, the anonymous author (who I shall henceforth call "Scriptor" for convenience) reports that Leo instructed his troops to acclaim him and his son Symbatios as "Leo and Constantine", wishing to rule as many years as the Isaurians (Leo III and Constantine V respectively), but then implies that reality turned out to be different.¹¹² This suggests that the author was writing after Leo V's assassination at Christmas in 820.¹¹³ On the other hand, it has been pointed out that the "Scriptor" does not refer to Antonios Kassymatas as future patriarch of Constantinople (he

¹⁰⁹ ὅσοι δὲ μὴ θανασίμους, δασυτέρων ὀρέων δραζάμενοι διεσώθησαν· ὅσοι δὲ ζῶντες ἐλήφθησαν, μὴ ἀνασχόμενοι τὸν Χριστὸν ἀρνήσασθαι εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ ἠναγκάζοντο παρὰ τῶν ἀθέων, οὐπω γὰρ αὐτὸν ἐπέγνωσαν πολυτρόποις καὶ χαλεπαῖς βασάνοις καὶ θανάτοις ὑπεβλήθησαν, οἱ μὲν ξίφει τὰς κεφαλὰς ἐτμήθησαν, οἱ δὲ σχοινοῖς τοὺς τραχήλους δεθέντες καὶ κρεμασθέντες ἐπνίγησαν, ἄλλοι μέλεσι κατατρωθέντες ἐξέψυξαν, ἕτεροι φρουραῖς καὶ λιμῶ καταδικασθέντες τὸν τοῦ μαρτυρίου στέφανον ἀνεδήσαντο; *Synaxarion CP*, 835–839.

¹¹⁰ For an alternative interpretation, see Stephenson 2006, 101–109, and Wortley 1980, 547–549.

¹¹¹ Cod. Paris gr. 1711, anno 1013; Browning 1965, 389–390; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 206; Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 179–180.

¹¹² ...βουλόμενος ζῆσαι ἔτη πολλά, ὡς καὶ αὐτοί, καὶ γενέσθαι περίφημον· οὐτινος τὴν βουλὴν Θεὸς κατήσχυεν, κόπας τοὺς χρόνους αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ; *Scriptor incertus*, 346.9–12.

¹¹³ Markopoulos 1999, 261, places the composition during the reign of Michael II (820–829) at the earliest; Ševčenko 1992a, 280 n. 3, thinks the author wrote after 820, but not too long after that date.

was appointed by Michael II in 821) but as bishop of the monastery known as *Ta metropolion*, a post he had held since 814.¹¹⁴

The last precisely datable event in the chronicle is the enthronement of the iconoclast patriarch Theodotos Melissenos at Easter in 815 (1 April), but the narrative ends abruptly with Leo's recall of "exiled bishops and monks".¹¹⁵ The most natural interpretation of this sentence is that it links up with what precedes and refers to the recall of iconophile clergy exiled after the Council of St Sophia (held probably in April 815).¹¹⁶ The *Life* of Niketas of Medikion, one of the most reliable *Vitae* of the time, reports that the saint was recalled to Constantinople along with other exiled iconophiles in the winter of 815/16.¹¹⁷ At that point the only surviving manuscript of the *Scriptor incertus de Leone* breaks off, but there is every reason to believe that the narrative extended at least until the end of Leo's reign, a natural stopping point. Crucially, the author, who otherwise gives a fairly detailed account of the Byzantine-Bulgar war in the years 813–814, deliberately suppresses Leo's victory near Mesembria in the autumn of 814.¹¹⁸ In any case, the closeness of the "Scriptor" to the events that he so vividly describes is undisputed. Although the author had access to well-informed written material, there are also traces of first-hand, eyewitness experiences in the text. It may therefore be conjectured that the "Scriptor" compiled his account soon after the last recorded event, most probably in the 820s, when he could still rely upon both his own memory of events as well as orally transmitted information from other eyewitnesses.¹¹⁹

As early as the mid 1930s scholars suggested a connection between the so-called *Chronicle of 811* and the *Scriptor incertus de Leone*. According to H. Grégoire, the similarity between the "psychosomatic" portraits of Nikephoros I (in the former) and Michael I (in the latter) pointed to a common author and a single historical work.¹²⁰ Some thirty years later, R. Browning

¹¹⁴ Markopoulos 1999, 261. For the *Ta metropoliton*, see Janin 1969, 197.

¹¹⁵ ... τοὺς ἐξορίστους ἐπισκόπους καὶ μοναχοὺς ἀνεκαλέσατο; *Scriptor incertus*, 362.6–7.

¹¹⁶ For the exiled bishops and monks, see *Scriptor incertus*, 361.5–14; Browning 1965, 405. For a different interpretation, see Tomić 1952, 80.

¹¹⁷ *Vita Nicetae Med.*, c. 39. Niketas was imprisoned for a few days in the winter in a fort in Asia and was then recalled to the capital along with others. Leo Grammatikos then interrogated and tortured the iconophiles to make them take communion from the new patriarch. This notice is corroborated by other hagiographical accounts: *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 45; *Vita Macarii*, c. 10; *Vita Ioannis Psich.*, c. 7; see here the comments by Bury 1912, 75 n. 1.

¹¹⁸ Sophoulis 2007–2008, 201.

¹¹⁹ Markopoulos 1999, 259.

¹²⁰ Grégoire 1936a, 417–427, who also claimed that the two fragments may have formed the final part of what he called a *Malalas continuatus*; Iadevaia 1997, 9–13; Treadgold 1988,

provided additional evidence for the derivation of the two fragments from the same source. Specifically, he noted that they both refer to Krum as ὁ πρῶτος Βουλγαρίας, an expression which is not used by other Byzantine sources for a Bulgar ruler (except the *Life of St Blasios of Amorion* which seems to offer a fuller version of Boris-Michael's title: ὁ πρῶτος ἐκ Θεοῦ ἄρχων) but appears to be a marked idiosyncrasy of this author.¹²¹ Furthermore, he demonstrated that passages from the *Scriptor incertus* which deal with the period following the accession of Michael I (811–813) and particularly the Bulgar war of 813–814 were either reproduced verbatim or paraphrased in the tenth-century chronicle of Pseudo-Symeon.¹²² In view of the absence of any trace of the *Chronicle of 811* in the unpublished section of Pseudo-Symeon (covering the period 714–811), Browning suggested that the two fragments belong to a short work of history—rather than a longer chronicle—devoted to the reigns of Nikephoros I, Staurakios, Michael I and Leo V.¹²³

Nevertheless, the most convincing evidence that the *Chronicle of 811* and the *Scriptor incertus de Leone* are parts of the same work was offered by C. Mango. In an article published in 1983, he showed that in the mid or late 850s a certain Sabas, the author of the second *Life* of St Ioannikios (d. 847), made extensive use of a source which contained these two extant fragments.¹²⁴ Mango called special attention to several points made in the *Life*, and specifically to its description of Nikephoros' Bulgar campaign, which could only be found in the *Chronicle of 811*.¹²⁵ Similar conclusions were drawn with

378; Bury 1892, 572–574; Kazhdan and Sherry 1997, 110–111, countered Grégoire's thesis by arguing that similarity of portraiture is a weak basis for conjecturing a link between the two texts; see also Markopoulos 1999, 258–259; Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 179–180.

¹²¹ ... ἐσκήνωσεν εἰς τὴν αὐτὴν τοῦ πρῶτου τῆς Βουλγαρίας; *Chronicle of 811*, 210.10–11; ... ὁ Πρωτοβουλγαρίας [emended to Πρῶτος Βουλγαρίας by Bekker in the edition of Pseudo-Symeon], ὁ Κροῦμος ὁ περίφημος; *Scriptor incertus*, 348.12; Browning 1965, 402; *Vita Blasii*, 407; Stephenson 2006, 97–100, claims that the use of *protos* was a means to distinguish the Bulgar ruler from Byzantine officials (*patrikioi* or *archontes*) mentioned in the text. Theophanes always uses the term ἀρχηγός τῶν Βουλγάρων for Krum and κύριος for the Bulgar rulers before him, while the title that prevailed in later Byzantine historiography was *archon*; see Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, 70–72; Stepanov 1999, 78; Nystazopoulou-Pelekidou 1985, 1357–1370.

¹²² Browning 1965, 410–411.

¹²³ Browning 1965, 411. Markopoulos 1999, 259, rightly pointed out that the two fragments had already been separated in the mid or late tenth century, when the chronicle of Pseudo-Symeon was compiled.

¹²⁴ Mango 1983, 393–404. Sabas, a monk at the monastery of St Zacharias at the foot of Mount Olympos in Bithynia, was also the composer of the *Life* of Peter of Atroa, which post-dates that of Ioannikios; Mango argues that the latter was compiled during the patriarchate of Ignatios (847–858), most probably ca. 855; Stephenson 2006, 93–94.

¹²⁵ Mango 1983, 398–399, identified four points made in the *Life* (346B–C) and the *Chronicle of 811*, but not found in the *Chronographia* or any other known source: the initial defeat of

reference to Sabas' comments on the Byzantine defeat at Versinikia in 813; the hagiographer could have only derived his information from the *Scriptor incertus de Leone*. Mango also observed that Sabas provides accurate dates starting from 753/4, but after the fifth year of Michael II's reign, that is 825, there follows a period of very vague chronology until the saint's death.¹²⁶ The principle conclusion that Mango drew from his analysis of the *Life* was that its author had access to a single historical work which extended at least as far back as the late eighth century and was in circulation by the 850s.

Numerous scholars have argued, mainly on stylistic grounds, that the two texts under scrutiny should not be attributed to the same author. Indeed, the language, vocabulary and style of the *Scriptor incertus de Leone* reveals a relatively low level of literary sophistication compared to the *Chronicle of 811*, which contains some elements usually associated with high-style productions.¹²⁷ The critics have also claimed that the style of the story of Nikephoros' expedition in the *Chronicle* is more dynamic than that in the *Scriptor incertus de Leone*, the former teeming with verbs of movement, the latter, by contrast, containing numerous verbs of stability.¹²⁸ There is, however, an important objection to this view. It is particularly striking that the *Scriptor incertus* describes the retreat of the Byzantine troops at Versinikia in terms which are identical to (and equally dynamic as) the account of the flight of Nikephoros' men in the *Chronicle of 811*: in both cases the Bulgars begin the pursuit, the imperial army rapidly dissolves, the soldiers trample

the Bulgars (though this is alluded to by Theophanes); the incautious sojourn of the emperor in the Bulgar capital; the Bulgar appeal to the neighbouring peoples (ἔθνη); and the Byzantine defeat "on the same spot" ("ἐπ' αὐτοῦ τοῦ τόπου"). In addition, Mango argues that the indication "τῶ ἐννῶτῳ ἔτι Νικηφόρου" with which Sabas begins the description of the campaign points to the probability that he drew for his detail upon a chronicle.

¹²⁶ These years, he noted, fall neatly within the period covered by the chronicle of Sergios the Confessor, which according to the *Bibliotheca* of Photios (cod. 67), covered ecclesiastical, political and military events from the reign of Constantine V to the eighth year of Michael II; Kazhdan 1999, 211; Markopoulos 1978, 155–157. Elsewhere Photios claims that his father suffered for the faith, that is, was a Confessor; Mango 1977b, 137–138, subsequently suggested that Sergios was Photios' father, an identification that has been challenged by numerous scholars, among them Ševčenko 1992a, p. 280 n. 3. Treadgold 1988, 376–378, on the other hand, hypothesized that Sergios was the anonymous author of the two fragments in question, and that these were part of his *Ecclesiastical History*, now lost; Treadgold 2002, 1–17. Sergios is commemorated in the *Synaxarion CP* on May 13; *Synaxarion CP*, 682; *Menologion Basilii*, 453C–D; see also *Hymnica*, 168–175 (text), 396–397. Barišič 1961, 260–266, had earlier argued that another fragment of the *Ecclesiastical History* was used in the tenth century by both Genesios and Theophanes continuatus for their description of the reign of Michael II, but his thesis was challenged by Köpstein 1983, 64 n. 24.

¹²⁷ See in particular Kazhdan and Sherry 1997, 110–112; Kazhdan 1999, 209–210.

¹²⁸ Kazhdan 1999, 211.

each other, and, as a result, a great many are killed.¹²⁹ More importantly, a side-by-side reading of the two passages reveals very close verbal parallels, and this may be no coincidence. The following examples are instructive:

ἔδωκαν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς τροπήν (*Chronicle of 811*, 214.50)—ἔδωκαν εἰς τροπήν (*Scriptor incertus*, 338.4)

καταδιωκόμενοι ὑπὸ τῶν πολεμίων (*Chronicle of 811*, 214.53)—ὑπὸ τῶν πολεμίων καταδιώκεται (*Scriptor incertus*, 339.2–3)

καὶ καταπατούμενοι ὑπὸ τῶν ὀπισθεν ἐρχομένων, καὶ ἄλλοι ἐπ' ἄλλοις πίπτοντες (*Chronicle of 811*, 214.54–55)—αὐτοὶ δὲ φεύγοντες ἀλλήλους συνεπάτουν, καὶ ὁ ἔμπροσθεν φεύγων τὸν ὀπίσω οὐ κατενόει (*Scriptor incertus*, 338.22–339.1)

More strikingly: οἱ δὲ ὀλίγον προβαίνοντες καὶ μὴ ισχύοντες βαδίζειν ἔπιπτον χαμαί, καὶ οὕτως κολαζόμενοι ἀπέθνησκον ἐν λιμῷ καὶ δίψῃ (*Chronicle of 811*, 214.64–65)—λιμαγχονηθέντες δέ, καὶ τοῦ δίψους καέντων, ὀλίγον ἀπερχόμενοι ἔπιπτον καὶ ἀπέθνησκον (*Scriptor incertus*, 339.6–7).

While the evidence presented above seems to confirm the hypothesis that the two extant fragments are somehow associated, we need not necessarily assume that they were both composed by the same person. If anything, the notable similarities in vocabulary and phraseology might suggest rather that the author of the *Scriptor incertus de Leone*, the more recent of the two texts, had access to the account of Nikephoros' campaign, which he consciously tried to imitate for his description of the battle of Versinikia. If we are to accept Mango's principal conclusion that Sabas, the second biographer of St Ioannikios, made use of a single source for the events of 811 and 813, then it may perhaps be hazarded that the iconodule author of the *Scriptor incertus* placed his work together with the older fragment, and possibly other tracts that dealt with contemporary history, into a boxful of loose papers which may have circulated, initially at least, among Orthodox circles. It is surely not unreasonable to suppose that all this was done in a monastic environment. Also noteworthy is the fact that during the iconoclast era, that is, at the time of composition of the *Scriptor incertus de Leone*, Mount Olympos in Bithynia had been a popular hiding place for Orthodox monks, hermits and laymen.¹³⁰ With a high degree of probability we may thus conjecture that our author

¹²⁹ *Chronicle of 811*, 214.50–56; *Scriptor incertus*, 338.19–339.7.

¹³⁰ The list of prominent iconophiles taking refuge at Olympos includes St Ioannikios, Peter of Atroa and Niketas the *patrikios*, among others; see Janin 1975, 127–191, esp. at 151 for the monastery of St Zacharias. In general for Mount Olympos, see Menthon 1935.

was working in this very milieu; this would perhaps explain why in the 850s Sabas, a monk at the Bithynian monastery of St Zacharias, had access to this “dossier” and was subsequently able to reproduce information provided in the two surviving (and possibly other, now lost) texts.

By way of concluding this discussion, we will once again turn our attention to the older of the two fragments. Much like the *Scriptor incertus de Leone*, the *Chronicle of 811* provides no evidence as to the identity of its author. The only thing we can say for certain is that he was an eyewitness to the Bulgar catastrophe which he so vividly describes. As noted already, the account of Nikephoros’ campaign was written in a rather elevated level of language inspired by classicizing models. Usually high-style productions, if the *Chronicle of 811* can really be described as such, originated in educated circles associated with the imperial court or the administration in Constantinople.¹³¹ The composer of our text was clearly a man of some culture, and there is good reason to believe that he was among the dignitaries or palatine officials who in the summer of 811 accompanied the imperial army into Bulgaria.¹³² At this point, it may be worth remarking that in the campaign Nikephoros also took along the *Hikanatoi*, an elite regiment made up of the sons of dignitaries aged fifteen and above.¹³³ The young notables were particularly hard hit, and towards the end of his account the author laments their loss in a most sentimental fashion:

Who on hearing these things will not weep? Who will not lament? For the children of the old and new commanders, who were numerous and in the very flower of youth, with bodies of beautiful paleness and hair and beards of shimmering fairness, and a face with beautiful features, some of whom were recently married to women distinguished by nobility and beauty, they all died there.¹³⁴

This type of commemoration reflects such an intimate, personal involvement to the events described as to tempt one to wonder whether the author

¹³¹ Hunger 1978, II, 243–278.

¹³² ἄρας μεθ’ ἑαυτοῦ...καὶ πάντας τοὺς πατρικίους καὶ ἄρχοντας καὶ ἀξιωματικούς; *Chronicle of 811*, 210.2–6; Theoph., 491.5–10.

¹³³ *Chronicle of 811*, 210.6–8. The *Hikanatoi* were created around 809 and were commanded by Nikephoros’ grandson Niketas (the future patriarch Ignatios), although actual power was placed in the hands of Peter the *patrikios*; see chapter 5.1 above.

¹³⁴ τίς οὐ κλαύσει ταῦτα ἀκούων; τίς οὐ θρηνήσει; Τὰ τέκνα τῶν ἀρχόντων, ἀρχαίων τε καὶ νέων, εἰς πλῆθος ὄντα, αὐτὸ τῆς ἡλικίας ἄγοντα τὸ ἄνθος, σώματα ἔχοντες περικαλλῆ λευκότητι καὶ τριχῶν ξανθότητι λάμποντα καὶ γενείων, καὶ ὄψεως θέσιν κεκαλλωπισμένην, οἵτινες ἐξ αὐτῶν νεωστὶ ζευχθέντες γυναῖξιν εὐγενεῖα καὶ κάλλει διαλάμπουσι, πάντες ἐκεῖ ἀπέθανον; *Chronicle of 811*, 214.70–74. English translation by Stephenson 2006, 89.

himself had been assigned to the *Hikanatoi*. Might it be the case, then, that the reminiscence of his young comrades—or perhaps a fallen son—inspired the reference to “the children of the old and new commanders”? Though it can hardly be substantiated, this remains a plausible working hypothesis.

a) *The Campaign of 811*

Unlike the *Chronographia* of Theophanes, the *Chronicle of 811* supplies a lively account of Nikephoros’ Bulgar campaign which is credited to an eyewitness. However, despite the fact that the narrative is generally trustworthy, there are certain inaccuracies or misinterpretations. For instance, the author does not make it clear that separate Byzantine detachments—rather than one large force—advanced simultaneously against Pliska.¹³⁵ In addition, he fails to understand the strategic goals of the Byzantines after the capture of the Bulgar capital. Thus, he ascribes the systematic pillaging of the countryside to the fact that discipline among the imperial army had deteriorated.¹³⁶ Furthermore, he misinterprets Nikephoros’ actions; the emperor was not refusing to issue any orders or leave his tent, as the author believes, but simply keeping his distance—something expected from a strict disciplinarian like Nikephoros.¹³⁷ The size of the two Bulgar armies destroyed by the Byzantines is grossly exaggerated (12,000 and 50,000 men respectively), although this may be the work of a later editor or copyist. There is no sign that written sources were being quarried for the account. However, the author is very likely to have talked to other survivors of the disaster. They may have provided some of the details of the flight of Byzantine troops after the Bulgar attack and influenced the portrayal of Nikephoros’ actions.

b) *The Years 813–814*

As noted already, the author of the *Scriptor incertus de Leone*, who was probably writing soon after the death of Leo V, has imposed on his work a very specific ideological programme, and thus his “Bulgar narrative” which encompasses events between 813 and 814 must be treated with caution, especially since corroborative material is difficult to find. The “Scriptor” devotes five informative notices to the war. The first describes Michael I’s campaign against the Bulgars, which culminated in the battle of Versinikia in June 813 (336.14–339.18). The second notice recounts Krum’s siege of Constan-

¹³⁵ *Chronicle of 811*, 210.11–15.

¹³⁶ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.34–38.

¹³⁷ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.28–32.

tinople and his subsequent operations in Thrace (342.1–346.2). Next comes a passage describing a Bulgar invasion of Thrace in the winter of 813/14, in the course of which Krum’s men are said to have taken 50,000 prisoners (346.12–347.11). The fourth notice relates the *khan*’s massive preparations for an assault on Constantinople (347.11–348.2), and the last reports his sudden death on April 13, 814 (348.6–22).

There is every sign that the author of the *Scriptor incertus de Leone* made use of well-informed written sources for his description of the war.¹³⁸ These sources offered a detailed coverage of events which often complements the paraphrasing of Theophanes. Specifically, they provided the “Scriptor” with information on the pagan rituals performed outside the walls of the capital, as well as Leo V’s attempt to assassinate Krum,¹³⁹ on the movement of the Bulgar troops in the Constantinopolitan hinterland between July and September 813,¹⁴⁰ and on the damage inflicted upon certain towns in the course of this raid.¹⁴¹ The “Scriptor” names one of his authorities, a bulletin (*sacra*) issued by Leo V to claim credit for Krum’s death, copies of which were distributed around the empire.¹⁴² It should be pointed out that a very similar statement is included in the *Chronica Venetum* of Andrea Dandolo (*Leo Armenus.....cum Crimino duce non verens bello inire, Deo favente victoriam consecutus est, Constantinumque filium suum consortem decrevit*).¹⁴³ This may suggest that copies of the *sacra* were also distributed to the west, particularly to areas that were still under nominal Byzantine authority, such as Venice.

The “Scriptor”’s account of the battle of Versinikia is fuller and more balanced than that provided by Theophanes. Thus, although openly hostile to Leo, the author does not accuse him personally of deserting the field but puts the blame on the *Anatolics*, thereby leaving room for doubt as to his

¹³⁸ Markopoulos 1999, 259, suggests the use of both imperial and ecclesiastical archives; see also Turner 1990, 191.

¹³⁹ *Scriptor incertus*, 342.1–344.1

¹⁴⁰ *Scriptor incertus*, 344.3–346.1.

¹⁴¹ The damage is specified on each occasion:...κατέκαυσαν πάσας τὰς ἐκκλησίας (344.5);...ὁμοίως καὶ τὰ μοναστήρια καὶ τὰ παλάτια καὶ τοὺς οἴκους καὶ τὰ προάστεια (344.8–9); τὰ ἐκέϊσε παλάτια καὶ τοὺς δύο κοιτῶνας, καὶ τοὺς κίονας κατέκλασαν, καὶ τοὺς μολύβδους ἐπήραν καὶ τὰ ζῶδια τοῦ ἵπποδρομίου (344.10–12). For more examples, see 344.18–19, 344.20–21, 344.24–345.1, 345.2–4. Theophanes abbreviates the same or a similar source. Thus, while the “Scriptor” talks in general about the “ζῶδια τοῦ ἵπποδρομίου”, Theophanes refers specifically to the “χαλκοῦν λέοντα τοῦ ἵππικοῦ σὺν τῇ ἄρκτῳ καὶ τῷ δράκοντι τοῦ ὕδριου” (503.21–24).

¹⁴² *Scriptor incertus*, 348.16–22.

¹⁴³ Dandolo, *Chronica*, 140.

real intentions.¹⁴⁴ His information was almost certainly derived from a written document which elaborated on the eventual battle, though there are also traces of possible first-hand, eyewitness accounts in the text (he has recorded, for instance, the comments made by certain Byzantine soldiers before the battle: ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐν τῇ Βουλγαρίᾳ εἰσελθόντες ἐν τόποις δυσβάτοις ἐκυρίευσαν ἡμᾶς, ἔξωθεν δὲ ἐπὶ κάμπου νικῆσαι αὐτοὺς ἔχομεν).¹⁴⁵

It should finally be noted that in some cases the author appears to have been satisfied by the information that was most readily available (including oral testimonies and rumour) without examining how accurate it might be. As a result, the scale of Krum's preparations for his assault on Constantinople is grossly exaggerated, as is the size of the invading Bulgar army (30,000) and the number of captives taken back to the *khanate* (50,000) in the winter of 813/14.¹⁴⁶

1.3 GEORGE THE MONK, THE LOGOTHETE'S CHRONICLE AND THE *SCRIPTORES POST THEOPHANEM*

The *Chronikon Syntomon* of George the Monk was written in the second half of the ninth century, most probably during the reign of Michael III (842–867).¹⁴⁷ It covers the period from Adam to the year 842, and is therefore contemporary with many of the events described. George has been described as a representative of the monastic chronographical tradition (*Mönchschronik*);¹⁴⁸ indeed, he is mainly interested in ecclesiastical affairs, particularly the iconoclast controversy, and has imposed on his work a very specific ideological programme—to present history in an uncompromisingly Christian and Orthodox light.¹⁴⁹ For the late eighth and early ninth centuries the chronicle of George is based almost entirely on the *Chronographia* of Theophanes. It therefore adds nothing that is new to our knowledge of Byzantine-Bulgar

¹⁴⁴ Scriptor incertus, 338.3–4, 340.7–9.

¹⁴⁵ Scriptor incertus, 338.9–12. It is extremely improbable that the author drew on a lost work of the patriarch Nikephoros for his account of the battle, as suggested by Turner 1990, 192–193. However, he may well have been influenced by the latter's theological and polemical writings; this could explain his description of Leo as “Χαμαιλέων” (341.5f), a phrase used by George the Monk (781.23) who, like Genesios, seems to have copied this postulated lost work of the patriarch; Alexander 1958, 179–190 and n. 2.

¹⁴⁶ Scriptor incertus, 346.14, 347.4, 347.11–348.2.

¹⁴⁷ Moravcsik 1958, I, 277–280; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 342–343; Hunger 1978, I, 347–351.

¹⁴⁸ Hunger 1978, I, 347.

¹⁴⁹ Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 172.

relations. Much the same is true of the Logothete's chronicle, a mid/late tenth-century compilation, and its variant redactions.¹⁵⁰ One version of this work, abridged and fleshed out with a wide range of additional material, is known as the chronicle of Pseudo-Symeon. For the reign of Leo V and particularly the Bulgar war of 813/14, Pseudo-Symeon relies heavily on the *Scriptor incertus*, which he either reproduces verbatim or paraphrases.¹⁵¹

The *Chronographia* of Theophanes was continued during the tenth century in the form of a series of chronicles known collectively as *Scriptores post Theophanem*. The works of Joseph Genesios and Theophanes continuatus were commissioned by Constantine VII. They were intended to justify the reign of Basil I, Constantine's grandfather and founder of the Macedonian dynasty, hence previous emperors tend to be treated in a less than sympathetic way.¹⁵² Genesios' *Basileiai* (which survives in a single manuscript, Leipzig, Univ. Lib. gr. 16 from the twelfth c.) encompasses the period 813–867, though it also deals briefly with the reign of Michael I (811–813). Theophanes continuatus, on the other hand, deals with the period 813–961. His work consists of six books, the first four of which are devoted to an emperor each, while the fifth book, which is thought to have been composed by Constantine VII himself, is a panegyric biography of Basil I (known as *Vita Basilii*). The final book deals with the period from the reign of Leo VI to that of Romanos II (959–963).¹⁵³ The problem of the interrelationship of these two texts is complicated. It has been suggested, for instance, that Genesios borrowed some of his material from Theophanes continuatus (especially from the *Vita Basilii*), or that they both depended on the same sources.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, on some occasions Genesios seems to have incorporated material found neither in the Continuator of Theophanes nor the work of John Skylitzes.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ The Logothete's chronicle has not been edited as such, though it survives more or less complete in eight manuscripts. It is only available in print from manuscripts which include the chronicle as part of a later compilation or as a continuation of the *Chronikon Syntomon*. References will be to the text published as Leo Gram., George cont. and Theodosios Melit. For an overview of the problems connected with these texts, see Hunger 1978, I, 349–357; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 368–372; Markopoulos 1978, 1–29, 141–143; and Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 173–176.

¹⁵¹ Markopoulos 1978, 138–181; Browning 1965, 389–411.

¹⁵² Hunger 1978, I, 339–343, 351–354; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 341, 370–371; Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 176–178; Toynbee 1973, 582ff.

¹⁵³ Hunger 1978, I, 339–343.

¹⁵⁴ Hunger 1978, I, 352; Ljubarskij 1987, 12–27; Barišić 1961, 257–271.

¹⁵⁵ See Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 177 with lit.

John Skylitzes wrote his *Synopsis Historiarum*, which covers the period from Michael I to Michael VI (811–1057), towards the end of the eleventh century. Skylitzes provides little on Byzantine-Bulgar relations that is new, relying almost entirely on Genesisios and Theophanes continuatus, although with occasional extra pieces of information not included in other works.¹⁵⁶

a) *The Battle of Mesembria*

Not very much is known about Byzantium's dealings with Bulgaria following the death of Krum in April of 814. This can be partly explained by the fact that all the sources which are relevant to the period with which we are concerned are almost exclusively preoccupied with Leo V's restoration of iconoclasm, thereby ignoring developments in the Balkans and the east. It should also be emphasized that these accounts were written by iconophiles, who were openly hostile to Leo V and would have naturally been reluctant to report his achievements. Although heavily tinged with an anti-iconoclastic sentiment, the works of Genesisios and Theophanes continuatus occasionally reproduce elements of reports favourable to that emperor.¹⁵⁷ More importantly, they provide the only extant account of Leo V's victory near Mesembria in the autumn 814, but also refer in passing to the conclusion of the Thirty Years' Peace between the emperor and the Bulgar *khan* Omurtag.

Theophanes continuatus devotes a long notice to the campaign of 814. Upon hearing that the *khan*, who was plundering Thrace, rejected a peace offer, Leo V is said to have hastened to meet the Bulgars. He set up a camp near Mesembria, where he devised a stratagem: he left the camp at night with some of his men and lay in ambush on a nearby hill. The Bulgars were tricked into believing that he had deserted his troops, but the same night Leo V emerged from his hiding place and fell suddenly upon them, killing a great many (24.9–25.19). Genesisios, by contrast, reports that the two armies met in battle, during which the Byzantines were ordered to retreat by imperial command. But then, with the Bulgars in pursuit, the emperor suddenly turned around, dealing the enemy a crushing defeat (10.4–19).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Hunger 1978, I, 389–393; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 406–407; Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 177.

¹⁵⁷ The best example is their description of the battle of Versinikia, where they both offer two versions of events, one of which, as already mentioned, is based on an official communiqué commissioned by Leo V soon after the battle.

¹⁵⁸ Skylitzes and Zonaras, who follow Genesisios, report that the *khan* was wounded and fell off his horse but was eventually rescued by his retainers; Skylitzes, 13.32–14.54; Zonaras, III, 321.9–322.19.

Although the two chroniclers tell essentially the same story, Theophanes continuatus, who is evidently drawing on a different source, inspires greater confidence, if only because he provides a more detailed description of the campaign. Still, the pace of his narrative is too fast and this gives the misleading impression that the Bulgar raid in Thrace, the peace proposal to the *khan*, as well as Leo's expedition against the Bulgars, all took place in quick succession.¹⁵⁹ Both accounts are clearly favourable to Leo V. However, Genesisios, who presents the emperor risking direct confrontation on the battlefield (rather than devising a stratagem) and prevailing over the *khan* himself, is likely to have derived his information, directly or indirectly, from an official source, quite possibly a communiqué commissioned by the government soon after the event in connection with a triumphal procession in Constantinople.

1.4 HAGIOGRAPHY

Hagiography, which showed a dramatic rise in popularity from the beginning of the ninth century, provides some information concerning Byzantium's relations with the *khanate*. Two types of hagiographical writings are particularly important: the *Vitae*, the biographies of saints; and the *martyria*, the accounts of the torture and execution of a martyr or a group of martyrs. The proportion of *Vitae* to have survived from the first half of the ninth century is significantly larger than from the so-called "Dark Ages".¹⁶⁰ Equally important, however, is the transition from biographies of the heroes of earlier centuries to the praise of contemporary or near-contemporary saints. Indeed, most of these *Vitae* are dedicated to "holy men and women" of the second iconoclast era.¹⁶¹ These sources need to be treated with caution since they are always informed by a clear ideological programme, exaggerating the opposition to iconoclasm and emphasizing the saint's role in the struggle. Nevertheless, they usually contain important reflections of the political and social history of the period in which the saint lived.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ In fact, the existing evidence suggests otherwise. As will be seen in chapter 6, the Bulgar raid is also reported by the *Scriptor incertus de Leone* and took place in early 814.

¹⁶⁰ Talbot 1998, xvi–xvii.

¹⁶¹ See Ševčenko 1977, 113–131; Kazhdan 1999, 385–389; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 71–75, 348–355.

¹⁶² *PmbZ, Prolegomena*, 52–146; Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 199–203.

a) *The Story of the Martyrs of Adrianople*

Our only information about internal affairs in Bulgaria during the last phase of the war comes from a set of hagiographical texts commemorating those captured after the siege of Adrianople by the Bulgars in September 813 and executed eventually a few years later, most notably the Constantinopolitan *Synaxarion*.¹⁶³ This provides the names of Krum's two immediate successors, Dukum and Dičevg, whose reigns were so brief that they went completely unnoticed by Byzantine historians.¹⁶⁴ Dičevg is said to have had the arms of Manuel, the captured archbishop of Adrianople, cut off, his body cut in two and the pieces thrown to the dogs. Shortly afterwards, the *khan* went blind and was subsequently killed by his retainers. Mourtagon (Omurtag), the next ruler, ordered in turn the death by torture of all the Christians who would not renounce their faith. Some 377 were reportedly martyred, including George, archbishop of Debeltos, Leo, bishop of Nike in Thrace, as well as the *strategoï* John and Leo.¹⁶⁵ The *Menologion* presents a slightly different and less detailed version of events. The only *khans* mentioned are Krum and Čok (Tzok); the former put Manuel to death, went blind and was then strangled by his own men, while Čok, his successor, executed all the *strategoï*, *presbyteroï*, deacons and laymen under his rule who refused to abjure Christianity.

There is little doubt that the two notices included in the Constantinopolitan *Synaxarion* and the *Menologion* were based on material collected soon after the martyrdom of the Byzantine captives. Theodore of Stoudios, who composed a short sermon commemorating another group of fourteen Christians put to death for refusing to eat meat during Lent, claims to have used eyewitnesses as his main source of information.¹⁶⁶ They are likely to have been among the prisoners-of-war released by the Bulgars after the conclusion of the peace treaty *ca.* 816. Their testimonies, along with other official or semi-official accounts, could therefore have formed the basis for the production of a hagiographical source (a *martyrion*), now lost, commemorating the

¹⁶³ *Synaxarion CP*, 414–416 (Jan. 22); *Menologion Basilii*, 276D–277A. The martyrs are also commemorated by a *kanon* composed either by Joseph of Thessalonike or Joseph the Hymnographer; Follieri and Dujčev, *Acolutia*, 71–106; Gjuzelev 2001–2002, 57.

¹⁶⁴ For instance by Theophanes continuatus, 217.4, and Theophylaktos of Ochrid, *Mart.*, 192B–193C. For a discussion, see Beševliev 1981c, 177; an alternative interpretation of these events is offered, among others, by Gjuzelev 2007, 197–204.

¹⁶⁵ Joseph's *kanon* gives the names of another 25 martyrs, among them Loubomiro and Chotomiro, who were obviously Slavs, as well as Koupergos and Asfir, who may have been Bulgars; Follieri and Dujčev, *Acolutia*, 75–85. For them, see chapter 4.4 below.

¹⁶⁶ τὸ δὲ διήγημα ἐστίν. Ἐν τῇ Βουλγαρία, ὡς ἐπήγγειλαν οἱ ἀκριβῶς εἰδότες, ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα πονηρὸν παρὰ τοῦ ἐκέισε κρατοῦντος. . .; Theod. Stud., *Parva Catechesis*, 149. The sermon, which alludes to iconoclasm, was clearly written after April 815.

377 Byzantine martyrs. It has been convincingly argued that the brief notices in the *Synaxarion* and the *Menologion* were based on this lengthier, informed text which seems to have been composed in the first half of the ninth century.¹⁶⁷ The notice in the *Menologion* evidently represents a less carefully abridged version of the original than that appearing in the *Synaxarion*.

It has recently been suggested that since there is no other evidence to corroborate the reports of violent Christian persecutions in Bulgaria, the story of the martyrs of Adrianople should perhaps be seen as Byzantine propaganda, intended to deter Byzantine officials from seeking rewards in the *khan's* service and harden the resistance of Byzantine cities to Bulgar attack.¹⁶⁸ With this in mind, it is significant to note that the original text may have been produced in the monastery of *Stoudion* at the time when Theodore was calling upon his compatriots for a sacred war against the Bulgars.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, while some aspects of the story must indeed be treated with caution (the number of martyrs, for instance, may well be exaggerated), overall its facts seem to be fairly reliable, as one would expect from a source written soon after the events for a contemporary or near contemporary audience, which could hardly be deceived beyond a certain point. To be sure, three of the principal martyrs are known from other sources to have been present in the *khanate* at the time: the archbishop of Adrianople, Manuel, and the *strategoi* Leo and John who, according to an inscription, had held important administrative roles in the Bulgar state.¹⁷⁰ These three men were well known in Byzantium; it is therefore unlikely that the hagiographer simply invented their execution. Still, there is every reason to think that they were executed for political rather than religious reasons, in which case the truth may have been filtered through the demands of the genre.

1.5 OTHER BYZANTINE LITERARY SOURCES

Several other sources, some of them contemporary, contain important additional material for the history of Byzantine-Bulgar relations in the later eighth and ninth centuries. The Acts of the Council of 787, held in the Church of Saint Sophia in Nicaea, which repudiated that of 754, condemned icono-

¹⁶⁷ Beševliev 1966, 92–93, 97–98; Grégoire 1934a, 766.

¹⁶⁸ Whittow 1996, 281.

¹⁶⁹ καὶ εὐ γὰρ ἔχει, καὶ νῦν τὸ αὐτὸ τοῦτο παρακαλοῦμεν, καὶ Σκύθας καὶ Ἄραβας θανατοῦντας τὸν λαὸν τοῦ θεοῦ πολεμεῖν καὶ μὴ φείδεσθαι τοὺς βασιλέας; Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, II, no. 455.

¹⁷⁰ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 47; Theoph. cont., 216.16–217.7; Skylitzes, 116.10–117.30.

clasm as a heretical belief and restored image worship, can perhaps be prized the most highly of all.¹⁷¹ Particular attention is paid to the problems encountered by Irene in the summer of 786, when a mob of armed troops from the *tagmata* broke up the proceedings of what was intended to be the Seventh Ecumenical Synod in Constantinople. A short notice included in the text provides valuable information about a military operation in Thrace (supervised by Irene herself) shortly before the opening session of the Council.¹⁷² Further, the lists of participants and signatories to the Council of Nicaea, although posing various problems for the historian who wishes to use them, can shed some light on the actual extent of imperial authority in the Balkans at the time.¹⁷³ Closely associated with these lists is the so-called “Iconoclastic Notitiae”, which, as C. Zuckerman has recently shown, originated in the patriarchal chancellery and is probably dated between 802 and 805.¹⁷⁴ A number of other, fairly reliable lists of episcopal sees compiled during the patriarchate of Nikephoros I (806–815) are also of some use.¹⁷⁵

The so-called *Chronicle on Leo the Isaurian* represents an extract of brief notices taken from a larger source (probably a chronicle), which may have recorded events from the reign of Leo III to that of Leo V or Michael II (the last preserved notice in the sixteenth-century manuscript records Leo V’s murder in 820).¹⁷⁶ Interestingly, it draws its information from a source other than the *Chronographia* (there are disagreements over some events and, occasionally, the two texts provide dates by using different chronological systems).¹⁷⁷ More importantly, it provides evidence about an otherwise unknown expedition led by Constantine VI against the Slavs of the Strymon River between September 796 and August 797 (fifth indiction).¹⁷⁸

¹⁷¹ Hefele and Leclercq 1911, 741–798; Lamberz 2008. For some of the problems connected with this text, see Lamberz 1997.

¹⁷² Lamberz 2008, 12.17–18; Mansi, XII, 990C. For these events, see Theoph., 462.5–7.

¹⁷³ Darrouzès 1975, 62–68; Lamberz 2004, 27–33.

¹⁷⁴ Darrouzès, *Notitiae*, 229–245 (Not. 3); Zuckerman 2006, 204–207.

¹⁷⁵ Parthey, 162–180 (Not. 8); Darrouzès, *Notitiae*, 216–227 (Not. 2); Koder and Hild 1976, 59–60. For the historical value of these lists, see Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 330; Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 299.

¹⁷⁶ “Ἐκ τοῦ χρονικοῦ περὶ Λέοντος τοῦ Ἰσαύρου”; *Kleinchroniken*, I, 46–49.

¹⁷⁷ As opposed to Theophanes who dates by indiction and the Alexandrian era, the *Chronicle on Leo the Isaurian* uses indiction, regnal years or the Byzantine era; *Kleinchroniken*, I, 46–47.

¹⁷⁸ *Kleinchroniken*, I, 49.16.

1.6 SYRIAC, ARABIC, ARMENIAN AND FRANKISH SOURCES

A number of histories and chronicles written in other languages provide important corroborative information on Byzantine relations with the outside world, but also on developments within the empire itself. One of the most important is the chronicle of Dionysios of Tell-Mahré, Jacobite patriarch of Antioch between 818 and 845. Little has survived of his work, except for what has been incorporated into other texts, notably that of Michael the Syrian, compiled in the twelfth century, as well as the anonymous *Chronicle of 1234*, the latter being independent of Michael.¹⁷⁹ Overall, the *Chronicle of 1234* seems to have preserved the shape of Dionysios's narrative which, for the most part, is lost in Michael.¹⁸⁰ Still, there are places where Michael, who usually excerpts and paraphrases Dionysios, has clearly copied him out in full.¹⁸¹ Dionysios, writing in the first half of the ninth century, was bilingual in Syriac and Greek, and may have also known Arabic, so the breadth of source materials at his disposal was probably wider than that available to contemporary writers within Byzantium.¹⁸² The value of his work lies in the fact that it sometimes conveys information on Byzantine affairs which is not derived from any of the known Greek sources.¹⁸³

Arabic sources treat in some detail relations between Byzantium and the Caliphate in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. The most important of them is the annalistic work of al-Tabarī (839–923), the *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa-l-mumlūk* ("History of Prophets and Kings").¹⁸⁴ Like all Arabic chronicles, al-Tabarī is not a reliable source for early Islamic history.¹⁸⁵ For the period under study his account, which is sometimes based on official documents, is more accurate, though it still needs to be treated with care since it may

¹⁷⁹ Palmer, *Chronicles*, 85–104; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 441, 471; Conrad 1992, 325–328; Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 191–192 with lit.

¹⁸⁰ Palmer, *Chronicles*, xxxii.

¹⁸¹ Palmer, *Chronicles*, 85, 90.

¹⁸² As noted already, Dionysios (Michael Syr., III, 16) says that one of his sources was a Chalkedonian writer who levelled accusations against Nikephoros I. These "accusations" bring immediately to mind the so-called "ten vexations" of Nikephoros I under the year AM 6302 of the *Chronographia* (486.10–488.6). It seems plausible that these had been circulating in the empire (after 811) in the form of an independent pamphlet, which somehow reached the hands of Dionysios; Abramowski 1940, 40.

¹⁸³ See, for example, Michael's notices on Nikephoros' and Staurakios' deaths; he also provides additional evidence for the terms of treaty of 816 (Michael Syr., III, 17, 26).

¹⁸⁴ *al-Tabarī*, i, 5ff.; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 375; Vasiliev 1935, I, 278–286.

¹⁸⁵ For the accounts of the early Islamic conquests, see Conrad 1992, 317–401; Whittow 1996, 83–89.

reproduce official propaganda or contain some of the *topoi* with which the Arab historiographical tradition is replete.¹⁸⁶ Another important text is the *Futāh al-buldān* (“Conquests of the Provinces”) of al-Balādūrī (d. 893). His work, arranged by province, deals mainly with the first period of the Islamic conquests, but also contains valuable information about the late eighth and ninth centuries.¹⁸⁷ The Arab chronicler and geographer Ibn Wādih (d. after 905) wrote a history of the Byzantine empire that does not survive; his other work, the *Ta’rikh* (“World History”), supplies useful data about Abbāsīd-Byzantine warfare.¹⁸⁸ The anonymous *Kitāb al-‘Ūyūn* (“Book of the Sources”, in Persian), probably compiled in the eleventh century but based on earlier sources, is also of some value.¹⁸⁹ Some additional information about Byzantium’s relations with the Caliphate can be culled from al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956/7) and Ibn al-Atīr (d. 1233), both of whom incorporated earlier material.¹⁹⁰ The last work to be considered here is the “World History” of the Melkite author Agapios of Menbidj, who died some time after 942. Agapios, who wrote in Arabic, probably drew on the Syriac chronicle of Theophilos of Edessa (d. 785).¹⁹¹ From the 640s to the mid eighth century, Agapios and George/Theophanes show close correspondence, but from *ca.* 750 to 776, when the “World History” breaks off, the former depends on different sources and occasionally complements the *Chronographia*.¹⁹²

Armenian sources deal with the Byzantine world very briefly, but occasionally contain some information not found elsewhere. Three works will be cited. To begin with, the “History of Lewond”, compiled in the late ninth century and covering the period 632–789. The value of Lewond’s account varies; overall, it is thought to be more reliable for the eighth century than for the seventh. Still, it rarely inspires unquestioning confidence.¹⁹³ The second source is the “Universal History” of Step‘annos of Taron which was written in the eleventh century and extended to 1004. A generally reliable source, the “Universal History” provides information which helps establish a *terminus ante quem* for the conclusion of the Thirty Years’ Peace between Byzantium

¹⁸⁶ For the series of *topoi* deployed by Arab historians, see Noth 1994, 109–172.

¹⁸⁷ Brooks, *Abbasids*, II, 84–93; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 346.

¹⁸⁸ Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 345; Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 195. The excerpts used here are from Brooks, *Abbasids*, I–II.

¹⁸⁹ Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 414. Excerpts in Brooks, *Abbasids*, I, 728–747.

¹⁹⁰ Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 397–398, 472.

¹⁹¹ Conrad 1990; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 376.

¹⁹² Conrad 1992, 322–348; *PmbZ, Prolegomena*, 234–235.

¹⁹³ Greenwood 2000, 170–228; Thomson 1995, 149.

and Bulgaria.¹⁹⁴ Samuel of Anec'i, who died sometime after 1180, reproduces this information in his own chronicle (the third work to be cited).¹⁹⁵

Western sources make frequent references to events about which Byzantine chroniclers and historians of the period under study often report nothing at all, including embassies which travelled to Rome and the Carolingian court, but also accounts of military operations in Italy, the Adriatic and the northern Balkans. Most of our information comes from various sets of annals that recorded events in the Frankish realm on a more or less year-by-year basis from the beginning of the eighth century. These earliest sets of annals now survive as parts of the later compilations that developed in stages from them.¹⁹⁶ The most important of these fuller texts, not least for its detailed accounts of events during the reign of Charlemagne, are the *Annales Regni Francorum* (*ARF*), which cover the years 741–829. They were probably written in several bursts, one taking the story to 788, and thereafter continuing in instalments from a variety of oral and written sources of information.¹⁹⁷ The *ARF* are thought to have been officially sponsored by the Carolingian government (it is correctly observed that their production coincides with the creation by Charlemagne of a large public court focusing on the royal palace at Aachen). They present a skillfully constructed, triumphal account of the reigns of the Carolingian rulers, and quite naturally certain events that did not quite fit in with this particular framework, for instance a number of Frankish defeats by foreign powers, were carefully omitted from the record.¹⁹⁸ These lacunae can be easily detected, thanks to the existence of a revised and partially expanded version of the *ARF*, the so-called *Annales Einhardi*, extending from 741 to 801. This was possibly produced towards the end of Charlemagne's reign or during the early part of the reign of Louis the Pious. It is important to keep in mind that there is a distinct coherence in tone and style between the Reviser's text and the latter section of the *ARF*, in

¹⁹⁴ Thomson 1995, 202–203; Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 410–411.

¹⁹⁵ Thomson 1995, 191.

¹⁹⁶ See the discussion in Collins 1998, 1–15, esp. 3–4; for an overview, see McKitterick 1995, 3–17; King, *Sources*, 17–41.

¹⁹⁷ McKitterick 2004, 19–20, 101–104, 126. It is generally believed that the first section of the annals (covering the years 741–788) had been written down by one person at one sitting. Collins 1998, 5–6, argues that it was probably composed towards the end of the eighth century. The entries of the years 820–829 have been attributed, on stylistic grounds, to Hilduin, abbot of St Denis.

¹⁹⁸ Collins 1998, 4; McKitterick 2004, 123ff.

particular the years 802–820, and this seems to be an indication of a single author at work.¹⁹⁹

Several other sets of monastic annals deserve mention. Most important among them are the Annals of Fulda (*Annales fuldenses*), which are generally regarded as the continuation, up to 876, of the *ARF*, though they also offer an independent, east Frankish perspective on the years 714–829.²⁰⁰ Important items of information are also contained in the *Annales Laureshamenses* (especially for the years 786–803), the *Annales Mosselani* and the *Annales Xantenses*.

The Frankish *Vitae*, namely the *Vita Karoli*, compiled by Einhard in the 820s, the *Gesta Karoli Magni* of Notker of St Gaul (*ca.* 887) and the *Vita Hludowici* of the Astronomer, written sometime after 840, can provide information or additional details not found in other sources, though they can just as easily be shown to be misleading on a wide range of subjects.²⁰¹ Much the same is true about the *Chronica Venetum* of Andrea Dandolo, which was not composed until the fourteenth century, and whose sources for the period under study are unclear.²⁰² Finally, an important source for Byzantium's relations with the Papacy and the Carolingians is the *Liber Pontificalis*, the collection of Papal biographies (up to 892) that had been compiled in Rome and which was normally kept up on a reign-by-reign basis.²⁰³

1.7 THE PROTO-BULGARIAN INSCRIPTIONS

The so-called proto-bulgarian inscriptions are the most informative source for the political, social and military organization of the *khanate* in the eighth and ninth centuries; they also provide very important evidence for the relations of the Bulgar state with Byzantium during that period. So far about one hundred inscriptions, most of them only fragmentary, have been discovered.²⁰⁴ Nearly all of them were found in northeastern Bulgaria, in the

¹⁹⁹ McKitterick 2004, 116–118, 127. Collins 1998, 5–6, has suggested that the last section of the *ARF* may have been an integral part of the “Reviser’s” text.

²⁰⁰ McKitterick 2004, 33–35.

²⁰¹ Thorpe, *Lives*, 15–29; Collins 1998, 1–2.

²⁰² For the reproduction of an official communiqué commissioned by the government of Leo V, see Dandolo, *Chronica*, 140 and 1.2 above.

²⁰³ Karayannopoulos and Weiss 1982, 347–348; McKitterick 2004, 32–33, with further literature.

²⁰⁴ For the history of their discovery, see Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, 21–32. Many of the inscriptions have been recycled as *spolia* for structures erected until the early 1900s. The earliest inscription dates from the reign of Tervel in the first decade of the eighth century (no. 1a–c),

central lands of the *khanate*.²⁰⁵ One (no. 46) was recovered near Thessalonike; another, dating from the reign of Persian (836–852), was placed in the Basilica “B” at Philippoi (no. 14a); finally, an inscription carved *ca.* 866 was discovered at Balši, Albania (no. 15).²⁰⁶ Thirteen inscriptions (nos. 10–11, 72–79, 92–94) are so badly damaged that they cannot be read. The rest, usually carved on a column of marble or granite,²⁰⁷ fall into two groups: the vast majority are written in Greek; a few, however, are in Turkic but written in Greek script.²⁰⁸ The proto-bulgarian inscriptions have no apparent Byzantine parallels (inscriptions on stone had largely disappeared in the empire after the early seventh century) but recall Sassanian and Turkic as well as Roman examples from classical antiquity.²⁰⁹ It should be noted here that a few brief inscriptions in runes resembling those used by the Orkhon Türks have been discovered in northeastern Bulgaria and parts of Romania.²¹⁰ It is generally believed that these runic-like signs had a mystical or sacred character (though they have also been found in a clearly Christian context) and were not widely used in the *khanate*.²¹¹

The majority of the inscriptions are written in a debased and provincial but correct Greek with no apparent “barbarization”, in a language close to the colloquial idiom that was spoken in Byzantium in the eighth and ninth centuries.²¹² This strongly suggests that the scribes who composed the inscribed documents were native Greek-speakers, presumably elements of the late-antique Roman population that had survived in Bulgaria, as well as

and relatively few postdate the Bulgar conversion to Christianity *ca.* 864 (nos. 15, 46, 71, 84–85, 87, 89–90). Most of them are from the reigns of Krum and Omurtag.

²⁰⁵ Forty-two were discovered in or around Pliska. Omurtag’s building inscription on a column now in the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Veliko Tărnovo (no. 56) originally stood on a hill at Kladentsi, half-way between Pliska and Silistra; Fiedler 2008, 190.

²⁰⁶ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, 21, 24–25, 26. Two more specimens (nos. 2 and 47) were found at Malamirovo, near the border in Thrace (see below).

²⁰⁷ Many inscriptions are cut on stone; a series were carved on the cliffs of Madara; others were cut on buildings and portable objects. In his edition of the *corpus*, Beševliev also includes a number of rings, a seal of Tervel (evidently used to authenticate official documents), two golden medallions (one now lost) and a golden cup (nos. 80–90).

²⁰⁸ To the second group belong certain “inventory inscriptions” (nos. 50, 52, 53). For their language, see the analysis by Pritsak 1981a, 38–60.

²⁰⁹ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, 91–92. For the Sassanian parallels, see Maricq 1965, 295–360. For Roman epigraphy in Bulgaria, see Beševliev 1964. For the decline in the production of inscriptions in the Byzantine world, see the discussion by Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 141ff.

²¹⁰ These runes were also used by the Bulgar groups living in the northern Caucasus; see Beševliev 1981b, 19–25; 1976, 12–22; Popkonstantinov 1993, 141–162. For the Orkhon inscriptions, see Thomsen 1896; Tekin 1995, 9–32; Harmatta 1988, 85–99.

²¹¹ Vaklinov 1978, 245–254; Tryjarski 1985, 53–80.

²¹² Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, 47–49; Bury 1912, 335.

Byzantine refugees and prisoners-of-war.²¹³ It is no coincidence that most of these inscriptions were carved during the reigns of Krum and Omurtag, when a large number of Byzantines, mainly from Thrace and Macedonia, were incorporated into the Bulgar state. The fact that so many Greek-speakers lived in Bulgaria was undoubtedly one of the reasons the *khans* chose to use Greek for the administrative, diplomatic and ideological needs of the state. The discovery of seven inventory inscriptions written in Greek or in Greek script, each listing the number of coats of mail, horse armour or helmets that certain military officers had to provide for (or raise from) their troops, clearly indicates that these officers, most of them presumably Bulgars, were able to read and understand that language (figs. VI–VII).²¹⁴ Greek was recognized at the time as the *lingua franca* of the eastern Balkans, hence its adoption—just like the adoption of Byzantine titulature and insignia—may have also been a matter of prestige for the Bulgar government, which early in the ninth century, and especially under Omurtag, started developing a more sophisticated administrative apparatus.²¹⁵

The proto-bulgarian inscriptions, which express the official ideology and policy of the Bulgar elite, deal with a wide range of subjects. Apart from the inventory lists mentioned already, they include victory proclamations (almost all of them recounting Krum's exploits against Byzantium),²¹⁶ building inscriptions, formal accounts of the deeds or other activities of the *khans* (“*Res Gestae*”), and funerary or memorial inscriptions.²¹⁷ A very important inscription, carved on the left side of an ancient altar at Malamirovo in northern Thrace, describes the political and military administration of a newly-established province in the south (*ca.* 812), thereby throwing light

²¹³ For a different opinion, see Bury 1912, 335; Runciman 1930, 272.

²¹⁴ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 48–54; Pritsak 1981a, 38–60; Fiedler 2008, 191. The same is evidently true for Tervel's inscription on the Madara relief, but also for Omurtag's gold medallions, which bear the inscription CAN-E SYBHFI ωMORT-AT, as Curta 2006b, 13, 29, has recently pointed out. I cannot agree with Mayr-Harting 1994, 20, who believes that to the Bulgars Greek epigraphy must have had a runic character.

²¹⁵ See the discussion in Nikolov 2000, 327ff., where he argues that the prerequisite for the development of such a sophisticated apparatus was the acquisition of some degree of Greek literacy. For the Byzantine titulature and insignia, see below at 2.2.1 and 8.1.

²¹⁶ For example: +Κάστρον Βουρδίζου; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 16–40, here no. 20, and chapter 6 below. The sign of the cross in the beginning of these (and other) inscriptions has no religious significance. The Bulgars may be imitating the Byzantine *invocatio symbolica*. For a different view, see Dunn 1997, 147; Asdracha and Bakirtzes 1980, 264–265.

²¹⁷ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 55–58 (building inscriptions), nos. 1–15 (“*Res Gestae*”) and nos. 59–71 (funerary inscriptions).

on the internal organization and structure of the Bulgar state.²¹⁸ Two other specimens set out some of the terms of the peace treaty of *ca.* 816 with Byzantium.²¹⁹ The proto-bulgarian inscriptions also inform us about the spiritual life of the Bulgar elite. For example, a fragment found at Madara commemorates a sacrifice made by Omurtag to Tangra, the supreme deity of the ruling class who served as the basic prop for the nomadic imperial ideal.²²⁰ Further, the funerary inscriptions, dedicated to the *khan's* "nurtured men" (*threptoi anthropoi*), indicate a special concern for the preservation of social memory.²²¹

1.8 ARCHAEOLOGY

The literary and epigraphic evidence for the relations between Byzantium and Bulgaria can be supplemented by archaeological evidence, which has been able to tell us a great deal about social and economic conditions in Byzantine Thrace and the *khanate*, the military organization and defense of the two states, the history of specific sites, commercial exchanges along the frontier, as well as the use of particular routes of communication. Although medieval archaeology in Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Hungary, Greece and Turkey still lags behind that of most western-european countries, there is a slowly growing corpus of material uncovered by extensive excavation programmes. Thus, field reports from sites throughout the region with which this study is concerned will be used to illustrate the narrative. However, there are problems which must constantly be borne in mind when studying this archaeological material. The conflicting presupposition of some Bulgarian and Romanian archaeologists is one of them. Bulgarian archaeologists tend to ignore or find very limited evidence for the survival of a sub-Roman, Christian population in the lands of the *khanate* in the eighth and early ninth centuries.²²² Their Romanian colleagues, on the other hand, highlight the evidence for such a continuity of settlement after the collapse of the Balkan frontier *ca.* 600, and emphasize the influence of the so-called

²¹⁸ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 47. This inscription is mistakenly classified by most authors as a "Militärbefehl".

²¹⁹ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 41–42.

²²⁰ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 6.

²²¹ See Nikolov 2000, 327.

²²² The case of Serdica, discussed in chapter five, is a very good example.

“proto-romanian” civilization upon the Slav or Bulgar settlers of Wallachia and the Dobrudja.²²³

Numismatic and sigillographic material can also provide valuable information. Between the early seventh and early ninth centuries, the use of money in the Byzantine empire, especially in the areas outside Constantinople, was greatly reduced—a phenomenon that was ultimately connected with the political, military and demographic crisis of the “Dark Ages”.²²⁴ The rapid and accentuated decline in monetary circulation is particularly evident in the northern Balkans, where extremely few coins have been unearthed in archaeological sites from *ca.* 685 until the reign of Constantine V.²²⁵ In this light, the frequency with which coin finds occur in present-day Bulgaria and Romania for the reigns of Leo IV, Irene, Nikephoros I and Leo V comes certainly as a surprise.²²⁶ Most of these are isolated (stray) or site finds of copper issues (*folles* or *half-folles*), although a small number of *solidi* and silver *miliaresia* are also present. While gold and, to a lesser extent, silver were the principal instruments for imperial payments (such as tribute and gifts to foreign rulers or salaries paid to civil servants, military officials and soldiers), low-value copper coins were mainly used for the minor transactions of everyday life and, as a result, changed hands more frequently.²²⁷ Such finds can therefore constitute significant evidence for the existence of direct contact between Byzantines and Bulgarians, both on an official level and among the ordinary population, along the Thracian border and the Black Sea coast during the period in question.²²⁸

Lead seals, used to close confidential communications and to authenticate documents, are also important. For the most part, they were struck by individuals operating in an official capacity, hence their discovery seems to reflect a degree of imperial interest in a particular area.²²⁹ The seals of the *kommerkiarioi*, the officers charged with the collection of the imperial sales tax (*kommerkion*), are first and foremost relevant because of the information they provide on the administration of the Balkan frontier.²³⁰ In the eighth

²²³ See, for instance, Teodor 1975, 155–170. For a discussion, see Curta 2001b, 84–86; Fiedler 2008, 151–152.

²²⁴ For a full analysis, see Laiou 2002b, 711–713; Morrisson 2002, 954–958; Georganteli 2008, 166.

²²⁵ For an overview of the evidence, see now Curta 2005, 131–133.

²²⁶ Sophoulis 2009b; Oberländer-Târnoveanu 1996, 107; Custurea 2000, 88.

²²⁷ Hendy 1985, 8; Morrisson 2002, 951; Oikonomides 2002, 978–979.

²²⁸ For further discussion see 3.2.6 below.

²²⁹ Stephenson 2000, 16–17.

²³⁰ For the role of the *kommerkiarioi*, see the discussion by Oikonomides 1986, 33–53; Oikonomides 2002, 984–988; Brandes 2002, 239–427; Haldon 1990, 232ff.; Dunn 1993.

and early ninth centuries, general *kommerkiaroi* were to be found in several cities in Thrace and the Black Sea coast, including Mesembria, Adrianople, Didymoteichon and Debeltos.²³¹ Some of these seals are dated (by indicating the indiction or carrying the portrait of the reigning emperor), and this helps to reconstruct the history of this particular institution in that area. A large number of seals which are datable by other means can provide useful, but rarely corroborated, information about specific individuals (military or civil officers, dignitaries and bishops), and thus the historian who wishes to utilize them must proceed with extreme caution.²³²

²³¹ Brandes 2002, 393.

²³² See for instance, Jordanov 1997, 35–39.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL SETTING

2.1 THE PHYSICAL CONTEXT, ROUTES AND CITIES

In 775, when Constantine V led his army for the last time against the Bulgars, Byzantium and the *khanate* had been neighbours for almost one century, and for most of this time their frontier had remained unchanged apart from variations in their spheres of influence among the Slavs of northern Thrace and Macedonia. From *ca.* 681 to 816 the border ran along the Haimos mountain range (Stara Planina) which separates Thrace from the plains of the Lower Danube. The Haimos extends eastwards from the Timok valley, near the modern Serbo-Bulgarian border, to the Black Sea coast—a total of 596 km in length.¹ Although its highest point, the summit of Mount Botev, rises over 2,300 metres, the range never proved an insuperable obstacle to invaders from the north; for it shelves gently upwards from the Danubian plain and has a number of negotiable passes (known in the Byzantine sources as *kleisourai*). By contrast, the Haimos is far more difficult to cross from the south, in the first instance because its southern slopes drop steeply into the Thracian Plain. At the same time, the surface—particularly in the eastern section of the range as one approaches it from the south—is composed throughout of limestone, while the rivers flow east into the Black Sea, with a course parallel to the lines of the mountains. To cross into the *khanate* it was therefore necessary to pass over several well-wooded ridges. There are several passes through the southern face of the range, most notably those of Riš (Verigava), Vărbita, Kotel and Djoula. These defiles are relatively narrow, steep and densely forested—mainly with beech and oak—and are thus ideal for ambushes and resolute defence.² Far more accessible, from a Byzantine point of view, is the easternmost section of the Haimos, which is comparatively low and where the hills fall abruptly away into the Black Sea.

South of the Haimos, and separated from it by a system of well-watered, narrow valleys, lies the Sredna Gora. It comprises a ridge of lower hills (none attaining 1,600 metres) which run parallel to the Haimos. Further south,

¹ Naval Intelligence Division 1920a, 21.

² Soustal 1991, 53–54; Naval Intelligence Division 1920a, 25–26.

one comes upon the Rhodope range. In its eastern section, where it touches the Aegean shore, it is composed of low foothills, which become steadily higher as the range pursues its northwesterly course, until at the junction with the Haimos, in the great knot around Serdica (modern Sofia), they rise above 2,900 metres. With mountain systems taking up such a large proportion of the surface area of that part of the peninsula, plains are correspondingly restricted in extent. The only plain of really considerable size is that of Thrace, delimited by the Rila mountains—the northwestern extension of the Rhodopes—to the west, the Haimos to the north, the Aegean and Marmara Seas to the south, and the Black Sea coast to the east. The Thracian Plain is watered by the Hebros River and its tributaries, most notably the Tundža and the Reginas (mod. Ergene). The Hebros originates in the northern slopes of the Rila and has a southeast course until it meets up with the Tundža; it then turns due south, flowing into the Aegean near Ainos, a total of 472 km in length.³ Protected by the Haimos, which wards off cold air when it masses from the north, the Thracian Plain, along with the Constantinopolitan hinterland, was one of the principle grain producing areas of the empire after the loss of Egypt in the early seventh century. It was also exploited for the production of wheat, barley, olive oil and wine.⁴ In addition, the forests of the Black Sea coast and the Strandža Heights—which ran parallel to the shore—supplied wood for Byzantine ships.⁵

The area west of the Rhodopes and the Sredna Gora comprises a series of relatively high, arable mountain-ringed plains, most importantly that of Serdica which is bounded by the foothills of the Haimos to the north and by steep ridges to the south, east and west. The plain is watered by two major rivers, the Iskär, which issues from the upland lakes of the Rila and flows into the Danube, and the Strymon which begins south of Serdica and runs into the Aegean near Amphipolis.⁶ The valleys of these two rivers provide an important north-south route, linking the Danubian plain with Lower Macedonia. Along the Strymon and Nestos Rivers—the latter originating in the western Rhodopes and discharging into the Aegean—are a number of small basins of fertile alluvium suitable for vineyards, orchards and olive groves.⁷ Moreover, the Strymon and Hebros define a narrow strip of land between

³ Soustal 1991, 347–348, 425; Naval Intelligence Division 1920a, 28–33.

⁴ Hendy 1985, 50–52; Teall 1959, 117–118, 122–125; Dagron 2002, 450.

⁵ Obolensky 1971, 15; Hendy 1985, 25.

⁶ Cvijić 1918, 50, 55f.

⁷ Naval Intelligence Division 1920a, 33–35.

the Rhodopes and the Aegean that represents an area of reasonably continuous plain, which could be exploited for the production of wheat.⁸

Although the Avaro-Slav invasions in the sixth and seventh centuries had resulted in considerable urban decline in the Balkans, a number of cities had survived on their ancient (Greek or Roman) sites or, more frequently, by moving to hilltops. Reduced in size and population, these urban centres changed in appearance, in function and in definition. From the eighth century most of them are designated as *kastra* or *phrouria*, two terms which clearly stress their defensive aspect.⁹ Indeed, the primary function of a town was to ensure the security of its residents, and to provide safe bases for the army from which to protect the surrounding countryside. Some of them also served as markets for local and regional exchange, and as administrative centres, ensuring, for instance, the transfer to the central authorities of fiscal revenues levied on rural populations.¹⁰ The diffusion of towns is therefore a useful indicator of the probable strength of Byzantine control in any particular area.

Literary evidence, including the *Notitiae episcopatum* (the lists of ecclesiastical dioceses), coupled with archaeological, epigraphic and sigillographic material can help sketch the urban geography of the Balkans, and specifically of Thrace and Macedonia, in the second half of the eighth century. Naturally, the areas closest to the imperial capital were the most densely populated. The two principal towns in the Constantinopolitan hinterland were Heraclea and Rhaidestos, both situated on the shore of the Sea of Marmara and playing an important role in the provisioning of the capital.¹¹ In the same region, Apros, Panion, and Daonion (mod. Eski-Eregli) seem to have had a continuous, unbroken existence from late antiquity to the so-called "Dark Ages".¹² Arkadioupolis (mod. Lüleburgaz), in the heart of the Thracian Plain, was one of the main fortresses guarding the northern approaches to Constantinople. By the late eighth century it had become the principle administrative centre of Thrace.¹³ The strategic importance of Adrianople, located at the intersection

⁸ Hendy 1985, 50–52. For evidence showing a reduction in land use, either cultivation or habitat, and a reversion to natural vegetation in "Dark Age" Macedonia, see Dunn 1992, 244–246. The reversal of this trend seems to have begun in the mid or late eighth century; for a discussion, see Lefort 2002, 268–269.

⁹ Dunn 1997, 137–151. For the impoverishment of the town's appearance, see Dagron 2002, 396–401, esp. 400–401; also Poulter 1983, 97–99; Bavant 1984, 245–288.

¹⁰ Dagron 2002, 401.

¹¹ Durlat 1995, 25, 29; Teall 1959, 123–124. For the remains of the two cities, see Papazotos 1989, 549–550.

¹² Asdracha 1988, 235, 248, 251; Papazotos 1989, 550.

¹³ Obolensky 1971, 76; Asdracha 1988, 231–233.

of routes from the Aegean, the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea, was even greater. Adrianople lay at the confluence of three rivers: the Hebros (navigable from Adrianople to the sea), the Tundža and the Ardas. It was a major commercial centre, and, with its particularly strong fortifications, the focal point of Byzantine defence in Thrace.¹⁴ Some 35 km southwest, Didymoteichon controlled communications along the Lower Hebros valley.¹⁵ Northwest of Adrianople, on the right bank of the Hebros and about 10 km north of the Rhodopes, lay Philippoupolis (mod. Plovdiv), an ancient city which does not appear to have survived into the early Middle Ages. Likewise, the occupation of Beroe (Roman Augusta Traiana, mod. Stara Zagora), on the southern foot of the eastern Haimos, approximately 77 km northeast of Philippoupolis, had ended sometime in the seventh or early eighth century.¹⁶

The Byzantines controlled several cities along the Black Sea coast. The northernmost was Mesembria, a well-protected fortress, situated on a peninsula, linked to the mainland by a narrow causeway, northeast of the Gulf of Burgas.¹⁷ Further south, Debeltos and Sozopolis continued to be inhabited, while Anchialos (mod. Pomorie), also on a rocky peninsula some 15 km northeast of modern Burgas, appears to have been destroyed by the Bulgars during the reign of Constantine V.¹⁸ Not only did these cities control the comparatively level coastal road to Constantinople, but with their natural harbours (particularly Mesembria and Sozopolis) and fertile hinterlands they served as military bases and possible landing-places for operations directed against the Bulgars.¹⁹ Along the Aegean coast, most ancient cities, including Traianopolis and Amphipolis, had been abandoned, but small communities continued to exist at Maroneia, Polystylon (ancient Abdyra), and possibly Topeiros and Philippoi (between the Nestos and Strymon Rivers).²⁰

¹⁴ Soustal 1991, 161ff.

¹⁵ Soustal 1991, 240ff.; Bakirtzes 1989, 50–51.

¹⁶ Hoddinott 1975, 291, 312–315; Soustal 1991, 203–205, 399–403; Kirilov 2006, 41; Dančeva-Vasileva 2009, 31–32. For evidence indicating the destruction of the outer fortifications at Beroe, see now Sharankov and Yankov 2008, 77.

¹⁷ Soustal 1991, 355–359. Mesembria was also the seat of a *kommerkiarios* until the reign of Constantine V. For the last preserved seals, see Zacos and Veglery 1972, I/1, no. 265a–c; Curta 2004, 155–190.

¹⁸ See below chapter 4.

¹⁹ Naval Intelligence Division 1920a, 38.

²⁰ Lemerle 1945, 131–132; Dunn 1997, 144–145, for the fortifications of Polystylon, which can be dated by their construction to the “Dark Ages”, and the sixth- to ninth-century basilica outside the western walls. The Church of St Charalambos in Maroneia is dated to the period of the second iconoclasm, but archaeological evidence (including a “Dark Age” necropolis) attests that the city was also occupied in the seventh and eighth centuries. The nearby rocky and inaccessible mountain of St George is thought to have played a vital part in the survival

A Christian community had also survived at Serdica, further north, although the town had remained beyond effective Byzantine control since the early seventh century.²¹

In the fragmented landscape of the Balkans, the well-organized network of roads, which the Byzantines had inherited from the Romans, provided essential links between urban settlements, thereby facilitating the spread of imperial authority. Three arterial routes, complemented by a number of spurs to the east and west, dominate in accounts of Byzantine campaigning, as well as that of their Bulgar opponents. The most important was the *Via Militaris*, connecting Constantinople with Singidunum (mod. Belgrade). From the imperial capital this road ran northwest across Thrace to Adrianople, and thence along the Hebros via Philippoupolis; it then led through the “Gates of Trajan” and the pass of Vakarel to Serdica, where it was connected with other Balkan land routes leading to the South Danube plain and the Black Sea.²² A particularly important road followed the course of the Tundža River from Adrianople to the town of Kabyle (abandoned in the late sixth century) and then over the pass of Vărbitsa or that of Kotel into the Bulgar heartlands.²³ Another road ran along the western bank of the Tundža, passing through the Derventski Heights and Versinikia (some 30–40 km north of Adrianople) on its way to Markellai, by the River Močuritsa, where it joined the Serdica-Black Sea highway, which ran parallel to the Haimos.²⁴ It then headed north, through the *kleisoura* of Veregava (Riš) to the Bulgar heartlands.²⁵ A branch of the Tundža valley route led from the Derventski Heights to Debeltos and then to the Gulf of Burgas.²⁶

The second arterial route proceeded along the Black Sea coast to Anchialos, Mesembria and Odessos (Varna), and then up to the mouth of the Danube.²⁷ At Anchialos one could take the main road connecting the Black Sea with Serdica and follow it to Aetos (in the eastern Haimos, 30 km northwest of Burgas) where another route through the Lopusna pass and then across the River Luda Kamčija (Tiča) led to Pliska, the Bulgar capital.²⁸ The third

of Maroneia by providing shelter, when needed, for the local population; see Bakirtzes 1989, 45–47; Soustal 1991, 250–351, 408–409.

²¹ The evidence for the survival of a Christian population in Serdica is presented below.

²² Wendel 2005, 74–141; Soustal 1991, 132–135; Beševliev 1974, 125–129; Avramea 2002, 65–66.

²³ Wendel 2005, 200–205; Soustal 1991, 142–143, 292.

²⁴ Soustal 1991, 135–136.

²⁵ Wendel 2005, 213–225; Soustal 1991, 143–144; Dobrova 2009, 151–158.

²⁶ Avramea 2002, 67; Soustal 1991, 144.

²⁷ Wendel 2005, 242–254; Avramea 2002, 67; Soustal 1991, 145–146.

²⁸ Wendel 2005, 225–229; Soustal 1991, 144.

important north-south axis had its starting point at Serdica; it then followed the Strymon valley through the *kleisoura* of Roupel to Serres before intersecting with the *Via Egnatia* near Amphipolis.²⁹ The *Via Egnatia* itself ran east-west across the southern Balkans, providing communications between Constantinople and Dyrrachion on the Adriatic coast. Its eastern section, which linked the imperial capital with Thessalonike, was frequently rendered inoperative as the result of Slav raids and settlements along it.³⁰ All these routes were regularly used by the Byzantines, though there is little doubt that urban decline, exacerbated by constant devastation and raiding, had dramatic consequences for the upkeep of the provincial road systems. Roads that were strategically important to the state may have been maintained more regularly; however, the majority of them, especially those close to the Bulgar border and within the *khanate*, must have become little more than paths or tracks, easily blocked by human agency or the weather.³¹

North of the protective barrier of the Haimos Mountains lay the Bulgar state, established by Asparuch in the 680s. Its precise extent in the late eighth century is not known. It certainly encompassed the territory between the Haimos and the Lower Danube, and possibly parts of southern Wallachia in Romania, although an expansion into that area is not clearly reflected in the archaeological record before the late 700s.³² In addition, the Bulgars seem to have controlled the marshy area north and west of the Danube estuary, in what is today Moldova and southwestern Ukraine.³³ In contrast to Thrace and Macedonia which enjoy the hot and dry Mediterranean climate, the area north of the Haimos Mountains has a continental type of climate with a variation in seasons. The summers are hot, the winters cold, and the rainfall, though heaviest in summer, is distributed throughout the year.³⁴ During the winter months the high-pressure system which lies over the greater part of the Pontic steppe extends into that region, and as a result, there is a general

²⁹ Wendel 2005, 153–159; Avramea 2002, 67.

³⁰ As can be seen in the journeys of Theodore of Stoudios in 797 and Gregory the Decapolites in the 830s. Both travellers preferred the sea voyage; Avramea 2002, 68–72, esp. 71. Note, however, that there is evidence that the *Via Egnatia* between Ochrid and Edessa was repaired at some point during the eighth century; see Oikonomides 1996, 13.

³¹ Indeed, according to Wendel 2005, 259, the evidence points to many of those roads being in very bad shape before the ninth century. For evidence for the very limited road maintenance or repair work since late antiquity, see Haldon 1999, 52–54.

³² Fiedler 1992, 270; Rašev 1982a, 19, 20ff.

³³ Indeed, a series of barriers of embankments and ditches, some apparently built as early as the late seventh century, are attributed to the Bulgars; Rašev 1995b, 89–95; Čebotarenko 1990, 49–55; Fiedler 2008, 159; see also below at 3.2.5.

³⁴ Naval Intelligence Division 1920a, 39; Naval Intelligence Division 1920b, 37.

tendency for cold winds to blow from the north. The most severely affected area is the Dobrudja, the coastal plain between the northeastern slopes of the Haimos and the mouth of the Danube.³⁵

With the exception of the Danube Delta, a wilderness of swamps and marshes, largely covered by tall reeds, the land controlled by the Bulgars was fertile. Watered by the Danube and its numerous tributaries, the Lower Danubian plain could be exploited for the production of wheat, maize and barley.³⁶ During the winter, when the water of the rivers was low, extensive tracts covered with grass afforded good pasture for sheep and cattle even when snow was on the ground.³⁷ Particularly suitable for stock-raising, horse-grazing and all kinds of cattle-fattening was the extensive stretch of grassland between the Dniester basin and the Danube Delta, as well as the steppe-like plains of northeastern Bulgaria (southern Dobrudja), which form the south-westernmost point of the Pontic steppe. These pasturelands are considerably smaller than the Hungarian Plain (the largest area of natural pasture in Europe), and only a pocket handkerchief compared with the vast expanses of the great Eurasian steppe. They could therefore feed only a relatively small number of horses, a fact that ultimately limited the impact of the Bulgar state upon its sedentary neighbours; for nomad military strength depended upon large and very mobile armies, whose mobility was in turn ensured by each warrior having numerous remounts.³⁸ Yet, although unable to provide for the needs of a very large force comparable to those mustered by the Kök Türks or the Mongols in Central Asia, the Bulgar grazing grounds had sufficient pasture to support the horse-oriented culture and attendant martial traditions of a small elite practicing a style of modified pastoralism that was typical of the aristocracies of the Western Eurasian nomadic states.³⁹ Under

³⁵ Spinei 2009, 15, 29–30; Naval Intelligence Division 1920a, 38; Naval Intelligence Division 1920b, 38–39.

³⁶ Hendy 1985, 44; Spinei 2009, 29–30; Naval Intelligence Division 1920a, 106; Naval Intelligence Division 1920b, 140–141.

³⁷ Spinei 2009, 30; Naval Intelligence Division 1920b, 141.

³⁸ Thus, when one horse was tired the mounted warrior moved to the next. For the limited resources of the European steppe nomads and particularly the limited carrying capacity of the Hungarian Plain, see Whittow 1996 23–25; Sinor 1972, 181–183. For the possible size of the Bulgar army, see the discussion below.

³⁹ This system (i.e. semi-nomadism) entailed some agriculture or other sedentary pursuits for part of the year; for a detailed discussion, see Györffy 1975, 45ff.; Pletneva 1967, 51–70. Much like the Hungarians, the Bulgars probably did not travel great distances between their winter and summer quarters. Only the ruling elite may have nomadized in the grasslands north of the Danube Delta. In this connection, see now Georgiev 2007b, 32–34. That the Bulgars practiced a mixed economy is illustrated by the discovery of numerous sickles and scythes, which, together with ploughshares and coulter, constituted a toolkit typically

these circumstances, it has been rightly remarked, semi-nomads could retain an essentially equestrian culture for quite some time.⁴⁰

The *khanate* had been established in what had previously been a militarized frontier province of the Byzantine empire, and although most urban centres had been abandoned by the seventh century, small and isolated Christian communities continued to exist at Serdica, Odessos/Varna, Dionysopolis/Cruni, Marcianopolis and Durostorum.⁴¹ These sub-Roman cities, reduced in both size and importance, established stable relations with the Slavs tribes settled in their vicinity, and were gradually incorporated into the Bulgar state.⁴² Although ready to tolerate the existence of the dwindling urban centres, and eager to exploit them as reservoirs of valuable craft skills, the Bulgar semi-nomadic aristocracy sought to settle elsewhere, in a more familiar habitat, in the steppe-like plains of the Dobrudja. A great number of settlements dating from the eighth and ninth centuries have been excavated in that region. The standard dwelling was the sunken-floored hut. Nearly all such structures found so far were near water sources; they were single-roomed and had a fireplace or oven, either of stone or clay, built in one of the corners.⁴³ Although traditionally associated with Slavic sites, sunken-floored dwellings were also adopted by the Bulgars after their arrival in the Balkans. It is only the distribution of burial assemblages in any one area that may help distinguish between Slav and Bulgar open settlements, since neither the architectural features of these buildings nor their heating installations, nor

associated with nomadic communities expanding into fertile regions of loess. According to archaeologists, some of the scythes discovered in Bulgaria and Romania were primarily used by nomads for wood-clearings and for spots where grass grew in abundance. Further evidence for pastoral nomadism in the *khanate* is provided by graffito drawings which frequently represent scenes of animal husbandry (several domestic animals are depicted, including horses, sheep, goats, cattle, dogs etc). Significantly, most of these drawings have been discovered in or around Pliska; Ovčarov 1982, 36–39; Henning 1987, 67, 73–74, 83, 122; Curta 1998–1999, 18–19; Comşa 1980a, 18–19, 28. For the values connected with the nomadic lifestyle, see Stepanov 2010a, 40–41.

⁴⁰ Golden 1992, 91.

⁴¹ For Durostorum/Silistra: Mutafčiev 1973, 28–29; Soustal 1997b, 119. For Varna and Dionysopolis (mod. Balčik): Rašev 1997a, 33–44 and Koledarov 1966, 327–328. A small Christian community may have also survived at Khan Krum (former Čatalar, 28 km to the southwest of Pliska), not far from the stone enclosure known as “*aule* of Omurtag”. Archaeologists believe that a late-antique church, built north of the enclosure in the fifth or sixth centuries, may have remained in use for a longer period; see Fiedler 2008, 195. Finally, for Marcianopolis, see Kirilov 2006, 39–40; see however Georgiev 2002, 94–100 and Angelov 2002, 105–122, with very different conclusions pointing to discontinuity.

⁴² Howard-Johnston 1983, 250–251.

⁴³ Vážarova 1971, 17; Fiedler 2008, 200–201. For some of the largest agglomerations of such buildings in Bulgaria, see Henning 2005, 45 with lit.

any category of artefacts associated with them can be safely ascribed to one group or the other.⁴⁴

In the central lands of the *khanate*, a series of fortified encampments, defended by an earthen or timber rampart and enclosing a large area of rich alluvial soil, has long been the object of scholarly attention. They are usually interpreted as winter camps for Bulgar semi-nomads and their herds or horses, though they are also thought to have served as defensive, military installations in times of need.⁴⁵ Whatever their primary function, it seems likely that each such enclosure served exclusively the needs of a specific tribe or clan. These sites should probably be identified with the Bulgar *aulai* (“courts”, “residences”), mentioned by Byzantine writers from the middle of the eighth century.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, very few of the camps excavated so far in the region can be assigned with any certainty to that time. Most prominent among them is the site of Kabijuk near the village Konäovets (some 8 km west of Pliska), which enclosed an area of 3.7 km². Recent investigations by a German-Bulgarian team of archaeologists has brought to light a number of stone buildings of early medieval age, superimposing older, late-antique structures.⁴⁷ South of the encampment, excavations of a group of four burial barrows have delivered the richest assemblage so far known from pre-Christian Bulgaria. Besides the remains of a horse (placed next to the human skeleton), ceramic finds and other metal objects, including horse gear, burial no. 4 produced a pair of golden earrings and several silver belt mounts of the Vrap/Velino series (or related to that). The deceased, a twenty to twenty-five year old man, was clearly a member of the Bulgar aristocracy. His burial is dated to *ca.* 700–720, and this strongly suggests an early date for the camp at Kabijuk as well.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Fiedler 2008, 200. It has been rightly pointed out that the sunken-floored dwellings of the seventh to ninth century have produced very few artefacts indicating sharp social differentiation. On the other hand, one must admit that the nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle that the Bulgar elite still practiced in the eighth century, and which must have entailed a seasonal migration from one area—and therefore residence—to another, would have left very few traces in the archaeological record.

⁴⁵ Rašev 1982a, 94–120, here at 15.

⁴⁶ Theoph., 436.23–24. The word *aule* does not have a Turkic (*ajyl*) or Mongolian (*ajil*) root as several Bulgarian scholars believe.

⁴⁷ Rašev 2006, 374–375; Henning and Eyub 2007, 428–431; Apostolov *et al.* 1995, 218–219 no. 472.

⁴⁸ Fiedler 2008, 156 n. 21, 197; Rašev 2006, 374–375. The presence of horse gear, particularly of stirrups placed by the skull, brings immediately to mind contemporary rich burials of the first phase of “Late Avar Age” in Hungary and southwestern Slovakia, with which the Kabijuk grave can be compared. I am grateful to Professor Florin Curta for this information.

Several other sites surrounded by earthen or wooden embankments seem to have been occupied during the eighth and early ninth centuries, most notably those at Kladentsi, about 35 km north of Pliska; Stan near Novi Pazar, enclosing an area of 6.9 km²; and Khan Krum (Čatalar), where recent excavations have demonstrated the existence of a double palisade fortification that was probably built several decades before the construction of an *aule* by Omurtag in 821/2.⁴⁹ A similarly early date has been advanced for a number of smaller camps, although, in most cases, the evidence published so far remains contentious. It is important to note at this point that very few, if any, late Roman or early Byzantine forts appear to have been extensively used by the Bulgars before the middle of the ninth century.⁵⁰

The most important site in early medieval Bulgaria was the fortified compound at Pliska, situated in the middle of a vast steppe-like plain in the vicinity of the old Turkish village of Aboba in northeastern Bulgaria.⁵¹ By the time all the fortification lines had been erected, they enclosed an area of approximately 22 km² (fig. II). A number of settlements were scattered over this entire area known as “Outer Town”, in the centre of which stood the “Inner Town”, consisting of several stone buildings and protected by an own inner fortification. Pliska’s “Inner Town” was first excavated in 1899–1900 by K. Škorpil and F. Uspenkij, director of the Russian Archaeological Institute of Constantinople, and again in the 1930s by K. Mijatev and P. Karasimeonov. Excavations on a much larger scale, although still strongly focused on the palace centre and the fortifications, resumed in 1945 and have continued, with few interruptions, to the present day.⁵² The recent research undertaken in the “Outer Town” by a team of German-Bulgarian archaeologists deserves special mention. The use of more advanced methods of archaeological surveying and analysis has created fresh opportunities for the better understanding of the history of the site, particularly the earliest stages of its development.⁵³

⁴⁹ Rašev 1982a, 94, 96, 100–101, 117; Fiedler 2008, 196–198; Apostolov *et al.* 1995, 277 no 460, 280 no 1007; Henning *et al.* 2007, 437–439.

⁵⁰ Although Georgiev 2004–2005, 27–29 (I), 55–56 (II), has recently suggested that until the mid 700s the Bulgar *khans* may have used the late Roman fortress at Ezerovo, 12 km west of Varna, as their main residence.

⁵¹ For the Slavic origin of the name Pliska, see Beševliev 1981a, 459–460; Simeonov 2008, 204; Prinzing 2007, 241. For an alternative etymology, see Dobrev 1995, 131.

⁵² For the history of archaeological research at Pliska, see Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 5–14; Fiedler 2008, 171–173.

⁵³ Henning 2007, 210–213.

As a result of these more recent investigations it has now become clear that neither the huge ditch-and-rampart fortification nor the settlements sites it enclosed existed in the late 600s or early 700s, as was commonly assumed.⁵⁴ The outer circuit—over 20 km in total length—formed an irregular quadrangle, with its sides measuring about $6.4 \times 3.9 \times 6.5 \times 2.9$ km respectively. The embankments, which in some parts were revetted with stone, must have been more than 3 metres high and up to 10–12 metres wide, while the surrounding ditch was between 4 and 5 metres deep and some 16 metres wide.⁵⁵ Dating Pliska's earthworks is extremely difficult. Most scholars point to their impressive uniformity to suggest a single, concerted effort of construction. But here agreement ends. Whereas some have assigned them to the mid 700s, others propose a much later date, connecting the fortification of the "Outer Town" with the Hungarian invasions of the *khanate* in the later ninth and tenth centuries.⁵⁶ To make things more complicated, it has recently been argued that the outer defences were built in several stages over a long period of time. According to this hypothesis, the first embankment, which is thought to have enclosed an area of approximately 3.7 km² in the Asar-dere creek valley on the northwestern edge of the town, was dug towards the middle of the eighth century, when the earliest datable occupation of the settlement sites inside that area is attested.⁵⁷ Although further research is needed to substantiate this claim, there is nothing in the least unlikely in the supposition that by the early 800s the 20 km circuit had already been erected. Despite recent claims to the contrary, it is clear that Pliska's earthworks were primarily military in purpose.⁵⁸ They may have lacked a palisade

⁵⁴ Rašev 1982a, 97–101; Rašev 1995a, 16; Henning 2007, 229ff. It is interesting to note that the so-called *Vision of the Prophet Isaiah*, otherwise known as the *Apocryphal Bulgarian Chronicle*, an Old Slavonic text written no later than the early twelfth century (and most probably at the end of the eleventh), remembers Asparuch ("Tsar Ispor") as founder of Pliska. The English translation is now available in Petkov 2008, 195.

⁵⁵ Rašev 1985b, 9–12; Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 14–15, 51; Squatriti 2005, 71–74; Fiedler 2008, 169.

⁵⁶ Henning 2007, 231–234. Henning adduces parallels with several other rectangular rampart fortifications, especially along the right bank of the Danube (Stärmen, Popina and Nova Černa), raised by the Bulgars at the same time. He thus talks about "country-wide military and defensive build-up", intended to protect the territories of the *khanate* from the Hungarian threat. In my view, this hypothesis lacks substantiation. For a date in the middle of the eighth century, see Squatriti 2005, 74, n. 37.

⁵⁷ Georgiev 2000a, 21–22; Georgiev 2000b, 25–28 and fig. 5. The author believes that the initial enclosure would have looked very much like the fortified camps of Stan and Kabijuk, both situated within a short distance from Pliska.

⁵⁸ Squatriti 2005, 78–81, claims instead that these embankments were symbolic lines of demarcation, erected to enhance the status of the *khans'* and inform onlookers. Following this

and a fighting platform on the inside from which the defenders could fight more efficiently, but could be protected by the actions of the mobile Bulgar cavalry which, unless faced with a much larger force, would have slowed down, if not hampered, the advance of an invader.

Judging by the existing evidence, only a small part of the area enclosed by the embankments would have been inhabited before the mid ninth century. To be sure, a great number of sunken-floored dwellings initially thought to have been associated with the earliest occupation phase of Pliska have, in fact, been shown to post-date the Bulgar conversion to Christianity in 864.⁵⁹ As noted already, some of the earliest datable finds inside the “Outer Town” (which very often come from buildings constructed at ground level) are located in the Asar-dere area, to the west and northwest of the “Inner” stone fortress.⁶⁰ One of the most important discoveries there is a large craft-working centre of the mid/late eighth and earlier ninth century. This area was covered by multiple layers of production waste consisting of various materials such as charcoal, ashes, waste from making window glass and glass vessels, iron and non-ferrous pieces of slag, fragments of melting pots etc. Further evidence of the industrial activities carried out on the site is provided by the discovery of numerous hearths and glass-making furnaces.⁶¹ Archaeologists now believe that this was a highly specialized metal, glass and ceramic production centre designed to meet the exclusive needs of the palace.⁶²

Since the end of the nineteenth century, when Pliska was first brought under archaeological investigation, the central palatial core has been the main focus of research (figs. IV–V). Archaeologists speak of several building phases, the latest of which certainly post-dates the Bulgar conversion to Christianity.⁶³ It is generally assumed that most of the stone buildings inside the “Inner Town”, including its quadrangular enclosure, were erected during the reign of Omurtag or shortly thereafter, although some scholars

line of thought, it may be further argued that Pliska’s earthworks served as boundary markers for the “sacred” space of the ruler’s residence.

⁵⁹ Henning 2005, 220–230; Balabanov 2004, 101ff.

⁶⁰ Vasilev 1987, 400–406; Georgiev 2000a, 18–21. Moreover, recent research outside the earthen rampart has identified more than fifty sites dated between the second half of the eighth and the tenth century; see now Henning 2005, 42–43 and fig. 1.2.

⁶¹ Henning 2007, 216–220, 235–236; Dončeva-Petkova 2007a, 293–294; Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 33–34.

⁶² Henning 2005, 44. By the end of the ninth century, if not earlier, the industrial quarter was transferred, perhaps for security reasons, inside the “Inner Town”. For some of the handicraft activities carried out there, see Dončeva-Petkova 1980, 27–36.

⁶³ Dimitrov 2007, 261, 267–271.

now argue for a much later date.⁶⁴ As far as the central area of Pliska in the eighth and early ninth century is concerned, the evidence produced so far is remarkably small. The remains of several wooden structures, often superimposed by stone buildings, have been identified over the last few years.⁶⁵ Most prominent among them is a “yurt-like” structure found in front of the main entrance to the palace complex. This consisted of three or four concentric circles of postholes, and may have had a platform with a ramp and a pavilion on top of it.⁶⁶ The building, which has been interpreted as a dwelling or palace, is mainly associated with material remains (including a small strap end) of the eighth or, more likely, the ninth century. This implies that it cannot *a priori* be assigned to the earlier occupation phase of Pliska in the mid/late 700s.⁶⁷ Recent excavations in the southwestern area of the palatial compound have uncovered a much similar, although larger, “yurt-like” building with four circles of postholes in concentric agreement, which is likely to belong to the same period.⁶⁸ Archaeologists tend to relate these wooden structures to a number of earth-and-timber ramparts inside the “Inner Town”. These were evidently created for the defence of the palace centre prior to the construction of the stone fortress.⁶⁹

A date between the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth century has also been suggested for the construction of the largest representative building at Pliska known as “Krum’s Palace”. Its foundations, which are still visible today, form a large rectangle, measuring 75 × 59.5 metres.

⁶⁴ See, for instance, Fiedler 2008, 174, 176–178, 187; Henning 2004, 75. For the traditional view, see Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 20–24, 71ff.; Rašev 2000, 10–22; Georgiev 2004, 46 fig. 24. On the other hand, Atanasov 2003, 105–106, 108 suggested that the first stone buildings at Pliska may have been built for Tervel in the early eighth century. For Omurtag’s building programme, see the detailed discussion in the final chapter of this book.

⁶⁵ Rašev 1993a, 254–255.

⁶⁶ Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 17–18, 72; Rašev 1995a, 15–18, figs. 3–8; Fiedler 2008, 185–186, 200–201. A number of round-shaped huts discovered elsewhere in northeastern Bulgaria (Garvan, Blăskova, Nova Černa) have been classified as “yurts”, the traditional dwellings of the nomads of Central Asia; Vážarova 1986, 107, 109; Dimitrov 1973, 101–104. However, Fiedler has rightly pointed out that these “yurts” have been discovered within the Slavic settlement area. For the yurt-model found at Devnja, see Rašev 1976, 39–46. A similar model, dated to the tenth century, has been discovered in northern China, a fact that according to Ts. Stepanov (pers. comm.) points to the possibility that the model from Devnja belonged to late nomads.

⁶⁷ Inkova 2000, 62, fig. 15.

⁶⁸ Fiedler 2008, 186–187, with further references.

⁶⁹ Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 51, 86–87 (ditch accompanied by an embankment and mounds XXXII and XXXIII, north of the “Inner Town”), 71 (double palisade line inside the “Inner Town”); Dimitrov 1994, 41, 48; Fiedler 2008, 174. For a number of other, much later defensive lines in the immediate vicinity of the stone enclosure, see Henning 2007, 234–235.

The interior comprised 63 compartments, with four tower-like additions (each enclosing spiral staircases) at either end of the eastern and western façade respectively.⁷⁰ The 25 larger compartments, located in the middle of the building, may correspond to an inner courtyard of square plan, each side 43 metres long. Archaeologists believe that above the ground floor, which may have been up to 6 metres high, stood one or more stories of living and representative premises.⁷¹

The foundations of “Krum’s Palace” were laid with massive limestone blocks, and although some scholars have maintained that it was primarily build of wood, there can be no doubt that this was one of the oldest stone buildings at Pliska.⁷² The archaeological evidence suggests that it was destroyed by fire, traces of which have been discovered below the foundations of a new, much smaller palace built, possibly during the reign of Omurtag, over the burnt remains of the old one. Some of the older building material, especially the thick stone walls, were reused for the construction of the new palace (the so-called “Throne Palace”), while the rest was thrown out in a dump into the “Outer Town”, where it was found by the excavators, covered by a thick layer of ash.⁷³ The fire that destroyed “Krum’s Palace” is generally thought to have been that of 811, though in a recent study it has been claimed that at the time the enclosure of the “Inner Town” was built, the palace was still in existence.⁷⁴

A secret underground passage connected the central part of the older palace with a group of buildings to the north (identified as a private residence) and to an unspecified area further to the south.⁷⁵ The passageway, nearly 1 metre wide and 2 metres high, was built of wood and paved with tiles. Inside it archaeologists discovered fragments from 50 high-quality vessels (pitchers, teapots and amphoras), 36 of which have been completely restored. These

⁷⁰ Mijatev 1940–1942, 105–130; Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 19–20, 72–73; Fiedler 2008, 174–175. The size of these stone blocks range between 80–100 cm in length and 40–50 cm in width.

⁷¹ Fiedler 2008, 175–176; Neikov 1981, 30; Bojadžiev 1981c. For a different reconstruction, see Stančev-Vaklinov 1968, 262–264, fig. 7.

⁷² Mijatev 1940–1942, 125–126, 130. It is important to note that the site has also produced a great number of Roman bricks.

⁷³ Mijatev 1940–1942, 133; Stančev 1964b, 29–30.

⁷⁴ Fiedler 2008, 174, 176. Fiedler observes that the eastern and northern gates of the “Inner Town” are adjusted to the position of “Krum’s Palace” (the northern gate was apparently the starting point of a road passing by the western façade of the palace, while another road linked the eastern gate to the centre of the eastern façade of the building). This, he continues, would have made no sense if the older palace had already been destroyed.

⁷⁵ Mijatev 1940–1942, 103–105. For the private residence to the north of the old palace, see Mihajlov 1955, 75–77; Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 86–87.

were apparently produced on a fast-turning wheel, and are distinguished by their fine yellow clay, mostly covered with glaze or, in a few cases, with a red slip and red paint.⁷⁶ Pottery of similar technology and appearance was found in other parts of Pliska, including Mound XXXIII, to the northwest of the stone enclosure, as well as the Asar-dere production centre.⁷⁷ Scholars have long noted pronounced similarities, especially when it comes to the colour and range of forms, between the ceramics of the “secret passage” group and the “Yellow ware”, which was very common in Late Avar assemblages (*ca.* 700–800) in the Middle Danube region. Strong Central Asian influences (particularly some of the features typical of the so-called “new style” of pottery of the eighth and early ninth centuries) can also be detected.⁷⁸ These parallels strongly suggest that the “secret passage” vessels, which were recently shown to have been locally produced, cannot be much later than the early 800s.⁷⁹ If so, then the secret passage itself and the buildings that it connected may also be dated to this time. Nevertheless, any conclusions reached about the dating of “Krum’s Palace”, as well as that of several other structures nearby, including a bath, water reservoirs and storage areas, which are usually assigned to the earliest phase of stone architecture at Pliska, must be tentative.⁸⁰ At present, it may suffice to say that during the second half of the eighth century, Pliska had already developed into a central urban settlement (with a palatial core, industrial quarter, defensive installations etc.) that clearly served as the main, if not permanent, residence of the *khan*, and might well have been designated a “capital”.

2.2 THE INTERNAL ORGANIZATION OF THE *KHANATE*

2.2.1 *Social, Political and Military Organization*

It has already been pointed out that the warriors who founded the Bulgar state in the Lower Danube region were culturally related to the nomads of Eurasia.

⁷⁶ Rašev 2004b, 61–100; Petrova 2007, 322, 332.

⁷⁷ Rašev 2004b, 79–80; Dončeva-Petkova 2007a, 302, 308–312.

⁷⁸ Dončeva-Petkova 2007a, 311–312; Petrova 2007, 315–324, 332–336, who argues that the “secret passage” group and the so-called “light coloured ceramics”, found predominantly in Pliska, belong to a single classification group. On the other hand, Rašev 2004b, 81–82, thinks that the vessels of the secret passage show traces of strong Byzantine influence transmitted mainly through the Christian populations of the *khanate*; see also Angelova 1984, 91–94.

⁷⁹ Dončeva-Petkova 2007b, 65.

⁸⁰ For this group of buildings, see Rašev 1983 261; Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 87–88; Georgiev 1992, 78 fig. 1, 101; Georgiev 2004, 30 fig. 8, 31–38, for a brick tank which the author interprets as Krum’s wine cellar; Fiedler 2008, 184–185.

Indeed, their language was Turkic, and more specifically Oğuric, as is apparent from the isolated words and phrases preserved in a number of inventory inscriptions.⁸¹ Furthermore, like numerous nomadic peoples of Central and Inner Asia, they were familiar with the twelve-year animal cycle, and used a variant of the Turkic runic script.⁸² More importantly, they adhered closely, as far as we can tell, to the structural forms and socio-political institutions of other nomadic states of Eurasia. The steppe traditions of statehood, most recently exemplified, from their perspective, by the Kök Türk and Avar *qaghanates*, of which they had been a part in the late sixth and early seventh centuries respectively, seem to have served as one of the principal elements of consciousness-shaping and a source of political unity amongst the elite.⁸³

Sometime *ca.* 670, these Turkic-speaking warriors who identified themselves as Bulgars, having been pushed out of the Pontic steppes by the powerful Khazar confederation, established themselves just north of the Danube Delta. From this region they began raids on the empire, and following their victory over the Byzantines in 680/1, they moved across the river into present-day northeastern Bulgaria, incorporating the Slav and Christian inhabitants of that region into a subject tribal union.⁸⁴

At the time of his arrival in the Balkans, Asparuch led a collection of peoples with different anthropological and cultural characteristics. The evidence adduced by physical anthropologists, based on grave finds in northeastern Bulgaria and southern Romania, indicates a variety of somatic types, including Europoid/Mediterranean and (less frequently) Mongoloid.⁸⁵ Different funerary customs within these cemeteries provide further evidence for the ethnically diverse composition of the migrating tribes. All the Bulgar necropolises excavated to date are bi-ritual; the dead were either buried

⁸¹ Pritsak 1955, 71–75 (who describes the language as “Hunno-Bulgarian”); Beševliev 1981a, 314–317; Erdal 1993; Aladžov 2007 (noting the presence of some Iranian elements in the language of the Bulgars). A number of scholars, most prominently Dobrev 1991, 102–113, have argued that the elite was Iranian-speaking; see also Stepanov 1999, 15–63. Certainly, the possibility cannot be excluded that more than one language was spoken during this period by the nobility.

⁸² Golden 1992, 250. For the runic script, see 1.7 above. According to Kyzlasov 2000, these runes are not of Turkic origin.

⁸³ Golden 1982a, 73; Golden 1992, 128, 134–135, 244–245.

⁸⁴ For the historical background of the Khazar conquest of the Black Sea steppes (quite possibly in the late 650s) and Asparuch’s subsequent migration to the Lower Danube, see 3.1 below.

⁸⁵ Boev and Čolakov 1992, 302–311; Boev, Kondova and Čolakov 1987, 208–219; Jordanov 1982, 367–379.

or cremated.⁸⁶ In the region of Pliska/Šumen (Novi Pazar, Kjulevča, Madara, Divdjadovo etc) inhumation is the most common type of burial. The deceased were usually placed in simple grave pits, although occasionally, as the recent excavation at Kabijuk has demonstrated, members of the nobility were buried in barrows. The skeletons in these cemeteries have a northern orientation, and are sometimes accompanied by weapons (battleaxes, swords, lances) and dress accessories. More typical are offerings of entire domestic animals (poultry, horses, sheep, cattle, dogs) or meat.⁸⁷ Ceramic assemblages usually include jugs and small cooking or drinking pots of either a grey ware with burnished decoration (labelled “Saltovo” or “Pastirskoe ware” because of good analogies in sites of the “Saltovo-Majaki culture” in the steppes north of the Black Sea, particularly the hillfort of Pastyr’ske on the right bank of the Dniepr) or a red ware with combed decoration in horizontal or wavy lines.⁸⁸

Bi-ritual cemeteries in the central lands of the *khanate*, in present-day northeastern Bulgaria, can also be seen to form clusters around Varna (Varna district), Bdintsi and Balčik (Dobrič district).⁸⁹ In the cemeteries investigated here (with the exception of Devnja-1 and -3), cremation is the dominant form of burial. The burnt remains were deposited in pit graves, cists built of brick tiles and stone slabs, or urns. The associated goods, in both cremation and inhumation burials, consist mainly of ceramic vessels; animal

⁸⁶ By contrast, the Balkan (Moesian) Slavs, who used their own cemeteries, practised only cremation. Unlike the Bulgars who usually placed the ashes of their dead into simple cist- or pit-graves, the Slavs used large cooking pots as urns. The Bulgar bi-ritual necropolises contain comparatively few urn-graves. The most notable exception is the cemetery of Istria-Capul Viilor which includes 55 inhumations, 77 unurned pit-cremations and 120 urn-graves. In this case it is clear that Slavs and Bulgars buried their dead side by side; Fiedler 1989, 146–147, 152; Fiedler 1992, 307–311; see also Vážarova 1976, 83–172. Needless to say, all these studies are predicated on the idea that burial customs are ethnically specific. For the opposite view, see now Härke 2007, 11–18.

⁸⁷ Dimitrov 1974, 51–94; Fiedler 1989, 147–148; Fiedler 1992, 290–297; Vážarova 1976, 86ff., 167–169; Jotov 2004. For the recent discovery of a rich burial (containing arms, belt sets, personal ornaments, as well as ceramic finds) at the Divdjadovo cemetery (Šumen), which dates from the early eighth century and evidently belongs to a nobleman, see Atanasov, Venelinova and Stojčev 2007, 57–66; Atanasov, Venelinova and Stojčev 2008, 59–76.

⁸⁸ Almost 90% of all early medieval pottery in Bulgaria consists of these two wares; Fiedler 1992, 121–124, 154–155; Angelova and Dončeva-Petkova 1991, 14–21.

⁸⁹ The large bi-ritual cemetery at Balčik, consisting of some 300 inhumation and cremation burials, is dated by L. Dončeva-Petkova to between the end of the seventh and the end of the eighth century. However, some of the earliest artefacts found in the cemetery, most notably a buckle of the Corinth type, are generally dated to an earlier date, perhaps as early as the first quarter of the seventh century, that is, before the arrival of the Bulgars in the Lower Danube region; Dončeva-Petkova 2009, 76–87.

bones occur less frequently, while weapons are rare.⁹⁰ As in the Pliska/Šumen region, inhumations here are aligned on a north-south axis. However, in some mortuary assemblages of this group (Devnja-1 and -3, Topola, Hitovo-1), but also at Istria and Sultana north of the Danube, the practice of artificial skull deformation is especially common.⁹¹ Further, measures were often taken to prevent the deceased from leaving their graves, a clear indication that the Bulgars—like many nomadic peoples—believed in the afterlife. These included mutilating the corpse, placing rocks over the head, thorax and bones or over the burial, and occasionally tying several corpses together.⁹²

Similar protective measures against “vampirism” are visible in the bi-ritual cemeteries north of the Danube, in Wallachia and the Romanian Dobrudja (Obîrșia Nouă, Izvorul, Sultana, Frătești, Platonești, Istria-Capul Viilor). Most burials here are inhumations, and their grave orientation is predominantly west-east (rather than north-south), much like with later Christian burials.⁹³ The associated grave goods are not very different from those found in mortuary assemblages south of the Danube, although one may note the great quantity of domestic animal bones (offerings to the dead) recovered at Izvorul and Sultana.⁹⁴

The diverse burial customs encountered in the cemeteries of pre-Christian Bulgaria has led some historians and archaeologists to hypothesize the existence of several groups of Bulgar populations and cultures.⁹⁵ Inhumation graves of northern orientation, accompanied by large animals, food offerings and weapons are interpreted as signalling the presence of nomadic warriors. These burials cluster around Pliska, and have been rightly associated with the ruling elite of the *khanate*.⁹⁶ On the other hand, the practice of artificial skull deformation and the inhumations of western orientation are often attributed

⁹⁰ Fiedler 1992, 282–288; Fiedler 1989, 148; Dimitrov 1977, 91–92. Unlike other bi-ritual cemeteries in that region, at Balčik a significant number of animal bones (some belonging to oxen and cows) have been discovered; Dončeva-Petkova 2009, 80, 86.

⁹¹ Dimitrov 1977, 91; Fiedler 1992, 331–332. Artificially deformed skulls have also been found in the cemetery of Novi Pazar.

⁹² Beševliev 1981a, 389; Dimitrov 1974, 68–69; Dimitrov 1977, 92–93; Fiedler 1992, 301–304; Vážarova 1976, 106, 171; Atanasov, Venelinova and Stojčev 2008, 64; Stojanova 2007, 154–159.

⁹³ Fiedler 2008, 156.

⁹⁴ Fiedler 1989, 150. For the bi-ritual cemeteries north of the Danube, see also 3.2.2 below. It is worth remarking here that the finds from Platonești, the largest Bulgar cemetery known to date, containing over 600 burials, have yet to be published.

⁹⁵ Rašev 1994b, 29–33; Stepanov 1999, 16ff.

⁹⁶ Rašev 1993b, 23–33; Fiedler 1989, 154.

to a group employing cultural elements of Sarmato-Alanian origin.⁹⁷ It is generally believed that during their migration to the Balkans, the Bulgars brought with them or swept along several other groups of Eurasian nomads whose exact ethnic and linguistic affinities are impossible to determine (these entities are commonly linked to pit cremations), as well as a large number of Slav or Slavized sedentary populations, also residing in the Pontic steppe.⁹⁸ Scholars have correctly noted that Slavic urn-fields cluster around the bi-ritual cemeteries in northeastern Bulgaria, an archaeological context that allows a clear-cut distinction between the Bulgar centre and the Slavic periphery.⁹⁹ The southern extremity of the Bulgar settlement area is marked by a line running roughly from Varna to the Provadija plateau, and thence to the plain of Preslav. A number of Slavic cemeteries appearing beyond this area (Razdelna, Bläskovo, Dälgopol-1 and 2, Preslav-2, Tärговishte-1) have been ascribed to the Severoi and the “Seven Tribes”, who are said to have guarded the southern and southwestern approaches to the *khanate* respectively.¹⁰⁰

We have little in the way of direct information about the socio-political organization of the Bulgar tribal union. One may reasonably assume that it was structured with the typical nomadic division between “inner” and “outer” tribes, composed of clans which, in turn, were based on—real or fictitious—kinship ties.¹⁰¹ At the top of the socio-political pyramid stood the ruling clan and its tribe. In other polities in medieval Eurasia, most notably the Türk *qaghanate*, the ruling clan presented its actions as sanctioned and aided by heaven; it was therefore believed that all its members possessed a heavenly-granted mandate to rule (*qut*) and distribute good fortune to their subjects (*ulug*).¹⁰² We have no direct evidence for this occurring with the Bulgars, though it is clear that the ruler had sacral qualities and acted as an intermediary between the divine and his people. Next to the royal clan/tribe

⁹⁷ Sarmato-Alanian (Iranian-speaking) populations had been present in the Pontic steppe for several centuries as members of successive nomad states. For the practice of skull deformation among them, see Lipták 1983, 42–43.

⁹⁸ For an attempt to identify by archaeological means some of these groups, see Rašev 1993b, 27–28.

⁹⁹ Fiedler 2008, 158. Nevertheless, one should allow for the possibility of a model of settlement pattern similar to that in the Avar *qaghanate*, in which small groups of nomads—mostly elite families—lived in the proximity of settlements of agriculturists. The model is presented in great detail in Takács 1999–2000, 457–472.

¹⁰⁰ Fiedler 2008, 158–159; Fiedler 2007, 282–283. For these Slavic tribes, see our comments below.

¹⁰¹ Golden 1982a, 49, 50–51. For the importance of clans, see Stepanov 2010a, 42–43, who rightly describes them as the “heart of the nomadic social system”.

¹⁰² Golden 1982a, 45–46; Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, II, 7. For the terms *qut* and *ulug*, see Pritsak 1988, 752f.

were the “inner” tribes, which had joined the confederation at its inception.¹⁰³ Included here were also the tribes which had freely joined the union at a later date. These were allowed to retain their own leaders, although representatives of the ruling tribe were usually present in some administrative capacity.¹⁰⁴ It must be pointed out that the nobility of the “inner” tribes is very likely to have played a prominent role in the political and military administration of the state.¹⁰⁵

The “outer” tribes consisted of those tribes that had been forced—before or during the migration to the Balkans—to join the confederacy. Their rulers were probably replaced by members of the Bulgar aristocracy.¹⁰⁶ Beneath them were tribute-paying vassals, in this case Slav and Greek-speaking populations, who had no part in the state save as its subjects. These peoples played a vital part in the survival of the *khanate*. For it was they who bore the burden of supporting, with their tribute (paid in the form of agricultural produce), a mechanism of patronage and rewards, upon which the *khan*’s political power ultimately rested.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, they provided most of the manpower and technical expertise needed for the state’s defence, but also the organizational and literary skills required for the development of a more sophisticated administrative apparatus, a tradition that went back to older Turkic polities in the Eurasian steppes.¹⁰⁸ Their treatment by the ruling elite was subsequently flexible and tolerant. They enjoyed considerable internal autonomy within the state and were allowed to retain their religion and identity, even if they were incorporated into the different levels of the central government and the army.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Golden 1987–1991, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Golden 1982a, 51.

¹⁰⁵ For which, see below. The proto-bulgarian inscriptions have preserved the names of some of the core Bulgar tribes and clans: Čakarar, Kubiār, Kurigir, Duar, Ermiar; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 59–63; Granberg 2004, 551–561; Golden 1992, 246–247; Simeonov 208, 114–131.

¹⁰⁶ Golden 1982a, 51.

¹⁰⁷ Shepard 1995, 231–232; Stepanov 1999, 67–68.

¹⁰⁸ Indeed, all of the Turkic nomadic states incorporated and made use of sedentary, literate, non-Turkic specialists in governance, culture, commerce etc. For some examples, see Golden 1992, 134, 144, 172–173. For Bulgaria in particular, see Whittow 2007, 386; Sophoulis 2009a, 137–138.

¹⁰⁹ Shepard 1995, 232. The Slavic place- and river-names in early medieval Bulgaria is a clear indication that the Slavs were able to lead a largely independent existence within the *khanate*; see in particular Duridanov 1968, 133–141. A rectangular structure discovered inside the late-antique fort of Montana, in northwestern Bulgaria, is interpreted by some archaeologists as a Slavic sanctuary of the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. However, the evidence of the use of that structure as a pagan shrine (as well as its dating) is seriously challenged; see Stanilov and Alexandrov 1983, 40–52, and 8.1 below.

The supreme ruler of the union, whom the Byzantines referred to as *archon*, *kyrios*, *archegos* or *hegemon*, styled himself *khan/kana/kana syb-igi*, a title of Turkic origin which connoted a claim to universal, heavenly-mandated rule.¹¹⁰ It is worth remarking here that the notions of legitimacy and *continuatio* or *translatio imperii* were deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Turkic-nomadic world. Therefore a claim to the *qaghanal* title had to rest, among other things, on descent from a recognized “charismatic” clan.¹¹¹ The official genealogy of the Bulgar ruling house, compiled most probably during the reign of Symeon (893–927), traces back the origins of the *khans* to Attila (Avitohol) and his son Ernach (Irník).¹¹² The Bulgar rulers also appear to have been affiliated with the *Tu-lu* (Dulo), the leading clan of the left division of the Western Türk *qaghanate*.¹¹³ Whether accurately or not, some historians have even identified the Western *qaghan* Mo-ho-tu (assassinated *ca.* 631) with Organas, the nephew of Kubrat (Asparuch’s father and founder of “Great Bulgaria” in the Pontic steppes).¹¹⁴ In any case, there can be no doubt that Asparuch and his successors considered themselves fully justified in claiming *qaghanal* status and adopting the imperial ideology associated with it.

¹¹⁰ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, 72–73; Doerfer 1963–1975, III, 141–179 (no. 1161); Dobrev 1991, 188–190; Golden 1992, 146–147; Golden 1982b, 84–85; Savvides 2000, 167–179. We might recall, in this context, that in a number of Turkic inscriptions from the Orkhon river valley in Central Asia (particularly the Tonyukuk and Ongin inscriptions of the early/mid eighth century) the titles *khan* and *qaghan* are interchangeable; Tekin 1968, 10–11 (for the dates), and 283 (T1W2–3), 287 (T1N9), 291 (OF1); Clauson 1972, 630. Interestingly enough, a Byzantine source, the late tenth-century compilation known as *Patria of Constantinople*, employs the term *qagan* to denote a Bulgar ruler (διὰ το ἔλθεῖν χαγάνων, τόν ἄρχοντα Βουλγαρίας). However, the author, who in this brief note refers to the construction of the fort of Galata by Tiberios I, may, in fact, have the lord (*qagan*) of the Avars in mind; *Patria Const.*, II, 265.14. The title *qagan* for a Bulgar ruler also appears in a number of late eleventh-century Bulgarian apocalyptic texts originating in western Bulgaria; for an excellent discussion, see Stepanov 2008, 363–375. For the titles used by Byzantine historians, see Beševliev 1941, 289–298; Stepanov 1999, 78; Nystazopoulou-Pelekidou 1985, 1357–1370; Kyriakes 1993, 238–242.

¹¹¹ Golden 1982b, 86; Golden 2006, 89.

¹¹² Pritsak 1955, 35–38; Simeonov 2008, 137–138. On the other hand, Stepanov 2009, 130–131 rejects the identification of Avitohol with Attila. I would like to thank Tsvetelin Stepanov for drawing my attention to this piece of information. For the date of composition of the “Nameslist”, see Moskov 1988, 17ff. In this connection, see also Biljarski 2005, 7–21.

¹¹³ Pritsak 1955, 38, 64; Simeonov 2008, 110–113.

¹¹⁴ Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, I, 159; Artamonov 1962, 161–162. Organas has in turn been identified with Gostun of the Bulgar “Nameslist”; see Džonov 1977, 32. This identification has been rejected by Beševliev 1981a, 185. One may reasonably wonder whether “Organas” is in fact a Turkic title (*or-ğan/qan*) rather than a proper name.

As far as we can tell the title *kana sybigi* (lit. “*khan* shining, fortunate, heaven-blessed”) was peculiar to the Bulgars.¹¹⁵ It comes to light under Omurtag in the early 800s, though it must be acknowledged that we do not know how eighth-century rulers referred to themselves.¹¹⁶ Certainly, the Bulgars were, along with the Khazars, the only legitimate heirs to the Western Türk *qaghanate*.¹¹⁷ Having been forced to flee the Pontic steppe, and as other Bulgar elements had already become Khazar vassals, the Turkic-speaking warriors who founded the state in the Lower Danube would undoubtedly have been eager to emphasize both their political independence from the Khazar ruler as well as their imperial status.¹¹⁸ As a consequence, although there is no direct evidence for it, the possibility cannot be excluded that the Bulgar rulers adopted the *qaghanal* title from an early stage, in the late seventh or early eighth century. Why, then, does it only become apparent during the reign of Omurtag? Scholars have noted that when royal institutions fully blossomed amongst Eurasian nomads, they were subject to very strong cultural pressures.¹¹⁹ As will be discussed below, the first quarter of the ninth century witnessed the dramatic increase in the number of Byzantines—political refugees, immigrants and war prisoners—living in the *khanate*. At the same time, the process of “Slavization” of some elements of the Turkic-speaking population, presumably the lower strata, was well on its way.¹²⁰ Finding themselves in an essentially non-steppe environment, and being vastly outnumbered by the Christian and Slav subjects, the *khans*’ connection with the steppe *impe-*

¹¹⁵ Moravcsik 1958, II, 148. The title *kana sybigi* has been recently interpreted as a Bulgar translation of the Greek phrase *ek theou archon* and, elsewhere, as an equivalent of the title *basileus*; see Stepanov 2001, 13f; Curta 2006b, 28–29. For earlier suggestions, see Menges 1951, 91–92 (“ruler, commander of the army”), Bakalov 1985, 88–90 (“glorious khan”), Ovčarov 2002, 24 (“khan supreme”) and Nikolov 2005, 108 (“great khan”).

¹¹⁶ The only evidence comes from two Greek inscriptions struck by Tervel, one on a lead seal, the other on the Madara relief (for which see below). On the seal Tervel is identified as a *Caesar*, while the inscription accompanying the horseman relief at Madara calls him an *archon*. However, as Curta 2006b, 13–14, has rightly pointed out, both inscriptions were almost certainly cast for a Byzantine, Greek-speaking audience.

¹¹⁷ For the other successor states in Central and Eastern Eurasia, see Golden 1982a, 53 with lit.

¹¹⁸ The rulers of the peoples who had become Khazar subjects were known as “lesser *qaghans*”. We know some of their individual titles: *el tābar/yiltawar* (borne by the ruler of the Volga Bulgars), *baz qaghan* (“vassal *qaghan*”), *yabgulug bodun*, *kende/kündü* etc.; Golden 1982a, 55–56, 58.

¹¹⁹ Golden 1982a, 73.

¹²⁰ This is best demonstrated by the mixed settlement patterns and the discovery of cemeteries with both Slav and Bulgar rites; Fiedler 1992, 307–311. For evidence coming from pottery showing trends of unification during this period, see Dončeva-Petkova and Angelova 1982, 163–181. Note that according to Beševliev 1963, 39–40, some Bulgar names in the inscriptions are rendered by Slav phonetic forms.

rium became even more important as it reinforced their claim to hegemony. It would thus stand to reason that Omurtag asserted his identification with the steppe by emphasizing his royal title and hence his divine right to rule.¹²¹ However, at the same time he also sought to project his authority in a way that was recognizable by the non-Turkic populations of the *khanate*, particularly the Greek-speakers and Christians. Indeed, there is clear evidence of Byzantine titlature and insignia;¹²² in addition, the *khan* adopted Byzantine court ceremonials and acclamations.¹²³ In other words, he combined the Byzantine political and religious ideology with the ancient nomadic tradition in order to create a sense of Bulgar political-religious unity and a unique Bulgar identity for the *khanate's* diverse population.¹²⁴

The *khan* reigned at the top of a fully developed, stratified and stable administrative apparatus, as the profusion of titles and designations of ranks in the proto-bulgarian inscriptions and the Byzantine sources clearly shows. It is worth remarking in this context that the Bulgar titles were divided into honours and offices. The title *boila* (βοιλάς), for instance, was a senior rank in the court hierarchy, but its holder had no particular office. However, *boilas* were frequently found performing a variety of tasks in the civil and military administration of the *khanate*, in other words, they combined their honorific rank with a post.

The Bulgar nobility was divided into two classes: the senior nobles (the *boilas*) and the lesser ones, known as *bagains* (βαγαίνοι).¹²⁵ A source post-dating the period in question, Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De Cerimoniis*, which

¹²¹ The arrival of new nomadic components from the Avar *qaghanate* in the late eighth century, as well as Omurtag's attempt to expand his authority into the steppes north of the Black Sea in the 820s, may have also played a role in this process. For a discussion, see below at 3.2.5 and 8.1.

¹²² For example: [Κανα συβηγ]η Ομου[ρταγ] ο έκ Θεου ἄρχων; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 6; also nos. 1 Id, 13, 57, 58. Moreover, the representation of Omurtag on two golden medallions (one of which is now lost) shows some similarities with the images on gold coins of Constantine V, Nikephoros I, Michael I, Leo V and Michael II (820–829). The medallion bears the inscription “CAN-E SYBHΓI ωMORT-AI”. It is generally believed that they were struck for ceremonial use, and specifically for distribution among supporters of the ruler; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 86a–b; Fiedler 2008, 192–193; Stepanov 2001, 6–7; see also my comments in 8.1 below.

¹²³ Inscription no. 57 appeals to the *khan* to “tramp well on the emperor”, clearly an imitation of the *calcatio*, a Roman triumphal custom; for this, see McCormick 1986, 144. For more examples, see Beševliev 1963, 80–81.

¹²⁴ Nikolov 2000, 333–334. For the mixing of Turkic, Arab and Jewish traditions in the special issue Khazar coins of 838/9, which were probably designed to disseminate the new ideology that came with the Khazar conversion to Judaism, see now Kovalev 2005, 220–242.

¹²⁵ ... κέ ο ἄρχων πολάκης ἔδοκεν τοὺς Βουλγάρης φαγῆν κέ πῖν κέ τοὺς βοιλαδας κ(ἐ) βαγαινοὺς ἔδοκεν μεγάλη ξένηα; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 58; Beševliev 1981a, 330–332; Stepanov 1999, 65–66.

lists the correct protocol and forms of address to be observed in receiving the Bulgarian ambassadors to Constantinople, and gives the highest Bulgar honours in order of precedence, distinguishes between the “six great *boilas*”, who were at the top of the socio-political hierarchy (after the royal family), and the “remaining inner and outer *boilas*” below them.¹²⁶ The “six great *boilas*” were the closest advisors of the *khan*; almost certainly among them were the *boila kavkhan* and the *ičirgu boila* who seem to have functioned both as civil administrators and military commanders.¹²⁷ Most—if not all—of the “inner *boilas*”, who resided at Pliska or its vicinity, and the “outer *boilas*”, based in the provinces, appear to have occupied important posts. This is probably true about the *kana boila qolovur* (κάνα βοιλάν κουλουβρος), the *bagatur boila qolovur* (βογοτόρ βοηλά κουλούβρος), the *ik boila* (υκ βοηλα), and the *boila čigat* (βοιλα τζιγατος).¹²⁸ In quite the same way, the term *bagain*, reserved for the lesser nobles, appears in association with a number of other titles (*bagatur bagain*, *biri bagain*, *ičirgu bagain*, *setit bagain*, *ik bagain*), the meaning and functions of which are uncertain.¹²⁹ As in all nomadic confederations, the *boilas* and the *bagains* made up a decision-making council, known in the Byzantine sources as κόμβεντον, which—at least until the late eighth century—could restrict the powers of the *khan*.¹³⁰ Over the next few decades, particularly following the reign of Krum, the Bulgar rulers tightened their control over the elite, and as a result the influence of the council gradually declined.¹³¹ Exactly how this happened remains unclear; the renewed Byzantine pressure under Nikephoros may well have facilitated the drive towards greater centralized political power. It may further be conjectured

¹²⁶ πῶς ἔχουσιν οἱ ἕξ Βολιάδες οἱ μεγάλοι; πῶς ἔχουσι καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ οἱ ἔσω καὶ οἱ ἔξω Βολιάδες; *De Cerim.*, 681.17–18 (ch. 48).

¹²⁷ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 13, 14, 47, 53; Beševliev 1981a, 345, 348–349; Gjuzelev 2007; Stepanov 1999, 85–87. Although it is possible that the *kavkhan* was the most powerful figure in the state after the *khan*—especially in the late seventh and early eighth centuries—there is no evidence that he functioned as a deputy or co-ruler, as suggested by Beševliev 1981c, 283–286, Nikolov 2005, 71–76 and others. Beševliev’s claims of a *Doppelkönigtum* have been rejected by Moskov 1988, 255–283. In this connection, see also Stepanov 2003, 219–232.

¹²⁸ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 14, 50, 69; Theoph., 447.3; Golden 1992, 249–250. Scholars have pointed out the similarity between the Bulgar κουλουβρος and the Avar Βουκολαβράς whom Theohylaktos Symocatta calls a “μάγος”; see Whitby 1988, 145–146. Beševliev 1981a, 351, claims that the former may have functioned as a high priest; Kalojanov 2003, 139ff.; Stepanov 1999, 88.

¹²⁹ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 48, 49, 50, 64; Slavova 2009, 116–129.

¹³⁰ Thus when Telets made overtures for peace to Constantine V in 761/2, the “Bulgars” (i.e. the nobility) held a council which deposed the *khan*; Theoph., 433.17–20; see here Beševliev 1981a, 346–347; Beševliev 1981c, 297–298; Curta 2006b, 16, 18–19.

¹³¹ Stepanov 2001, 3–4.

that the influx of booty yielded by Krum's raids in the former Avar territory and in Thrace—which was then distributed as largesse to nobility—ensured that the *khan* became the primary source of wealth, and hence of political power, in the *khanate*.¹³² This new relationship between the *khan* and his nobles is reflected in the appearance under Omurtag of a special institution, the so-called “nurtured men” (θρεπτοί ἄνθρωποι).¹³³ This institution may have been closely connected with the notion of *ulug*, the *khan's* heavenly good fortune: the ruler would distribute (in the form of personal gifts at special festivals involving, among other things, the provision of food) luck, happiness and wealth to his aristocrats in return for their loyalty and support.¹³⁴ Archaeologists believe that the hoard burial of weapons and other iron implements—an ostentatious display of wealth, power and prestige, characteristic of eighth- and ninth-century Bulgaria, but also well known in other societies—was an integral part of these “alliance-building” festivals.¹³⁵

The administrative structure of the *khanate* is only partially known due to the fragmentary nature of our sources. The limited evidence seems to suggest that the state was divided into two parts: a central or “inner” district, encompassing the steppe-like plain of Pliska which was mainly settled by the ruling elite; and the provinces, also known as “outer” or “border” territories.¹³⁶ An inscription carved *ca.* 812 on the left side of an ancient altar at Malamirovo in northern Thrace describes the political and military administration of a newly-established province on the Byzantine frontier, thus throwing light on the internal organization and structure of the “outer lands”.¹³⁷ The province was subdivided into two “wings” and a “centre”, that is to say, three defined

¹³² See my comments at 5.2.1 below.

¹³³ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 59–69.

¹³⁴ Stepanov 2001, 14 with lit; Andreev 1993, 63–70; Pritsak 1981b, 19–29. Such a festival/ceremony is commemorated in an inscription found near Šumen; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 58 (see above footnote no. 125).

¹³⁵ Curta 1998–1999, 15–62, here at 37–38. The author has identified at least 23 such hoards in the territories of the *khanate* in Bulgaria and Romania.

¹³⁶ A later source, the *Annales Bertiniani* by Hincmar of Rheims, reports that *ca.* 866 the *khanate* was divided into ten administrative districts (*comitatus*). However, in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, before the Bulgar expansion into western Thrace, Macedonia and present-day Albania, the number of provinces was certainly smaller; *Annales Bertiniani*, 85. Some scholars, most notably Ts. Stepanov (pers. comm.), believe that Bulgaria's “inner” district was not around Pliska only, but may also have encompassed the areas around Varna and Silistra.

¹³⁷ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 47. For this inscription, which scholars often interpret as describing the Bulgar army in order of battle, see 6.2.2 below.

areas with their own administrators.¹³⁸ The “centre” was evidently the seat of the overall commander, the governor, who seems to have borne the title/rank *tarqan*.¹³⁹ Another regional official mentioned in the Byzantine sources is the *komes*;¹⁴⁰ it might be assumed that he was the commander of one of the two “wings”. Beneath the *tarqans* and the *komites* were the leaders of the tribute-paying vassals. In northern Thrace the Christian populations were headed by the *strategoï*, i.e., prominent Byzantine deserters or refugees who enjoyed the confidence of the *khan*.¹⁴¹ The *župans* appear to have played a similar role among the Slavs.¹⁴² The “inner land”—Pliska and the surrounding plains—was under the direct authority of the supreme ruler. It is possible, though by no means certain, that it was also subdivided into a “centre” and two “wings”. The *khan*’s brother and elder son, who seem to have been the next in line of succession, are likely to have commanded the two “wings”.¹⁴³

Like all nomads, the Bulgars through their experience of life in the steppes had acquired a set of skills that could be easily put to military use should the need arise. The early training in horsemanship and marksmanship, the courage and ruthlessness instilled by hunting and fighting, the stamina developed through singular privations, all gave them a physical and moral advantage vis-à-vis their sedentary enemies.¹⁴⁴ At the same time, being subject to constant pressure from their neighbours, the Bulgars had no choice but to attain a high level of strategic organization, cohesion and discipline,

¹³⁸ The division of the state or its provinces into “wings” (reproducing the traditional division of an army in battle array) was practiced by the Kök Türks and other Eurasian nomads; see Golden 1982a, 52–53, 64–65.

¹³⁹ Thus, in the second half of the ninth century a *bori tarqan* was reportedly commander of Belgrade; *Vita Clementis*, ch. xvi, 47; further, an inscription recovered near Thessalonike refers to a certain Theodoros, *olgu tarqan* and *komes* of Dristros; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 46 and p. 75; Golden 1980, 181, 210–212. Unfortunately, in inscription no. 47 from Malamirovo neither the title nor the name of Krum’s brother, who commanded the “centre”, have been preserved. The inscription leaves no doubt that his post was higher than that of the *kavkhan* and the *ičirgu boila*, in the left and right “wings” respectively, though it is very unlikely that he bore the title *tarqan*; see the analysis in Gjuzelev 2007, 193–198. The *kavkhan* and the *ičirgu boila* were both “inner boils”, it is therefore surprising that they had been entrusted with administrative commands in the provinces. However, it must be born in mind that the arrangements described in the inscription were temporary and reflect the situation in northern Thrace immediately after its incorporation into the *khanate*.

¹⁴⁰ Leo Gram., 232.43; *Vita Clementis*, ch. xvii, 54.

¹⁴¹ This is also true about the Byzantine captives resettled north of Danube; they had their own *strategos*, who was under the authority of a Bulgar *komes*; Leo Gram., 231.15–232.3; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 47.

¹⁴² In turn, the Slav *župans* may have been supervised by the *župan tarqan* who was Bulgar; see Beševliev 1981a, 353.

¹⁴³ For the lateral system of succession in the *khanate*, see the comments at 7.1 below.

¹⁴⁴ Di Cosmo 2002b, 6–7; Stepanov 2010a, 42–43, 46–47.

unknown to many nomadic peoples. Indeed, the sources describing Byzantine-Bulgar warfare, particularly in the early ninth century, indicate that the Bulgars could fight in an orderly formation, thus being able to execute more complex tactical maneuvers.¹⁴⁵ Without a strong leadership this would have been impossible. Their army was strongly hierarchical, with a clear line of command and orders enforced through blind obedience. As in the Türk and Avar *qaghanates*, the military and socio-political organization of the Bulgar state appear to have been inseparable; for instance, the governor of a province was also its supreme military commander.¹⁴⁶ Likewise, his subordinates in the two “wings” combined military and civilian duties. On campaign, each administrative district might have been represented by a unit headed by the *tarqan* and his “left” and “right” sub-commanders. The overall command was in the hands of the *khan*.¹⁴⁷

Mobilization in the army was all-inclusive and was enforced by fear rather than by consensus, as was usually the case in unions containing unwilling members (in this case the Moesian Slavs and Christians).¹⁴⁸ Thus, according to the letter of reply of Pope Nicholas I to the *khan* Boris-Michael, if before going to war a recruit was found to have been unprepared or ill-equipped, he was to be executed.¹⁴⁹ The subject populations, above all the Slavs, were mainly recruited as infantrymen. They were lightly armed, carrying small shields and spears, and may not have worn body armour. Some of them, especially their elite, are likely to have fought on horseback.¹⁵⁰ Being the lowest-ranking and most unreliable members of the union, they were placed in the front ranks of the fighting unit to absorb enemy attacks.¹⁵¹

We are much better informed about the military organization of the ruling elite. This is mainly due to the discovery of seven inventory inscriptions, written in Greek or in Greek script, each listing, under the title of an officer, a number of coats of mail, helmets or suits of horse armour (bardings).¹⁵²

¹⁴⁵ See, for instance, Theoph., 484.29–485.4, 501.32–34; Scriptor incertus, 337.9–339.1.

¹⁴⁶ Beševliev 1981a, 347.

¹⁴⁷ Theoph., 433.1–8, 500.28–30, 503.5–7.

¹⁴⁸ Golden 2002, 133.

¹⁴⁹ A similar fate awaited those who took flight before or during battle; *Responsa*, chs. xxii–xxiii, 579; see also ch. xl, 582, where Nicholas refers to the forceful extraction of arms from the poor.

¹⁵⁰ This is clearly demonstrated by the discovery of eighth- or early ninth-century spurs at Stårmen and Odårtsi. It must be noted here that there is no evidence that Bulgars or any other nomads made use of spurs; Madgearu 2005, 106.

¹⁵¹ Nicolle 1996, 107; Golden 2002, 129–130.

¹⁵² For example: σετη βαγαίνου ἐξουσία λορίκια ὀμοῦ πγ', κασίδια ὀμοῦ ο'; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 48–54, here no. 49; Gjuzev 2007, 132–140. These inscriptions do not mention

This material would appear to indicate that, as in other nomadic confederations, the highest-ranking—and presumably wealthiest—Bulgar officials were required to produce a certain number of soldiers and their equipment.¹⁵³ From these inscriptions it is also possible to see that at least some portion of the Bulgar army consisted of heavy cavalry alongside the light cavalry bowmen so typical of the Eurasian steppe armies.¹⁵⁴ The former probably formed a special, elite unit, whose presence is attested by the author of the so-called *Chronicle of 811* in his account of Nikephoros' disastrous campaign against the Bulgars.¹⁵⁵ Iconographic evidence (graffito drawings) indicates that the riders were normally armed with lance and sword, and often carried a shield for additional protection.¹⁵⁶ Although not mentioned in the sources, it is almost certain that the *khan* (and perhaps his brother and elder son) had a mounted retinue of a few hundred men, which is very likely to have been drawn from the ranks of the nobility.¹⁵⁷

The size of the Bulgar army is difficult to estimate. The numbers given in the Byzantine sources are, most of the time, highly inflated.¹⁵⁸ In any case, it is clear that Bulgar military strength did not match that of Byzantium, a highly militarized state. The empire in the eighth and ninth centuries may have had a really large military establishment, but in practice could only field in a given theatre of war an army of a maximum of 20,000 troops.¹⁵⁹ The Bulgars were unable to achieve anything approaching that result. It may be conjectured that the maximum conceivable force led by the *khan* himself on a major offensive expedition (such as that against Constantinople reportedly

the name of the ruler who commissioned them, but one may venture to suggest that they date from the reign of Omurtag, when all the evidence points to the development of an elaborate and centralized state organization increasingly based on literacy.

¹⁵³ For some examples, see Golden 2002, 142–143. Pritsak 1981a, 55, believes that these officers simply “commanded” the troops whose equipment is listed in the inscriptions.

¹⁵⁴ The existence of heavy cavalry can be inferred from the use of coats of mail; Pritsak 1981a, 53–55; Golden 2002, 140. In this connection, see also Dien 1981–1982, 37–41.

¹⁵⁵ ... ἐνρὼν τινα στρατὸν τῶν Βουλγάρων ἐπιλέκτων ἐνωπλισμένων, ἀπομεινάντων πρὸς φυλακὴν τοῦ τόπου; *Chronicle of 811*, 210.11–12.

¹⁵⁶ Ovčarov 1982, 44–53; Rašev 1984, 61, 63. For the horse armour, usually of lamellar or felt, see Ovčarov 1975, 31–34.

¹⁵⁷ The only available evidence concerns Krum's brother who is reported to have besieged Adrianople with his “own army” in 813; Theoph., 503.6–7.

¹⁵⁸ See for example, *Chronicle of 811*, 210.13–14 (50,000); Scriptor incertus, 346.14 (30,000).

¹⁵⁹ See Haldon 2000, 305ff., esp. at 310. The most reliable evidence for the size of the Byzantine expeditionary force are the tenth-century military manuals and specifically the *Praecepta Militaria*, and the *De re Militari* (the latter is concerned with operations against the Bulgars, and envisages the army as commanded by the emperor), both of which describe a force of about this order of magnitude; *Praecepta Militaria*, 12–59; *De re Militari*, 241–327.

prepared by Krum in 814) was no more than 10,000–12,000 men.¹⁶⁰ At the same time, the limited carrying capacity of the Bulgar pasturelands meant that this was mainly an army of foot soldiers. A reasonable guess for the cavalry/infantry ratio would be 1:3, or 3,000 cavalry and 9,000 infantry.

The main strength of the Bulgar army was the great degree of discipline, cohesion and co-ordination attained by the highly mobile—and rapidly deployed—cavalry. Its battle array and tactical employment seem to have been extremely flexible.¹⁶¹ Equipped mainly for close action, the heavy cavalry was probably positioned at the centre of the formation (immediately behind a first column consisting of tribute-paying troops), with the light cavalry bowmen in the flanks to encircle or lure the foe into an ambush.¹⁶² Surprise attacks and feigned retreats were prominent in the repertoire of steppe tactics, and, as the Byzantine sources seem to suggest, were used quite often by the Bulgars during this period.¹⁶³ Although engineering and siege machinery are not usually associated with nomads, the sources also indicate that the Bulgars could be quite ingenious in these areas, often making use of talent locally available, or, more frequently, imported from Byzantium.¹⁶⁴ These men, with their expertise, seem to have contributed greatly to Krum's military successes in the years 812–814, when numerous Thracian cities as far as the Sea of Marmara were captured. It must be borne in mind, however, that the Bulgars were at times aided by the ineptitude of the Byzantine commanders within these cities, or by the fear they—like all steppe warriors—managed to instill in the defenders.¹⁶⁵

2.2.2 *The Religion of the Proto-Bulgarians*

Not very much is known about the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Bulgars. Our best evidence comes from the *Responsa* of Pope Nicholas I, a long pastoral letter addressed to the Bulgar *Khan* Boris-Michael soon after his conversion to Christianity in 864.¹⁶⁶ Some additional information can

¹⁶⁰ Nikolov 2005, 114–115. For Krum's massive preparations in 814, see Scriptor incertus, 347.11–348.2.

¹⁶¹ The same can be said for the combat techniques employed by the Bulgar cavalymen who could rapidly switch from lance or sword to bow. In this connection, see now Curta 2008a, 310–314 (with reference to the Avars).

¹⁶² See here Maurice, *Strategikon*, ii. 1.20–27; xi. 2.1–65; Golden 2002, 133–137; Nicolle 1996, 105–107.

¹⁶³ For instance, Theoph., 484.29–485.4, 501.32–34; Scriptor incertus, 338.17–19.

¹⁶⁴ Theoph., 485.9–11; Golden 2002, 151–152.

¹⁶⁵ A point illustrated by Krum's capture of Serdica in 809; Theoph., 485.4–7.

¹⁶⁶ MGH, Epp. VI, 568–600.

be culled from the proto-bulgarian inscriptions, the study of archaeological finds, as well as the brief references of Byzantine writers. Indeed, Theophylaktos of Ochrid writes in the eleventh century that before 864 the Bulgars venerated the sun, the moon and the stars, and that they sacrificed dogs to them.¹⁶⁷ He also indicates that they believed in many gods and worshipped idols.¹⁶⁸ Theophanes describes the sacrifices made by Krum outside the Golden Gate in 813, while the *Scriptor incertus de Leone* provides a clear statement of human sacrifice.¹⁶⁹ Further evidence is offered by Theophanes continuatus and the *Vita Nicephorii* on the occasion of the conclusion of the Thirty Years' Peace between Byzantium and Bulgaria ca. 816.¹⁷⁰

Far more informative is the pastoral letter of Pope Nicholas I, in which he responds to a set of questions raised by Boris-Michael (852–889).¹⁷¹ The *khan's* questions, which the Pope often paraphrases, concerned dogmatic and technical issues, and more specifically external practices and disciplinary aspects of the Christian faith.¹⁷² This material strongly implies that Boris

¹⁶⁷ Σκυθηκῆ δὲ ἀφροσύνη δουλεύοντες ἡλίῳ τε καὶ σελήνῃ καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς ἄστροις· εἰσὶ δέ, οἳ καὶ τοῖς κυσὶ θυσίας προσέφερον; Theophylaktos, *Mart.*, 189C.

¹⁶⁸ Theophylaktos, *Mart.*, 196C–197D. In addition, he provides evidence that the Bulgar rulers presided over religious disputes, such as that between Omurtag and the Byzantine captive Kinamon. Similar disputes appear to have taken place in the Uighur and Khazar courts; see for example, *Vita Constantini*, ch. 9, 45.

¹⁶⁹ Theoph., 503.10–11; *Scriptor incertus*, 342.2–4; Golden 1998, 195. These written accounts of Bulgar sacrifices are corroborated by archaeological finds. Excavations of a pre-historic mound just outside Pliska's "Outer Town" brought to light a 12 metre-deep shaft containing the skeletons of two horses, two dogs and a cat, as well as pottery of the mid/late eighth or early ninth century. Although initially interpreted as a cenotaph for a Bulgar *khan*, the shaft is more likely to have been a sacrificial pit dug into an older burrow; Rašev and Stanilov 1998, 67–72; Fiedler 2008, 209; Čobanov 2008. Moreover, a mound excavated at Zlatna niva, some 3 km west of Pliska, has produced 250 animal bones accompanied by eighth- and ninth-century pottery, and is also believed to have been a pagan memorial monument; Rašev 1991, 209–218. The same is probably true about the so-called "Devtaşlar", a group of monuments consisting of upright stones (1–2 metres tall) set in rows, usually marking important roads from Pliska to other sites in the central area of the *khanate* (Madara, Kabijuk, Stan); see Rašev 1992a; Fiedler 1992, 324–326.

¹⁷⁰ Theoph. cont., 31.16–21; *Vita Niceph.*, 207.2–6.

¹⁷¹ The *Responsa* was written in 866, less than two years after the *khan* had accepted baptism by the delegates of the patriarch of Constantinople, Photios. Boris, ever mindful of Byzantine control of his land through the Byzantine church (Photios' delegates had successfully sought to direct the missionary activity in Bulgaria) and anxious to establish his own church hierarchy, flirted briefly with Rome, but by 870 he was once again ready to recognize Byzantine ecclesiastical direction; for a discussion, see Gjuzev 1976, 128–159; Curta 2006a, 166–174; Fine 1983, 113–126; Sullivan 1966, 60–74. For Photios' two letters to Boris (ca. 865–866), see *Epist.*, nos. 1, 271; see also Simeonova 1998, 112–156; Stauroudaki-White and Berrigan 1982, 13ff.

¹⁷² For example, dietary and fasting regulations (chs. 4–5, 42–43, 59, 60, 69), sexual *mores* (63–64), divorce (96), asylum for criminals (24, 26–30) and battle customs and preparations (33–34, 36, 40, 46).

viewed religion as a ritual rather than a dogma. He—and no doubt his subjects—appear to have been beset by a fear that as neophyte practitioners of the Christian cult they might commit certain faults which would displease the Christian god and result in great consequences.¹⁷³ Such an approach was shared by many Eurasian nomads, who believed that every aspect of life involved acts which might please or displease the divine power and thus shape the course of one's very existence.¹⁷⁴

The *Responsa* demonstrates how difficult it was for the new Bulgar converts to give up their ancient customs and habits of life renounced by the Byzantine missionaries then operating in Bulgaria. A major concern of Boris, for instance, seems to have been the anxiety of his subjects about abandoning the practice of ancestor worship.¹⁷⁵ In general, dualistic concepts were quite common among the beliefs of Turkic peoples, who venerated as one of their most important deities Erlik or Arlik-khan, lord of the underworld.¹⁷⁶ Although the cult of Erlik/Arlik is not evident in the *khanate*, there is little doubt that the Bulgars believed in an afterlife. This is confirmed by some of their burial customs, particularly the mutilation of the corpse and the placing of food offerings in the grave.¹⁷⁷ As noted already, the cult of ancestors had also important political and ideological functions. Thus, in an attempt to establish its authority over the other members of the union, the ruling elite traced back its origins to Attila and his son Ernach (Avitohol and Irnik in the "Namelist of the Bulgarian Princes").¹⁷⁸

The *Responsa* affirms the practice of paganism in its crudest form by the Bulgars. In chapter 62, Nicholas refers to a stone credited with healing

¹⁷³ Sullivan 1966, 134; Simeonova 1998, 195–222.

¹⁷⁴ As Sullivan 1966, 85, 134, has rightly pointed out, the conversion of 864 did not fundamentally change the religious outlook of the Bulgars; it simply involved the substitution of a new, more powerful deity for an old one. The consequence of this fact was the need to adjust the outward conduct of life to a new law so as to assure the continued flow of divine assistance and to avoid the possibility of divine wrath.

¹⁷⁵ *Pro parentibus vestris, de quibus consulitis, qui infideles mortui sunt...*; *Responsa*, ch. lxxxviii, 596. In the indigenous religious systems of Inner Asia, it was widely believed that family, clan and tribal ancestors served as protective spirits for the well-being of the people. Their souls were, in effect, recycled as each newborn child received the soul of one of his/her dead ancestors; Golden 1998, 196. For the Papal policy towards the ancestor worship of the Bulgars and a comparison with the situation in Beowulf's England, see Wormald 1978, 46ff.

¹⁷⁶ Eliade 1964, 10, 204.

¹⁷⁷ The mutilation of the corpse was meant to prevent the deceased from leaving his grave; see section 2.2.1 above.

¹⁷⁸ Pritsak 1955, 35–38; Nikolov 2000, 337.

properties.¹⁷⁹ This stone is often associated with the rocky cliff of Madara, some 10 km south of Pliska. There, archaeologists have discovered a semi-circular wall enclosing a large rock, which has been interpreted as a pagan shrine.¹⁸⁰ Elsewhere, we hear that the Bulgars “sacrifice and bend their knees to idols” and “adore works of their own hands and senseless elements”, a common enough accusation in the western sources and one that should automatically be discarded as a mere *topos* of the genre.¹⁸¹ In addition, the Pope indicates that the *khan* exercised priestly authority. Thus, in a time of drought he used to command his subjects to pray to summon the rain.¹⁸² In many steppe societies weapons and other iron implements played a symbolic, arguably quasi-magic role.¹⁸³ Similar ideas probably existed in pre-Christian Bulgaria where it was customary to swear oaths on swords.¹⁸⁴ Further, it appears that horses were considered to be sacred, a clear sign that the steppe past continued to play an important role in shaping the consciousness of the ruling elite.¹⁸⁵ Particularly revealing is the section of the *Responsa* devoted to the customs and rituals of the Bulgars when setting out for battle. There we hear that they observed the “days and hours” (*dies et horas observare*), and performed “incantations, jests, iniquitous songs and auguries”.¹⁸⁶ In addition, Boris inquired of the Pope whether there were any days when it was not fitting to go into battle.¹⁸⁷ It should be noted in this context that some Eurasian nomads believed that the best time to attack was when the moon

¹⁷⁹ *Refertis, quod lapis inventus sit apud vos, antequam Christianitatem suscepissetis, de quo, si quisquam ob aliquam infirmitatem quid accepit, soleat aliquotiens remedium corpori suo praeberere...*; *Responsa*, ch. xlii, 589.

¹⁸⁰ Minaeva 1996, 55; Beševliev 1981a, 366–367. In this connection, it is worth mentioning the discovery in other parts of northeastern Bulgaria (Pliska, Kameniak, Dlačsko) of a group of eight libation stones, each with engraved channels in a geometric pattern. These stones are clearly connected with pre-Christian ritual practices; Fiedler 2008, 209 with lit.

¹⁸¹ *Responsa*, ch. xli, 582–583.

¹⁸² *Nosse vos velle asseverates, si liceat omnibus vestries praecipere tempore siccitatis ad pluviam postulandam ieiunium et orationem facere*; *Responsa*, ch. lvi, 587–588. The priestly authority of the *khan* is also deduced from the fact that he made sacrifices to the Bulgar deities; see Theoph., 503.10–11; Scriptor incertus, 342.2–4.

¹⁸³ Golden 1998, 193–194; Curta 1998–1999, 31–32 with lit.

¹⁸⁴ *Responsa*, ch. lxxvii, 591.

¹⁸⁵ *Responsa*, ch. xxxiii, 580–581. Describing the procedure by which the Thirty Years’ Peace was ratified *ca.* 816, Ignatios the Deacon reports that Leo V, who took his oath after the Bulgar rite, turned the saddles of a horse upside down and grasped its triple-stranded reins; Beševliev 1967, 70, subsequently claimed that this particular rite was connected with the veneration of the horse.

¹⁸⁶ *Responsa*, ch. xxxv, 581.

¹⁸⁷ *Responsa*, ch. xxxvi, 581.

was full or still waxing; when it was waning, however, military action had to be avoided.¹⁸⁸

The Bulgar belief system seems to have consisted of several other cults, including that of the hero-horseman, a popular character in Turko-Altaiic (but also Alan) mythology.¹⁸⁹ Amongst other things it has been suggested that the massive rock-relief at Madara (depicting a hunting scene in which a horseman, followed by a running dog, points his spear towards a lion) is connected with this particular cult.¹⁹⁰ Cults centered on celestial bodies and natural elements were particularly popular in the *khanate*. As already mentioned, Theophylaktos reports that the Bulgars deified the sun, the moon and the stars, while Clement of Ochrid (*ca.* 830–916) indicates that they also venerated fire and water—a comment that makes one wonder whether we have hear another example of literary *topos*.¹⁹¹ According to some archaeologists, the images of horsemen depicted on amulets or in rock drawings may well represent Turkic (or Iranian) solar cults.¹⁹² Similar ideas have been expressed about certain sun-images, as well as the artificial rock grooves discovered in the cave of Gortalovo near Pleven.¹⁹³

Despite the fact that the Bulgars venerated numerous deities, the protobulgarian inscriptions, which express the official ideology of the state, refer explicitly to only one god (ὁ θεός).¹⁹⁴ This could suggest that the warrior aristocracy stood closer to henotheism, a term meaning belief in, and possible

¹⁸⁸ Beševliev 1981a, 382–383.

¹⁸⁹ Ovčarov 1982, 61f; Rašev 1984, 60–70.

¹⁹⁰ Rašev 1984, 64–65. On the other hand, Stanilov 1996, 270–278, believes that the horseman represents an anonymous Bulgar deity, while Aladžov 1983, 77–79, identifies him with Tangra (on whom see below). On the other hand, Toporov 1981 relates the horseman to the Iranian deity Mithra/Mitra. For a detailed overview of the debate, see Stepanov 2007. For the alleged parallels of the Madara relief with Sassanian rock-reliefs, see Čobanov 2005. For the description of the relief, which probably dates from the early eighth century, and is accompanied by several fragments of Greek inscriptions mentioning the *khans* Tervel, Krumesis (or Krum) and Omurtag respectively, see Rašev 1998, 192–204; Gerasimov 1956, 115–166; and Beševliev 1956, 51–114.

¹⁹¹ Theophylaktos, *Mart.*, 189C; Kliment, 52 (homily no. 5); Vaklinov 1977, 113–114.

¹⁹² Ovčarov 1984, 136–139. For a different interpretation, see Minaeva 1996, 76–77, 216–217.

¹⁹³ Ovčarov 1982, 64–69; Ovčarov 1996, 283–286. The cross-sign, the circle and the swastika, which are all represented in a great number of drawings in Bulgaria, were also popular solar symbol in the steppes; Nikolov 2000, 339, 345.

¹⁹⁴ For instance: ἔδοκεν ὁ Θε[ὸ]ς φόβον κὲ ἄ[φ]ηκ[α]ν κὲ ἔφυγαν; Beševliev, *Napdisi*, no. 2; ὁ Θε(εὸς) ἀξήσοι αὐτὸν ζῆσε ἔτη ρ'; no. 56; more striking is the statement in inscription no. 14, found in the Basilica “B” at Philippoi: Ἡ [τη]ς τὴν ἀλήθην γυρεύη, ὁ Θε(εὸς) Θεοῦ. κ(έ), ἢ της ψεύδευτε, ὁ Θε(εὸς) Θεοῦ. Τοὺς Χριστιανοὺς οἱ Βούλγαρις πολὰ ἀγαθὰ ἐπίυσα[ν] κ(έ) οἱ Χριστιανοὺς ἐλησιμόνησαν, ἀλλὰ ὁ Θε(εὸς) Θεοῦ. It is clear that in the eyes of the Bulgar nobles this *theos* acted as an omnipotent, invisible judge. Nikolov 2000, 347, argues that the inscription of Philippoi is a clear manifestation of religious syncretism.

worship of, multiple gods, one of which is supreme.¹⁹⁵ By failing to specify his name, the *khans* had evidently tried to make this god recognizable to many different peoples.¹⁹⁶ Thus, for the Greek-speaking populations of the *khanate*, the anonymous god invoked in the title of the Bulgar ruler as the provider of his divine mandate (ὁ ἐκ θεοῦ ἄρχων) is very likely to have been the Christian god. There is good reason to believe that in the mind of the *khan* and his nobles this god was Tangra. While originally this Turkic name designated the physical sky, Tangra/Tängri eventually emerged as a sky-god and supreme divine being of many Central and Inner Asian nomads.¹⁹⁷ In the sixth century Tängri became closely associated with the Ašina, the ruling, “charismatic” clan of the Türk empire, and together with it constituted one of the primary sources of political unity.¹⁹⁸ The *qaghan* was not merely a head of state but a divinely appointed ruler, whose heavenly status was especially emphasized in the Orkhon inscriptions.¹⁹⁹ The governance of the earth being a reflection of that of heaven, the *qaghan’s* authority was, in theory, ecumenical. Territories, rulers and peoples may have been *de facto* beyond his sphere of influence but, by order of Tängri, were *de jure* and potentially members of his world empire.²⁰⁰

There are two direct references to Tangra as a Bulgar deity in the sources. One is found in an Ottoman manuscript where it is stated that the name of god in Bulgarian was “Tängri” (*Bulghar dilindzä Tängri der*).²⁰¹ The other is in a badly-damaged inscription (carved on a marble column) which com-

¹⁹⁵ For henotheism, see Müller 1883, 145–146.

¹⁹⁶ Likewise, the title of the Bulgar *khans*, especially under Omurtag, failed to specify the identity of the ruler’s subjects. Only one pre-conversion inscription (no. 14) recalls the “ruler by god of the many Bulgars” ([Tō]ν πολῶν Βου(λ)γάρων [ὁ] ἐκ θεοῦ ἄρχων). However, the possibility that the “(of) many Bulgars” was part of the regular title has already been ruled out; see Nikolov 2000, 334.

¹⁹⁷ His cult was widespread among the Türks, the Sabirs, the Caucasian Huns, the Khazars and the Mongols; Roux 1988, 512–532; Roux 1956, 49–82 (part I), 197–230 (part II); Golden 1980, 9, 37–42; Morgan 1986, 43. It has recently been suggested that although Tängri was viewed as an “active Being”, he was not the Creator *ex nihilo*. Rather, he brought order and structure to what already existed; Róna-Tas 1987, 38.

¹⁹⁸ Golden 1982a, 44–45.

¹⁹⁹ Roux 1956, 28–31 (part III).

²⁰⁰ Roux 1956, 42–47 (part III); Roux 1987, 402; Minaeva 1996, 75–76. A parallel between the monarchical constitutions of heaven and earth is clearly drawn in the letters of submission dispatched by Genghis Khan to European powers in the mid thirteenth century: *in cello non est nisi unus Deus eternus, super terram non sit nisi unus dominus Chingischan*; Voegelin 1940–1941, 403–404. Although Tängri appears to be a personified deity with anthropomorphic characteristics, there are no pictorial representations of him. This may have something to do with the idea that the *qaghan* was his reflection.

²⁰¹ Roesler 1871, 251 n. 4; Menges 1951, 111–112.

memorates a sacrifice made by Omurtag “to the god Tangra” (κὲ ἐτύθη]εν θυσ[ήαν ἢς τὸν θεὸν Ταγγρα).²⁰² The inscription was found at the rocky cliff of Madara, a site that is commonly associated with the Tangra cult. It is worth remarking that according to ancient Inner Asian religious traditions, the favour of heaven had to manifest itself in the possession of “sacred mountains”. There the *qaghan* was thought to be closer to Tängri; he could therefore conduct “privileged conversations with him” and receive or transmit his orders.²⁰³ It is not unlikely that the site of Madara played a similar role in Bulgaria.²⁰⁴ To be sure, below the relief of the horseman archaeologists unearthed the foundations of a complex comprising of what seems to have been a pagan shrine (built on top of a three-aisled church dated to the sixth and seventh centuries), as well as a building with three divisions, which has been interpreted as a dwelling.²⁰⁵ Amongst other things, it has been suggested that the latter was a kind of private quarter for the ruler from which he seems to have directed the cult of Tangra, the ceremonial sacrifices and, quite possibly, the collective prayers.²⁰⁶

While Tangra is very likely to have been worshiped by certain Bulgar groups/clans before their migration to the Balkans, his promotion to the supreme god of the elite and, in a sense, the official religion of the Proto-bulgarian state coincides in time with the gradual centralization of political power, a process that is rightly connected with Krum’s and Omurtag’s reigns in the early ninth century.²⁰⁷ Indeed, the ideology associated with the worship of Tangra was bound to enhance monarchical rulership.²⁰⁸ Just as Tangra was the supreme celestial being, the *khan*—his reflection—was regarded

²⁰² Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 6. For a different interpretation of the text, see Philippou 2001, 106–109. It has been claimed that the symbol IYI, which is frequently found on amulets, stones (fig. VIII) and pottery, is also connected with Tangra; Beševliev 1979, 17–24; against this hypothesis: Georgiev 1995, 554, and Tryjarski 1985, 66–67, who thinks that this sign is an invocation of the Christian god.

²⁰³ Thus, for example, in thirteenth-century Mongolia the *khan* would conduct orisons from an elevation over a period of time (1–3 days), continually bowing in prayer to the sky with bare head and loosened belt; Roux 1987, 402–403; Golden 1982b, 86; Golden 1982a, 48–49. See also DeWeese 1994, 43–48.

²⁰⁴ See in particular, Stepanov 2005b, 268; Stepanov 2007.

²⁰⁵ Velkov 1934, 87–99; Stančev 1964b, 33. The pagan shrine and the angular building were recently dated to the second quarter of the ninth century; Balabanov 1992, 132–133. However, Fiedler 2008, 206, believes that both structures post-date the Bulgar conversion to Christianity.

²⁰⁶ Vaklinov 1977, 97–99; Rašev 1992b, 117; Stančev 1964b, 33.

²⁰⁷ Stepanov 2001, 3–4; Nikolov 2005, 88ff.; Gjuzelev 2007, 41–42.

²⁰⁸ In this connection, see the remarks of Hocart 1970, 85, 89, 248–249. For some examples, see Golden 1983, 130 n. 9.

as rightfully the sole sovereign on earth or, at any rate, in the Bulgar state (an idea which finds clear expression in Omurtag's building inscription from Čatalar).²⁰⁹ The ideology of a strong, divinely-sanctioned leadership clearly bears much of the credit for the survival of the *khanate* during this period. The certainties which this system of beliefs and values presented to the warrior aristocracy, if not to the entire population, the aura of sanctity surrounding the ruler, the awareness of heavenly support granted to military undertakings (an awareness reinforced through the regular performance of religious rituals and ceremonials while on campaign),²¹⁰ all immeasurably strengthened the unity of the state and the political will of its subjects to survive.

Another factor operative in the transition to Tangrist henotheism at this time may have been the fear of Byzantine imperialism. Foreign influences, as scholars have long pointed out, often paved the way for the adoption of a more sophisticated faith among nomads. However, this was rarely the religion of their imperial neighbours, for such a course invariably implied submission to the authority of the rulers of these states.²¹¹ The Bulgars, realizing that conversion to Islam or Judaism was not a viable option, and mindful of the influence the Byzantine Church could exercise on the *khan's* Christian subjects, had little choice but to promote Tangra as their supreme deity.²¹²

It is important to emphasize that the late eighth/early ninth century marked the period of transition to henotheism only for the upper strata of the Bulgar society. Vigorous polytheism and totemism (i.e. the existence of an intimate, "mystical" relationship between a group or an individual and a natural object), both of which were incapable of furnishing a principle of spiritual (and political) unity, proved to be persistent and strong among

²⁰⁹ Κανα συβιγι Ομουρταγ ις την γιν ὄπου ἐγενίθιν, ἐκ Θεου ἄρχων ἐστίν; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 57. Omurtag had this inscription cut and set up to commemorate the construction of a fortified settlement and a bridge on the Tiča River ca. 822. The remains of the bridge, thrown into the river, and the *aule*, consisting of an outer earthen fortification and an inner stone fortress with a number of buildings made of large, well-hewn stone blocks, are still visible today; see the discussion in 5.2.2 below.

²¹⁰ See for instance, Theoph., 503.10–11; Scriptor incertus, 342.2–8; *Responsa*, ch. xxxv, 581; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 3b; Squatriti 2005, 89.

²¹¹ Golden 1983, 130; Stepanov 2010a, 66.

²¹² The increase of the Turkic nomadic component in Bulgaria at about the same time (see 3.2.5 below) may have been another contributing factor to this process. Although the *khanate* was too far away from any Islamic power, there is evidence that in the first half of the ninth century the Bulgars had had some interest in Islam; thus the Arab Caliph al-Ma'mūn (813–833) is said to have produced a book titled "Answers to the Questions of the King of the Burgar addressed to him about Islam and the Unity". However, Pritsak 1981b, 60–62, thinks that the Bulgars of the Crimea are meant here; see Golden 1992, 250; Stepanov 2010a, 79.

the masses.²¹³ This is also true of shamanism, a complex belief system especially common in Central and Inner Asian societies, but also discernible in the *khanate* in the pre-conversion period.²¹⁴ Shamanism has been defined by anthropologists as a technique of ecstasy. By mastering this technique and reaching a state of trance the shaman was able to mediate between the world of humans and that of spirits.²¹⁵ He thus functioned as a magician, prophet and healer who, among other things, had to “descend to the underworld” to find and bring back a sick person’s soul.²¹⁶ Given that most aspects of daily life in Eurasia were directly linked with the spiritual world—for instance, the life-supporting economic activities, from hunting to husbandry to agriculture, were thought to be protected by spirits—the role of the shaman was bound to be extremely important.²¹⁷

Before we proceed any further, a piece of essential explanation: shamanism has been a popular subject of accounts and research since the early eighteenth century.²¹⁸ Although it is correctly believed that the shaman’s technique of ecstasy and mode of operation are basically uniform throughout Central and Inner Asia, it is impossible to construct a uniform model of shamanism as an institution. Further (and partly as a result of the above), it would be perilous to equate the modern “ethnographic shaman” with the religious specialists noted among historical Eurasian peoples.²¹⁹ In this light, any attempt to investigate the development of this phenomenon in medieval steppe-nomad societies, including Bulgaria, is bound to be inconclusive.

We have only fleeting glimpses of Bulgar shamanism in our sources. In his *Responsa*, Nicholas I writes to Boris that “false, deceptive happiness cannot produce real tears in your neighbour”—a statement which may be taken to

²¹³ See the *Responsa*, chs., xli, 582–583, and lxii, 589. On totemism in general, see Lévi-Strauss 1972; Wagner 1987, 573–576 with lit.

²¹⁴ Besides Eliade 1964, see references in Roux 1984, Johansen 1987 and Potapov 1991. Account of shamanic practices among the Türks and Mongols have been also collected by Boyle 1972. For shamanism in the Balkans, see now Nejkova 2006, 119–175. For Bulgaria, the best studies thus far are those of Kalojanov 2003 and Ovčarov 1981; see also Ovčarov 1997, esp. at 59–74.

²¹⁵ The nature of these spirits (good or evil) determined whether the shaman was “white” or “black”; Eliade 1964, 68–69, 184–189. In this connection see also Stepanov 2010a, 118–119.

²¹⁶ The shaman’s descent also took place to “escort” the soul of the deceased to the world of the dead. Anthropological studies have shown that many shamans in Central and Inner Asia sacrificed, a practice associated with both healing and prophesying; Eliade 1964, 190ff. and 200–204 for the descent to the underworld.

²¹⁷ See the discussion in Siikala 1978, 16–17, 303ff.

²¹⁸ For example, Swan 1841–1842, 370–400 (part I), 39–44, 103–107 (part II).

²¹⁹ DeWeese 1994, 33–34.

be a reference to the shaman's ecstatic experience.²²⁰ In a letter addressed to the Eastern patriarchs, Photios also refers to what one would interpret as shamanic practices (ὥστε τῶν δαιμονίων καὶ πατρόων ἐκστάντες ὀργίων), while al-Mas'ūdī reports that the Bulgars practiced the religion of the "Magis".²²¹ Further evidence is provided by archaeology. Specifically, it has been argued that certain symbols appearing on stone and brick constructions, as well as on vessels and metal objects—particularly rings and amulets, which according to the *Responsa* were credited with healing or apotropaic powers—are associated with shamanism.²²² These include anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations of the sun, and images of boots which may have been symbols of pilgrimage.²²³ In addition, a large number of amulets, stone plates and brick tiles are thought to depict shamans, part of their ritual clothes, and several animals (mainly harts and horses), interpreted as their "helping spirits".²²⁴

As in the other steppe-nomad states of Eurasia, in Bulgaria shamanism appears to have interacted with, if not to have been incorporated into, the "high" religion of the elite. Indeed, "the incantations, jests and auguries", which the Bulgars reportedly performed before going into battle, are thought to be associated with shamanic rituals.²²⁵ Moreover, Liudprand of Cremona reports in his *Antapodosis* that Baian, the son of Symeon, could turn himself through magical (i.e. shamanic) practices (*magicam didicisse*) into a wolf.²²⁶ Nevertheless, the "official" religion of the ruling classes was ultimately anti-shamanic, not only in its advocacy of the supremacy of Tangra, but also in

²²⁰ ...*falax ac deceptrix laetitia*; *Responsa*, ch. xlvii, 585–586.

²²¹ Photios, *Epist.*, no. 2; al-Mas'ūdī, *Merveilles*, 123.

²²² *Responsa*, ch. lxxviii, 594; Beševliev 1981a, 367, 369–373.

²²³ Ovčarov 1997, 83–92, 130–140; Kostova 1994, 140–165. For the function of boot images as protective symbols in shamanic practices related to hunting and war, popular in other nomadic societies in the ninth century, see Nikolov 2000, 345 and n. 181.

²²⁴ Similar images are frequently encountered in Inner Asian art; Ovčarov 1997, 59–81; Beševliev 1973, 53–64. According to Fiedler 2008, 208f, most of the objects or monuments bearing images of shamans probably post-date conversion to Christianity. Concerning the shaman's helping spirits, see Eliade 1964, 89, 92ff. For the so-called "Šumen plate", a small marble relief commonly associated with shamanism, see now Georgiev 2001, 45–55.

²²⁵ *Responsa*, ch. xxxv, 581; Golden 1998, 206.

²²⁶ Liudprand, III, 29. Similar practices were encountered among the Qipčaq in the late eleventh century, and, as Golden, *Introduction*, 281, remarks, they ultimately hark back to the ethnogenetic wolf myth of the Türks. This tale clearly reflects the continuity of pagan traditions in newly Christianizing Bulgaria. Note here that the shaman or his helping spirits would frequently "transform" themselves into certain animals; Eliade 1964, 92–93, 94, 328f, 458f.

the sense that shamans, like everybody else, were forbidden to have closer relations with the sky-god than the *khan*.²²⁷

2.3 THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CONFLICT

Bulgar contact with the Byzantine world started long before Asparuch led his horde to the Dobrudja in the late seventh century. A number of Bulgar groupings and other kindred tribal unions in the Pontic steppes (Kutriğurs, Utriğurs, Onoğurs) appear in the sources as allies or enemies of the empire by the late 400s.²²⁸ In addition, we know of several chieftains who came in person to Constantinople, became Christian, and were rewarded with gifts and senior honorific titles by the imperial authorities. Most prominent among them was Kubrat, who having formed an alliance with Heraclius, revolted against the Avars and formed his own independent polity in the steppes north of the Black Sea.²²⁹ Further evidence is provided by the numerous Byzantine coins and valuables, some with obvious Christian symbolism, found in rich burial assemblages in the Crimea and Middle and Lower Dnieper regions.²³⁰ The association of these objects with imperial power seems to have been important enough to produce prestige. Their use by the local elites denoted social status and power—the power of those able to maintain good relations with Byzantium and thus to yield influence.

The close contacts of Bulgar rulers with the empire continued after the creation of the *khanate* in the Lower Danube. Several eighth-century *khans*, most notably Tervel, built up strong economic and political ties with the government at Constantinople and were undoubtedly proud of their Byzantine court connections. It is certainly no mere coincidence that, much like Kubrat in the early 600s, they frequently used Byzantine and Christian symbols to bolster their authority.²³¹ And yet herein lies the ambivalence of early Bulgar

²²⁷ For a good illustration of this, see Morgan 1986, 43; Roux 1987, 402–403.

²²⁸ Most of these Oğuric tribes had been part of the Hunnic union. In the sixth and seventh century, they were in turn incorporated into the Avar (Kutriğurs) or Türk (Utriğurs) confederations; for a discussion, see Golden 1992, 97–104.

²²⁹ See the discussion below at 3.1. Other examples include Gord (Γορδῶς), a chieftain ruling over certain Bulgar tribes in the Crimean Bosphoros who received baptism during the reign of Justinian I, Kuber of the *Miracles of St Demetrios*, I, 228ff., and an unnamed “Hunnic” (i.e. Bulgar) chieftain, who ca. 620 arrived in Constantinople in the company of his noblemen and their wives and became baptized; see Nikeph., c. 9.1–9. For Gord, see Theoph., 175.24–176.7; Jordanov 1994, 27–44.

²³⁰ For some examples, see Smilenko 1965, 10; Aibabin 2006, 49, 53–54; Zalesskaja *et al.* 1997; Werner 1984.

²³¹ This is best illustrated by the actions of Tervel, for which see below.

political history; for at the same time these rulers, just like their successors in the ninth century, were determined to hold the empire at arm's length and preserve the independence of their realm.

There were three main phases to relations between Byzantium and Danube Bulgaria up to 775. The first phase, which lasted from the arrival of the Bulgars in the Lower Danube to *ca.* 718, was dominated by the attempts of Constantine IV (668–685) and Justinian II (685–695, 705–711), made during intervals of Arab pressure, to expel the newcomers from what the Byzantines continued to regard as imperial territory. Constantine IV's expedition in 681 ended in complete defeat, and as a result he was forced to recognize the *status quo* by signing a treaty and pledging to pay an annual tribute to the *khan*.²³² Early on in his reign, Justinian II led his army against the Bulgars twice, in 688 and 689, but his endeavours, like that of his father, met with little success.²³³ Ironically, it was the Bulgar ruler Tervel who helped Justinian regain the throne in 705 (he had been deposed by the *strategos* of Hellas Leontios in 695).²³⁴ After spending nearly a decade with the Khazars, Justinian arrived in Bulgaria to seek the aid of the *khan*. Receiving help, he appeared before the walls of Constantinople with a Bulgar army. Although the fortifications proved impregnable, Justinian entered the capital through the aqueduct, and with the help of supporters within the city he managed to take possession of the imperial palace. Once in power again, he granted Tervel the title of *Caesar* (which even though it had lost its earlier significance still ranked next to the imperial title), and agreed to resume payments to the Bulgars.²³⁵ Nevertheless, friction soon followed between the two states.

²³² Theoph., 358.11–359.21; Nikeph., c. 36.1–29 and 196 (commentary) for the date. The Byzantines would have certainly argued that Asparuch's acceptance of an annual subsidy was a recognition that the Bulgars were only there by permission of the emperor. In effect, both the treaty and the subsidy marked their status as the emperor's clients—recipients of his generosity. The literature is immense, but see here Beševliev 1981a, 176–180; Božilov 1995b, 24–25; Kyriakes 1993, 50–57; Whittow 1996, 272–273; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 88–93.

²³³ Theoph., 364.5–9, 364.11–18, 376.13–29; Nikeph., c. 38.5–9; Zonaras, III, 229.12–15. Many Bulgarian scholars have maintained that the army that ambushed and defeated the Byzantines on their way back from Thessalonike in 688/9 was not Asparuch's but that of a second Bulgar state which Kuver, known from the second collection of the *Miracles of St Demetrios*, I, 222–234, had established shortly before in Macedonia; Zlatarski 1918, 160–161; Beševliev 1981a, 169–170, 192; Beševliev 1992, 11–27; also Fine 1983, 71–72. This hypothesis has been challenged by Greek historians; see for instance Gregoriou-Ioannidou 1982, 113–124, and Kyriakes 1993, 65–72.

²³⁴ Ziemann 2007, 182–188. Tervel has been identified by some scholars as Asparuch's son; see Curta 2006b, 10 n. 47, and Beševliev 1981a, 191. For the dates of his reign, see Moskov 1988, 240–282.

²³⁵ Nikeph., c. 42.37–64; Theoph., 374.2–375.1 (who makes no mention of the title *Caesar*); *Suidas*, I, 483.21–29. Tervel's title is confirmed by sphragistic data: Jordanov 2001, 19 with

The emperor probably withheld the tribute and, in order to stop Tervel's retaliatory raids into Thrace, invaded the *khanate* in 708.²³⁶ Relations were restored three years later when Justinian II, faced with another uprising, asked once again for help from the *khan* who is said to have sent him three thousand men.²³⁷

Over the next few years, as internal divisions and the growing Arab threat had thrown the empire into crisis, the Bulgars continued to play a significant role in Byzantine politics. Although soon after the death of Justinian II a Bulgar force marched unopposed to Constantinople and devastated the surrounding countryside,²³⁸ in 716 Theodosios III (715–717), who was confronting in the east both a massive Arab invasion and a rebellion by his Asiatic armies, sought an alliance with Kormesios/Krumesis by offering very favourable terms.²³⁹ When the following year the Arabs appeared and laid siege to Constantinople, Leo III, who had just come to power, appealed once again to the *khan*. Kormesios' troops played a role in breaking the siege by inflicting severe losses on the Arabs.²⁴⁰ Shortly afterwards, the Bulgars are said to have supported—for reasons which are not fully understood—the bid of the former emperor Artemios (Anastasios II, 713–715) to regain power, although eventually they came to an understanding with Leo's government.²⁴¹

fig. 5; Nystazopoulou-Pekelidou 1991, 17–18. For these events, see Curta 2006a, 82–83; Primov 1978, 8–13; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 104–107. For Tervel's alleged baptism, see Atanasov 1999, 39–41. According to Vachkova 2008a, 345–346, by obtaining the title of *Caesar*—a truly unique act—Tervel gained the position of legitimate ruler of the Byzantine west. Vachkova 2008b, 18–19, also claims that during the last few years of his life, Tervel resided predominantly in Constantinople.

²³⁶ This campaign ended with a Byzantine defeat near Anchialos; Nikeph., c. 43.1–10; Beševliev 1981a, 195–196. A Bulgar account of the events of the years 705–708 has been preserved in one of the inscriptions on the Madara relief; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 1, Ia–b, Ic, and 103–109 (commentary). For the overall message of both the relief and the accompanying inscription, see now Curta 2006b, 14. For the representation of the Bulgar ruler in the relief and the lead seal (struck probably during his visit to Constantinople in 705), see Atanasov 1994, 62–69; Minaeva 1996, 59–60; Stepanov 1999, 150–155.

²³⁷ In spite of this, Justinian II was deposed and killed; Nikeph., c. 45.70–90.

²³⁸ Nikeph., c. 47.1–10; Theoph., 382.22–28. Agathon the Deacon claims that the raid was in reprisal of non-payment of tribute; Mansi, XII, 193B.

²³⁹ For the treaty of 716, which Krum tried to renew in 812, see Theoph., 497.16–20, and Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 1, IIa–b. Moskov 1988, 253–283, has shown that Kormesios/Krumesis should be distinguished from Kormisoš of the “Princes’ list” who ruled later; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 113–114; for a different interpretation, see Beševliev 1981c, 99ff.; Curta 2006b, 15 n. 72. Moskov has also rejected Beševliev's claims that Kormesios and Tervel ruled together, one as a *khan*, the other as a co-ruler.

²⁴⁰ Theoph., 397.28–30; Michael Syr, II, 485; Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langob.*, 181; Yanopoulos 1997, 483–516; Beševliev 1981c, 100–102; Gjuzelev 1980.

²⁴¹ Nikeph., c. 57.1–8, 21–31; Theoph., 400.18–29; Beševliev 1981a, 201–202; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 108–109; Ziemann 2007, 202–210.

Very little is known about the second phase, which lasted from *ca.* 718 to 754/5. There were no notable military actions to attract the attention of Byzantine historians, and this may suggest that relations between the two states were basically peaceful. However, it was probably during this period (and not in the late 750s or early 760s as is usually maintained) that the Dulo, the traditional “charismatic” clan of the Bulgars, lost the reins of power. This development inaugurated a time of troubles, which was to continue until the last quarter of the eighth century.²⁴²

In the mid 750s a new phase in Byzantine-Bulgar relations began. Taking advantage of the Abbāsīd revolution in the Caliphate, and having already presided over the Council of Hiereia which officially condemned icon veneration, Constantine V diverted his military resources to the Balkans in a concerted effort to eradicate the Bulgar state and re-establish imperial power up to the Danube.²⁴³ Before the beginning of the conflict, Constantine V took precautions to reinforce Byzantium’s influence along the frontier. Thus after capturing Germanikeia/Maraš (744/5), Theodosiopolis and Melitene (750/1) in the east, he transplanted most of his Syrian and Armenian prisoners to Thrace.²⁴⁴ This was followed by the construction of several towns and fortresses, which were intended to bar access to the Thracian Plain and form around it an elaborate system of defence-in-depth.²⁴⁵ The Bulgars reacted by demanding tribute for the new *kastra*, and when Constantine V refused to pay, they invaded Thrace as far as the Long Walls, causing much destruction.²⁴⁶ Over the next fifteen years (*ca.* 760–775) the emperor held at least nine cam-

²⁴² Pritsak 1955, 47ff.; see also the discussion in 4.2 below.

²⁴³ For an alternative interpretation of Constantine’s aims, see Shepard 1995, 232–233. For the civil war in the Caliphate and the subsequent collapse of the Ummayyad dynasty, see Kennedy 1986, 112–123. For the Council of Hiereia (in 754) and Cosnatntine’s attempts to enforce iconoclasm upon private religious practice, see Gero 1977, 53–142; Rochow 1994, 43–72; Thümmel 2005, 63–78.

²⁴⁴ Theoph. 422.14–18, 429.19–22; Nikeph., c. 73.1–5, and Nikeph., *Antirrheticus*, III, 509A. Indeed, as Shepard 1995, 232–233, has rightly pointed out, the empire’s urgent requirement, probably aggravated by recurrent plagues, was for people, both to defend the border and bring the land under cultivation. Constantine’s military endeavours in the east did not bring any permanent territorial gains to the empire, apart from the fortress of Kamachon (Kemāh) in the Upper Euphrates; see Honigmann 1935, 57. For an overview of his policy towards the Arabs, see Rochow 1994, 73–87.

²⁴⁵ In spite of his efforts to denigrate Constantine V (because of his iconoclasm), the patriarch Nikephoros considered the construction of these forts a great achievement: Ἀλλὰ φήσεις, ὅτι τὰ ἐπὶ Θράκης ἐπετείχισε φρούρια, καὶ εἰ μέγα σοι τοῦτο εἰς πίστιν; Nikeph., *Antirrheticus*, III, 512B.

²⁴⁶ Theoph., 429.25–30; Nikeph., c. 73.5–9; for a discussion, Beševliev 1971a, 6ff. The Anastasian or Long Walls ran from the Sea of Marmara near Selymbria to the Black Sea coast; Crow 1995.

paigns against them, winning a number of major victories which threw the *khanate* into a prolonged period of instability. On their part, the Bulgars were able to inflict considerable damage on Thrace, effectively depriving the empire of a major part of its resources.²⁴⁷

Constantine's strategic objective during these wars was to strike at the heart of the *khanate* in the hope that this would lead rapidly to its break-up. On numerous occasions, the Byzantines delivered simultaneous attacks by land and sea, overstretching Bulgar military resources; while one part of the army (usually the *tagmata*) moved directly across the mountains, another, carried by the imperial navy, landed on the Black Sea coast or on the south bank of the Danube, attacking the Bulgars on their rear. Around 761 (the precise date and sequence of events is unclear) Constantine's forces broke for the very first time into the "inner lands".²⁴⁸ This came as a major shock to the Bulgars and, naturally, exacerbated the pre-existing political instability. The ruler (apparently Vineh of the Vokil clan) was overthrown and in his place the decision-making council appointed Telets who represented another clan, the Ugain.²⁴⁹ Telets' coup has been described as a 180 degree turn from the political course set for Bulgaria by its previous rulers.²⁵⁰ He seems to have represented a coalition of aristocrats who pushed for a more belligerent stance toward Byzantium. By contrast, for a less radical section of the ruling elite, Bulgaria's future was still closely bound up with that of the empire. There can be no doubt that personal and political conflicts within these circles also added to the tension of the situation.

Telets turned first against the Slavic tribes of Thrace and Macedonia, some of which he tried to resettle in the *khanate*. As a result, a large number of Slavs (Theophanes amounts them to 208,000 but this figure is highly exaggerated) is said to have fled to the empire.²⁵¹ In addition, the Bulgars began raids into Thrace, and in response, Constantine V organized a co-ordinated assault on the *khanate* from the Black Sea coast and the Danube. His victory

²⁴⁷ For an overview of the conflict, see Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 114–120; Beševliev 1981c, 111–129; Rochow 1994, 89–105; Primov 1978, 24–35; Soustal 1991, 79–81; Ziemann 2007, 213–234.

²⁴⁸ Nikeph., c. 73.11–20 and 219 (commentary). For an earlier expedition, see Theoph., 431.6–11.

²⁴⁹ Theoph., 432.25–27; Nikeph., c. 76.1–5; Pritsak 1955, 38–39, 48; Beševliev 1981a, 212–213; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 115.

²⁵⁰ Curta 2006b, 16, who claims that the new *khan* may have ruled together with some of his peers. Indeed, to judge from the existing evidence, during the fictional strife the aristocratic class played a much more influential role in the decision-making process.

²⁵¹ Nikeph., c. 75.1–5 and 220 (commentary). The author wrongly states that the migration took place several years after the winter of 763/4; Theoph., 432.27–29; Fine 1983, 76–77.

at Anchialos in June 763 led to the overthrow of Telets and his replacement by a certain Sabin.²⁵² The new *khan* tried to make peace with the empire, was accused of handing the country over to the Byzantines, and had to flee to Constantinople.²⁵³ A temporary truce was agreed soon afterwards, but the struggle for the throne continued with different members of the Bulgar nobility (apparently representing different tribes or clans) in and out of power.²⁵⁴ If events took an unfavourable turn, the emperor intervened by force, as in 765 when his troops tried to remove Umar from office and proclaim in his place a certain Tokt (Τόκτος).²⁵⁵

Although by the mid 760s Constantine had considerably weakened the *khanate*, with his repeated campaigns, he was unable to deal the final blow and either conquer it or impose imperial suzerainty and a lasting peace. The inherent military ability, institutional strength and ideological coherence were the ingredients that gave Bulgaria such an extraordinary resilience in the face of adversity. Even though there is no military action recorded at the Byzantine-Bulgar border between 767 and 773, Constantine is unlikely to have relaxed pressure on the *khanate*. Our sources have simply shifted their attention to the east to record the first serious Arab raids since the fall of the Umayyads.²⁵⁶ Theophanes concentrates again on the Balkans in 773, when Constantine V embarked on a vast campaign by land and sea, which compelled the Bulgars to sue for terms.²⁵⁷ The following year the emperor was informed by secret agents operating in Bulgaria that Telerig, the new ruler, was planning to dispatch a large force in order to conquer and transfer into the *khanate* the Berzitai, a Slavic tribe settled in Macedonia.²⁵⁸ Constantine marched against the Bulgars, defeating them at Lithosoria (presum-

²⁵² Nikeph., c. 76.5–16, c. 77.1–4; Theoph., 432.25–433.16. Beševliev 1981a, 212–213, who like others before him is mistaken in identifying Sabin with Vineh of the “Prince’s List”; see Moskov 1988, 318ff; Nikolov 2005, 75 n. 64.

²⁵³ Theoph., 433.16–21; Nikeph., c. 77.4–9.

²⁵⁴ Theoph., 433.21–22; Nikeph., c. 77.11–12; Curta 2006a, 85–88.

²⁵⁵ Nikeph., c. 79.1–12. Umar is mentioned in the “Princes List” with a reign of 40 days; Moskov 1988, 327–330.

²⁵⁶ Such raids are recorded under AM 6261 (when the Arabs are said to have besieged Kamachon), AM 6262, AM 6263 (Arab siege of the fort Syke in Isauria; see Hild and Hellenkemper 1990, 421–423), and AM 6264; Theoph., 444.13–15, 444.28–445.2, 445.16–27, 446.18–21; al-Tabari, xxix, 66; Brooks, *Abbasids*, I, 734; II, 89–90. For an unsuccessful operation against the Bulgars in 766, see Nikeph., c. 82.1–20; Theoph., 437.19–25.

²⁵⁷ Theoph., 446.27–447.5. For the date of this expedition, see Mango and Scott 1997, 616 n. 1. In order to launch this attack, the emperor seems to have arranged a truce with the Caliph in 772; al-Tabari, xxix, 70.

²⁵⁸ For the Berzitai, see *Miracles of St Demetrius*, I, 75.

ably near the border) in what became known as the “noble war”.²⁵⁹ This was his last recorded military success against them. In 774, the Byzantine fleet was destroyed by a storm off the coast of Mesembria.²⁶⁰ Shortly afterwards Telerig is said to have tricked the emperor into disclosing the names of the Byzantine agents who were active in Bulgaria, whom he subsequently put to death.²⁶¹ In August 775, Constantine V set out on another expedition against the *khanate*. However, while still in Thrace he became afflicted with boils on his legs and a high fever. He returned to Selymbria and took a ship, but died before reaching Constantinople on 14 September.²⁶²

The campaigns of *ca.* 760–775 marked a fundamental turning point in Bulgar history, and opened a new phase of Byzantine involvement in that region. Once Constantine V had made the destruction of the *khanate* his strategic priority, his successors were almost bound to think of Bulgaria as a traditional enemy and an ancient part of the empire due for reconquest. It is also worth remembering that in the context of eighth-century Byzantium—an impoverished war-ravaged rump of the Roman empire—and compared with the political instability and defeatism of the previous one hundred years, Constantine’s victories in the Balkans and the east, his extensive building programme, even his enforcement of iconoclasm, marked an important re-assertion of imperial power which helped restore Byzantine self-confidence.²⁶³ Constantine’s military successes may not have changed the balance of power between the empire and its neighbours, but they provided the Byzantines with an unaccustomed amount of security. The inability of his immediate successors to contain the Bulgar and Arab threats gave a particular boost to Constantine’s image, and led to the creation of the legend of that emperor as a triumphant military leader.²⁶⁴

2.4 THE BYZANTINE AND BULGAR DEFENCE

As has been noted already, one of the strategic priorities for the imperial government at Constantinople was to protect the rich lands of Thrace and Lower Macedonia, which provisioned the principal Byzantine cities, including

²⁵⁹ Theoph., 447.10–26.

²⁶⁰ Theoph., 447.29–448.4.

²⁶¹ Theoph., 448.4–10; Beševliev 1981a, 226–227.

²⁶² Theoph., 448.12–21.

²⁶³ For Constantine’s building programme, see Foss and Winfield 1986, 53ff.; Rochow 1994, 36–39; Peschlow 1977, 212–213.

²⁶⁴ For instance, see Theoph., 495.22–24; Whittow 1996, 142–144; Rochow 1994, 123–131.

the capital itself, from Bulgar attacks. From the late seventh century the *theme* system formed the basis for the defence of these regions. By that time the word *theme* designated a territorial unit and a military division headed by a *strategos* who combined both military and civil power.²⁶⁵ Local defence was organized around the *tourma*, likewise both a military and administrative division, which in turn was subdivided into a number of *banda* (or *topoteresiai*), each under a *komes*.²⁶⁶ Like the *strategos*, the *tourmarchai* had headquarters of their own, usually a fortress town; they had formal jurisdiction over all those directly under their military command, but were also responsible for the safety of the local population, and for dealing with local raids.²⁶⁷

The soldiers of the *thematic* army were almost entirely recruited from local sources. Although there was a regular core of salaried and full-time troops, the local military command and the state were able to rely increasingly on individuals who served, usually on a seasonal basis, at their own or their family's expense (providing the soldier's gear, provisions and—in some cases—mount); in exchange the soldier or his immediate dependents received certain fiscal privileges (their property, for instance, was exempted from all but the basic public taxes).²⁶⁸ In this respect, military service entailed privileged status for the soldier's household. The only formal obligation was with regard to the hereditary nature of military service. Thus, the position of every dead or retired soldier was to be taken by a member of his family. This guaranteed, in theory at least, that the nominal number of troops in the *thematic* army would not be reduced.²⁶⁹

The first Balkan *theme* was that of Thrace, established by Constantine IV soon after the arrival of Asparuch's Bulgars in the peninsula.²⁷⁰ Its precise

²⁶⁵ It is generally believed that the *theme* system first appeared after the withdrawal of the Byzantine forces from the Middle East and their re-deployment in Asia Minor and the Balkans in the first half of the seventh century. The word *theme* meant an army corps and eventually came to refer also to the province on which that corps was re-deployed; Haldon 1990, 204, 208–220.

²⁶⁶ The number of *tourmai* and *banda* in each *theme* varied considerably. The same was true about the military strength of these units; Leo, *Tact.* iv. 42, 47–48; *DAI*, c. 50.92ff.; Haldon 1999, 113–114.

²⁶⁷ See, for example, *De velitatione bellica*, 166, 187, 216.

²⁶⁸ Haldon 1979, 48–51, 74ff.; Haldon 1990, 249.

²⁶⁹ Haldon 1979, 36ff.; Haldon 1990, 249–250. The *thematic* soldiers were entered on lists or *κατάλογοι*, and were called up as and when required.

²⁷⁰ Stavridou-Zafraza 2000, 128; Lilie 1977, 9, 20ff. In the seventh and eighth century, the territory between the Hebros and Axios Rivers, including the hinterland of Thessalonike, was not always under firm imperial control; see for example, *De Them*, 91.33–36. In Thrace, as elsewhere in the northern Balkans, the general retreat of Byzantine authority is clearly

extent is unknown. It appears that until the late eighth century its capital was Adrianople, the largest city in the region (although Heraclea, the residence of the metropolitan of Europe, has also been suggested).²⁷¹ When Adrianople was detached from the *theme* of Thrace, the seat of the *strategos* probably moved to Arkadioupolis.²⁷² There is evidence to suggest that there were at least two *tourmai*, one based at Bizye (some 20 km west of the Black Sea coast) and possibly another at Sozopolis.²⁷³ A seal dating from the second half or the third quarter of the eighth century may refer to a third *tourma* (Τζάτζιος β παθ. κ. τουρμαρχ. τῶν Μακεδό[νων]).²⁷⁴ This system may have been complemented by the so-called *kleisourai*, that is, districts including frontier passes, and the territory most immediately threatened by hostile activity, whose commanders usually enjoyed greater autonomy than the other *thematic* subdivisions.²⁷⁵ Indeed, in his *De Thematibus*, Constantine VII indicates that before its elevation into a *theme* in the second half of

visible in the numismatic evidence. This region has produced only four coins that could be dated to between 690 and 829; Sophoulis 2009b, 179 n. 13; Curta 2005, 120; and for a recent find, Minkova 2008, 83. Further south, in central and southern Greece, Justinian II created sometime between 687–695 the *theme* of Hellas with Corinth as its capital. The *theme*'s territory may have extended into Thessaly, large parts of which appear to have been occupied by virtually independent Slavic tribes. In the early ninth century Nikephoros created at least two new *themes* in the Balkans: the *theme* of the Peloponnese may have been established between 805–807, following a series of successful military operations against the local Slavonic tribes (for a much earlier date, in the mid 780s, see Živković 1999, 141–155); the earliest reliable reference to it comes from the *Scriptor Incertus* (336.8–9), which states that a certain Leo Skleros was appointed governor of that region by Michael I. On the other hand, the *theme* of Kephalaria was created during the Frankish-Byzantine struggle for the control of Venice and Dalmatia between 806 and 810, most probably *ca.* 808; ARF, 127, 130; Soustal and Koder 1981, 52–53; Curta 2006a, 116 (for a date in the late eighth century). For a discussion, see Treadgold 1988, 160–162; Nivais 1987, 74ff. with lit.

²⁷¹ Soustal 1991, 49.

²⁷² Brooks 1901, 73 (Ibn al-Fakih); Treadgold 1988, 92–93, 204. For the detachment of Adrianople from Thrace, see below.

²⁷³ For the late eighth-/early ninth-century seal of a certain Staurakios, *basilikos spatharios and tourmarches of Bizye*, see Konstantopoulos 1902, no. 31; for the Roman and medieval city, Velkov 1978, 174–181; Pralong 1988, 192–198. The seals of an anonymous *spatharios* and *tourmarches* of Sozopolis (9th c.) has been published by Zacos and Veglerly 1972, no. 2643. That this is the Sozopolis in Thrace and not that in Pisidia becomes evident from the *Taktikon Uspenskij* (842/43), which refers to a *kleisourarches* (i.e. the commander of a frontier district) of Sozopolis. As is well known, Pisidia was nowhere near the border. The title of the commander in question may well have varied; see Oikonomidès, *Listes*, 55. For the seal of a certain *Constantine, b' spatharios and kleisouriarques Soksopoleos* (Σωξοπόλεως), see Jordanov 2003, no. 74.1.

²⁷⁴ Winkelmann 1985, 100 (quoting Seibt). Note however that Zacos and Veglerly 1972, no. 2663, read instead “*tourmarche Boukellarion*”.

²⁷⁵ Haldon 1999, 114 with lit. Note here that in this study the term *kleisoura* will always refer to a frontier pass.

the ninth century, Strymon (i.e. the area between the Strymon and Nestos Rivers up to the southern slopes of the Haimos) had the status of a *kleisoura*.²⁷⁶ Although this is not confirmed by other sources, the establishment of such a command near the Bulgar border makes a great deal of sense in the light of the military situation after *ca.* 681. It may be conjectured that the base of the *kleisourarches* (or *archon*) was the Aegean port of Christoupolis (mod. Kavala).²⁷⁷

In the late eighth century, the territory between the Hebros and Strymon Rivers was detached from Thrace and made into a new *theme*, that of Macedonia. The first reference to it comes from Theophanes who mentions a *monostrategos* in Thrace and Macedonia active in 801/2.²⁷⁸ The violent Bulgar attack on the army of Thrace at Strymon in the late autumn or early winter of 788 provides a firm *terminus post quem* for the creation of the new command.²⁷⁹ Because of the pressing need to prevent further Bulgar encroachment into Byzantine territory, Irene, who took a strong interest in Balkan affairs, is very likely to have established the Macedonian *theme* soon thereafter. Her (temporary) removal from power in December 790 may therefore serve as a *terminus ante quem*.²⁸⁰ There is no evidence that the empress brought in soldiers from Asia Minor or Anatolia to serve in the army of the new *theme*. Instead, she seems to have divided the army of Thrace into two smaller units, thus increasing the flexibility of the empire's defence along the Bulgar border. The total number of troops present in Thrace and Macedonia is hard to estimate. The Arab geographer Ibn al-Fakih, who wrote in 902/3 but apparently drew on material collected by a certain Muhammad b. Abi Muslim al-Jarmi, a Byzantine prisoner until 845/6, gives a total of 5,000 men for each army.²⁸¹ It is possible that this figure actually represents the nominal roll of the army rather than a total of active troops. The active soldiers on the

²⁷⁶ *De Them.*, 88.47–89.5. The earliest textual reference to a *strategos* of Strymon is in the *Treatise of Philotheos* (899); Oikonomidès, *Listes*, 101. It is not mentioned in the *Taktikon Uspenskij*, although two seals of *strategoï* date before the mid-ninth century; see Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1991, 37.2–3. The *theme* may have therefore been created in the late 840s.

²⁷⁷ Stavridou-Zafraka 2000, 131. For a seal of an *archon* of Strymon (ninth c.), see Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1991, 37.1. For Mesembria, also administered by an *archon* in the eighth century, see nos. 77.1–3. For the history of Christoupolis, see Lemerle 1945, 128, 123ff.

²⁷⁸ Theoph., 475.22–23. The same post was held by John Aplakes in 813; Scriptor incertus, 337.18–19. Several seals of various *strategoï* of Macedonia belong to the first half of the ninth century: Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1991, 43.31, 43.36, 43.37; *PmBZ*, #11199.

²⁷⁹ Indeed, the *strategos* of Thrace would probably not have operated in the Strymon valley had an independent Macedonian *theme* already been created; Theoph., 463.28–464.2.

²⁸⁰ See 4.4 below. The capital of the new *theme* was Adrianople; Oikonomidès, *Listes*, 349.

²⁸¹ Brooks 1901, 73. Ibn al-Fakih's total figure of the Byzantine army is 85,000 men; Whit-tow 1996, 184; Haldon 1999, 102ff. with the literature on the Arabic lists.

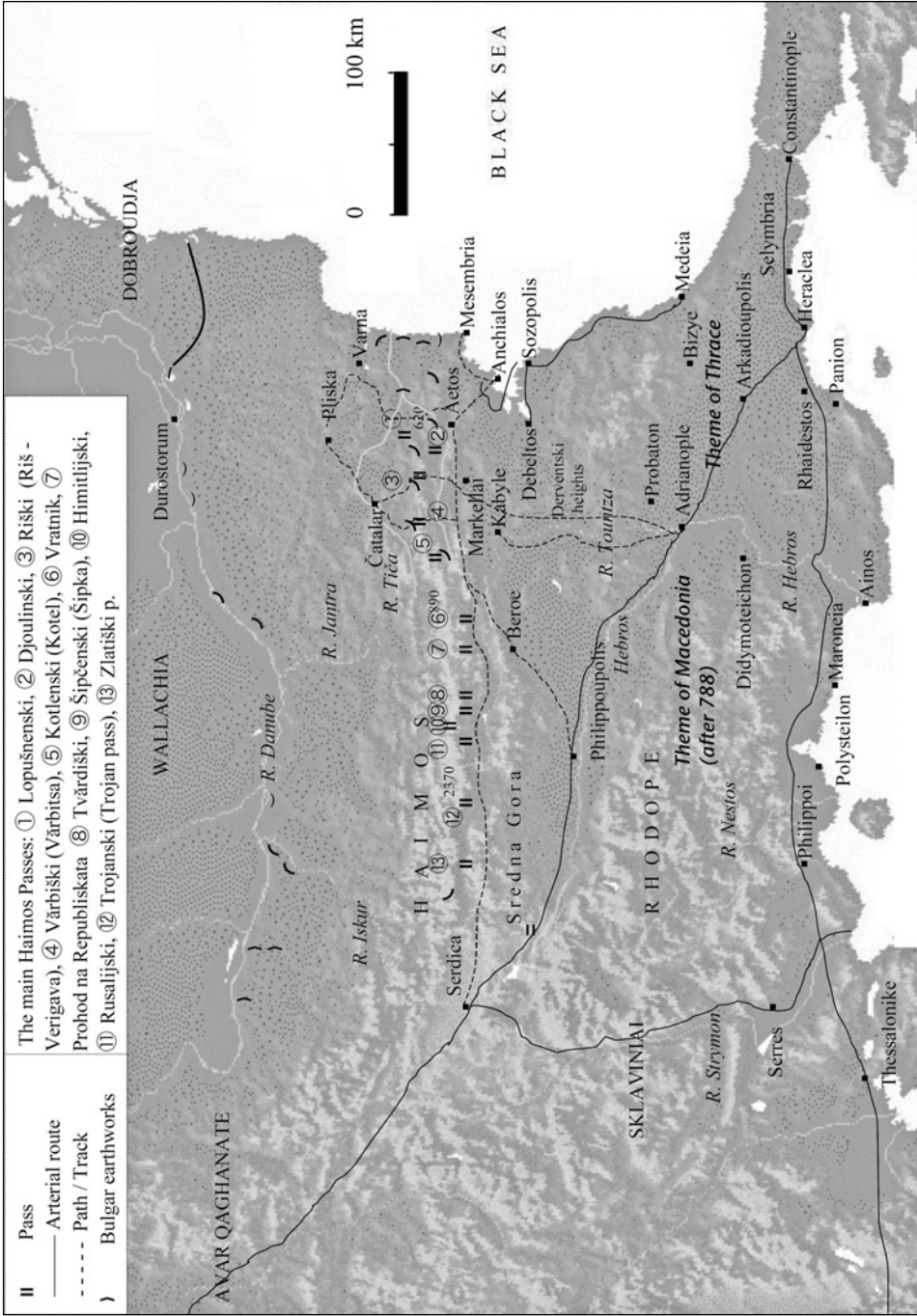
military registers must have numbered considerably less than this, perhaps 2,000–3,000 men in each *theme*.

The fundamental principles of Byzantine strategy in Thrace and Macedonia were, as far as we can tell, twofold: where possible, raiding forces should be held and turned back at the border before they could do any damage. To this end, the Byzantines built or restored and garrisoned a number of fortresses along the major invasion routes (particularly near the Haimos passes) which provided safe bases for the local *thematic* forces.²⁸² Where this policy of meeting and repulsing hostile attacks at the frontier did not work (which seems generally to have been the case judging from the fact that Bulgar raids frequently reached the heart of the Thracian Plain), then larger armies, often made up of both the local *themes* and the *tagmata*, were to meet the invading raiders and either attempt a direct confrontation or force a retreat. In any event, it was essential to minimize the scale of destruction inflicted on the land and prevent Bulgar penetration into the Constantinopolitan hinterland. As noted already, a series of fortified settlements and *kastra*, some of which had been erected during the military resettlements of Constantine V, constituted a strong rampart around southeastern Thrace (the most fertile part of the plain), but could also act as refuges for the local population in times of need.²⁸³ These *kastra* by themselves could hardly prevent the passage of raiders, but at least they limited the availability of easy plunder and forced the invaders, unless they undertook laborious sieges, to extend their ravaging to less fertile areas.

However important these raids may have been for the *khan* (given that they provided a positive outlet for the energies of the restless warrior aristocracy), his military priority was to defend the Bulgar pasturelands which supported the nomadic culture, economy and institutions of the ruling stratum. Although less fertile than the Wallachian and Bessarabian pasturelands (which the Bulgars also controlled during the period in question), the plains of northeastern Bulgaria were far easier to defend, hence the selection of Pliska as the permanent residence of the *khan* in the second half of the eighth century. The principle advantage of the so-called “inner lands” was their positioning between two natural protective barriers—the Haimos on the south

²⁸² The most important of these fortresses was Markellai (near modern Karnobat), guarding the passes of Riš and Värbitsa; Nikeph., c. 73.16–18; Soustal 1991, 348–349; Shtereva and Aladžov 2000, 290–299; Wendel 2005, 91ff. Several other border outposts, some of which cannot be safely identified, are mentioned in the inscription containing a summary of the terms of the peace treaty of ca. 816.

²⁸³ For these forts, see references in chapter 6.



Map I: Thrace, Macedonia and Bulgaria ca. 775

and the Danube on the north. As already mentioned, the Haimos is far more difficult to cross from the south than the north, above all because its southern slopes drop steeply into the Thracian Plain and are composed throughout of limestone.²⁸⁴ In addition, the defiles are narrow and densely forested, and are therefore easily blocked by human agency or weather. To prevent the passage of raiders, the Bulgars constructed above or behind these passes, but also along the eastern slopes of the Haimos which are comparatively low, an intricate system of earthworks and palisades, the remains of which are still visible today at Riš, Kotel, Dragoevo and Tsonevo, among other places.²⁸⁵ At the same time, the Black Sea shore was defended by a series of fortifications and ditches with embankments, intended to prevent landing and bar access to the naturally unprotected coastal road which afforded easy access to the Bulgar heartlands.²⁸⁶

Along the southern banks of the Danube an elaborate system of earthen ramparts, ditches with embankments, and stone-built defences (the latter pre-dating the arrival of the Bulgars in the Balkans) served as a deterrent to nomad or sedentary attacks from the north.²⁸⁷ Furthermore, a series of fortified camps along the river functioned as bases for the army from which raids against an invading fleet or enemy installations might be mounted, but could also afford protection to the local population and its livestock.²⁸⁸ Particularly important was the so-called Small Earthen Dyke, built apparently in the late seventh century, and running across the Dobrudja, from the Lower Danube to the Black Sea—a total of 59 km. This is superposed by the Large Earthen Dyke, which is traditionally dated to the reign of Symeon, and by the even later Stone Dyke, one of the most impressive structures of its kind in the Balkans.²⁸⁹ Further north, the Bulgars had constructed, probably in the early eighth century, a series of monumental barriers of embankments and ditches, which seem to have functioned both as defensive installations and

²⁸⁴ See 2.1 above.

²⁸⁵ The passes were also blocked by earthen or timber strongholds; Rašev 1982a, 55–65, 199; Wendel 2005, 205, 216, 211, 217, 223.

²⁸⁶ Such defences were built near Kranevo, Ozbor, Varna, Škorpilovtsi and on the mouth of the River Kamčija (Tiča); Rašev 1982b, 20–49; Rašev 1982a, 32–50; Georgiev 1998–1999, 167–182. Fiedler 2008, 164–165, believes that these dykes were erected after 864.

²⁸⁷ For example, at Hairedin, Ostrov, Kozloduyi and Lom. The two ditches at Kozloduyi and that near Lom were apparently directed against the Avars; Rašev 1982a, 67–74; Koledarov 1978, 134–135.

²⁸⁸ Rašev 1982a, 71–73.

²⁸⁹ Both the Large and Stone Dykes are equipped with a series of forts built against the ramparts; see Squatriti 2005, 65–71; Rašev 1982a 77–95; Curta 1999, 145–146.

symbolic lines of demarcation.²⁹⁰ The most important among them are the so-called North and South Bessarabian Ramparts, the former running from the River Prut to the Dniester (106 km in all), the latter covering an area of 126 km, from Prut to Lake Sasik (Sasicul Mare) by the Black Sea coast.²⁹¹ Another embankment dated to this period runs for approximately 22 km by Galați, located in the angle formed by the Prut and Siret Rivers. There are two dykes in the Wallachian Plain: the *Brazda lui Novac de Nord* (some 305 km long) and the *Brazda lui Novac de Sud* (about half that length), but their attribution to the Bulgars is far from certain.²⁹²

A key aspect of Bulgar defensive strategy was the movement of population groups to the regions behind the frontier. Theophanes reports that Asparuch transferred the Slavic tribe of the Severoi from its home by the pass of Veregava (Riš) to the eastern borders of the *khanate*, near the Black Sea coast; another group of Moesian Slavs, the so-called “Seven Tribes”, was established on two different parts of the Haimos Mountains, guarding the Thracian frontier and acting as check upon the eastern adventurism of the Avars.²⁹³ Similar arrangements were undoubtedly made in Wallachia and Moldavia (near the mouth of the Siret River), where in the early ninth century Krum resettled a large number of Byzantine prisoners from Thrace, who formed a self-governing Bulgar borderland under the supervision of a *komes*.²⁹⁴ In all these areas the Bulgars had established a chain of look-out posts covering the various points of ingress into the *khanate*. The task of the frontier populations, particularly the Moesian Slavs on the Haimos Mountains, was not only to warn of invasion but also to meet and repel their opponents before they gained access into the Bulgar hinterland.²⁹⁵ If that failed, they were to

²⁹⁰ See Squatriti 2005, 87–90.

²⁹¹ Rašev 1982a, 28–29, 32, 74, 123; Dimitrov 1987, 185, 187; see also the discussion in 3.2.5 of this study.

²⁹² See Fiedler 1986, 463.

²⁹³ Theoph., 359.12–17; Nikeph., c. 36.23–26; Obolensky 1971, 64–65. There is no doubt that these Slavs were tribute-paying vassals of the Bulgars, although many Bulgarian scholars have in the past tried to idealize the relationship between the two groups, talking instead of an “agreement”; see for example Zlatarski 1918, 142–144, and Koledarov 1978, 132–133. On the other hand, Dujčev 1938 and 1959a, claimed that the name “Seven Tribes” had symbolic significance and did not reflect the actual number of Slavic tribes participating in the union.

²⁹⁴ Leo Gram., 208.7–9, 231.15–232.3. Archaeological research has indicated that until the late eighth or early ninth century, when the first clear signs of Bulgar presence along the Lower Dniester River can be observed, that region was mainly defended by Slav or Slavicized populations; see Rašev 1995b, 91–92, and below at 3.2.5.

²⁹⁵ *Responsa* ch. xxxiv, 581.

follow, harass and dog the invading forces, thus making their expeditions riskier than before.²⁹⁶

Beyond the frontier regions, we might expect to find, by analogy with other Eurasian states, sparsely populated areas designed to offer additional obstacles to the invaders—for instance, making it extremely difficult for them to secure adequate supplies, and limiting the availability of easy plunder.²⁹⁷ However, the creation of such “wastelands” in Bulgaria is highly improbably due to restricted space. Thus, if the distant defence was neutralized, the “inner land” could only be protected by the actions of the mobile Bulgar cavalry, which supplemented the passive protection afforded by the circumferential fortifications of Pliska. On the whole, the Bulgar strategy of establishing successive lines of defence acted as an effective deterrent to most attacks from the north or the south. Nevertheless, an important factor affecting its application was that of human resources. As already mentioned, it is very possible that at times—in special circumstances—the Bulgars might have been able to raise armies of more than 10,000 men, but even then the Byzantine forces are very likely to have been greatly superior. Thus, as successive Byzantine emperors, most notably Constantine V and Nikephoros I, were clearly aware, a co-ordinated assault on the *khanate* from several fronts could easily overstretch the Bulgar defence. In the light of this strategic situation, maintaining, if not expanding, the size of the population in Bulgaria was one of the primary concerns of the *khans*. The Slavs of Thrace and Macedonia represented an obvious solution, but any attempt to incorporate them into the *khanate* was always bound to be met with stiff Byzantine resistance.²⁹⁸

Although the Bulgar state had only limited resources with which to oppose the Byzantines, it proved far more resilient than one might have expected; for not only was it defended by a ruling elite of nomadic warriors who enjoyed an advantage over their sedentary enemies in virtue of their customs and way of life, but, more importantly, it possessed the institutions and ideology of a centralized state that could include the *khan's* non-Bulgar subjects. As will be seen, the co-operation between the latter—whether Slavs or Christians—and the Turkic-speaking aristocracy was vital for the survival of the *khanate* in the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

²⁹⁶ Tactics of skirmishing warfare as employed by the Slavs are described in some detail in Maurice's *Strategikon*, xi. 4; xii.B. 20–21.

²⁹⁷ Koledarov 1979, 21; Koledarov 1978, 134–136. In Hungary in the ninth and tenth centuries the “wasteland” around the “core territories” was over 250 km long; this area is still called *puszta* after the Bulgarian word “*pusta* ~a/~o” from where we have “*pusto*”, i.e. “deserted land”.

²⁹⁸ For Telerig's plan to resettle the Slav Berzitai in Bulgaria *ca.* 773, see Theoph., 447.10–13.

CHAPTER THREE

BULGARIA'S NORTHERN NEIGHBOURS AND THE BLACK SEA ZONE IN THE SEVENTH TO NINTH CENTURIES

3.1 FROM "OLD GREAT BULGARIA" TO THE DANUBE KHANATE. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO ASPARUCH'S MIGRATION TO THE BALKANS

It is generally believed that a number of Oğuro-Bulgar tribes were already present in the Pontic steppe zone when the Huns arrived on the scene in the second half of the fourth century. In the aftermath of Atilla's death, his third son Ernach (Irnik in the "Namelist of the Bulgarian Princes") seems to have formed his own tribal union in southern Ukraine which contained numerous remnants of the Hunnic state, including the Kutriğurs, Utiğurs and Onoğurs. The first clear reference to the Bulgars is dated to *ca.* 480, when they fought as allies of Zeno (474–491) against the Ostrogoths, though on occasion they launched their own predatory raids on the empire.¹ For a brief period in the mid sixth century, the Kutriğurs became the dominant force in the region (the Bulgars temporarily fading from view), only to be overwhelmed by the formidable Avar confederation, which in the late 550s established its hegemony over Western Eurasia.² Thereafter, the Avars went on to conquer Pannonia, and the Kök Türks, who propelled them westwards, may have extended their influence over certain Oğuro-Bulgar groupings in the Pontic steppes.

In any event, by the early seventh century there is evidence that Avar power had reasserted itself in the region.³ According to Nikephoros, the "Onogundurs" rose against the Avar *qaghan* under the leadership of Kubrat,

¹ John of Antioch, 211.4–5; Beševliev 1981a, 76–77; Beševliev 1981c, 11–12; Golden 1992, 91–92, 98–100; Ziemann 2007, 44–55. However, one must not exclude the possibility that John of Antioch, who was writing in the seventh century, employed an ethnic name which applied to a steppe population of his own time, but which did not exist—or at least was not regularly used—for a specific nomadic group in the late fifth century. The same may well apply to Paul the Deacon writing, in his *Historia Romana* (215.18–19), about the Bulgars plundering Thrace in 493. Indeed, if we leave aside John of Antioch, the first references to the Bulgars are all from the early sixth century (Ennodius, Marcellinus Comes). I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Florin Curta for these remarks.

² Ziemann 2007, 95–103.

³ Pohl 1988, 273; Szádeczky-Kardoss 1975, 267–274.

who built up close diplomatic ties with the emperor Heraclius.⁴ Kubrat's revolt broke out soon after the unsuccessful Avar assault against Constantinople in 626, and, as has been rightly pointed out, it could not have been better timed to serve the political and military interests of the Byzantine empire. Having thrown off Avar rule, Kubrat proceeded to create his own independent polity in the steppes.⁵ Most scholars locate "Old Great Bulgaria" in the area north of Crimea, on both sides of the Lower Dnieper River—a theory that seems to be confirmed by a number of exceptionally rich burials discovered in western Ukraine, most notably at Malo Pereshchepine (13 km southwest of Poltava), which produced a hoard of gold and silver finds of some 21 kg. The collection included three golden rings with monograms mentioning Kubrat ("Χοβράτου πατρικίου"), as well as Sassanian, Türk and Avar artefacts (especially horse gear and weapons).⁶

Unfortunately, little else is known about Kubrat's activities. What seems to be certain is that he benefited from his relationship with the empire by the receipt of the dignity of *patrikios*, with associated stipends and prestige, and quite possibly tribute payments.⁷ The archaeological record is quite explicit in this regard. The burial assemblages found in the Lower and Middle Dnieper (Malo Pereshchepine, Novye Senžary-Začepilovka, Kelegei, Makuhivka etc.) included a large number of Byzantine *solidi* minted for late sixth- and seventh-century emperors. These, along with numerous other

⁴ Ὑπὸ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν καιρὸν ἐπανάστη Κούβρατος ὁ ἀνεπιθὸς Ὀργανά ὁ τῶν Οὐνογουνδούρων κύριος τῶ τῶν Ἀβάρων χαγάνω, καὶ ὃν εἶχε παρ' αὐτοῦ λαὸν περιυβρίσας ἐξεδίωξε τῆς οἰκείας γῆς. διαπρεσβεύεται δὲ πρὸς Ἡράκλειον καὶ σπένδεται εἰρήνην μετ' αὐτοῦ, ἥνπερ ἐφύλαξαν μέχρι τέλους τῆς αὐτῶν ζωῆς· δῶρά τε γὰρ αὐτῷ ἔπεμψε καὶ τῆ τοῦ πατρικίου ἀξία ἐτίμησεν; Nikeph., c. 22.1–7; Theoph. 357.8–11. Curta 2006b, 6, believes that earlier Kubrat may have been appointed by the Avars to govern a subject tribal union in the Black Sea steppes. Other scholars, among them Pletneva 1976, 21 and Pohl 1988, 273 with n. 43, maintain that the Onogurs separated themselves from the Türks rather than the Avars.

⁵ The chronicle of the emir Gazi-Baradj, written in the thirteenth century, places the foundation of "Great Bulgaria" in the year 629/30. However, the reliability of this work is still under scrutiny; see L'nova 2003, 134–141.

⁶ Werner 1984, 31–36, 35–44, fig. 32, 1,2; Werner 1992, 430–436; L'nova 1995, 257–270; Róna-Tas 1999, 215–220; Róna-Tas 2000; Zalesskaja *et al.* 1997; Ziemann 2007, 144–148. Curta 2006a, 78–79, remarks on the similarities between the Ukrainian assemblages and the exceptionally rich *qaghanal* burials of the late Early and Middle Avar periods in Hungary. But this interpretation is by no means uncontested: Aibabin 2006, 47–60, claims that the assemblages in the Lower and Middle Dnieper belonged to the Khazars, even though their content may have been collected, at least partly, by the Bulgars. On the other hand, Komar 2006, 158–166, 230–239, rejects any connection with the Bulgars (he locates Kubrat's state to the east of the Taman peninsula, in the Kuban steppes), and attributes them instead to early Khazar elites. Ambroz 1981, 20–22, interprets the assemblages of the Pereshchepine culture as commemorative monuments of noble Türks.

⁷ Nikeph., c. 22.1–7 (see n. 4 above).

objects of Byzantine provenance associated with the burial assemblages of the Malo Pereshchepine group, clearly served as gifts or bribes sent from Constantinople to Kubrat's "court" in the Pontic steppes.⁸

Significantly, the analysis of the numismatic material in most of these sites seems to suggest that the flow of Byzantine coinage into that area was terminated early in the reign of Constans II (in or shortly before 650).⁹ Certainly, after the removal of the Sassanid-Avar threat and the loss of Byzantium's wealthiest provinces to the Arabs, the empire was unwilling, if not unable, to commit substantial resources to its allies. By the middle of the seventh century, therefore, Kubrat or his successors no longer enjoyed Byzantine patronage so necessary to them and their followers, and this is likely to have produced internal rivalries and splits in "Great Bulgaria". On the other hand, Byzantine *solidi* struck after 650 have been found in burial assemblages in the Lower Don. The cluster of coin finds in that area, which does not appear to have been under the control of Kubrat's Bulgars, may be taken as an indication of a Byzantine attempt to build up a new relationship with the Khazars, the rising power in Western Eurasia.¹⁰

We possess only sparse information regarding the circumstances under which Asparuch's horde arrived in the Lower Danube region in the second half of the seventh century. Nikephoros and Theophanes report that following the death of Kubrat (at some point during the reign of Constans II), the nomadic union he had established was broken up.¹¹ His five sons divided the subject tribes among themselves. Batbaian remained in his native land, and Kotrag, having crossed the Tanais (Don), settled opposite him. The fourth brother went off to Pannonia to become an ally of the Avars, while the fifth entered Byzantine service in Pentapolis of Ravenna.¹² Asparuch, the third

⁸ See now the excellent analysis in Somogyi 2008, 127–128; Gavrituhin 2006, 14–15.

⁹ Semenov 1991, 121–130; Semenov 1986, 92–98; Sokolova 1993, 151–152; Gavrituhin 2006, 14–15; Somogyi 2008, 108–109 with particular emphasis on the coin-dated burial assemblages at Dnipropetrovs'ke, Maistrov and Rovnoe, which are likewise attributed to Kubrat's Bulgars.

¹⁰ The evidence is summarized in Somogyi 2008, 111–112.

¹¹ ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν χρόνων Κωνσταντίνου, τοῦ εἰς τὴν δύσιν, Κροβάτου τοῦ κυροῦ τῆς λεχθείσης Βουλγαρίας καὶ τῶν Κοτράγων τὸν βίον μεταλλάξαντος καὶ πέντε καταλιπόντος υἱοὺς καὶ διατυπώσαντος μηδαμῶς τούτους ἀποχωρισθῆναι ἐκ τῆς πρὸς ἀλλήλους διαίτης, διὰ τὸ πάντη κυριεύειν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἐτέρῳ μὴ δουλωθῆναι ἔθνει, μετ' ὀλίγον δὲ χρόνον τῆς ἐκείνου τελευτῆς εἰς διαίρεσιν ἑλληλυθότες οἱ αὐτοῦ πέντε υἱοὶ διέστησαν ἀπ' ἀλλήλων μετὰ τοῦ ἐν ὑπεξουσιότητι ἐκάστου αὐτῶν ὑποκειμένου λαοῦ; Theoph., 357.11–19. Kubrat's death is usually placed in the early or mid 640s, although later dates have also been suggested; see Golden 1992, 245.

¹² Beševliev 1981a, 156–158, identifies this brother with the "*Vulgarum dux*" Alzece, who according to Paul the Deacon, c. 5.29, 196 had placed himself under the service of the Longobard

brother, also moved westwards. He crossed the Dnieper and Dniester Rivers, and established himself and his followers just north of the Danube Delta, at a place called Onglos.¹³ Shortly afterwards, according to the two Byzantine chroniclers, the Khazars invaded the lands lying behind the Black Sea, and subjugated Batbaian who was forced to pay tribute.¹⁴

The events narrated in these accounts are confirmed, in their broader aspects, by two independent sources. The *Armenian Geography* attributed to Movsès Xorenac'i, but most probably written by Ananias of Širak in the seventh century, reports that Asparuch "fled from the Khazars from the Bulgarian mountains".¹⁵ Moreover, the mid tenth-century Khazar ruler Joseph recalls in a letter addressed to Hasdai ibn Shaprut, a senior minister of the Umayyad Caliph of Cordoba, how his ancestors, when they conquered their land, chased the defeated V.n.nt.r (Vununtur < Onoğundur) all the way down to the Danube.¹⁶ Clearly, the expanding Khazar confederation proved too strong for "Great Bulgaria". Nevertheless, the Bulgar polity may have been pulled apart as much by powers from within as from without. As noted already, the declining revenues from Byzantium would have weakened the bonds of the union, and with Kubrat's death, a struggle for the throne is very likely to have ensued between his sons. This was typical of many nomadic states, and may have resulted in the migration of elements of the union to the west.

The date of the Khazar conquest of the Black Sea steppes and Asparuch's subsequent migration to the Balkans is still the subject of a lively debate. The Khazar invasion originated, it appears, in the Middle Volga region, and quickly the entire area controlled by Kubrat's successors, including a large part of Crimea, was brought under the *qaghan's* control.¹⁷ Recent excavations at the city of Bosphoros revealed a destruction level dated by means of a

king Grimoald (662–671). The presence of nomadic warriors in Lombard Italy is confirmed by archaeological evidence and specifically the discovery of seventh-century horse burials in the cemetery of Vicenne; see Genito 2000, 229–248, esp. at 233–234. On the other hand, Pohl 1988, 269–270, 276, identifies Alzeco with Alciocus; the latter, having fought for the "Bulgar party" in the Avar civil war that broke out in the early 630s (see below), left Pannonia and brought his followers to Bavaria. For the migration of Bulgar groups in the Carpathian basin, see 3.2.3 below.

¹³ Nikeph., c. 35.1–27; Theoph., 357.19–358.5.

¹⁴ Nikeph., c. 35.27–34; Theoph., 358.5–11. Zuckerman 2007, 426–427, recently argued that the Khazar conquerors, who subjugated the Pontic steppe, comprised a strong Barsilian, that is Bulgar, element.

¹⁵ Ananias, 48, 55. For the date of composition of the two versions (one long and one short) of this work, see Zuckerman 2007, 418.

¹⁶ Kokovtsov 1932, 74–75, 91–92; Dunlop 1954, 42–43.

¹⁷ Zuckerman 2001, 325–329.

half-*foliis* of Constans II to no later than 659. This, according to some scholars, provides the *terminus post quem* for the Khazar invasion of the Pontic region.¹⁸ If so, by the early 660s Asparuch must have already been driven out of the Black Sea steppes.

A short time thereafter, this Bulgar group is reported to have arrived at a place called Onglos, which was thought to be secure and impregnable, being surrounded by marshes and rivers.¹⁹ Some scholars have identified this area with the large fortified camp of Niculițel, situated just south of the Danube Delta, and briefly occupied, most probably by Turkic nomads, at some point between the fifth and seventh centuries.²⁰ R. Rašev put forward the idea that the Onglos was a much larger area bounded on the south by the Small Earthen (or Dobrudjan) Dyke and on the north by the South Bessarabian Rampart (although he later admitted that this structure may well be ascribed to a later period).²¹ The Onglos has also been located, mainly on the basis of numismatic finds, in Wallachia, but this hypothesis is far from convincing.²² Others think it lay between the Siret and Prut Rivers, and in fact, Theophanes's description of events speaks strongly in favour of this opinion.²³ The large Roman camp at Barboși (near Galați, on the Romanian-Moldovian border), which was surrounded by an intricate system of earthen walls, and which appears to have been in relatively good condition at least until the sixth century, remains the most likely candidate for the place mentioned by the Byzantine chronicler.²⁴

The Bulgars, therefore, entered the Balkans as refugees, anxious to carve out a homeland for themselves. If the chronology of Asparuch's flight from the steppes is correct, then he and his followers remained north of the Danube Delta for a considerable amount of time. During that period, they must

¹⁸ Aibabin 2006, 32–33, 60.

¹⁹ Nikeph., c. 35.22–26; Theoph., 357.27–358.5. There has been a lengthy debate as to whether Onglos is derived from the Slavic 'o'gl' meaning 'corner' or from the Turkic 'oghul' meaning 'court/enclosure'; see Beševliev 1981a, 174–175; Simeonov 2008, 237–242; Ziemann 2007, 164.

²⁰ Zlatarski 1918, 132; Fiedler 1992, 21–22. For the archaeological evidence showing a brief period of occupation at Niculițel, see Madgearu 2000, 344.

²¹ Rašev 1982c, 76–79; on the South Bessarabian Rampart, see Rašev 1997c, 50, and below at 3.2.5; Dimitrov 1987, 185–192.

²² Diaconu 1970, 330–334; Chiriac 1991, 375–376.

²³ Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 86–87.

²⁴ For the identification of Barboși with the Onglos, see Madgearu 2000, 345–346. For a description of the Roman camp and its defences, see Madgearu 1992, 205–207. The isolated burial found at Bălteni, not far from the camp of Barboși, was originally interpreted as evidence for the presence of the Bulgars in that region before 680; see Comșa 1989, 77–86. However, Harhoiu 1997, 161, dated the assemblage to ca. 410.

have experienced increasing difficulties, having lost their pasturage and, in all likelihood, much of their livestock. Some of the tribesmen may have subsequently become semi-sedentary or fully sedentary, though it is clear that the ruling elite continued an essentially horse-oriented culture.²⁵ Faced with these conditions, they came to rely largely on predation. Their depredations are said to have caused havoc in the Lower Danube region still under Byzantine control, and may have forced the imperial government, confronted at that time with an Arab blockade of the capital, to pay tribute to them.²⁶ Some scholars have interpreted the presence of a large number of silver coins, minted mainly for Constantine IV, in hoard finds from Romania as bribes or gifts sent to Asparuch.²⁷ However, it has been pointed out that most of these hoards had an extensive age structure, containing also coins issued for Heraclius and Constans II, long before the arrival of the Bulgars in the Balkans.²⁸ Much like the *Priseaca* and *Drăgășani* hoards, which point to the existence of an independent power centre in Oltenia in the second and third quarters of the seventh century (see below), those of eastern Romania, assembled over a long period of time, may have served as tribute payments to “barbarian” chieftains established in that region after *ca.* 630. It is possible that in the second half of the seventh century the imperial government tried to recruit these chieftains as allies against the Bulgars, who in their westward migration had by that time approached the Lower Danube frontier of the empire. These tribal groups, one may conjecture, were defeated by Asparuch’s Bulgars and absorbed into their polity.²⁹

It is important to note that Asparuch’s devastating forays into the Lower Danube region, which may have resumed *ca.* 678 (there is good reason to believe that following his victory over the Arabs, Constantine IV refused to make further payments to the Bulgars), seem to have been partly motivated

²⁵ See especially the discussion above at 2.1.

²⁶ Nikeph., c. 36.1–4; Theoph., 358.11–15.

²⁷ Curta 1996, 115, referring to the hoards from Galați and *Priseaca*; Curta 2005, 119; Chiriac 1991, 373–377.

²⁸ Madgearu 2000, 345–346 and n. 33 on the hoards of Galați (earliest specimens minted between 615 and 638), *Valea Teilor* (containing one hexagram of Constans II’s first series, dated between 642 and 646) and *Piua Petrii*; Chiriac 1991, 374; see also Somogyi 2008, 112–117, 124–125. For the *Obârșeni* hoard (34 copper coins of Phocas, Heraklios and Constans II), see Dimian 1957, 196. On the other hand, the hoard from *Silistra*, which consists of 21 silver earrings, 3 silver rings and 3 silver coins minted between *ca.* 670–680, may well be associated with the Byzantine-Bulgar conflict of *ca.* 680; see Curta 1996, 169 no. 210.

²⁹ This hypothesis seems to be corroborated by the *Armenian Geography*, which reports that before establishing himself at Onglos, Asparuch had to chase the “Avars” from that region; see Madgearu 2007, 271–272.

by the need to consolidate his recently-formed but weak tribal union through military success and booty. The centrifugal tendencies of the migrating tribes were also kept in check through the ideology of strong leadership which the Bulgars had brought with them from the steppes. Asparuch's political legitimacy rested on descent from the *Tu-lu* (Dulo in the "Namelist"), the leading clan of the left division of the Western Türk *qaghanate* or *On Oq*.³⁰ The *On Oq* fully emerged as a confederation in its own right during the 630s, directly after the assassination of the Western *Qaghan* Mo-ho-tu, who some scholars have identified with Organas, the nephew of Kubrat.³¹ Whether Kubrat, following the creation of his state, actually assumed the *qaghanal* title or not, he was clearly familiar with the Türk notions of monarchical power, with their emphasis on the divinely sanctioned right to rule. There is no evidence to indicate how Inner Asian imperial tradition manifested itself in "Great Bulgaria", but in the state founded by Asparuch in the Lower Danube, the ruler possessed heavenly good fortune and exercised priestly authority, thereby acting as intermediary between the human and divine worlds.³² In this respect, Asparuch's state adhered closely to the socio-political institutions of the Türk *qaghanate* which, at least until conversion to Christianity, seem to have played a major role in shaping the consciousness of the Bulgar aristocracy.

At this point, it may be worth remarking that the Bulgar elite in the Lower Danube region seems to have maintained a strong sense of its historical past. Records of that past have survived in a number of texts, including the works of Theophanes and the patriarch Nikephoros, which evidently drew on native, oral tradition.³³ The so-called "Namelist of the Bulgarian Princes", compiled most probably during the reign of Symeon, also refers to the Bulgar rulers "on the other side of the Danube" and Asparuch's migration from the Pontic steppes.³⁴ Similar references appear in the eleventh-century *Apocryphal Bulgarian Chronicle (Vision of the Prophet Isaiah)*.³⁵ Given that these

³⁰ The tribal union led by the *Tu-lu* (just as that led by the *Nu-shi-pi*, the right branch of the *On Oq*) had its own *qaghan*; see Golden 1992, 135–136. As noted already, Asparuch and his successor also justified their authority in Attilid terms; Pritsak 1955, 35–37, 63–64.

³¹ Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, I, 159; Artamonov 1962, 161–162.

³² See 2.2.1 above.

³³ Theoph., 356.20–359.21; Nikeph., c. 35.38–36.29. In this connection, see also Green 1990, 272.

³⁴ Moskov 1988, 17ff., 160ff.; Tihomirov 1946, 81–90; Gorina 1995, 10–29. Pritsak 1955, 48, and Dujčev 1934, 6–7, propose earlier dates of composition.

³⁵ Täpkova-Zaimova and Miltenova 1996, 199–200; Kaimakamova 2004. It has been suggested that for some of his information (especially regarding "tsar Ispor", that is, Asparuch) the

two accounts date from the period after the Bulgars had been Christianized, one may reasonably suppose that they relayed lively oral traditions/genealogies (spurious as well as authentic) and principal events maintained through the eighth and ninth centuries.³⁶

The Bulgars, then, were deeply conscious of their steppe past. Unlike many other nomads, they were also aware of the steppe traditions of statehood, most recently exemplified, from their perspective, by the Kök Türks and the Avars. Their state in the Balkans was able to survive exactly because it drew on these traditions. The constant pressure exerted on it by its Byzantine and, to a lesser degree, Khazar neighbours undoubtedly served as a catalyst for further political development. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of its expulsion from the steppes, in its pre-680/1 state, the Bulgar union was probably nothing more than a fragile personal creation held together by Asparuch's political and military skills. Under his leadership, it seems to have grown very quickly, taking on new elements (mainly weaker sedentary populations) and in continual interaction with the Byzantine empire, from which it was able to extract tribute or other material benefits, it gradually developed into a more stable polity.

3.2 BULGARIA'S NORTHERN NEIGHBOURS, LATE SEVENTH TO EARLY NINTH CENTURY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

We do not know with any certainty the extent of Bulgar power north of the Danube River prior to the reign of Omurtag. By the time of his death in 831, the Bulgars appear to have controlled a broad belt of territory stretching east from the Lower Tisza River in the southern fringes of the Carpathian basin to the Dniester River in the Pontic steppes. However, the archaeological evidence suggests that their expansion into most of that area cannot be dated before the late eighth and early ninth centuries. It is almost certain that during the first one hundred years of its existence, the Bulgar *khanate* encompassed only a narrow strip of land running roughly along the northern

author of this Slavonic adaptation of a Byzantine apocryphal text drew upon the "Namelist"; see Dujčev 1972, 122–133.

³⁶ Indeed, Biljarski 2005, 7–21, who emphasizes how very unreliable both the "Namelist" and the *Apocryphal Bulgarian Chronicle* are for chronology, being geared to scriptural models for Christian ideological purposes, does see in them traces of some historical personages and events; see also Stepanov 2008, 364–365.

bank of the Lower Danube, as well as the marshy area north and west of the Danube Delta, in what is today southern Bessarabia.³⁷

Our purpose here is to review the existing evidence, both literary and material, in order to produce a thorough analysis of Bulgaria's relations with the sedentary and nomadic peoples living beyond the frontier region in the seventh to ninth centuries. Geographically, the inquiry is limited to four main areas: the Carpathian basin, the Wallachian Plain, the Crimean peninsula, and the region between the Eastern Carpathians and the middle courses of the major rivers which flow into the Black Sea, an area which closely corresponds to the boundary between steppe proper and wooded steppe.

3.2.1 *The Geographical Setting*

As noted in chapter 2, the Wallachian Plain, which lies between the Danube and the southern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, is one of the most important agricultural areas in the Balkans, producing mainly wheat, barley and maize. In addition, the land afforded good pasture for sheep and cattle, particularly during the winter months.³⁸ It is important to note, however, that until the large drainage works of the twentieth century, a great portion of the southern part of the plain, especially along the Danube, was covered by marshes. Several major rivers cross the Wallachian Plain, including the Olt and the Argeş. Both of these rivers served as important routes of communication between the northern Balkans and the Byzantine- and later Bulgar-controlled territories south of the Lower Danube.

North and west of the Wallachian Plain is the Carpathian mountain system, which extends over 1,500 km from the Middle Danube basin (at the confluence of the Danube and Morava Rivers) to the "Iron Gates", forming a semi-circle around the greater part of the Hungarian Plain and Transylvania. At the "Iron Gates", a narrow gorge with impressive towering cliffs near the modern Serbo-Romanian border, the Danube separates the Carpathians from the Haimos Mountains. The Carpathians in the territory of Romania are generally divided into three sections. The Southern Carpathians (Carpaiți Meridionali), otherwise known as the Transylvanian Alps, between the Carpathian Arc (or the valley of the River Bazău) and the Danube, in the "Iron

³⁷ For a series of Bulgar bi-ritual cemeteries in Wallachia, whose beginning cannot be dated before the late 700s or early 800s, see Fiedler 1989, 154.

³⁸ See 2.1 above.

Gates” region, all in an east-west range.³⁹ The western part of the Southern Carpathians consists of a series of lower mountain ranges, separated by structural depressions, which allow easy passage into Transylvania. Highest among them are the Banat Mountains. To the north, occupying an isolated position inside the Carpathian Arc, lies the Bihor Massif which, much like the Banat Mountains, contains large iron and copper deposits.⁴⁰

The Eastern Carpathians (Carpaiți Orientali), between the modern border with Ukraine and the valley of the Bazău River, are made up of a series of parallel ridges that are aligned on a northwest to southeast axis. One of them, Mount Harghita, is rich in mineral resources, and several gold, iron and copper mines are known to have operated there (most notably at Atid, Lueta and Balan) since Roman times at least.⁴¹ A number of wide structural depressions and rivers, including the Olt and Mureș, provide access across the eastern and southern sections of the Carpathians.⁴²

The Western Carpathians (Munții Apuseni), between the “Iron Gates” and the Ukrainian border, on the eastern border of the Tisza Plain, fall into three nearly equal sections, of which the central section reaches the greatest elevation. The other two sections are generally lower and are crossed by a number of navigable passes allowing access into the Hungarian Plain, most notably Portile Meseșului.⁴³

The eastern and southern branches of the Carpathians surround a vast flatland known as the Transylvanian Plateau, the greatest part of which was incorporated, along with Oltenia (Little Wallachia), into the Roman province of Dacia in the second century AD.⁴⁴ Watered by numerous rivers, among them the Olt, Mureș, Criș and Someș, Transylvania is by nature a wealthy agricultural region, mainly exploited for the production of cereal crops. However, not all the inhabitants of this region made a living as peasant farmers. A considerable part of the plateau is taken up by forest, interspersed with permanent grasslands where transhumant nomads grazed their flocks.⁴⁵ Others derived their existence from precious metal mining. Archaeological research has identified a large number of sites where iron and copper had been

³⁹ They reach their highest point at Mounts Moldoveanu and Negoiu; Naval Intelligence Division 1920b, 10–13.

⁴⁰ Rusu 1975, 145–146, fig. 4.

⁴¹ Rusu 1975, 144–146, fig. 3–4.

⁴² Naval Intelligence Division 1920b, 11–15, 17–18, 28–29.

⁴³ Daicovicu *et al.* 1960, xviii–xix.

⁴⁴ Tóth 2001, 67–71.

⁴⁵ Spinei 2009, 17–19; Horedt 1975, 113.

extracted in the Middle Ages,⁴⁶ while small quantities of gold-bearing sand or gravel were washed from the banks of the local rivers.⁴⁷ Transylvania was also endowed with rich salt resources (at least ten mines seem to have operated in the seventh to tenth centuries), and the sedentary or nomadic rulers of this area, aware of the value of the commodity, were actively involved in its trade.⁴⁸ There were several routes by which salt reached the areas north, west or south of the plateau. It usually moved along the Mureş River to the Tisza and thence to the Danube. The salt from the mines of northern Transylvania (Sic, Sărăţel, Ocna Dejului, Cojocna) followed the Someş River through the pass of Porţile Meseşului in the Apuseni Mountains, while that from the southern mines (Ocland, Ocna Sibiului) was shipped along the Olt River down to the Lower Danube.⁴⁹ The control of these routes and the enjoyment of the profits they produced were perhaps the most important factor in the politics of the Carpathian basin, and this helps explain the Bulgar interest in the region from the late eighth century onwards.⁵⁰

Further west, surrounded by the Alps and the Carpathian Arc, lies the Hungarian Plain, the largest area of steppe grassland in Europe. The Middle Danube divides the plain into two parts, the Great or Nagy Alföld and the Little Alföld (Kisalföld). The former covers approximately 100,000 km², but in the Middle Ages a great portion of that region was occupied by marshland, forests and, in an ever increasing measure, land used for agriculture.⁵¹ As a consequence, the Hungarian Plain could only support a relatively small number of horses, and the nomadic peoples who settled there could not maintain themselves without eventually adopting more sedentary forms of economic organization.⁵² Several rivers, most of them tributaries of the Danube, water the plain. Most important among them is the Tisza which is navigable over

⁴⁶ As shown by metallographic analyses of tools, arms and adornments found in the Carpathian basin; Rusu 1975, 143–145; Rusu 1972, 8ff.

⁴⁷ Horedt 1975, 119.

⁴⁸ Madgearu 2005, 103f. For a map of salt resources in the region, see Rusu 1975, 146 fig. 4. For the great demand of salt in the Byzantine Empire, see Stephenson 2000, 44–45.

⁴⁹ Madgearu 2005, 103.

⁵⁰ Spinei 2009, 23–26.

⁵¹ Until the extensive river-control works of the mid 19th c., the cycles of flood in some areas of the Hungarian Plain resulted in the inundation of much of the available land surface. These areas could remain under water for up to one-third of the year; Gillings 1995, 69–70. For the extent of marsh, moor and forest in the Hungarian Plain in the Middle Ages, see Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, I, 172 map 7; Curta 2006a, 93 n. 54. According to one estimate, the plain contains now some 41.900 km² of pasture; Den Hollander 1960, 75 n. 1; Lindner 1981, 14.

⁵² Sinor 1972, 181–182.

much of its course.⁵³ The same is true of the Drava and Sava Rivers, which served as major commercial waterways, connecting the Carpathian basin to northern Italy and the Adriatic.

The eastern and northern hinterlands of the Carpathian and Black Sea regions respectively played a particularly important role in the history of the Bulgar state in the eighth and ninth centuries. This area embraced a variety of landforms and climates but the dominant feature here is the extensive stretch of grassland, known as the “steppe corridor”, along which nomads moved between Central Asia and the Balkans.⁵⁴ The steppe belt funnels from the east across southern Ukraine and toward the mouth of the Danube. Its northwestern extremity is marked by a line drawn roughly between the Middle Volga and Middle Prut Rivers.⁵⁵ Beyond this line lies the forest steppe, where open treeless areas alternate with deciduous woodlands.⁵⁶ Much of the steppe and wooded steppe belts are covered with chestnut soil and *černoziem* (“black earth”), an excellent soil for the raising of cereal crops; nevertheless, the natural fertility of these soils is often reduced by relatively long periods of drought.⁵⁷ In general, the climate in this area is continental, with hot (and at times very hot) summers followed by extremely cold winters. In terms of relief, the open steppe is characterized by low-lying plains, with an altitude of no more than 200–250 metres.⁵⁸ In the north Pontic zone the plains are incised by the broad terraced valleys of several major rivers which drain into the Danube or the Black Sea, most notably the Prut, the Dniester (originating in the Eastern Carpathians and flowing south and east to the sea near Odessa), the Southern Bug and the Dnieper, the latter rising in central Russia and running south, with a total length of 2,285 km.⁵⁹ Joined by numerous tributaries, the Dnieper formed a major commercial waterway that linked, with a few portages (some 20–30 km long), the Baltic to the Black Sea.⁶⁰

Further south, lying between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, is the Crimean peninsula, which is linked to the Pontic mainland by a narrow causeway. The northern and central part of the peninsula (nearly three-

⁵³ Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, I, 171–173.

⁵⁴ Spinei 2009, 37, 39–40.

⁵⁵ Spinei 2009, 25, 29.

⁵⁶ Obolensky 1971, 34; Dolukhanov 1996, 16.

⁵⁷ Obolensky 1971, 34; Toynbee 1973, 431.

⁵⁸ Dolukhanov 1996, 10.

⁵⁹ Spinei 2009, 26–28.

⁶⁰ For a description of the trade route down the Dnieper River, used by the Rus to reach the luxury markets of Byzantium, see *DAI*, c. 9.1–113; Whittow 1996, 242–243; Obolensky 1971, 38–41.

quarters of its total area) has a semi-arid climate and is covered with grasslands where nomadic pastoralists from the south Russian steppes, following the seasonal cycle of transhumance, grazed their flocks during the spring.⁶¹ Southern Crimea, on the other hand, is dominated by a series of thickly-forested mountain ranges which run parallel to the southeastern coast, and towards the west drop steeply down to the Black Sea. The sheltering action of the mountains ensures that the fertile but narrow coastal fringe enjoys a humid Mediterranean climate. As a result, the production of wine, corn and grain was on a notable scale. The two principal cities, Kherson and Bosphoros, the former on the southwestern tip of the peninsula, the latter on its easternmost projection (near the entrance into the Sea of Azov), retained close political and economic ties with the Byzantine world throughout this period; for their predominantly Greek-speaking inhabitants carried on a lively trade with the empire, exporting foodstuffs and other raw materials of the hinterland, and importing Byzantine manufactured goods. At the same time, these cities served as strategic centres and observation posts, from which the imperial government could keep track of the movements of potential enemies in the Pontic steppe, and promote its diplomatic relations with them.⁶²

3.2.2 *Wallachia and the Bulgars*

Not much is known about the history of the region in the early Middle Ages. As noted already, there is some evidence pertaining to the presence of a centre of power in Oltenia (Western or Little Wallachia) during the first half of the seventh century. The local chieftains—undoubtedly former subjects of the Avar *qaghan*—had established close ties with Byzantium. These are well illustrated by the discovery of artefacts associated with power and prestige, such as bow fibulae, Byzantine belt buckles, earrings with star-shaped pendants, and coins (both stray finds and hoards, including those of *Priseaca*, *Drăgășani* and *Vărtope*) minted for Heraclius, Constans II and Constantine IV.⁶³ With the arrival of Asparuch's band in the Lower Danube, some

⁶¹ Obolensky 1971, 28; Noonan 2007, 221.

⁶² Noonan 1992, 118; Obolensky 1971, 30–31; Shepard 2009, 427–428.

⁶³ Madgearu 2000, 346 and n. 32; Madgearu 2007, 271–272. For the silver dress accessories found in *Coșovenii de Jos* (Dolj district), see Curta 1996, 116, who, however, associates them with the Bulgars. For a different opinion, see Somogyi 2008, 117. For the *Priseaca* hoard, see also Oberländer-Târnoveanu 2002, 176–177. At least two coins found in Oltenia date from the eighth century. The latest was struck for Leo III in Constantinople between 720 and 741 (*Drobeta Turnu-Severin*); Oberländer-Târnoveanu 2003b, 171; Curta 2005, 132–133, nos. 102, 118.

elements of this political organization may have been incorporated into the more powerful Bulgar union, while others are likely have moved westward.

Although the Bulgars established, *ca.* 680, their authority into southern Wallachia, they only sought to settle in the steppe-like plains of northeastern Bulgaria.⁶⁴ In the generations immediately following Asparuch's installation on the Lower Danube region, Wallachia (especially the grassland plain of Bărăgan, south of the Călmățui River, a tributary of the Danube) is more likely to have been the seasonal grazing ground for the herds and horses of the Bulgar (semi-) nomads. The latter, it may be pointed out, were probably small in number, and hence did not need to occupy land north of the Danube.

The expansion of the Bulgar settlement area in that direction took place several decades later, and can be explained in terms of a substantial growth of population in the central lands of the *khanate*.⁶⁵ A number of cemeteries excavated in southern Wallachia (in a narrow strip of land running roughly along the Danube and about 20 km inland) can be dated with some degree of certainty, mainly on the basis of the associated grave goods, to the period between the late eighth and early tenth centuries. Like cemeteries in northeastern Bulgaria, those of Wallachia (Sultana, Obișia Noua, Izvorul, Frătești) contained both inhumation and cremation burials (the latter were either in urns or, more usually, pit graves without urns), and are often accompanied by dress accessories, metal artefacts, small ceramic finds and food offerings.⁶⁶ This is in sharp contrast with a large number of burials with few or no grave goods, a contrast that has been rightly interpreted as signalling the presence of Slav and indigenous Romanic populations. Despite attempts of Romanian archaeologists to attach ethnic badges to specific traits or types derived from archaeological assemblages, it is, in fact, very difficult to distinguish between Slav and Romanic material culture. Thus, neither the use of sunken-floored buildings with clay ovens, nor the production of wheel-made or better-tampered hand-made pottery can be ascribed with any certainty to one group or the other.⁶⁷ Other scholars have striven to show that some of

⁶⁴ Obolensky 1971, 64.

⁶⁵ The demographic growth in the *khanate* is best illustrated by the great number of cemeteries (more than thirty) that are known to have been in use in northeastern Bulgaria in the eighth and ninth centuries; Fiedler 1989, 155 fig. 3; Curta 2006a, 89.

⁶⁶ Fiedler 1989, 148–150; Fiedler 1992, 268–272, 333f; see also 2.2.1 above.

⁶⁷ Curta 2001a, 276–284, 309; Barford 2001, 48–49. Fiedler 1989, 151–152, suggests that inhumation burials without any grave goods are the only feature in the archaeological record that might be associated with the indigenous Romanic populations. Still, it is by no means certain that the latter practised only this particular rite of burial.

the ceramic material found in the region has local Thracian, Dacian or provincial Roman origin, but this notion too has become very controversial.⁶⁸

Equally problematic is the assumption that the so-called “Dridu” or “Balkan-Danube culture”, which is thought to represent a mixture of Bulgar, Slav and Romanic ethnic elements, and is mainly attested in late eighth- to late tenth-century sites in the Wallachian Plain and, to a lesser extent, in Transylvania, southern Moldavia and Bessarabia (in present-day Moldova), is correlated with the expansion of the Bulgar state north of the Lower Danube region. This is not altogether unlikely, especially as concerns the pottery of the so-called “Dridu B” type, marked by a gray ware with burnished decoration and amphora-like jugs, which are so typical for northeastern Bulgaria.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, as was recently remarked, we are still waiting for a comprehensive study of this culture and its distribution.⁷⁰

3.2.3 *The Southern Regions of the Carpathian Basin*

By the end of the seventh century, when the Bulgar state in the Balkans was founded, the Hungarian Plain and its immediate hinterland were still under the control of the Avars. However, after their defeat outside Constantinople in 626, the latter had increasing difficulty dealing with their vassals, and were unable to retain their influence over the lands east and south of the Carpathian basin. Unfortunately, the state of affairs in the *qaghanate* between 626 and the late 780s, when a series of Frankish attacks led to its destruction, is imperfectly known due to the dearth of written sources. It is only with the aid of archaeology that a partial reconstruction of the history of the Avar state during this period becomes possible.

There is no doubt that the failure to capture Constantinople seriously damaged Avar prestige.⁷¹ Conflicts between the ruling class and various subject peoples seem to have followed the siege, and the *qaghan's* supremacy was

⁶⁸ See for instance Dolinescu-Ferche 1986, 121–154; Dolinescu-Ferche 1985, 117–147. The Ipotesti-Cândești culture was initially viewed as a combination of Romanic, Slav and East Roman elements, but gradually its origins were pushed back by Romanian archaeologists to before the arrival of the Slavs; for a discussion, see Curta 2001c, 367–384.

⁶⁹ Comşa 1963, 413–438; Madgearu 2002–2003, 51.

⁷⁰ Fiedler 2008, 216.

⁷¹ The crisis at the heart of the *qaghanate* is also visible in the archaeological record. Thus, after 626 (and until the second half of the seventh century) there is a significant break in coin imports from Byzantium, undoubtedly due to the interruption of tribute payments. Nevertheless, the *qaghans'* ability to keep control of the massive treasure acquired up to that point ultimately enabled the Avar state to survive for another 170 years; Somogyi 1997, 118–119; Somogyi 2008, 87–103; Daim 2003, 481.

challenged both at the centre and the fringes of his hegemony. In addition to Kubrat, who created an independent state in the Pontic steppes, to the north of the Hungarian Plain a Frankish merchant named Samo became leader of a Slav revolt, after which he set up an ephemeral polity centred probably on present-day Austria.⁷² Other groups of Avar subjects who were able to establish their own socio-political organizations around this time may have included the so-called “Seven tribes”, a federation of large Slav communities in the Lower Danube region which was later subdued by the Bulgars.⁷³

In the core lands of the *qaghanate*, a civil war is reported to have broken out in the 630s between two rival factions, one “Avar”, apparently referring to the ruling aristocracy, and the other “Bulgar”, which may have designated the less prestigious but still free nomadic warriors of different (mainly Pontic) origin that had joined the union.⁷⁴ The latter seem to have formed a separate unit within the Avar army, as indicated by several Byzantine sources, and following the 626 debacle, one of their leaders is likely to have laid claim to the *qaghanal* title. The conflict ended up in a victory for the “Avar” party, and as a result some 9,000 “Bulgar” families fled to Bavaria.⁷⁵ In terms of material culture, the Middle Avar Period (*ca.* 650–710) is marked by two important developments: firstly, a certain homogenization of the archaeological material in the large necropolises, a process which may reflect the “re-unification” of many small, virtually independent groups under the *qaghan*’s (nominal) sovereignty.⁷⁶ Secondly, an attempt to create a representational culture which, although relying on Byzantine technology, tried to avoid Byzantine fashions and instead looked consciously to the steppes for models. This is demonstrated in a particularly impressive manner by a number of high-status burials dated to the second quarter of the seventh century (Bócsa, Tépe, Kunbáony),⁷⁷ although from *ca.* 650 Byzantine objects, including gold and silver coins, once again appear in princely graves (for

⁷² Fredegar, 39–40, 56–88; Pohl 1988, 256–268; Barford 2001, 79–80.

⁷³ See above at 2.2.1.

⁷⁴ For a discussion, see Pohl 2003, 578–579.

⁷⁵ Most of these families were subsequently massacred at the orders of the Frankish King Dagobert; only a group of 700 men, women and children under their duke Alciocus escaped to a certain Walluc, duke of the Wends; Fredegar, 48, 68; Pohl 1988, 268–269; Ziemann 2007, 130–134.

⁷⁶ Daim 2003, 488; Vida 2008, 31. For evidence showing the re-assertion of Avar power in the northwestern lands of the *qaghanate* in the aftermath of Samo’s revolt, see Stadler 2008, 78–79.

⁷⁷ Tóth and Horváth 1992.

instance at Ozora-Tótipusztá).⁷⁸ In general, some archaeologists have linked the changes occurring in the material culture during the Middle Avar Period (yellow pottery, sabres etc) with the migration of Bulgar elements from the east.⁷⁹ However, as P. Somogyi has shown, any such a conclusion must be treated with scepticism.⁸⁰

During the last century of its existence (Late Avar Period, *ca.* 710–800), the Avar *qaghanate* was restricted in political significance to the central area of the Carpathian basin. The centre of power was still in the Hungarian Plain, between the Middle Danube and Tisza Rivers, but even there very few signs of nomadic life are discernible in the archaeological record. Clearly, by the time of Charlemagne's wars the *qaghanate* had evolved from its militaristic nomad background towards a more sedentary and less aggressive society, although the political language employed by the Avar elite continued to underline its steppe character.⁸¹ Meanwhile, small centres of power had developed on the fringes of the Carpathian basin, as shown by the accumulation of equestrian graves and rich finds of gold—a rather unusual phenomenon in the Late Avar Period—along the Middle Danube between Vienna and Komárno, in the area around Keszthely west of Lake Balaton, in the Upper Tisza region, as well as in present-day northern Serbia and western Romania (Vojvodina and Banat).⁸² It has been rightly noted that the

⁷⁸ Daim 2003, 517, 521–522. In a recent article, P. Somogyi suggested that this renewed flow of Byzantine coins into the *qaghanate* can only be understood as imperial gifts or bribes meant to buy an Avar alliance against the Onoğur-Bulgars, who in the process of their westward migration in the third quarter of the seventh century (following the collapse of Kubrat's state) may have threatened Byzantium's northern borders in the Lower Danube region. Evidence of a Byzantine-Avar *rapprochement* is provided by Theophanes for the year 678 (an Avar embassy arrives in Constantinople to congratulate Constantine IV on his victory over the Arabs), although this was probably not an isolated incident. Somogyi claims that the shipments of gold and silver to the Avars were interrupted once Asparuch established himself on imperial territory south of the Danube (the coin series ends abruptly around 681/5); Somogyi 2008, 126–130, 132; Theoph., 356.2–7. By contrast, Bóna 1993, 531, 536, explains the presence of Byzantine coins of Constans II and Constantine IV by means of the migration of Asparuch's brothers into the Carpathian basin. For Byzantine-Avar contacts after 626, see Pohl 1988, 278 n. 28.

⁷⁹ For example, Fülöp 1988; Fülöp 1990; Bálint 1989, 169; Curta 2006a, 91 and n. 51. The Tótipusztá-Dunapentele-Igar group of burials (dated by a coin of Constantine IV to the last third of the seventh century) shares many features with some of the princely graves discovered in western Ukraine (see above). Some scholars, most recently Makkay 1994, 157, have suggested that the nomadic elements that entered the Carpathian basin *ca.* 680 were, in fact, Hungarians.

⁸⁰ Somogyi 2008, 141–142.

⁸¹ See the discussion in Curta 2006a, 92–93.

⁸² Daim 2001, 163–164; Daim 2000; Kiss 1995, 120 fig. 5. For the treasure of Sânnicolău Mare in Romanian Banat (Timiș county), see now Bálint 2003, 57–69; see also Mavrodinov

occurrence of rich burial assemblages containing gilded belt sets (many of them decorated with motifs of obvious Byzantine origin) and other imports from the Adriatic and Italy in these peripheral regions of the *qaghanate* point to the existence of regular diplomatic contacts between the local elites and the Byzantine empire.⁸³ Luxury goods such as cast belt buckles, strap ends and mounts made of gold or silver are very likely to have been gifts to the leaders of these virtually independent power centres, with which Byzantium evidently wanted to maintain good relations.⁸⁴

Why was the imperial government so keen to build up close diplomatic ties with the local elites, particularly in the southern parts of the *qaghanate*? There can be no doubt that the existence of the Bulgar state in the Lower Danube region must have played a role. Although the written sources remain silent on the matter, it seems reasonable to suppose that Constantine V's military pressure in the third quarter of the eighth century marked the beginning of a Bulgar search for an ally in the Avar territory to the northwest. The horseman burials discovered in cemeteries in northern Serbia (Sremska Mitrovitsa, Pančevo, Vojka and Dudeštii Veci—the latter on the Serbo-Romanian border) are an indication that these frontier societies had retained some of the aggressive nomad militarism, which had been the true basis of Avar power in the sixth and early seventh centuries.⁸⁵ At the same time, the great number of sites that could be dated to this period seems to suggest a substantial growth of population in that same area.⁸⁶ Thus for the Bulgars,

1943; Marschak 1986, 308–316; László and Rácz 1983. The treasure included 23 gold vessels of alleged Byzantine, Inner-Asian, Sassanian and Avar provenance, with a chronology stretching back over a period of 120 years (the latest finds date from the mid or late eighth century). These objects may have in fact been “left-overs” from the Avar royal hoard, which remained in the Carpathian basin when most of the treasure was sent into the Frankish empire by Charlemagne's armies; Daim 2003, 516. For other gold finds, signalling the existence of regional centres of power in the southern borders of the Avar state, see Bóna 2001, 239 (Bačko Novo Selo), and Stanojevic 1987, 143.

⁸³ Daim 2001, 161ff. A very large number of belt parts and strap ends found in eighth-century Avar graves are decorated with motifs of Byzantine/Mediterranean origin (circus scenes, griffins, imperial portraits etc.). The vast majority of these finds were produced in local workshops, although recent metallographic and technological examinations have also identified a small number of Byzantine originals which served as prototypes for Late Avar representation and craftsmanship. In this connection, see now Heinrich-Tamaska 2008, 257. For the pieces of Byzantine jewellery discovered in Avar cemeteries from the eighth century, see Distelberger 1996, 77ff.; Callmer 1995, 49–54.

⁸⁴ Most of the belt components found in Bulgaria (at Preslav, Kamenovo, Velino, Varna, Divjadovo, Kabiuk, Zlatare, Gledačevo) are thought to have been manufactured in Byzantine workshops for the eighth-century Bulgar elite; Daim 2000, 94–106; Fiedler 1996, 248–264; Fiedler 2008, 218–220 with lit.; Stanilov 2006, 142. However, some of them may well have been brought into the *khanate* in the course of diplomatic missions from Byzantium.

⁸⁵ Bóna 2001, 238; Trbuhović 1982, 61–75.

⁸⁶ Takács 1999–2000, 463; Kiss 1977, 154.

whose defence had been overstretched by Constantine V's successive campaigns, these peripheral centres could have become important reservoirs of manpower to draw upon. The common nomadic consciousness and culture would have facilitated the Bulgar approach to the local elites, whose military resources the *khan* may have hoped to deploy against the empire, just as Krum reinforced his forces with Avars and Slavs from the "surrounding *Sklaviniai*" in the early ninth century.⁸⁷ This potentially dangerous development demanded an immediate Byzantine response. The regular diplomatic contacts with the rulers of the power centres in the southern region of the *qaghanate*—and of course the luxury goods brought to them from Constantinople or Byzantine Italy—were aimed at weaning them away from the political orbit of the Bulgars, and ensuring that they preferred peaceful relations with the empire. Links between the two sides may have remained strong during the last quarter of the eighth century, when Byzantium was itself under pressure from the Bulgars, and in need of allies to distract them.

In any case, Charlemagne's wars and the intense power struggles between rival elites that broke out thereafter opened a period of more aggressive Bulgar involvement in the southern and eastern regions of the former *qaghanate*, which eventually became a major recruitment ground for Krum's armies in the early 800s.⁸⁸ During the reign of Omurtag, the Bulgars were even able to bring some of these areas under their direct control. Their disputes with a number of local Slavic tribes, including the Timociani and the Abodritai, who are said to have been neighbours of the Bulgars, feature prominently in the Frankish sources of the period.⁸⁹ By the late 820s, Omurtag's forces had extended their operations to Pannonia: in 827, a Bulgar fleet is said to have sailed up the Drava and an attempt was made to replace the local Slavic chieftains with Bulgar governors; two years later, the Bulgars entered the Drava once again on boats and attacked a number of Frankish estates along the banks of the river.⁹⁰ However, *ca.* 832 Omurtag and Louis the Pious probably signed a peace treaty which may have divided the sphere of influence between the two powers in the southern Carpathian basin.⁹¹ Although recently the notion that linear earthen structures signalled boundaries

⁸⁷ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.43–44; Scriptor incertus, 347.2–8. These were doubtless former members of the Avar confederation who still dwelt in the Carpathian basin.

⁸⁸ For Charlemagne's campaigns against the *qaghanate*, see 4.3 and 5.2.1 below. For the civil war among rival Avar factions, see Pohl 1988, 317–323.

⁸⁹ *ARF*, 149–150, 159, 165–166.

⁹⁰ *ARF*, 173; *Annales Fuldenses*, 25–26.

⁹¹ *Annalista Saxo*, 574; Ronin 1985, 39–57. These events are discussed in more detail in chapter 8.

between rival polities has been called into question, there is little doubt that the large embankment built at about this time across Bačka (in southwestern Vojvodina), closing the angle between the Lower Tisza and Danube Rivers, served both as a defensive, military installation and a border indicator, east of which the *khan* claimed absolute sovereignty.⁹²

3.2.4 Transylvania

The picture of “Dark Age” Transylvania is similar in many respects to that of the contemporary Hungarian Plain. This area came under Avar control *ca.* 568 (when, allied with the Lombards, *Qaghan* Baian defeated the Gepids), and was quickly settled by large numbers of nomadic horsemen.⁹³ The ruling elite established its centre in the region between the Mureş and Târnava Mică Rivers, which produced some of the richest burials of the Early Avar Period, including that at Firtuşu. The hoard discovered there in 1831 consisted of some 300 gold coins, the latest of which were minted during the reign of Heraclius.⁹⁴ This was clearly part of the annual tribute paid by the imperial government to the *qaghan*, who in turn distributed it as largesse to the Avar elites in the Transylvanian Plateau. More research is needed to substantiate the evidence, but it seems that the local power centres derived their importance from the control of the production of salt, which, given its necessity for domestic animals, was in great demand in the *qaghanate*.⁹⁵ For the extraction and transport of the commodity, the ruling elite relied on the Romanic, Slav and Germanic populations that had either been present in Transylvania before the Avar conquest or had been transferred there by the *qaghan*, presumably for that purpose, in the late sixth and early seventh centuries.⁹⁶

The political crisis that broke out in *qaghanate* in the early 630s appears to have had an important effect on the peoples living in Transylvania. The archaeological record is quite explicit in this regard. Most Avar settlements

⁹² Fiedler 1986, 461–462; Squatriti 2005, 81–86; Curta 2006a, 157–159.

⁹³ For the early presence of the Avars in the region, see now Rustoiu and Ciută 2008, 71–98. I am particularly grateful to Professor Florin Curta for bringing this article to my attention.

⁹⁴ Bóna 2001, 104; Somogyi 1997, 40–42.

⁹⁵ Barford 2001, 158; Rusu 1975, 145.

⁹⁶ For the Gepids, who remained in place at least until the middle of the seventh century and continued to be involved in salt extraction on behalf of the Avar elite, see Horedt 1986, 29–36, 66–72; Rusu 1975, 119–120; Pohl 1980, 239–305. For the Slav and Romanic populations in Transylvania, see Madgearu 2005, 104–105 with lit. A significant number of grave goods (weapons and belt fittings) found on Gepid sites in that region have been interpreted as evidence for the presence of recently-settled Germanic groups who, unlike the Gepids, were not forced to provide labour in the salt mines, and may even have been able to retain a separate organization under their own leaders; Bóna 2001, 224–245.

and cemeteries dating from the period before 630 continued to be in use.⁹⁷ A number of cemeteries that have produced artefacts associated with high status (jewellery, belt buckles, fibulae), show traces of both Avar and Slav burial rites, an indication that from the second half of the seventh century Avar power in the region relied increasingly on local chieftains of Slavic origin.⁹⁸ During this period the archaeological evidence also demonstrates the emergence of new elements in the material culture of the ruling elite. The single-edge curved sabres, the broad symmetrical bows, the stirrups with flat footrests, and the rectangular belt ornaments, all of which were deposited in horseman burials, point to the influx of new Turkic nomads, quite possibly former elements of the Bulgar confederation in the Pontic steppes.⁹⁹ Judging by the distribution of these finds in cemeteries of the late seventh and eighth centuries in Transylvania, the newcomers settled mainly in the area between the Mureş and Târnava Rivers, and either lived side by side with the older populations (Cicău, Teiuş, Gîrbou) or carved out their own territories (Cîmpia Turzii, Noşlac).¹⁰⁰

The eighth century is marked on the one hand by the growth of the Slavic populations living in Transylvania, perhaps as a result of the arrival of new groups from the northwest, and on the other by the clear trends of unification shown in the material culture of the local elites. Indeed, it is usually hard to distinguish between Avar and Slav pottery and dress accessories, and only the study of burial rites (and in some cases skeletal remains) may help ascertain the ethnic affinities of the deceased.¹⁰¹ With few exceptions, Avar settlements and cemeteries now cluster around the Middle Mureş River and the salt mines of Turda, Ocna Mureş and Ocnişoara, a fact that points

⁹⁷ Harhoiu 2001, 139–163; Harhoiu 2004–2005.

⁹⁸ The archaeological evidence pertaining to the presence of Slavic populations in Transylvania in the mid-seventh century consists of a number of sites and cemeteries with mixed traditions of West Slav pottery and East Slav types of barrow construction; Székely 1972b, 55–57; Rusu 1975, 141; Barford 2001, 76; Bóna 2001, 233–236.

⁹⁹ There are also significant differences in burial practices (for instance, the separate burial of horses next to human graves) and in the inventory; see Rusu 1975, 137–138, 141; Horedt 1975, 120; Bóna 2001, 236–239. Similar finds have also been discovered in burial assemblages in the Hungarian Plain; see Bóna 1968, 614, and 3.2.3 above.

¹⁰⁰ The hypothesis that the new settlers came from the east is confirmed by the finds at Noşlac: the horses buried there belonged to the Przewalski type (also known as “Mongolian Wild Horse”); Rusu 1975, 137; Bóna 2001, 237–239.

¹⁰¹ Most archaeologists attribute a number of seventh- to ninth-century cremation and burial cemeteries known as “Mediaş group” to the Slavic populations of southern Transylvania; Horedt 1986, 60–66; Rusu 1975, 140–141; Barford 2001, 206. For the barrow cemeteries at Someşeni-Cluj and Nuşfalau, both attributed to Slavs, see Stanciu 1999; Macrea 1959.

to the existence of a centre (or centres) of power in that region.¹⁰² On the other hand, eighth-century settlements excavated in the eastern and southern Transylvanian basin (at Şura Mică and Medişoru Mare, near the mines of Praid and Ocna Sibiului respectively) have produced a number of hooked spurs, which were very popular in Central Europe among the western Slavs, and may be linked to the use of heavy cavalry. These finds have been associated with the rise of a non-Avar military organization of the local—Slav or Romanic—populations, which may have established defined tribal areas in the periphery of the salt-mine district and competed with rival centres for the production and distribution of this economically important commodity.¹⁰³

The Bulgars are likely to have entertained relations with these centres in the eighth and early ninth centuries, and some of the “Avars and Slavs” to whom Krum is said to have appealed for help in 811 may well have come from that region. The *khan’s* remarkable victories may even have encouraged the local elites to work out some kind of political relationship with the Bulgars, though it is important to point out that there is no evidence to suggest that Krum ever expanded his authority into Transylvania.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, it seems probable that the Bulgars obtained some of their raw materials from that area. Recent metallographic analyses of tools and weapons from hoards collected in Bulgaria and Romania have indicated that iron was extracted from ores (that is, natural iron oxides recovered from lakes or swampy areas) with a high phosphoric composition. The ores were roasted in an open fire and then placed in a furnace where the oxides were reduced to metallic iron. This had to be heated again into an iron sponge (bloom) and hammered to remove the rest of the waste material. It was then shaped into bars, some of which were later heated in charcoal fires to make steel.¹⁰⁵ With a high concentration of phosphorus, however, steel could only be produced in special surface-built furnaces which could maintain a temperature of over 1100°C. To date, such furnaces have not been found in Bulgaria, and this is likely to suggest that the *khanate* depended upon supplies of imported iron.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Bóna 2001, 244.

¹⁰³ Madgearu 1994, 155; Madgearu 2005, 106. For the use of horses by the Slavs, see Barford 2001, 143–144.

¹⁰⁴ A claim made, among others, by Beševliev 1981a, 235–236; see also Browning 1975, 68; Tăpkova-Zaimova 1970, 67–68; Mladjov 1998, 96. By contrast, the archaeological evidence supports the notion that during his reign the Bulgars took control of large parts of Wallachia and Oltenia; see 8.1 below.

¹⁰⁵ Barford 2001, 161; Curta 1998–1999, 28–29; Ziniakov 1988, 86, 89.

¹⁰⁶ Even though the local production of iron artefacts is attested both by the written sources and the discovery of smithies in Pliska and Preslav; *Scriptor incertus* 347.22–348.2; Curta 1998–1999, 28–30; Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 34; Vitliakov 1989–1990, 149–150, 165.

As noted already, a number of iron mines appear to have operated in Transylvania in the early Middle Ages, and though direct evidence is lacking, one should not exclude the possibility that locally-produced iron was shipped along the Olt and Argeş Rivers down to the Lower Danube.¹⁰⁷

Transylvania, then, represented an important reservoir of human and natural resources. Among the latter, by far the most valuable was salt, serving both as a means of sustenance as well as a source of wealth for whoever could supervise and regulate its exchange. In this light, it is no surprise that Krum's successors tried to bring the salt-mine district of Transylvania within their political orbit. Their presence there is attested by a number of settlements and cemeteries along both sides of the Middle Mureş (Alba Iulia, Blandiana, Sebeş, Călnic), the earliest of which are now dated to the first half of the ninth century.¹⁰⁸ These have produced ceramic assemblages (fine grey polished pottery), and dress accessories (mainly earrings) with good analogies in sites in the Lower Danube region.¹⁰⁹ Inhumation burials aligned on a west-east axis or accompanied by domestic animal bones—the remains of food offerings to the dead—also suggest strong cultural influences from Bulgaria.¹¹⁰ Much misunderstanding has been caused by the ethnic attribution of another group of burials from Ciumbrud and Orăştie, which are closely connected with the “Blandiana A” sites. The people buried there were most

¹⁰⁷ Rusu 1975, 144–146.

¹⁰⁸ Most significant in this respect are the numerous burial assemblages excavated at Blandiana (three different groups, “A–C”). Unlike “Blandiana A”, groups “B” and “C” did not contain any Christian artefacts. One key assemblage of group “B” is grave 8, which produced an amphora-like jug very similar to those found in Pliska and dated to the ninth century. Two similar specimens (one with painted decoration) were found outside of any identified grave during excavation, a sign that the amphora-like jug in grave 8 is not unique. Another important assemblage from “Blandiana B” (“La Brod”) is the so-called “shaman burial” which contained a horse skeleton, complete with gear and stirrups, the skull and some bones of a sheep, the skull and front legs of a cow, as well as three lyre-shaped belt buckles. Fiedler's chronology of the grave (tenth century) is primarily based on these buckles, but this interpretation is challenged by a recent re-examination of tenth- to eleventh-century burial assemblages in Transylvania; see Anghel and Ciugudean 1987, 183–184; Fiedler 2008, 160; Gáll 2004–2005, 384. I am very thankful to Prof. Florin Curta who called my attention to this point. For “Blandiana A”, see Blăjan and Popa 1983, 375–380; Horedt 1986, 75–76, 78; Simina 2002, 47–58.

¹⁰⁹ This type of pottery, known as “Dridu B type” (see above), differs slightly from the “Saltovo” pottery, which is likewise defined by grey ware with burnished decoration. The “Dridu B type” is common in the Lower Danube area and in sites concentrated around Alba Iulia, but is rarely found outside that part of Transylvania (pottery of this kind was only found in the southeast, at Cernat and Poian) or elsewhere in Romania; Horedt 1986, 75–78; Madgearu 2002–2003, 51; Madgearu 2005, 106–108.

¹¹⁰ Madgearu 2002–2003, 51–52; Madgearu 2005, 107–108; Bóna 2001, 265–270.

likely Christians, although it is not entirely clear whether they had come from the Lower Danube region or Moravia.¹¹¹

In any case, there can be no doubt that for a large part of the ninth century the Bulgars controlled the major salt-trade routes from Transylvania to the north, west and south. Judging by the existing evidence, they first occupied a number of strategic points in the southeastern Carpathians and along the Olt and Jiu river valleys (Slon, Poian, Cernat etc.), which afforded easy access from the Danube to southern and central Transylvania.¹¹² They subsequently penetrated the salt-mine district, subdued the local military forces, and transplanted from the *khanate* a small number of settlers (perhaps the soldiers of a garrison and their families) to control traffic along the Mureş River and tax transports of salt to Pannonia and Moravia.¹¹³ The Bulgar base of power seems to have been established at Alba Iulia, which has produced a number of important finds that could be dated to the ninth century.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, by the early 900s the Mureş valley became the target of successive Hungarian raids from the northwest, as a result of which Bulgar control over southern Transylvania quickly disintegrated.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Dankanits and Ferenczi 1960, 605–611. The “Ciumbrud A group” produced dress accessories with analogies in Christian sites in both Bulgaria and Moravia. For the idea of a Moravian population moving into Transylvania, see Pinter and Boroffka 1999, 327; Horedt 1986, 78–80; Fiedler 2008, 161–162. For a “Bulgar attribution”, see Fodor 1984, 49–50; Bóna 2001, 267–268; Madgearu 2002–2003, 53–54. In this connection, see Štefanovičová 1990, 215–129, for earrings of the “Nitra type” which have good analogies with earrings discovered at Ciumbrud and other sites within the Bulgar “cultural zone” (northeastern Bulgaria, Wallachia, Moldavia, northern Serbia). It is tempting to suppose that the Bulgar expansion in the southern regions of the Carpathian basin and Transylvania was responsible for the influence from the Lower Danube region so clearly visible in the jewellery of Great Moravia in the ninth century.

¹¹² As indicated by the discovery of tiles, bricks and other building materials (some of them bearing various proto-bulgarian runic signs and symbols); see Comşa 1969, 232–238; Comşa 1960, 401–403; Székely 1972a, 127–128; Székely 1992, 271, 278, 290–294. It is important to point out that the construction techniques and some of the building material (bricks, clay pipes) used at Slon strongly suggest that the fort was erected under the guidance of Byzantine engineers and craftsmen; see now Damian 2003, 487–491.

¹¹³ Bóna 2001, 268–269. Trade contact with territories under Frankish control are documented by the discovery along the salt routes of several artefacts of western origin such as weapons (Iernut, Tărtăria), spurs (Breaza, Dăbâca, Iernut, Tărtăria), ceramic finds (Iernut) and jewellery (Sălacea, Zalău, Deta); Madgearu 2005, 106–107; Nägler 1969, 100–101; Pascu *et al.* 1968, 177–178; Pinter 1998, 145–150.

¹¹⁴ The archaeological evidence is summarized by Madgearu 2005, 106–107; Madgearu 2002–2003, 55–56; Fodor 1984, 51.

¹¹⁵ Bóna 2001, 277–286.

3.2.5 *The Steppes North of the Black Sea*

In the eastern hinterland of the Carpathians and the steppes north of the Danube Delta the situation is more obscure. From the late seventh or early eighth century onwards, most of this area was occupied by a new archaeological group, the so-called Luka Rajkovetskaja culture (its local variant in Moldavia is known as Hlincea I culture) which is generally associated with the Eastern Slavs. A large number of settlements has been excavated so far, most of which are sited on elongated terraces, just above the floodplains of rivers.¹¹⁶ The archaeological evidence seems to suggest that these were usually shifting units—the dominant type of economy was the “alternating-fallow”, a form of itinerant agriculture which encouraged settlement mobility—consisting of a small number of square or rectangular sunken (or semi-sunken) huts with stone-built corner ovens.¹¹⁷ In the late seventh and eighth centuries, the vessels of the Luka Rajkovetskaja/Hlincea I culture were hand-made; the shoulders were usually rounded, the base was relatively narrow, while some specimens were decorated with notches or dished dimples. However, after the end of the eighth century, the pottery, which was now predominantly wheel-made, adopted a more S-shaped profile and was ornamented mainly with lines incised horizontally or in waves, a decorative scheme that according to archaeologists reflects the strong “Danubian” influences on that region.¹¹⁸

The “Danubian”, i.e. Bulgar, presence is more evident at a series of sites located around the freshwater lakes of southern Ukraine (Cahul, Jalpug, Katlabug), just north of the Danube Delta. This area has produced ceramic assemblages (mainly cooking pots, but also a range of small and medium-sized bowls and jars) with clear analogies to settlements and cemeteries in northeastern Bulgaria. The earliest material here, however, appears to date to the beginning of the eighth century.¹¹⁹ A similar date has recently been suggested for the construction of the South Bessarabian Rampart, which covers an area of approximately 126 km, from the River Prut to the Black Sea coast.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Barfield 2001, 96. For a good survey of the archaeological evidence in the steppes north of the Black Sea in the sixth and seventh centuries, see Curta 2008b, 149–185.

¹¹⁷ Gončarov 1963, 282–316; Teodor 1980, 60–61. For the itinerant agriculture of that area, see Barford 2001, 153–154. A similar phenomenon is also documented in Wallachia; see for example Dolinescu–Ferche 1992.

¹¹⁸ Sedov 1982, 90–93; Stoljarik 1992, 51; Barford 2001, 96.

¹¹⁹ Čebotarenko 1990, 49–55; Dončeva-Petkova 1977, 48–51, 68–98.

¹²⁰ For the late-seventh or early eighth-century sunken-floored huts unearthed against the rampart, see Čebotarenko and Subbotin 1991, 127–142 and figs. 1–9. On the other hand, Atanasov 2003, 101, refers to the discovery of Prague- and Penkova-type pottery in that area

Given the absence of any archaeological evidence pertaining to the presence of the Bulgars beyond that point before the late 700s, one may fairly suppose that the South Bessarabian Rampart served as a boundary marker.¹²¹ A broad area of sparsely inhabited territory as far as the Dnieper River appears to have separated the Bulgar possessions from the Khazar state. Although the Khazars are very likely to have controlled and used part of that area as their grazing ground, nothing is known about their relations with their Bulgar neighbours until the middle of the ninth century.¹²² They may well have applied local pressure across the frontier, but in general it seems that they had no expansionist plans at Bulgar expense. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the possibility that the political crisis at the heart of the *khanate* in the mid eighth century was the result of co-ordinated Byzantine-Khazar military action.¹²³ However plausible it may seem, such a scenario must be rejected for two reasons. In the first instance, it finds no support in the, admittedly, meagre surviving written source material of this period. Secondly, during the 750s and the 760s, when Constantine V stepped up his offensive on the Bulgar state, the Khazars' strategic priority lay in the Caucasus and the war against the Arabs; it is hard to believe, therefore, that the *qaghan* would have been in a position to divert sufficient military resources to the Lower Danube area to cause the Bulgar government much concern.¹²⁴

The Khazar *qaghanate* was an ethnically-diverse formation, containing, according to a tenth-century source, at least 25 subject peoples.¹²⁵ These included certain nomadic groupings inhabiting the Pontic steppe zone (especially the area between the Dnieper and the Don) which appear to have been genetically and linguistically related to the Danubian Bulgars. As noted above, the Dnieper-Don steppes had formed part of Kubrat's "Old Great Bulgaria" and not all the components of this confederation accompanied Asparuch in

and links the construction of the dyke to Asparuch and his Slavic subjects in the late 680s. In this connection, see Rašev 1997c, 50.

¹²¹ Squatriti 2005, 59–70, has persuasively argued that earthworks like those built by the Bulgars were randomly effective as fighting platforms; nevertheless they were especially important, since they offered a unique occasion for the *khans* to make a statement of despotic power and control over specific territories and peoples. Therefore, with the construction of the "monumental" South Bessarabian Rampart, the Bulgars may have wanted to send a message to onlookers in the Ukrainian steppe.

¹²² See now Pavlov 2003. Note that there are no permanent Khazar settlements found west of the Dnieper River; see Rašev 1995b, 89–95 and fig. 2; Atanasov 2003, 98f.

¹²³ See in particular Pavlov 2003, 128; Shapira 2002 (not available to me).

¹²⁴ For the Arab-Khazar war of the mid eighth century, see Czeglédy 1960, 75–88 (with special reference to all the Eastern sources); Dunlop 1954, 179–181.

¹²⁵ Ibn Fadlan, 76; Noonan 2007, 208.

the migration towards the Danube in the second half of the seventh century.¹²⁶ In the view of numerous scholars, these Bulgar elements, along with Alans and other Iranian-speaking populations, played a prominent role in the formation of the "Saltovo-Majaki" culture, the archaeological reflection of the Khazar state.¹²⁷ Certain features of this culture are, not unexpectedly, similar to those found in the Bulgar *khanate* in the seventh to ninth centuries. Thus a large number of cemeteries excavated in the steppes north of the Black Sea contained inhumation burials made in relatively shallow, quadrangular pits; as in the Lower Danube region, the bodies were laid on their back with head to either west or northwest, and were accompanied by objects such as pots containing food (meat offerings), ornaments, weapons (swords, spears and bows), and in some cases by horses.¹²⁸ Several other elements of the material culture of the Dnieper-Don steppes (ceramic assemblages, fortifications and building techniques) are also of a similar character to those found in the territories of the Bulgar state in the early Middle Ages.¹²⁹

In recent years, debate has focused on whether these Bulgar-speaking populations maintained any contacts with their kinsmen in the Balkans. The idea has been put forward that the Khazar-Arab conflict in the middle of the eighth century set the stage for a massive migration of Bulgar tribes into the Lower Danube region. Their arrival there, it is argued, had a profound effect on the Bulgar polity, breaking down internal cohesion and exacerbating the pre-existing political instability; at the same time, however, it increased the Turkic component and brought new military manpower into the *khanate*, thereby enabling the Bulgars to surmount the crisis triggered by the Byzantine offensive in the mid/late eighth century.¹³⁰ Unfortunately, the archaeological evidence that we possess at present speaks strongly against this hypothesis.¹³¹ Although it is possible that some nomadic groupings were

¹²⁶ Shepard 1998, 15.

¹²⁷ Pletneva 1967, 186–189, who cites five variants of the Saltovo-Majaki" culture, the "Forest-steppe", "Dagestani", "Don-Donets", "Crimean" and "Azovian" variants (the last three she attributes to the Bulgars); Werbart 1996, 199–221. See also references in Miheev 1985. For the Bulgar presence in Crimea, see 3.2.6 below.

¹²⁸ Rašev 2001a, 162–163; Pletneva 1967, 91–100.

¹²⁹ Dimitrov 1987, 130–132; Aksenov and Tortika 2001, 191ff.

¹³⁰ Pavlov 2003, 128–129 with further literature. Other scholars believe that a significant number of Bulgar elements migrated westwards at a later date, in the beginning of the ninth century (see below); see also Atanasov 2003, 111; Dimitrov 1987, 272.

¹³¹ Rašev 2001b, 27.

driven southwest into the Lower Danube, much more data is required to trace their movement with absolute certainty.¹³²

By contrast, the archaeological evidence seems to support the idea of the Bulgar settlement area gradually expanding into the northeast. More than 30 rural sites have been found at the border between the steppe and steppe-forest belt, on the right bank of the Dniester River.¹³³ Occupation of some of these settlements, which have produced ceramic assemblages resembling those from sites in the Lower Danube, as well as shreds of amphoroidal jugs imported from Byzantium, seems to have begun in the first decades of the ninth century.¹³⁴ The newcomers, who according to archaeologists had not yet adopted a fully sedentary mode of life, lived side by side with Slav agriculturalists associated with pottery of the Luka Rajkovetskaja type.¹³⁵

Regrettably, the circumstances under which the Bulgars were able to expand their authority into the Dniester basin elude us. The only clear evidence of military activity in the steppes north of the Danube estuary comes from a memorial inscription dating from the reign of Omurtag; it commemorates a military officer, the *kopanos* Korsis of the Čakarak clan, who drowned in the Dnieper River while on campaign.¹³⁶ It cannot be known whether the expeditionary force was directed against the Khazars or one of their nomadic clients, such as the Magyars. By the 830s, the latter were neighbours of the Bulgars in the Pontic steppe zone, and had already been drawn into Balkan affairs and Bulgaria's conflicts with Byzantium.¹³⁷ In any case, whatever

¹³² Dimitrov 1987, 271, produces some evidence for the existence of cultural contact between the Bulgars of the Lower Danube and those living in the Pontic steppes in the second half of the eighth century. However, as he admits, this was on a rather small scale.

¹³³ The most recent survey of the archaeological evidence is that of Kozlov 2007.

¹³⁴ That these sites were occupied by a population coming from the Lower Danube region (rather than by survivals of Kubrat's "Great Bulgaria" in the Pontic steppes) is best illustrated by the fact that most of the associated pottery finds were based on the "Balkan-Danube" tradition; see Kozlov 1997, 99–115; Kozlov 1990, 173ff. and 189–191, for the differences between the "Balkan-Danube" and "Saltovo-Majaki" pottery; Fedorov and Čebotarenko 1974, 40–52; Čebotarenko 1990, 47ff.

¹³⁵ This is substantiated by the discovery of semi-dug-outs with clay or stone stoves as well as yurt-like structures with hearths, but also by the presence of both inhumation and cremation burials; Stoljarik 1992, 53–54; Kozlov 1984b, 142–144. In the tenth century most of the Slavic settlements were destroyed by fire and subsequently abandoned; Čebotarenko 1973, 17–29, 76–86.

¹³⁶ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 59; Božilov 1973, 72–76; Simeonov 2008, 185.

¹³⁷ Thus around 837, responding to *Khan* Persian's request, the Magyars raided the Lower Danube region and attacked the Byzantine prisoners-of-war that had been moved there during the reign of Krum; George cont., 817.10–819.15. It is generally believed that by that time the Magyars controlled the entire steppe-corridor between the Don and Dniester Rivers.

the Khazar reaction may have been, it was certainly not sufficiently effective to prevent the Bulgar advance. This could, in turn, suggest that during the early 800s the Khazars were already facing serious difficulties. We cannot pinpoint the precise cause of this crisis. Perhaps it was brought on by events in the eastern periphery of the *qaghanate*. To be sure, in the early ninth century the tribal confederation of the Oğuz, forced west by the rising power of the Uigurs, invaded Turkestan. Their arrival there set off further migrations which culminated in the appearance of the Pečenegs in the Volga-Ural steppes, where they posed a direct threat to the Khazar state.¹³⁸ Meanwhile, the *qaghanate* was also locked in conflict with the Arabs in the Caucasus. The picture that emerges from a number of eastern sources is one of successive raids and counter-raids which continued through the third decade of the ninth century and may well have prevented the Khazars from making an active response to the Bulgar expansion into the Ukraine.¹³⁹

As the memorial inscription of Korsis suggests, the Bulgars were active in the steppe north and northwest of the Black Sea during the reign of Omurtag. The campaign on the Dnieper River probably dates from the 820s, but there is no way of confirming this. Whether this was a carefully prepared act of aggression or simply a response to a growing military threat coming from the *qaghanate* is equally difficult to say. The Magyars, who by the 830s were firmly in control of the area between the Don and Dniester Rivers, are likely to have constituted a considerable menace to the Bulgars. However, some scholars have connected the funeral inscription with developments inside the Khazar state. Relying on information provided by Constantine Porphyrogenitos' *De Administrando Imperio*, they have suggested that at about this time the *qaghanate* was caught up in internal struggles.¹⁴⁰ This interpretation seems to be supported by archaeological finds. Excavations at Tsimlianskoe,

¹³⁸ Golden 1972, 50–59; Golden 1992, 207, 265.

¹³⁹ Indeed, although the last major Khazar raid into Muslim-held Transcaucasia occurred in 799, hostilities did not cease until 822; Kennedy 1981, 122–123; Dunlop 1954, 183–185; Kralidis 2003, 107–108 with further lit.

¹⁴⁰ Indeed, in chapter 39 the *DAI* talks about a civil war that broke out when the “Kabaroi” (Qabars), apparently a Khazar tribe, revolted against the *qaghan*. Most of the rebels were killed, but those who managed to escape went off to join the Magyars as they moved to “Atelk-ouzou” (Etelköz), that is, the steppe north of the Black Sea. Given that the Magyars occupied that area in the 830s, it follows that the Qabar revolt took place somewhat earlier, possibly in the mid or late 820s; *DAI*, c. 39.2–10; c. 40.3–4, 6–7; Whittow 1996, 237; Golden 1992, 262; Atanasov 2003, 111–112. Kristó 1996, who considers the Qabars to be Onoğur-Bulgars, places their revolt in the 810s; see also Róna-Tas 1999, 322–324, 328. Alternative explanations are offered by Pritsak 1978, 278–280 and Howard-Johnston 2007, 187–188.

a fortified settlement located on the right bank of the Lower Don, have produced evidence of wholesale destruction effected by invading forces. Several skeletons have been found on the site, while the walls, built of white ashlar blocks during the late 700s, bear traces of a serious fire. The raid that completely destroyed the fort is dated by means of some 50 Arab coins to the first quarter of the ninth century.¹⁴¹ It is worth pointing out that all the other settlements in the vicinity of the fort, although less protected, seem to have been continuously occupied throughout this period. This, according to archaeologists, excludes the possibility of an external enemy invading the region. In all likelihood, therefore, Tsimlianskoe was sacked in the course of the revolt described by the *DAI*.¹⁴² Its suppression was probably followed by a Khazar-sponsored rearrangement of their nomadic clients, which might have been responsible for the arrival of the Magyars in the Ukrainian steppe, where they evidently acted as guardians of the *qaghanate's* western frontier.¹⁴³ Interestingly enough, a number of scholars have argued that significant Bulgar elements in the Don, Donets and Azov steppes, as a consequence of the turmoil, scattered and fled. Thus, some groups are believed to have moved to the Middle Volga region, while yet others are thought to have made their way westwards, towards the Dniester and into the Bulgar *khanate*. This opinion is mainly based on a number of ceramic finds produced by various sites in the Lower Danube, which, it is claimed, have similarities to the "Saltovo-Majaki" pottery, particularly its "steppe" variant. Archaeologists have also noted the presence of vessels with "pseudo-handles" and ornament applied in relief. These finds are similar in form and decoration to Alanic vessels from the north Caucasus and Don regions, and are thought to have been brought to the area with the populations coming from the *qaghanate*.¹⁴⁴ The impression one gets from the available evidence is that some "steppe"

¹⁴¹ Flerov 1996, 111; Dimitrov 1987, 151–157.

¹⁴² Artamonov 1962, 322–323; Flerov 1996, 100–113. On the other hand, Pletneva 1993, 48ff. and Zuckerman 1997, 66 see the destruction of the fort as evidence of a Khazar-Magyar conflict.

¹⁴³ This view runs counter to the version of events presented by the *DAI*, c. 37.8–14 and c. 38.24–31, according to which the Magyars were driven out of "Lebedia" (perhaps around the Don and Donets Rivers) by the Pečenegs. Nevertheless, the account of the *DAI* needs to be treated with caution, as it seems to be based on oral—and thus to a degree unreliable—information given to the Byzantines several decades later; see Whittow 1996, 229–230, 232–233.

¹⁴⁴ Dimitrov 1987, 271–272; Pavlov 2003, 129–130; Pletneva 1981, 16–17; Pletneva 1997, 48–51, where the Qabar rebellion and the migration of Bulgar elements to the Lower Danube are connected with the Khazar conversion to Judaism. A similar interpretation is offered by Atanasov 2003, 110. He claims that Omurtag's armies came to the rescue of their kinsmen who were pursued by the Khazars, and that Korsis' death on the Dnieper occurred then.

elements may indeed have been introduced into the material culture of the Lower Danube during the first half of the ninth century. However, whether this was due to a migration of former Khazar subjects to the *khanate*, or simply to the growing economic and cultural interaction across the no-man's-land separating the two states, cannot be known with any certainty.¹⁴⁵

It is against this background that one should probably see the campaign on the Dnieper mentioned in Korsis' memorial inscription. Omurtag must have been keen to exploit Khazar difficulties and extend his influence to an area that had been closely associated with early Bulgar history. Indeed, judging from various written accounts that drew upon Bulgar oral tradition, the members of the ruling elite in the ninth and tenth centuries were fully aware that their ancestors had been driven out of the Ukrainian steppes by the Khazars.¹⁴⁶ In any case, Omurtag's military endeavours did not bring any permanent territorial gains to the Bulgars. Further advances in that direction were blocked by the Magyars' arrival in the 830s. The appearance of this dangerous nomadic confederation in the northeastern borders of the *khanate* seems to have marked a fundamental shift in Bulgar strategy, with the adoption of a more defensive posture along the steppes north of the Danube Delta. The primary goal of this strategy was to protect the abundant pastureland of that area which, as has been noted in the previous chapter, would allow the Bulgar elite to retain a horse-oriented culture and attendant martial traditions.

3.2.6 *The Crimea*

Any serious analysis of Bulgaria's relations with the lands and peoples beyond its frontier cannot leave out the Crimea, which throughout this period maintained close ties both with the nomad world of the Eurasian steppes and

¹⁴⁵ For the discovery of beads of (probable) "oriental" origin that seem to have entered northeastern Bulgaria in the late eighth and ninth century and may therefore point to possible trade links with the Khazar world, see Callmer 1991, 26 fig. 1, 31. I would like to thank Dr Natalija Ristovska for her very useful remarks on this topic.

¹⁴⁶ See my comments above at 3.1. In addition to the texts mentioned already, a poem written in Volga Bulgaria by the Islamic scholar Mikail Bashtu ibn Šams Tebir in 882 preserved the tradition of a Bulgar ruler in the Middle Dnieper region (Buri-chai). This has been linked by Ukrainian scholars with the finds of Malo Pereshchepine and Kubrat's "Great Bulgaria"; see Baranov 1998, 19–21; Curta 2006b, 4. Also note that according to Theophanes continuatus (358.2–6), Symeon, following his first victory of the Byzantines in 894, slit the noses of the captured Khazars (serving in the imperial bodyguard) and sent them back to Constantinople. Although Symeon's gesture is commonly thought to have been intended to humiliate Leo VI, Zuckerman 2007, 432 recently suggested that the Bulgar ruler may have been seeking revenge for Asparuch's defeat in the seventh century; Shepard 1997, 571–572.

the Byzantine empire. In the early Middle Ages, the Crimea was a region of considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity. The southern part of the peninsula, with its hot and dry Mediterranean climate, was dominated by a Greek-speaking, Christian population of mainly Gothic and Alan origin. From the late seventh and eighth centuries onwards, the material culture of this area came under strong Byzantine influence, most evident in the population's clothing and funerary rites, as well as the production of pottery and glass.¹⁴⁷ Some scholars have connected this phenomenon with the arrival of a large body of iconophile refugees from the empire.¹⁴⁸ Significantly, archaeologists have also uncovered sufficient evidence for a very lively trade with Byzantium. Imported pottery (amphoras and glazed wares), metal goods and glass from the empire were widely distributed throughout the peninsula and north of the Black Sea in the seventh to ninth centuries.¹⁴⁹ On the other hand, the cities of the southern Crimea exported to Byzantium raw materials (notably fish, furs, salt, wood and wax), many of which were obtained from the nomads of the South Russian steppes.¹⁵⁰ This conclusion is further substantiated by the discovery of lead seals of Byzantine traders, who were evidently active in the Crimean markets during this period.¹⁵¹ At the same time, the sheer number of seals of Byzantine officials that have come to light at Kherson, Sugdaia and Bosporos, attest to the strong political ties between these cities and the empire.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Baranov 1990a, 129–139; Kazanski and Soupalt 2000, 261–274; Bortoli and Kazanski 2002, 662.

¹⁴⁸ Obolensky 1971, 174.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Smokotina 2003, 172–181; Bortoli and Kazanski 2002, 660–663 with additional bibl. For the large amounts of amphoras and related vessels produced both in the Byzantine and Khazar areas of the Crimea, see Jakobson 1979, 39ff.

¹⁵⁰ *DAI*, c. 53.512–535 on the Crimean ships in Byzantine ports; Madgearu 2006, 194. For the wreck at Bozburun, on the southwest coast of Asia Minor, of a ship carrying Crimean wine amphoras (ninth or early tenth c.), see Hocker 1998. For the evidence of trade relations with the Khazar *qaghanate*, see Bortoli and Kazanski 2002, 661–662; Noonan 1992, 121, 127; Bogdanova 1991, 62–65.

¹⁵¹ Šandrovskaja 2003, 393–398; Šandrovskaja 2002, 43–46.

¹⁵² Alekseenko 2002, 455–500; Šandrovskaja 1993, 85–98. The southwestern part of the Crimea remained part of the empire for most of the period under consideration. Local officials known as *archontes* or “fathers of the city” are attested at Kherson since the early eighth century. However, at about the same time the Khazars were able to install a governor there and establish a working relationship with the local nobility. The Khersonites, aided by the *qaghan*, revolted against Justinian II in 711, but shortly afterwards the Byzantines restored their authority over the city. During the reign of Theophilos, Kherson was incorporated into the *thematic* system, becoming the seat of a *strategos*. In the second half of the ninth century, the mint of the city began to issue copper coins in large quantities; Nikeph., *Opuscula Hist.*, 44; Sokolova 1983, 34–40; Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1991, 183; Zuckerman 1997, 215–222. For the local *kommerkiarioi*, see Sokolova 1983, nos. 17, 21, 23, 28; Oikonomides 2000,

Various other groups were present in the Crimean peninsula before the Khazar conquest in the beginning of the eighth century. Turkic-speaking nomads, described by archaeologists as Oğuric Bulgars, grazed their flocks in the pastures of northern and central Crimea, although they too gradually adopted a sedentary way of life.¹⁵³ The particular cause for this profound social and economic change may have something to do with population growth in the region following the arrival of new settlers (Khazars, Bulgars and Alans) in the late seventh and eighth centuries. This new population, which as of the late 700s had settled both in the eastern and western parts of the peninsula, soon became more sedentary (particularly the Bulgar and Alan elements engaged primarily in the cultivation of wheat and rye, and in viticulture), though there is clear evidence that the local, “Khazar” elite maintained a semi-nomadic lifestyle.¹⁵⁴ The material culture of the newcomers has been defined as the “Crimean” variant of the “Saltovo-Majaki” culture.¹⁵⁵ However, it also shows the influence of the Byzantine cities of the south, in both the population’s funerary rites and the construction of larger dwellings (consisting of one or two rooms), which came to replace the typical nomadic semi-dugs-outs.¹⁵⁶ It is also worth pointing out that the sedentarized Turkic settlers of the Crimea had extensive trade ties with their Hellenized neighbours, and a few even converted to Christianity in the eighth and ninth centuries.¹⁵⁷

Aside from the Hellenized Goths of the southwestern coast of the peninsula, there were smaller groups of Germanic populations, deriving from elements of the mighty Gothic kingdom in the Pontic steppes (destroyed by the Huns in the 370s), which had established themselves at the Crimean mountains. There they were able to preserve their language and maintain their

318–323. By contrast, Bosphoros, where a Khazar governor was also appointed in the early 700s, remained under the *qaghan’s* rule throughout the ninth century. The same is true for most of eastern and central Crimea; Theoph., 373.8–10; Aibabin 2006, 46–47. For the political tensions between Byzantium and the *qaghanate* which periodically erupted in the Crimea, see Noonan 1992, 112–117, 123–132.

¹⁵³ Baranov 1990a, 14–18; Noonan 2007, 220–221; Kazanski and Soupalt 2000, 281; Gavrilov 2000, 109–114.

¹⁵⁴ Baranov 1990a, 71–75. For the rich nomad burials attributed by archaeologists to the Khazar aristocracy, see Aibabin 2005, 422–423.

¹⁵⁵ Baranov 1990a, 5; Baranov 1990b.

¹⁵⁶ Baranov 1990a, 37–53; Zin’ko and Ponomarev 2005, 406–421.

¹⁵⁷ Their conversion may have been the result of Byzantine missionary activity in the peninsula. Note that at least two churches built in the Crimea (Planerskoe and Kordon-Oba) combine Byzantine architectural elements with “Saltovo-Majaki” building techniques; Baranov 1990a, 133–139; Stepanov 2010a, 25.

autonomy at least until the mid sixth century.¹⁵⁸ During the reign of Justinian I, the Crimean Goths, who had earlier converted to Orthodoxy, seem to have worked out some kind of political relationship with Byzantium. Their principle city, Doros (probably to be identified with Mangup, some 20 km east of Kherson), became the seat of the bishop of Gothia, with the help of whom the imperial government tried in the late eighth/early ninth century to establish seven new bishoprics at key locations within the Khazar *qaghanate*.¹⁵⁹ The Khazars responded by conquering the Gothic area of Crimea sometime around 787.¹⁶⁰

There is some evidence to suggest the existence of contacts between the Crimean peninsula and the Lower Danube region during the period of our interest. Pottery vessels, roof tiles, bricks and other building materials bearing various signs and symbols were found in significant quantities at Kherson. While these signs are common enough throughout the Byzantine world on amphoras, their use on tiles is paralleled only in Bulgaria. What is more, some of the signs are strikingly similar to those found on sites in the *khanate* in the late eighth to tenth centuries.¹⁶¹ At Bucov, in central Wallachia, a network of settlements was established in the 700s.¹⁶² Alongside a small number of Byzantine glazed or partly-glazed wares, including chafing dishes and amphoroidal jugs that may have transported oil and wine, archaeologists have discovered pottery remains produced in the north Pontic and Crimean regions.¹⁶³ Other ceramic finds may have come from as far as Transcaucasia.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, female dress accessories, especially earrings, and other metal artefacts dated to the late eighth and early ninth centuries have turned up on several rural sites in the Dobrudja and Moldova.¹⁶⁵ At the same time, a number of (mostly commercial) seals of Crimean provenance were found along

¹⁵⁸ Obolensky 1971, 30; Vasiliev 1936, 23–32.

¹⁵⁹ Darrouzès, *Notitiae*, 241–422 (Not. 3). The date of the *Notitia* is highly contentious. Recently Zuckerman 2006, 204–214, argued convincingly that it was compiled during the last years of the patriarchate of Tarasios (784–806) but based on the lists of the second Council of Nicaea; Shepard 1998, 18–20; Vasiliev 1936, 97–104.

¹⁶⁰ For these events see *Vita Ioannis Gotth.*, 81 (c. 4.50–59); Noonan 1992, 113–114; Vasiliev 1936, 91–92.

¹⁶¹ Romančuk 2005, 144–145 and n. 18 claims that some 60 tiled stamps came directly from Pliska; Dimitrov 1993, 77. For a somewhat different interpretation, see Smedley 1978, 181.

¹⁶² Although Fiedler 1992, 336–337, dates the earliest occupation on that site around 800.

¹⁶³ Comşa 1980b, 323 n. 2, 333.

¹⁶⁴ Comşa 1980a, 114. Similar finds have also been discovered at Kherson; see Bortoli and Kazanski 2002, 662; Jakobson 1959, 313–314 and fig. 168.

¹⁶⁵ Barnea 1971, 140; Mitrea 1979, 156–159.

the coast of Bulgaria and southern Romania.¹⁶⁶ All these items seem to have reached the northeastern territories of the Bulgar state through a process of peaceful exchange (which, judging by the discovery of seals of *kommerkiarioi*, may have been regulated by the imperial authorities).¹⁶⁷

This hypothesis is further substantiated by the presence of a significant quantity of Byzantine coins that could be dated to after *ca.* 750. About 50 specimens (mainly stray and hoard finds of copper) from Constantine V to Leo V are widely dispersed in the coast of the Dobrudja as well as in Wallachia.¹⁶⁸ Given the scarcity of numismatic evidence from that region in the previous seventy years, these finds, although relatively few in number, must be regarded as very weighty evidence for the existence of direct contact between the local rural population and Byzantium.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, despite claims to the contrary, it is clear that sailing along the Black Sea coast was not that uncommon during this period.¹⁷⁰ Apparently, commercial ships on the route between Kherson and Constantinople or the Aegean readily put into Dobrudjan shores, for they afforded supplies of fresh food and shelter when the crews were tired or a storm threatened. There, one would suspect, the

¹⁶⁶ See, for example, Barnea 1966, no. 6 (*to so doulo... koumerkiario Khersonos*; ninth c.); Jordanov 2003, no. 78.2 (*Ioannes, kommerkiarios Khersonos*; 9th–10th c.). For a seal of the *imperial kommerkia of Euxinos Pontos* (dated to 783/4) at the Institute and Museum of Archaeology in Sofia, see Jordanov 2003, no. 28.1.

¹⁶⁷ For a thorough investigation of seals of *kommerkiarioi*, see Brandes 2002, 511–592, 594–610.

¹⁶⁸ 19 specimens (15 *folles* and 4 *miliaresia*) are included in the Urluia hoard, which closes with 10 coins minted for emperors of the Macedonian dynasty; Dimian 1957, 199. Metcalf 1967, 280 n. 2 supposes that in this case two separate hoards may have been conflated by error in the record.

¹⁶⁹ Some 20 other coins from the years 750–820 (almost all of them *folles*) have been recovered in the “core” territories of the Bulgar *khanate* in present-day northeastern Bulgaria. However, in contrast to finds from the Dobrudja and Wallachia, these coins should not be explained in terms of commercial exchange. It seems reasonable to conclude that, for the most part, they were the fruits of raids and tribute payments; for a discussion, see Sophoulis 2009b, 189–193, with a catalogue of all the finds of these years from the territories under Bulgar control.

¹⁷⁰ Makris 2002, 95–96; Laiou and Morrisson 2007, 82. The testimony of numerous texts is proof that early medieval shipping was concentrated in frequent landings. McCormick 2002, 418–425, presents some of the evidence. The author also remarks that hostilities with the Bulgars could have dissuaded Byzantine sailors from using a coastal route in the Black Sea. Nevertheless, there is absolutely no indication that the Bulgars possessed a fleet before the reign of Omurtag (and even then they only appear to have sailed up the major rivers of the central and northern Balkans). It must also be kept in mind that navigation in the Black Sea, with its frequent and violent storms, was particularly difficult, and indeed, references to Byzantine fleets that were destroyed on that region occur repeatedly in the eighth century (see for example, Theoph., 377.22–378.16; 447.29–448.4); see also Parker 1992, nos. 860–1, 1137, 1208; Spinei 2009, 41–42.

sailors or merchants transacted small-scale business with the inhabitants of the area, some of whom appear to have been Christians.¹⁷¹ One may go even further to suggest the existence of periodic local markets or fairs involving not only the peasants of the coastal region, but also transhumant pastoralists who came from as far as Wallachia or the Carpathian Mountains to exchange their produce for the commodities brought in by the Byzantines.¹⁷²

Copper coinage, particularly stray finds, is generally interpreted as indicating small-scale trading activity. Although their presence in the coast of the Dobrudja clearly shows that copper coins were of some value to the local population, it is difficult to decide precisely how far they were being used as denominations (that is, traded more or less at face value as currency) and how far they were prized purely for looks and ornamental value. As far as we can tell, most of the Dobrudjan coins were found in settlement contexts, and do not appear to have been perforated or turned into pendants.¹⁷³ However, a number of Byzantine *folles* found in northeastern Bulgaria had been pierced and therefore used as ornamental objects or amulets, while two other coins minted in Constantinople between 780 and 797, one of gold, the other of silver, ended up in burial no. 34 at Kjulevča, evidently as funerary offerings.¹⁷⁴ A good number of the coins that entered the territory of the Bulgar state may eventually have been melted to provide raw material for silver or bronze jewellery, especially earrings.¹⁷⁵ It might, therefore, be reasonable to suppose that, although used as a medium of exchange, Byzantine coins were likely to have been demonetized.¹⁷⁶ In any case, the numismatic evidence

¹⁷¹ Chera 1997, 88–93. For the gradual ruralization of urban centres in the Dobrudja (Tomis, Callatis, Histria) during the sixth and seventh centuries, see Madgearu 2001, 207–217; Poulter 1992, 127–132. For the prosperity of these cities in the sixth century, see Curta 2001a, 124–127, 149–150. For Byzantine ships putting into beaches and ports for supplies, see Pryor 2002, 38.

¹⁷² See the comments made by Metcalf 1965, 23–24.

¹⁷³ Unfortunately, the exact circumstances of discovery of most these coins are not recorded.

¹⁷⁴ See, for example, Žekova 2000, no. 8, fig. 2.6; Oberländer-Târnoveanu 2003a, 382 n. 232. For the solidus and *miliaresion* or Irene and Constantine VI at Kjulevča, see Vážarova 1976, 106–107; Curta 2005, nos. 142–143. For Roman and early Byzantine specimens found in funerary assemblages in the Lower Danube region, including a copper coin of Constantine I, wrapped in cloth and placed in the right palm of the deceased in an eighth-century burial at Izvorul (no. 108), see Fiedler 1992, 170–171. Some of these coins (for instance, at Istria grave no. 119, Izvorul no. 300, Kjulevča no. 84, and Razdelna no. 40) were pierced and used as pendants.

¹⁷⁵ For earrings found in Bulgar graves, see Fiedler 1992, 171–180. For a classification, see now Grigorov 2007. See also *Chronicle of 811*, 212.20 for the “χαλκός” (metal objects?) discovered by the Byzantine army at Krum’s palace in 811.

¹⁷⁶ In this connection, see Laiou 2002b, 704; Curta 2005, 123.

yields an important conclusion: the continual contacts which populations in the coastal region of Bulgaria, at least, had with the Byzantine world in the eighth and ninth centuries. These contacts are likely to have created a high level of "Byzantine awareness", perhaps not only on the part of the ruling elite but also of the mass of the ordinary people. To be sure, such an "awareness"—especially pronounced among those living on the "core" territories and southern borders of the Bulgar state—would have strengthened political ties between its heterogeneous (nomadic and sedentary) components and reinforced the sense of collective "Bulgar" identity.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONFLICT AND CONTACT, 775–802

4.1 THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE UNDER LEO IV (775–780)

The death of Constantine V marked the end of one of the more martial phases in Byzantine-Bulgar relations.¹ His campaigns had thrown the *khanate* into internecine strife and a prolonged period of instability, which continued during the brief reign of his successor Leo IV. However, the latter, faced with a new wave of Arab attacks in the east, had little choice but to turn his back on the Balkans, and as a result, the Bulgars were gradually able to recover from this crisis. Before we can observe these events, let alone interpret them, it is necessary to introduce the reader to the broad outlines of the political history of the empire under Leo IV.

Leo IV came to power in September 775.² Although Theophanes' attitude towards the new emperor is relatively hostile, the latter deserves credit for trying to moderate the divisions left behind by his father.³ An iconoclast by conviction, Leo kept the decrees of the Council of Hiereia in force, but abandoned the measures taken by Constantine V against both monasticism and the invocation of the Virgin and the Saints, in an attempt, no doubt, to build up a broader range of support.⁴ According to Agaprios of Menbidj, in the beginning of his reign Leo allowed all those exiled or arrested by his father to return home.⁵ He is also said to have appointed abbots to major bishoprics, and some of his appointees may well have been secret iconophiles.⁶ This is probably true of Paul of Cyprus, the successor of the patriarch Niketas the Slav, who died early in 780.⁷ Some hagiographical sources have attempted to

¹ For a summary of these events, see above 2.3.

² Rochow 1996, 5.

³ Ostrogorsky 1968, 175.

⁴ ... οὗτος τῆς μὲν τοῦ πατρὸς αἰρέσεως ἦν μέτοχος, τῆς δὲ πράξεως ἀμέτοχος; Constantine of Tios, *Encomium*, c. 10; *Vita Nicetae Med.*, c. 30; Speck 1978, 70–73, 99–101.

⁵ Agaprios, 547.

⁶ Theoph., 449.14–16; Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Plat.*, 821B–C.

⁷ Some sources claim that Paul was initially a supporter of iconoclasm. Still, the author of the *Chronographia* calls him “venerable” and “most holy patriarch”; Theoph., 453.7, 457.14–15; Rochow 1996, 15.

portray the emperor as an active iconoclast, but the reports of violent persecutions of monks they provide have been rejected as fictitious.⁸

Early in his reign, Leo's position on the throne was insecure. His half-brothers, Christophoros and Nikephoros (Constantine V's eldest sons by his third wife Eudokia), presented a serious threat.⁹ Indeed, Constantine V had crowned Christophoros and Nikephoros *Caesars*, and given Niketas and Anthimos, Eudokia's third and fourth sons respectively, the next-highest rank of *nobilissimus*.¹⁰ This had apparently given the impression that Leo's younger brothers would have some claim to rule alongside him. In response, the emperor took certain steps to consolidate his hold on power. In the Holy Week of 776, he encouraged troops from the *tagmata* and the *themes* to demand the coronation of his five-year old son Constantine as his heir, and eventually extracted a written oath by which the Senate, senior military officers, the city Guilds and the citizens, all swore that they would accept no emperor other than Constantine VI and his descendants.¹¹ One month later, in May 776, Leo stripped the *Caesar* Nikephoros of his title for allegedly plotting against him with the support of certain imperial dignitaries and officers.¹² The text is unclear, but it appears that he then exiled all his half-brothers, along with the other conspirators, to the Crimea.¹³

Although some of Constantine V's generals, including Michael Lachanodrakon and Anthony the *patrikios*, remained in imperial service, most senior military commands seem to have gone to men who had not previously held high office.¹⁴ The *strategos* of the *Anatolics* Artavadz Mamikonian, the new commander of the *Boukellarion* Tačat Anjevac'ı (Tatzates), as well as the *strategos* of the *Armeniakon* Varaztiroc' (Baristerotzes) all owed their positions to Leo, hence their loyalty to him was guaranteed.¹⁵ The emperor also sought to establish tighter control over the two *tagmata* in Constantinople, the *Scholai* and the *Exkoubitores*, which, since the reign of his father, had functioned both as the personal guards of the emperor and the nucleus of a mobile and efficient field force.¹⁶ These units were formed of especially

⁸ Rochow 1996, 14f, 29; Speck 1978, 101ff.

⁹ Constantine's third marriage took place ca. 752. For Christophoros and Nikephoros, see *PmbZ* #1101 and 5267 respectively.

¹⁰ Theoph., 443.28–444.4; Nikeph., c. 87.1–5.

¹¹ Theoph., 450.13–23; Treadgold 1988, 9–11.

¹² Theoph., 450.23–26; 454.15.

¹³ Theoph., 450.26–451.2; Mango and Scott 1997, 622 n. 9; Rochow 1996, 11 n. 72.

¹⁴ Theoph., 440.27, 442.24–26, 451.13–16. For Lachanodrakon, see *PmbZ* #5027; for Anthony, *patrikios* and commander of the *Scholai*, see *PmbZ*, #531.

¹⁵ Theoph., 451.14–16; Łewond, 129–130, 140, 142.

¹⁶ Haldon 1984, 231–234.

chosen men—those who supported Constantine and his iconoclastic policies wholeheartedly—and were under constant imperial surveillance.¹⁷ Accordingly, in the beginning of his reign, Leo brought in new recruits, whose loyalty must have focused entirely on him and his son.¹⁸ In addition, he may have appointed the *spatharios* Constantine as *domestic* of the *Exkoubitores*.¹⁹

The Abbāsīd revolt in the middle of the eighth century and the consolidation of power which followed so preoccupied the Caliphate that Constantine V had little to fear from it.²⁰ By the 770s, the new dynasty, having already reorganized the realm and built a new capital (Baghdad), concentrated its resources in the war against Byzantium. The growing threat posed by the Abbāsīds became clear during the reign of Leo IV. In 775/6 long-distance raids resumed when the commander al-‘Abbās advanced as far as Ankyra.²¹ During the next four years, Dorylaion, Amorion, Koloneia and Ephesos were either captured or besieged by Arab forces.²² The Byzantine response was to adopt a new defensive strategy: instead of trying to prevent Arab armies invading Anatolia they would usually be allowed to enter the plateau, where they would be shadowed and harassed by relatively small mobile units.²³ The first clear evidence of this strategy in action comes from Theophanes’ account of the year 778/9.²⁴ Gradually it developed into a highly sophisticated model of warfare, described in more detail in the tenth-century military treatise known as *De Velitatione*.²⁵

In the west, the most important development during this period was the growing Frankish involvement in Italy, some parts of which were still under real or nominal imperial authority.²⁶ By the mid eighth century, the Franks, led by Pepin III, the first Carolingian king, were more powerful than ever

¹⁷ Indeed, the patriarch Nikephoros indicates that the *tagmatic* troops were carefully “educated” in Constantine’s policy; Nikeph., *Apologeticus*, 556B.

¹⁸ στρατεύματά τε ἐποίησε κατὰ θέμα πολλὰ καὶ τὰ τάγματα ἐπηύξησεν; Theoph., 449.16–17; Speck 1978, 73; Haldon 1984, 234–235, 281.

¹⁹ Theoph., 454.16–20; Zacos and Vegler 1972, I/3, no. 3095.

²⁰ In addition, the Caliphate had many other foreign policy concerns at the time. For instance, in the 740s and 750s, the powerful Tang dynasty of China was trying to expand its authority into Transoxonia; see Kennedy 1986, 121–122 and 112–117, 123–132, on the third civil war in the Caliphate and the rise of the Abbāsīds.

²¹ Theoph., 449.9–11; al-Tabarī, xxix, 170; Agaprios, 287; Lewond, 140.

²² al-Tabarī, xxix, 206–207, 214–215, Brooks, *Abbasids*, I, 735–737; Theoph., 451.4–5, 452.4–17, 453.20–22; Michael Syr., III, 2; Lewond, 142.

²³ Theoph., 453.22–25; Whittow 1996, 171, 176–178.

²⁴ Theoph., 452.4–17; Lewond, 141.

²⁵ *De velitatione bellica*, 154–214, 226–232.

²⁶ Byzantine control was strong in Sicily and southern Calabria, but less so in Rome, Naples and Venice; see in particular, Brown 1995, 324–348.

before. As Paul Fouracre has pointed out, that power rested ultimately on the fact that their kingdom was formed out of a massive conglomeration of territories and confederation of peoples—held together by acknowledgement of royal authority—which no other west European grouping could match.²⁷ What gave them a cutting edge against their neighbours was the assertion of royal control over military organization, for this diverted martial energies away from internal conflict (most evident in the early eighth century) towards profitable aggression on their borders.²⁸

It was the papal pleas for military and diplomatic assistance against the Lombards, sent to Pepin in 753, which led the Franks to become involved in Italy. In 756, the Frankish ruler led a campaign across the Alps, in the course of which he took Ravenna (held by the Lombards since in 751).²⁹ This had been the administrative centre of the Byzantine *exarchate*, but Pepin rejected the request of Constantine V that he return it to imperial control. Instead he gave it into the hands of the Pope, to be administered from Rome.³⁰ In 774, Charles, Pepin's son and successor, now defending his own interests, captured the Lombard capital, Pavia, and crowned himself *Rex Langobardorum*.³¹ The conquest drew the Franks further into papal politics and brought them into direct contact, and eventually conflict, with the empire. The break came in the late 780s. During the reign of Leo IV, the two powers seem to have remained on good terms, although the emperor gave refuge to the Lombard prince Adelchis who had been defeated by the Frankish armies in 774/5.³²

4.2 BYZANTINE-BULGAR RELATIONS UNDER LEO IV

As we have already seen, Theophanes' coverage of affairs in the Balkans during the reign of Leo IV is poor. Only two events are reported; the flight of the Bulgar *khan*, Telerig, to the imperial court, and the resettlement of Monophysite Syrians in Thrace.³³ By contrast, the author of the *Chronographia*, who up to 780 makes use of a Syriac source translated into Greek, closely

²⁷ Fouracre 1995, 94–99 with lit. For the territories and peoples under Pepin III, see Collins 1998, 30–37.

²⁸ Fouracre 1995, 100–101.

²⁹ *Liber Pontificalis*, I, 444–448; *ARF*, 12; Delogu 1995, 299–300; Collins 1998, 59–61.

³⁰ Brown 1995, 63–64.

³¹ For the reasons for Charlemagne's intervention in Italy, see Collins 1998, 60f; McCormick 1995, 366.

³² He was given the name Theodotos and the title of *patrikios*; Theoph., 449.1–3; *Annales Einhardi*, 41; *ARF*, 38–40.

³³ Theoph., 451.5–9; 452.1–2.

follows developments in the east.³⁴ This reflects a fundamental eastward shift in the political interests of the empire under Leo: once the Abbāsids decided to concentrate their resources on the Holy War against Byzantium, the emperor was almost bound to turn his back on the Balkans.

The limited evidence provided by Theophanes, read in conjunction with material in the *Breviarium* of the patriarch Nikephoros, may suggest that the political turmoil which hit the *khanate* during the reign of Constantine V was still continuing. The two chroniclers indicate that the wars with Byzantium had been a central issue in that crisis.³⁵ Certainly, the Bulgar polity, characterized as it was by a small ruling elite, was almost bound to undergo stress once it faced the concerted efforts of a superior power. The key strategic factor in these wars was the positioning of the Bulgar heartlands north of the natural barrier of the Haimos Mountains. A further advantage was the protection which the Danube afforded from sudden attacks from the north. From an early stage, in the 760s, Constantine V managed to overcome both obstacles, and this naturally threw the Bulgars off balance. The effect of their repeated defeats (suffered mainly on Bulgar soil) was to exacerbate the pre-existing political instability.³⁶

The political crisis in the *khanate* ultimately had its roots in the savage power struggle between rival Bulgar clans. The “Name-list of the Bulgar Princes”, probably written during the reign of Symeon, seems to suggest that sometime in the first half of the eighth century, the Dulo, the traditional “charismatic” clan of the Bulgars, lost the reins of power.³⁷ The causes of their downfall are very likely to have been structural. The ambiguity of the system of succession (the information at our disposal is sufficiently vague to permit a variety of interpretations, but it is clear that power was not always passed from father to son) meant, in practice, that any of the members of the leading clan, especially the sons and brothers of the deceased *khan*, had a legitimate claim to the throne as long as they secured enough support among the ruling elite. This kind of succession system tended to aggravate, if not create, enormous tension in the polity. More often than not, bloody struggles were necessary as a means of selecting the ruler.³⁸

³⁴ Mango and Scott 1997, lxxxii–lxxxvii.

³⁵ Theoph., 433.17–22; Nikeph., c. 77.1–22, 79.1–12; Nikeph., *Antirrheticus*, 508C.

³⁶ See above 2.3.

³⁷ Moskov 1988, 17ff.; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 113.

³⁸ Golden 1992, 146–147; Golden 1982a, 45–46. See also the discussion in Barfield 1989, 41–42, 131–145; Di Cosmo 2002a, 184–185; Drompp 1991, 92–115, 349–352; Sinor 1996, 249–256.

Although references to the political developments in Bulgaria are extremely meagre, one may fairly suppose that the leading clan was losing its vitality. Divided and weakened by political infighting, the Dulo would have been unable to assert their authority over the union and eventually may have been toppled by a more powerful clan. During the second half of the eighth century, the *khanate* was increasingly caught up in internecine strife between the Vokil and Ugain houses, a fact that Constantine V was able to exploit by either campaigning against the Bulgars or intervening with his secret agents and his armies on behalf of one of the two sides.³⁹ Overall, it is clear that none of the *khans* who ruled between the late 750s and the mid 770s (we know seven of them by name) was able to entrench himself in power to the complete satisfaction of important political and military circles. The absence of a dynamic, charismatic leader who could rally around him the entire ruling elite should also be emphasized.

Against this backdrop, the flight of *khan* Telerig to the imperial court in 776/7 comes as little surprise. Telerig had come to power in the late 760s or early 770s, at a time when Constantine V may have diverted some of his resources to the east to deal with the first serious Arab raids since the fall of the Umayyads. Taking advantage of this, the new *khan* strengthened his hold on power, and was apparently able to maintain some cohesion among the elite when the emperor stepped up pressure on the Bulgars in 773.⁴⁰ Ironically, Telerig's position seems to have become more vulnerable after the end of the war, when the power struggles within the aristocracy could no longer be contained by fighting for the state's survival. By 777, there were evidently many in the *khanate* who wished to be rid of their ruler. Fearing for his life, Telerig had little choice but to take refuge at Constantinople. After receiving baptism (he was given the name Theophylaktos), the emperor married him to Irene's sister and gave him the honorific title of *patrikios*.⁴¹

Unlike his father, Leo IV was not prepared to take full advantage of the political crisis in the *khanate* because of the pressing need to organize the defence of Anatolia. He did, however, continue Constantine's policy of repopulating the war-ravaged Balkan frontier with Christian prisoners from the east.⁴² Thus, after a successful expedition against the Arabs in 778, the

³⁹ Nikeph., c. 76.7–16, 77.12–18, 79.1–5; Nikolov 2005, 69.

⁴⁰ Theoph., 446.27–447.5.

⁴¹ Theoph., 451.5–9; Kedrenos, II, 19–8–11; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 118–120; Božilov 1995a, 352–353. For his seals, see Jordanov 2001, 21 with fig. 6; Zacos and Veglery 1972, I/3, no. 3188. For Sabin, another *khan* who had fled to Constantinople under similar circumstances (ca. 763/4), see Nikeph., c. 77.1–18; Theoph., 433.15–21; Božilov 1995a, 350–352.

⁴² For the transfers under Constantine V, see 2.3 above.

emperor transferred a large number of Monophysite Syrians to Thrace.⁴³ It would be reasonable to believe that this was followed by the construction (or more probably the restoration) of several towns and fortresses which could act as refuges for the civilian population in case of an attack, but could also provide safe bases for the army from which to protect the surrounding countryside. The Bulgar response is not known. Given that Leo did not take, as far as we can tell, any direct action against them, they too are likely to have refrained from invading imperial territory. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest the resumption of commercial exchanges between the two countries, disrupted by constant warfare since the mid 750s. As noted in chapter 3, hoards and single finds of coins of Leo IV are widely dispersed in the north-eastern part of the *khanate*, particularly in Wallachia and on the coast of the Dobrudja.⁴⁴ Most specimens are class A *folles* (“Four Busts”) struck at Constantinople in the years 776–778 (six from Urluia, one from Constanța). The rest are class B *folles* (from 778–780 with two seated figures and two busts), half-*folles* and silver *miliaresia*.⁴⁵ Moreover, a number of ceramic finds, as well as female dress accessories and other manufactured goods of Byzantine origin, all dated to the late eighth and early ninth centuries, have turned up on several rural sites in the Dobrudja and Moldova (Bucov, Gîrlite, Izvorul, Bratei, Izvoare-Bahna).⁴⁶ All these commodities seem to have reached the northeastern part of the *khanate* through a process of peaceful exchange between the crews of ships travelling to or from the ports of the Crimea and the inhabitants of the coastal region, who acted as suppliers of grain, cattle and other alimentary products to the Byzantines.⁴⁷

4.3 THE EMPIRE UNDER IRENE AND CONSTANTINE VI (780–802)

Leo’s reign was too brief to have left any significant imprint on the empire’s relations with Bulgaria; for in September 780 he died suddenly at Constantinople,

⁴³ ἐπέρασε δὲ καὶ τοὺς αἰρετικοὺς Σύρους ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ καὶ κατόκισεν αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ; Theoph., 452.1–2; Michael Syr., III, 2. Lewond, 140–141, amounts them to some 150,000. For the Byzantine raid in Syria in 778, see Theoph., 451.12–27; al-Tabarī, xxix, 198; Brooks, *Abbasids*, II, 89.

⁴⁴ 15 specimens have been recorded so far, 4 single finds (Constanța, Ovčarovo, Silistria and Tichilești) and 15 finds included in the Urluia hoard; see Sophoulis 2009b, 189–190.

⁴⁵ Dimian 1957, 197, 199. For Leo IV’s coinage in general, see Grierson 1973, 325–327.

⁴⁶ Barnea 1971, 140; Mitrea 1979, 156–159; Comșa 1980b, 323–339, esp. 323 n. 2 and 333; Comșa 1980a, 107–114. According to the excavator, the earliest fragments of Byzantine pottery found in the network of settlements at Bucov date from the last quarter of the eighth century.

⁴⁷ See 3.2.6 above.

under undoubtedly suspicious circumstances.⁴⁸ Since his son and heir Constantine VI was just nine years old, power passed to the empress Irene who acted initially as a regent (780–790). Her accession to the throne inaugurated a period of severe political instability during which Byzantium was forced into a precarious defensive position against both the Arabs and the Franks. It also marked the beginning of a new phase of active Byzantine involvement in the Balkans: Irene and her immediate successors tried to re-assert imperial authority in that region, but their advance was blocked by the resilient Bulgar *khanate*. The subsequent struggle, which culminated in the second decade of the ninth century, was largely overshadowed by developments inside the empire. A sense of these developments is essential if Byzantium's relations with Bulgaria are to be understood. Equally important is a basic knowledge of events in the eastern and western borders of the empire; for only after securing—through military or diplomatic means—these two fronts could an emperor deploy his limited resources to the Balkans to deal with the Bulgar threat. Our first goal will therefore be to identify the key events of the reigns of Irene and Constantine VI and look at the empire's relations with the Caliphate and the Franks, followed by a discussion of the Byzantine-Bulgar conflict itself.

Irene's position on the throne was almost bound to be insecure. As a woman, she could never rule as independently as her predecessors no matter how much intelligence and determination she showed. Her brothers-in-law, Constantine V's sons by Eudokia, were all more likely potential rulers, while the army, especially the elite guards regiments, looked to an active male emperor to lead them. An ambitious and ruthless politician, Irene naturally directed most of her efforts towards consolidating her hold on power.

Irene's primary allies were among the palatine officials, some of whom had apparently been part of her inner circle before her husband's death. Early in her reign, the empress appointed several eunuchs to key posts in the government. The most important of them was Staurakios, a high-ranking court official who in 780/1 became the new *logothetes of the Dromos*. With Irene's great confidence in him, but also the most direct control over the daily affairs of the government, Staurakios gradually acquired so much power that he could aspire to overthrow his patroness.⁴⁹ Other important appointees included Aetios the *protospatharios*, John the *sakellarios* and *logothetes of the Stratiotikon*, and Theodore the *patrikios* and *strategos* of Sicily.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Theoph., 453.25–30; Speck 1978, 405, 823–824 n. 4; Treadgold 1984a, 75–76.

⁴⁹ Theoph., 456.12–13; 464.19–20; Treadgold 1988, 62; *PmbZ*, #6881.

⁵⁰ For Aetios: Theoph., 466.29–467.1; *PmbZ*, #106 with lit. For Theodore: Theoph., 455.26–29; 464.6–7; *ARF*, 82; *PmbZ*, #7578. For John: Theoph., 455.4–5; 464.3–4; *PmbZ*, #3055. Note that Irene put some of these trusted eunuchs in military commands.

Irene is presented in hagiography and the surviving chronicles, all written by iconophiles, as a pillar of Orthodoxy who had always remained faithful to the worship of icons, even when married to an iconoclast emperor. However, had she been a convinced iconophile from birth, Constantine V, an uncompromising and persecuting iconoclast, would never have chosen her to be the wife of his son and heir. Therefore, it might be more reasonable to suppose that Irene's support for icons was a product of her circumstances at the time of her accession; the return to Orthodoxy offered ideological justification for her rule, as well as the opportunity to undo the established iconoclastic structure which was threatening her.⁵¹ Thus in 787, after an abortive first attempt in Constantinople, Irene brought about an Ecumenical Council at Nicaea which repudiated that of 754, condemned iconoclasm as a heretical belief, and restored veneration of religious images.⁵² Monastic communities and devout iconophiles, who had stood by Irene ever since she had made her intentions clear, were gradually established in influential positions.⁵³ As a result, by 788 she was fully in control of the palace, the civil services and the Church.

By contrast, Irene could never be sure of the loyalty of the army, which in the face of the growing Arab threat looked to an active male emperor to lead them. During the three-year truce with the Arabs (782–785), she was able to bring the provincial armies under some control by conducting a gradual purge of the military commanders appointed by her two predecessors.⁵⁴ At the same time, she attempted to curb the power of the *tagmata*, which were bound to find her decision to restore icons difficult to come to terms with. Thus, when Irene made a first attempt to hold a Church Council in Constantinople in the summer of 786, a large body of officers and soldiers violently broke up the proceedings.⁵⁵ In response, the empress is said to have exiled some 6,000 men, women and children (soldiers and their families), and then to have recruited her own *tagmatic* soldiers.⁵⁶ She further reinforced her position by creating a new *tagma*, the *Vigla* or *Arithmos*, drawn apparently from one of the provincial armies.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Whittow 1996, 149–150; Lilie 1996, 48–78.

⁵² Mansi, XII, 986–1154; XIII, 1–496; Lamberz 2008; Theoph., 462.27–463.13; Herrin 1987, 417–424; Treadgold 1988, 82–89; Thümmel 2005, 87–198.

⁵³ Whittow 1996, 150; Speck 1978, 178, 193.

⁵⁴ Treadgold 1988, 65–66, 70.

⁵⁵ Theoph., 461.16–462.3; Lamberz 2008, 14.7–19; Mansi, XII, 990E; Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Plat.*, 828A.

⁵⁶ *Vita Ioannis Gotth.* 3.45–49; Lamberz 2008, 14.28–16.10; Mansi, XII, 991B–C; Constantine of Tios, *Encomium*, c. 11; Theoph., 462.5–18.

⁵⁷ Theoph., 466.4–5. Haldon 1984, 236–245 and n. 642, suggests that the new *tagma* may have been drawn from the *Thrakesion*, where anti-iconoclast sentiments appear to have been particularly strong.

Despite Irene's efforts, the army continued to be a prominent source of unrest during the rest of her reign. The primary reason for trouble was the frustration resulting from military defeat and incompetent leadership. Indeed, by gradually purging most senior commanders appointed by Constantine V and Leo IV, and replacing them with civil officers or eunuchs with little or no military experience, the empress greatly weakened the imperial forces. Their limited success against Hārūn's armies, and particularly their inability to hold up Arab encroachment on the empire's fertile coastal plains, previously well-protected, was undoubtedly a symptom of this process.⁵⁸

Unfortunately for Irene, her reign coincided with the golden age of the Abbāsīd Caliphate. With their authority stretching over a vast area, and in control of a powerful army, the Abbāsīds were able to extract sufficient revenues from their subjects and build a powerful army. Throughout the 780s the Muslim world was, with some exceptions, at peace, and naturally the Caliphs directed their resources against Byzantium. The purpose was mostly propaganda for internal consumption; leading the summer raid was a mark of the Caliph's position as leader of the community and defender of the faith.⁵⁹ The Abbāsīd offensive culminated in February 782 when a massive army invaded the empire. Due to its size, the army was divided into three corps, one of which advanced in the direction of Constantinople under the nominal command of Hārūn al-Rashīd, the young son of the Caliph al-Mahdī (775–785). Hārūn's forces devastated the Asian suburbs of the capital, but on their way back through the valley of the River Sangarios, they found that they were surrounded by the Byzantines. Hārūn sued for peace, but with the help of the *strategos* of the *Boukellarion* Tačat, who had secretly come to an understanding with the Arabs, he managed to seize Staurakios, Peter the *magistros* and Anthony the *domestikos* of the *Scholai* as hostages. Irene had little choice but to agree to a truce of three years on extremely unfavourable terms, the most important of which was the payment of an enormous annual tribute (160,000 *nomismata* according to al-Tabarī).⁶⁰

In 785, Arab attacks began again and after Hārūn's accession (786) they increased in number and intensity.⁶¹ The new Caliph, whose public image was that of a ruler personally engaged in the Holy War, took part in raids,

⁵⁸ See for example, Theoph., 465.12–26, 465.32–466.20; *Synaxarion CP*, 433–434.

⁵⁹ Kennedy 1986, 96–123, 144–145.

⁶⁰ Theoph., 456.2–23; al-Tabarī, xxix, 217, 220–221; Michael Syr., III, 2; Bar Hebraeus, 117–118; Łewond, 142–143; Speck 1978, 123–127.

⁶¹ al-Tabarī, xxix, 240; xxx, 39, 100, 104, 108 n. 414, 110; Theoph., 463.15–21; *Synaxarion CP*, 98.

but also concerned himself with the administration of the border. Thus, he established a separate province immediately behind the frontier zone, the *al-'Awāsim*, whose resources were to be devoted to the war against Byzantium.⁶² Unlike the previous Abbāsīd rulers, Hārūn also took a strong interest in naval warfare. As a result, by the late 780s the Arabs had invaded Cyprus and inflicted a crushing defeat on a Byzantine fleet off the Lycian coast.⁶³

One of Irene's earliest diplomatic moves was to arrange for the betrothal of her son to Charlemagne's daughter Rotrud (781).⁶⁴ Nevertheless, relations between the two powers were gradually soured. The principal cause of friction appears to have been the control of the independent Lombard Duchy of Benevento.⁶⁵ Thus, when early in 787 envoys from Constantinople met Charlemagne at Capua to request that Rotrud be sent to Constantinople the Frankish monarch refused, thereby breaking off the alliance.⁶⁶ Irene retaliated by sending an army to Italy, but the *dux* of Benevento sided with the Franks and the imperial army was crushed near Calabria.⁶⁷ The Byzantine defeat reinforced the Frankish position in Italy and left relations with Constantinople at a standstill.

Not surprisingly, the soldiers' frustrations grew to enormous proportions in the wake of successive military setbacks in the eastern, western and Balkan fronts. Plots continued to haunt Irene's regime, centring on Constantine VI who formed a focus for the discontented. In October 790, the *peratics* (i.e. the *thematic* armies of Asia Minor) proclaimed Constantine VI sole emperor and massed at Atroa in the *Opsikian theme*.⁶⁸ Facing a general military uprising, Irene, who had shown no intention of withdrawing from her position as regent even though her son had already reached his majority, was subsequently forced to step down.⁶⁹

⁶² Kennedy 1981, 130–131; Haldon and Kennedy 1980, 115ff.

⁶³ Theoph., 465.12–26. For an attack on Crete, see al-Tabarī, xxx, 114.

⁶⁴ Theoph., 455.19–25; *Annales Mosellani*, 497.

⁶⁵ McCormick 1995, 366–367; Collins 1998, 70–72.

⁶⁶ *Annales Einhardi*, 75, 83; Theophanes (463.21–27), who follows the official Byzantine version of events, reports that Irene was the one who actually called off the marriage; see Speck 1978, 121, 164–165.

⁶⁷ John, *logothetes of the Stratiotikon*, was among the dead; Theoph., 464.2–8; *ARF*, 82; *Poeta Saxo*, 244–245; Treadgold 1988, 91–92.

⁶⁸ The uprising was preceded by a humiliating Byzantine defeat near Myra, during which the *strategos* of the *Kibyrrhaiotai* Theophilos was captured by the Arabs; Theoph., 465.12–26; *Menologion Basilii*, 285–287.

⁶⁹ Theoph., 466.15–22. For an account of these events, see Speck 1978, 221–229; Treadgold 1988, 94–96.

Constantine VI (790–797) was only nineteen when he took power, and naturally lacked the experience and determination with which Irene had run the state since 780. Eager to establish his own authority, he confined his mother to her newly constructed palace of Eleutherios, and exiled Staurakios, Aetios and several other chief eunuchs to different parts of the empire.⁷⁰ However, unlike Irene when she first came to power, Constantine seems to have left most court and civil servants in office. To be sure, the young emperor had never been at the heart of court politics and could therefore not have created his own supporters who could then replace the existing hierarchy. Thus, he rallied around him those who had loyally served his father and grandfather, and who had since fallen out of favour, among them Michael Lachanodrakon.⁷¹

Despite these appointments, Irene's supporters seem to have continued to hold influential positions and, eventually, persuaded Constantine to restore her to a role in the government. Unable to break with his mother and—no doubt—bewildered by his responsibilities, Constantine reconfirmed her as his co-ruler in January 792.⁷² During the next five years, Irene and her closest allies did everything they could to undermine his authority, and in the end were able to remove him from office. The support of the imperial guards regiments was critical in the plot that led to his deposition in August 797.⁷³ But even before his downfall, several manifestations of military restiveness had occurred. The most important of them was the *Armeniac* rebellion (January 792–May 793), which destabilized the empire's eastern frontier, leaving Anatolia exposed to repeated Arab devastation.⁷⁴

Byzantine-Arab relations during the reign of Constantine VI went through two distinct phases. The first was between 791 and 794, when the Arabs, taking advantage of the confused and demoralized state of the *peratic* troops, launched a number of long-distance attacks on the empire and captured Kamachon and Thebasa (the latter in Lykaonia).⁷⁵ At the same time, Hārūn built or restored several military bases along the frontier, including Adata

⁷⁰ Theoph., 466.27–467.3.

⁷¹ Theoph., 466.22–23; 468.1–2. For Lachanodrakon, see Treadgold 1988, 70; Brubaker and Haldon 2010, 650, claim that Michael was a loyal general under Irene even after 787, and wonder whether he was never as profoundly iconoclast as the later tradition would have us believe. The *patrikios* Bardas (killed along with Lachanodrakon in 792) should probably be identified with the *strategos* of the *Armeniacs* in 780.

⁷² Theoph., 467.17–20.

⁷³ Theoph., 471.13–18, 471.31f.

⁷⁴ Theoph., 468.23–469.21; Lillie 1996, 84–86; Speck 1978, 241–243, 246–250.

⁷⁵ Theoph., 471.20–27; al-Tabarī, xxx, 138, 139, 151, 164; Michael Syr., III, 8–9.

and Anazarbos.⁷⁶ From 794 to 797 the Caliphate was shaken by serious disturbances in North Africa, Egypt, Palestine and Iraq, and this seems to have given the Byzantines a much-needed breathing space. Constantine led several expeditions into the frontier region, and defeated an Arab army at Anusan in the spring of 795.⁷⁷ However, no permanent gains were made.

In the west, the most important development during this period was the destruction of the Avar *qaghanate* by Charlemagne's armies. Although after 626 the Avars, established between the Alps and the Sava, were no longer a formidable nomad power, they still had an awesome reputation and could pose a direct military threat to their neighbours.⁷⁸ The precise causes of the conflict are not entirely clear. It appears that the Avars felt threatened by the gradual eastwards expansion of Frankish power, and responded by launching a series of attacks on Bavaria and Italy (788/9).⁷⁹ The intermittent war that followed came to a climax between 791 and 796, when Charlemagne and his generals led several large-scale expeditions deep into Avar territory.⁸⁰ Frankish forces broke twice into the core nomadic territories designated as the "Ring" (*Hringum*) and carried off, apparently unhindered, a huge collection of treasure (795, 796).⁸¹ The expected retaliation never came, and in fact Avar power soon disintegrated, first in civil war and then through the escape of elements of the subject population.⁸² Although Frankish influence expanded into the Hungarian Plain and the former Avar territories south of the Danube, Charlemagne made no attempt to incorporate these regions into his state. As a consequence, various former Avar subjects were able to carve out their own territories and to engage in intense regional rivalries, which continued into the early ninth century.⁸³

In 795, Constantine divorced his lawful wife, Maria, and forced her to become a nun.⁸⁴ A few months later he married again, in defiance of canon law (since Maria was still alive).⁸⁵ His adulterous second marriage, the so-called

⁷⁶ Brooks, *Abbasids*, II, 87; Haldon and Kennedy 1980, 108–109.

⁷⁷ Kennedy 1981, 121–122. For the battle at Anusan, whose exact location is unknown, see Theoph., 469.27–470.1.

⁷⁸ Pohl 1988, 288–323.

⁷⁹ ARF, 80–84; *Annales Einhardi*, 81–83; Collins 1998, 89–93; Pohl 1988, 314.

⁸⁰ ARF, 88; *Annales Laureshamenses*, 34; *Vita Caroli*, 15–16.

⁸¹ ARF, 98–100; *Annales Einhardi*, 99–101; *Annales Laureshamenses*, 36–37; Bowlus 1995, 46–58. For the Ring, see Pohl 1988, 306–308.

⁸² ARF, 98; *Annales Einhardi*, 101; Pohl 1988, 318–320.

⁸³ ARF, 119–120; Bowlus 1995, 59ff.; Collins 1998, 97–101, and 3.2.3 above.

⁸⁴ Theoph., 469.23–27. For Maria of Amnia, granddaughter of St Philaretos the Almsgiver, see *PmbZ*, #4727.

⁸⁵ Theoph., 470.2–3, 470.5–7. His second wife was Theodote; *PmbZ*, #7899.

“Moechian controversy”, met with general disapproval, and a strict monastic party headed by Theodore of Stoudios and his uncle Plato of Sakkoudion, who were relatives of the new empress, protested immediately; they broke communion with the patriarch Tarasios (784–806), primarily because he had not excommunicated the couple, as well as with the *oikonomos* of Saint Sophia and abbot of the monastery of Kathara Joseph, who had performed the marriage.⁸⁶ The “Moechian controversy” preoccupied the Byzantines for a considerable period and threatened to destroy the ecclesiastical unity achieved by the Council of Nicaea in 787. It also enabled Irene to mobilize her own supporters and move against her son.⁸⁷ Thus in the summer of 797, Constantine was arrested at Pylai in Bythinia.⁸⁸ He was taken back to the imperial palace where, by his mother’s order, he was blinded on August 19.⁸⁹ The conspirators claimed that the emperor survived the blinding and lived on in confinement, but, in fact, it appears that he died soon thereafter of his wounds.⁹⁰

During the next five years (797–802), Irene reigned as sole empress, the first woman ever to rule the empire in her own right. Although she was aware that she was breaking a long Roman tradition which required that a man be the head of the state and the army, her use of the title *basileus* in official documents suggests that she had no intention of sharing her supreme power with anyone.⁹¹ Under these circumstances, her position was bound to be vulnerable. While she clung to her throne, her closest allies fought amongst themselves for the succession; as a result, the next few years were marked by political and military unrest throughout Byzantium. Groups formed around Staurakios and Aetios, the two chief eunuchs, who were gradually able to secure the empire’s most important commands for themselves or their relatives. Aetios, the most influential of the two during this period, was appointed *monostrategos* of the *Anatolikon* and *Opsikian themes*, and promoted his brother Leo to *monostrategos* of *Thrace* and *Macedonia*.⁹²

⁸⁶ Theoph., 470.24–28; Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Plat.*, 829A–832B; *Vita Theod. Stoud. A*, 137C. For the monastery of Kathara in Bithynia, see Janin 1975, 158–160.

⁸⁷ Theoph., 470.29–471.5; *Vita Theod. Stoud. A*, 141B; Theophanes, 469.22–25, implies that Irene was actually behind Constantine’s decision to divorce Maria. For a discussion, see Speck 1978, 255–256; Lilie 1996, 71–76, 263–267.

⁸⁸ Theoph., 471.29–472.16.

⁸⁹ Theoph., 472.16–18. For the date, see Mango and Scott 1997, 649 n. 8.

⁹⁰ This claim is reproduced by the chronicle of George continuatus, which suggests that Constantine lived for a time in a mansion called *ta Isidorou*; George cont., 809.5–21; also Kedrenos, II, 31.14–20; Zonaras, III, 304.6–9; Speck 1978, 308–321, esp. 318f.

⁹¹ *Jus Graecoromanum*, I, 45. Likewise, her coinage carried her portrait on both sides, a departure from imperial custom; Grierson 1973, 347–349.

⁹² Theoph., 473.20–24; Lilie 1996, 102–105; Speck 1978, 329–332.

He had also allied himself with Niketas Triphyllios, the *domestikos* of the *Scholai*, and presumably Niketas' brother, the *patrikios* Sisinnios.⁹³ Staurakios' main backing was amongst lower-ranking military officers as well as the court hierarchy.⁹⁴ He is said to have repeatedly plotted to overthrow Irene, and it was during a conventional coup attempt that he eventually died in June 800.⁹⁵ Between 800 and 802, Aetios' growing power was challenged by his former allies, the Triphyllioi brothers, who had rallied around them a large number of senior officials in the court, the bureaucracy and the army. Among them was the *patrikios* Leo Serantapechos, a relative of Irene, the *sakellarios* Leo Klokas and the *general logothetes* Nikephoros.⁹⁶

In an attempt to boost her popularity, Irene seems to have granted sweeping tax-exemptions to certain categories of people. She abolished the civic tax paid by the inhabitants of Constantinople, as well as the duties (*kommerkia*) levied on goods at Abydos and Hieron, the two maritime toll stations of the capital.⁹⁷ Theodore of Stoudios presents a picture of much wider fiscal remissions: he speaks of taxes collected on roads and at narrow passes, but also on exactions imposed on fishermen, hunters, artisans and petty traders.⁹⁸ Judging from the enthusiastic way in which he received the measures, Irene must have also exempted ecclesiastical institutions from paying certain taxes. However, her financial generosity, which came on top of significant increases in expenditure (mainly as a result of the annual tribute paid to the Arabs), seriously depleted the Byzantine treasury.⁹⁹

The conclusion of peace with the Arabs (*ca.* 798) was preceded by the intensification of warfare in Anatolia. Having recovered from the crisis of the mid 790s, Hārūn once again turned his attention to Byzantium. In the summer of 797, he personally led his army in an attack on Cilicia, and in 798 a raiding party penetrated the *Opsikian theme* as far as the imperial stables

⁹³ Theoph., 474.13–14. Until 801/2 Sisinnios was *strategos* of Thrace, a post given that year to Aetios' brother; for a seal of his discovered at Debelto (Sisinnios *b' protospatharios and strategos of Thrace*), see Jordanov 2003, no. 35.6.

⁹⁴ Theoph., 474.24–25; 475.6–7; Lilie 1996, 104.

⁹⁵ Theoph., 474.22–475.11.

⁹⁶ Theoph., 476.4–11. The latter (the future emperor Nikephoros I) may not be identified with the *strategos* of the *Armeniacs* in the 780s, as suggested by Treadgold 1988, 79, 127–128. Leo Serantapechos must have been related to Constantine Sarantapechos, apparently the *strategos* of Hellas. Constantine's son Theophylaktos was Irene's nephew; therefore, the *strategos* was either her brother or, more likely, her cousin; Theoph., 474.3–4; Lilie 1996, 37–38. For Leo Klokas, a eunuch from Sinope, see Kedrenos, II, 29.3–15.

⁹⁷ Theoph., 475.15–18; Mango and Scott 1997, 653, translate “ἐκούφισεν” as “cancelled” rather than “reduced”.

⁹⁸ Tax exemptions were also granted to the widows of soldiers; Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, I, no. 7.

⁹⁹ For a different interpretation, see Treadgold 1988, 118f; Speck 1978, 382ff.

at Malagina.¹⁰⁰ In response, Irene seems to have agreed to pay tribute to the Caliph. The information comes from two Arab authors, Ibn al-Atīr and al-Mas'ūdī, as well as the biography of Euthymios of Sardis, who apparently led the Byzantine embassy to Hārūn.¹⁰¹ These testimonies seem to be confirmed by the fact that neither Greek nor Arabic sources record raids from either side between 798 and 802.¹⁰²

In the west, the most important development was the coronation of Charlemagne as emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day 800.¹⁰³ The intentions of the parties involved in this event are the subject of a considerable debate, but here it needs only be pointed out that the papacy's action represents the culmination of a long process of distancing from the Byzantine empire, most evident in the iconoclast era, and that one possible motive for Charlemagne may have been to legitimize his rule and impose unitary authority over Italy.¹⁰⁴ Although Einhard claims that Charlemagne was reluctant to be crowned, there is no doubt that in reality the Frankish ruler arranged for it to be done; in fact, it is possible that some such plan had been in the air as early as 796/7, when the Byzantine throne became theoretically vacant (after Constantine VI's blinding) and when Charlemagne secured the Avar treasures, becoming thereby a figure of increasing note in the east.¹⁰⁵ In Constantinople, Charlemagne's imperial coronation naturally appeared as an act of usurpation.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps more alarming, however, was his intention to challenge the empire for the control of southern Italy, Sicily and

¹⁰⁰ For the invasion of 797: al-Tabarī, xxx, 165; Mich. Syr., III, 12; Theoph., 473.7–11. For 798: Theoph., 473.24–32; al-Tabarī, xxx, 168; Brooks, *Abbasids*, I, 741; Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Plat.*, 833A–836A.

¹⁰¹ *Vita Euthymii*, 23–25; al-Mas'ūdī, *Livres*, 228; for Ibn al-Atīr, see Lilie 1996, 165; Canard 1962, 345 n. 1.

¹⁰² For Michael the Syrian's confused chronology, see Niavis 1987, 192 n. 99.

¹⁰³ ARF, 112; *Vita Karoli*, 32–33; *Liber Pontificalis*, II, 7; *Annales Laureshamenses*, 38. In the *Chronographia* the proclamation is reported twice, first under the year 798 (472.30–473.4), then, correctly, under the year 800 (475.11–15); for a discussion, see Classen 1985, 57–59, 62–82.

¹⁰⁴ Classen 1951, 103–121; Brown 1995, 331; Brown 2008, 446–447; Collins 1998, 141–159, here 148–149. For an alternative interpretation of Charlemagne's motives, see Mayr-Harting 1996, 1113–1133. For an overview of the relations between Byzantium and the papacy, marked by the condemnation of iconoclasm by Pope Gregory III (731–741) in November 731, see Herrin 1987, 344–352, 389.

¹⁰⁵ For the claim that the imperial throne was vacant insofar as it was occupied by a woman, see *Annales Laureshamenses*, 38. For Charlemagne's contacts with Hārūn al-Rashīd and the patriarch of Jerusalem, see Borgolte 1976, 46–76.

¹⁰⁶ Note that the coronation was reflected in official papal documents (dated by Charlemagne's regnal years) and in the Pope's own coinage in Rome, where the Frankish ruler was accorded the title *imperator*. Moreover, Charlemagne's name preceded that of the Pope in public acclamations and prayers, and his portrait was given the place of honour. In other

the Adriatic.¹⁰⁷ Charlemagne's objective was to put pressure on Byzantium and force this way the recognition of his imperial title. Indeed, the empress was prepared to negotiate, and in the summer of 802, Charlemagne's envoys arrived at Constantinople.¹⁰⁸ Theophanes claims that they proposed a marriage between the two rulers, but this is not corroborated by the usually more informative western sources.¹⁰⁹ Exactly what was discussed is unclear, though it is quite conceivable that Irene was prepared to recognize Charlemagne as emperor (perhaps under the title "emperor of the Franks", granted by Michael I in 812). In exchange, Charlemagne may have agreed to act as protector for her and her insecure regime.

Alarmed by the prospect of a Frankish-Byzantine alliance which could strengthen her hold on power, the two rival factions at court decided to move against the empress. Aetios was apparently planning to secure the throne for his brother Leo, but his opponents, now led by the *logothetes* Nikephoros, were quicker to act. In October 802, Nikephoros and a group of other high dignitaries, including the Triphyllioi brothers, Leo Serantapechos, the *questor* Theoktistos and Peter the *patrikios*, accompanied by some officers of the *tagmata*, made their way into the imperial palace and arrested Irene.¹¹⁰ At dawn on October 31 they arrived at St Sophia, where the patriarch Tarasios crowned Nikephoros emperor.¹¹¹ Irene was exiled to the Convent of Theotokos which she had founded on the island of Prinkipos. Shortly afterwards she was transferred to Lesbos, where she died on August 9, 803.¹¹²

4.4 BYZANTIUM AND BULGARIA, 780–802

Relations between Byzantium and Bulgaria after the death of Constantine V had apparently been peaceful. As we have already seen, Leo IV paid relatively little attention to the Balkans, mainly because of the pressing need to

words, those rights traditionally reserved for Byzantine rulers were now transferred to the new Western emperor; *Liber Pontificalis*, II, 7–8.

¹⁰⁷ Theoph., 475.12–15.

¹⁰⁸ For an earlier embassy sent by Irene to the Carolingian court, see *ARF*, 117; *Annales Xantenses*, 3; *Annales Fuldenses*, 15.

¹⁰⁹ Theoph., 475.27–30. It has been suggested that this report is based on rumours circulating in the imperial capital at the time; Classen 1985, 84–86; Lilie 1996, 211–212; Speck 1978, 326–328.

¹¹⁰ Theoph., 476.3–23.

¹¹¹ Theoph., 476.23–27.

¹¹² Theoph., 476.26–28; 480.6–9; *Vita Irenae imp.*, 24–27; *Life of Irene*, 243–251. For the convent at Prinkipos, see Janin 1975, 68–69.

organize the defence of Anatolia in the face of the growing Abbāsīd threat. However, he did try to make Thrace and the Constantinopolitan hinterland more secure by transferring there a large number of Monophysite prisoners from Syria. It would be reasonable to suppose that these regions recovered some prosperity, as farmlands returned to cultivation and imperial subsidies contributed to the reconstruction of some of the urban centres destroyed during the war. Meanwhile, the Bulgars were once again caught up in internecine strife between rival clans or factions, and their *khan* Telerig was forced to take refuge at Constantinople in 776/7. Nevertheless, they seem to have benefited from the re-establishment of trade links with Byzantium, as evidenced by the discovery of coins of Leo IV in the northeastern part of the *khanate*.¹¹³

Two years after her accession to the imperial throne, Irene sent her chief eunuch, Staurakios, at the head of an expeditionary force against the Slavs of Macedonia, Hellas and the Peloponnese. This campaign opened a new phase of active Byzantine involvement in the Balkans which was to continue, with short intervals, until the death of Nikephoros I in 811. Being an Athenian, the empress was almost bound to take a strong interest in the peninsula, only a small part of which was under effective imperial control at the time. Indeed, since the middle of the seventh century, the demands of the Balkans had been secondary to those of the crucial eastern front; thus her predecessors only intervened in the Balkans when the areas around Constantinople (which functioned as a zone of defence-in-depth, protecting the capital from its northern neighbours) were under serious threat. The major centres (Adrianople, Thessalonike, Dyrrachion, Corinth and Patras) were in Byzantine hands, but much of the peninsula's countryside, including the fertile plains of lower Macedonia, Thessaly and Boeotia, were occupied by Slavs operating in relatively small groups based on extended family, which in times of war could unite into larger military organizations.¹¹⁴ The stateless nature of Slav society, particularly the multiplicity of groups and leaders, made it difficult for the Byzantines to build normal diplomatic relations with them. At the same time, the imperial authorities were unwilling to commit greater mili-

¹¹³ See 3.2 above.

¹¹⁴ Whitby 1988, 82; Barford 2001, 125–128. In the seventh century part of the plains of Thessaly and Boeotia were controlled by the Slav Belegezitai, who exported food to Thessalonike during the siege of the city by other Slavic tribes; see *Miracles of St Demetrius*, I, 214ff. By the first half of the eighth century, the Belegezitai had been incorporated into the empire, since we have the seal of their *archon* Tichomir who was also an *imperial spatharios*; Seibt 2003, 462. For the economy and agricultural wealth of late-antique Thessaly, see Karagiorgou 2002, 159–169.

tary resources to the Balkans on a permanent basis as a means of establishing lasting control over a fluid, fragmentary world designated as *Sklaviniai*. Although unable to exploit some of the richest agricultural areas in the region, the Byzantines were, at least, not faced with an aggressive nomad power, such as the Avars, who early in the seventh century had looked set to establish their dominion over the peninsula, but with a series of small, politically independent and militarily weak tribal unions, which did not threaten in any way the vital interests of the empire. In this light it is little wonder that up to the 780s the *Sklaviniai* had been left largely to themselves.

Apart from her desire to regain control of these fertile plains and render them capable of providing the empire with grain and revenue from the land tax, Irene desperately needed military successes that could boost the reputation of her insecure regime. Indeed, early in 782, about a year before Staurakios' campaign in the Balkans, an Arab army under the nominal command of the young Hārūn al-Rashīd advanced as far as the Asian suburbs of Constantinople and seized Staurakios and two other senior officials as hostages. Irene was forced to agree to a peace on humiliating terms, a decision that risked serious political consequences, not least because it was measured against her predecessors' achievements in the east.¹¹⁵ Naturally, the empress needed a victory to restore her own and Staurakios' prestige, and the easiest way to achieve it was by campaigning against the Slavs who, despite their quality as individual warriors, were not regarded as very dangerous opponents.¹¹⁶ Thus in the spring or early summer of 783, Staurakios set out for the Balkans with a large force, presumably made up of *thematic* contingents from Asia Minor.¹¹⁷ Marching through Thrace, where he may have joined forces with the local army, he arrived at Thessalonike, forcing on the way some of the Thracian and Macedonian Slavs to acknowledge Byzantine authority and pay tribute to the empress.¹¹⁸ While in Thessalonike, Staurakios may have begun work on the large Church of Saint Sophia, whose mosaic inscriptions in the sanctuary celebrate the patronage of Irene and Constantine VI.¹¹⁹ He then proceeded to central Greece and the territory of the *theme* of Hellas, subduing more Slavic

¹¹⁵ For these events, see 4.3 above.

¹¹⁶ Maurice's *Strategikon* describes in some detail Slav military tactics: xi. 4; xii.B. 20–21; Kardaras 2008, 185–205.

¹¹⁷ Theoph., 456.25–27. The peace with the Arabs would have made possible the transfer of the *peratics* to the Balkan front.

¹¹⁸ καὶ κατελθὼν ἐπὶ Θεσσαλονίκην (Anastasios has instead *Thessaliam*) καὶ Ἑλλάδα ὑπέταξε πάντα καὶ ὑποφόρους ἐποίησε τῇ βασιλείᾳ; Theoph., 456.28–29.

¹¹⁹ The bishop of Thessalonike, Theophilos, a participant to the Council of Nicaea, was also commemorated in these inscriptions; Spieser 1973, 159 n. 9 (pl. II, 1); Mango 1986, 89–90.

tribes, and penetrated the Peloponnese, where he collected a great amount of booty and many captives.¹²⁰ The *logothetes* then marched back the way he had come, and when he finally returned to Constantinople, in January 784, Irene granted him a triumph in the hippodrome.¹²¹

Although the *Sklaviniai* had been defeated and forced to pay tribute, any permanent requisition of their territory was a problem less of military conquest than of establishing an army of sufficient size to ensure that the Slavs remained under Byzantine control and to prevent Bulgar encroachment into the region. The restoration of a series of fortresses or fortified settlements, which could provide safe bases for the army from which to protect the surrounding countryside, was therefore essential. To this end, in May 784 Irene set out for Thrace, accompanied by Constantine VI and a sizable force. In order to encourage a festive atmosphere, she also took along organs and other symbols of musical majesty.¹²² The empress first arrived at Anchialos on the Black Sea, which seems to have been destroyed by the Bulgars some time after 766.¹²³ She restored its fortifications and, following the main road connecting the coast with Serdica, came to Beroe on the southern foot of the Särnena gora (central Haimos).¹²⁴ Beroe had probably been abandoned by the Byzantines not long after the arrival of the Bulgars in the Balkans.¹²⁵ Irene ordered the town to be rebuilt, naming it after herself (Irenoupolis). A dated inscription found in the western section of the city wall in 2005 corroborates the *Chronographia*: in what has been described as high style, it records the restoration of the city (πόλις) by the empress and her son.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ εἰσῆλθε δὲ καὶ ἐν Πελοποννήσῳ καὶ πολλὴν αἰχμαλωσίαν καὶ λάφυρα ἤγαγε τῆ τῶν Ῥωμαίων βασιλείᾳ; Theoph., 456.29–457.2; Oikonomides 1999–2000, 61–65, claims that Staurakios faced serious resistance in the Peloponnese, a fact which may have made it necessary to remain for several months in that region.

¹²¹ Theoph., 457.4–6.

¹²² Theoph., 457.6–8.

¹²³ In their description of Constantine V's campaign against the Bulgars in 766, Theophanes and Nikephoros refer to Anchialos as a πόλισμα; Nikephoros' account in particular suggests that the city had not been destroyed yet; Nikeph., c. 82.4.9; Theoph., 437.19–21.

¹²⁴ The Black Sea-Serdica highway branched off at Stilbnos (mod. Sliven), connecting the latter with Beroe and Philippoupolis. At Philippoupolis this road joined the *Via Militaris* (see MAP I); see also Soustal 1991, 135; Belke 2002, 77; Wendel 2005, 75ff. The re-establishment of imperial authority at Anchialos is also attested by the discovery of the seal of a certain Niketas, *hypatos and basilikos kandidatos*, firmly dated to the last quarter of the eighth century; Jordanov 1993, 39.

¹²⁵ Archaeological evidence attests that the occupation of the city had ended no later than the early eighth century; Hoddinott 1975, 312–315; Whitby 1988, 189.

¹²⁶ +Ἀνεκένησαν τὸ κάστρον τοῦτο οἱ τῶν ὄλων δεσπότε Κωνσταντῖνος καὶ Ἡρίνη ὑπέροσοφοι καὶ πασέκυδοι ἄνακτου Ῥομέων. Χ(ριστό)ν γὰρ συλῶσιν πιστῆ πρόμαχον εἶνε τῆ πόλι; Shrankov and Yankov 2008.

Irene then advanced as far as Philippoupolis, which may have survived as a small fortified settlement, and returned to Constantinople without being hampered by either Slavs or Bulgars.¹²⁷

This process was continued over the next three years. Several *kastra* were rebuilt, garrisoned and repopulated in southern Thrace and the Constantinopolitan hinterland. The list of participants in the Council of Nicaea confirms the strength of Byzantine control in that region by 787: thirty-two bishoprics are recorded, most of which were located along the main routes.¹²⁸ Administration and culture spread from these fortified centres to the countryside, and gradually some of its Slav inhabitants appear to have been incorporated into the Greek-speaking and Christian world.¹²⁹

The Bulgars had every reason to feel threatened by the growing Byzantine involvement in Thrace, which probably encouraged them to reinforce their own influence along the frontier. Their attitude towards the Slav inhabitants of northern Thrace and the Black Sea coast was crucial, since Bulgar defence depended to a considerable extent on their co-operation. Thus, it is possible that they tried to resettle some of these Slavs beyond the reach of Byzantine control, north of the Haimos Mountains, and may have incited others to conduct raids into the most exposed parts of the plain, disrupting local communications. To be sure, there is some evidence for upheaval in northern Thrace between 786 and 787. In the summer of 786, and as the delegates sent by the Pope and the eastern patriarchs started arriving in Constantinople for the Ecumenical Council that was scheduled to begin on August 1 in the Church of the Holy Apostles, Irene and Constantine VI are reported to have been in Thrace, accompanied by the *tagmata* and certain *peratic* contingents.¹³⁰ Having decided to restore icons, Irene was looking to reinforce her political position by winning a victory that court propaganda could portray as proof of God's favour to her and her regime. The Slav attacks on northern Thrace would have given her such an opportunity. The empress led the

¹²⁷ ... καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἕως Βεροίας, καὶ ταύτην οἰκοδομηθῆναι κελεύσασα ἐπωνόμασεν αὐτὴν Εἰρηνούπολιν. κατῆλθε δὲ ἕως Φιλιππουπόλεως μετὰ πάσης ἀπαθείας καὶ ὑπέστρεψεν ἐν εἰρήνῃ κτίσασα καὶ τὴν Ἀγχιάλον; Theoph., 457.8–11. Note that the order in which these cities are mentioned by Theophanes (Beroe-Philippoupolis-Anchialos) makes no geographic sense.

¹²⁸ Darrouzès 1975, 20, 29–30, 54–55, 62–68; Lilie 1996, 176; Lilie 1977, 42–43; Ostrogorsky 1959b, 58–61; see also MAP II.

¹²⁹ Indeed, a *kanon* commemorating the martyrs of Adrianople, executed by the Bulgars around 815, gives the names of two Slavs, Loubomiros and Chotomiros, who may well have been converted to Christianity during Irene's reign; Follieri and Dujčev, *Acolutia*, 76, 84.

¹³⁰ ... αὐτῶν δὲ ἀφικομένων ἐν τῇ θεοφυλάκτῳ καὶ βασιλίδι πόλει, ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ διατριβὰς ἐποιούντο οἱ αὐτοὶ κράτιστοι βασιλεῖς; Lamberz 2008, 12.17–18; Mansi, XII, 990C.

expeditionary force into the frontier, but towards the end of July she returned with the *tagmata* to the capital, leaving the *peratics* to continue the operations.¹³¹ The latter were still there in September, when Staurakios came to enlist their support against the *tagmata* which in the mean time had broken up the proceedings of the Council.¹³² The presence of the *peratics* in Thrace, especially at a time when hostilities in the east had resumed, strongly suggests that this area had been severely disturbed by the Slavic raids.¹³³

This is confirmed by a further scrap of evidence. As has already been pointed out, the Conciliar lists of the Synod of Nicaea, if they are to be trusted, record the names of thirty-two bishops from Thrace, twenty-nine of whom were actually present at the proceedings.¹³⁴ Surprisingly, none of the three cities visited or rebuilt by Irene in 784, that is, Philippoupolis, Beroe and Anchialos, sent representatives to the Council. This could be taken as an indication that these particular sees were not occupied at the time. However, from the *Life of Peter of Atroa* (compiled around 847) we hear that during the patriarchate of Tarasios (784–806) the great Hesychast Jacob was appointed to the bishopric of Anchialos.¹³⁵ If the bishops of the three cities had officially retreated to other local centres, such as Adrianople or Arkadioupolis, it is almost certain that they would have somehow attended the Council. Their absence can perhaps suggest they were still in their own sees where they would have played a crucial role in maintaining the morale of the recently established communities.

It is not known how long it took the Byzantines to re-establish order in that part of the Balkans. One thing, however, is certain. By 788/9 they had extended their operations into the territory west of the Hebros River. On his way to Thessalonike in 783, Staurakios had forced some of the Slavs of

¹³¹ ... εισελθόντων οὖν τῶν βασιλέων καὶ τοῦ λαοῦ τῶν ταγμάτων, σχολαρίων, ἐξκουβιτορίων τε καὶ λοιπῶν στρατευμάτων τῶν στρατευομένων ἐν τῇ βασιλίδι πόλει; Lamberz 2008, 14.3–4; Mansi, XII, 990D–E.

¹³² Τοῦτο τῷ ἔτει ἀποστείλασα ἡ βασίλισσα Σταυράκιον τὸν πατρίκιον καὶ λογοθέτην ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ τῷ Σεπτεμβρίῳ μηνί, ἀρχῇ τῆς [1'] ἰνδικτιῶνος, πρὸς τὰ περατικά θέματα ἐκεῖσε τηλικαῦτα ὄντα, ἔπεισεν αὐτοὺς συνεργῆσαι αὐτῇ καὶ ἐξεῶσαι τῆς πόλεως τὸν δυσσεβῆ λαόν; Theoph., 462.5–9; Lamberz 2008, 14.28–16.3; Mansi, XII, 990B–991B.

¹³³ For the hostilities in the east, see above 4.3.

¹³⁴ The two exceptions being the bishops of Hexamilion and Lithoprosopon, whose names appear in the generally reliable list “F”, that is, the list of signatories (the decisions of the Councils were usually circulated afterwards in order to obtain the signature of bishops who had not been able to attend it in person), as well as the bishop of Traianoupolis; Darrouzès 1975, 29–30, 54–55, 62–68; Zuckerman 2006, 211–213, for some of the difficulties encountered when dealing with the lists of 787.

¹³⁵ *Vita Petri Atroa*, c. 65; Gjuzev 1997, 27.

the coastal strip of Thrace and Macedonia to acknowledge Byzantine overlordship. Nevertheless, Maroneia and Polystylon, two of the local centres known to have had a continuous unbroken existence from late antiquity to this period, had not sent representatives to the Council of Nicaea, an indication that land communications with Constantinople were still difficult.¹³⁶ The imperial armies may have by now tried to reopen the *Via Egnatia*, linking the capital with Thessalonike, and to establish direct control over the fertile valleys of the Nestos and Strymon Rivers, which afforded easy access into the Balkan interior. In the latter part of 788, an expeditionary force under the command of the *strategos* of Thrace, Philetos, was operating in that region, apparently targeting the Slavs settled between the western Rhodopes and the Strymon. These developments alarmed the Bulgars, who during the reign of Constantine V had made an unsuccessful attempt to conquer and transfer into the *khanate* some of the local Slavonic tribes, including the Berzitai.¹³⁷ It was now a Bulgar priority to prevent the Byzantines from asserting their authority over these tribes and the territory they controlled. This way the *Sklaviniai* could continue to serve as a buffer zone against Byzantine aggression.

Philetos' campaign on the Strymon appears to have been particularly successful. It may be assumed that upon his arrival, probably in the summer, the Slavs left for the mountains where the imperial army could not reach them and where resistance was possible and easy. During that time, the *strategos* must have remained in the river valley, destroying whatever they had left behind. Then, late in the autumn or early in the winter, when cold and the inevitable shortages of supplies made life in the mountains almost impossible, the Slavs may have agreed to surrender to Philetos. Expecting no further opposition from their enemies, the Byzantines appear to have grown lax. Unknown to them, however, the *khan* had sent a detachment of his troops to watch their moves. Late in 788, the Bulgars fell suddenly on the Byzantines, who had failed to establish a secure camp, killing Philetos and many of his men.¹³⁸ It is not clear if, and to what extent, this attack altered the political balance of the area. What is certain is that it terminated a period of peaceful

¹³⁶ For these two cities, see 2.1 above.

¹³⁷ Theoph., 447.10–26. It is worth remarking that the *Miracles of St Demetrios*, I, 75, distinguish between the Berzitai and the Belegezitai (for whom see n. 114 above).

¹³⁸ Φιλιτὸς δέ, ὁ τῆς Θράκης στρατηγός, ἀπελθὼν ἐν τῷ Στρυμῶνι καὶ ἀφυλάκτως ἀπληκεύσας, ἐπιπεσόντων αὐτῷ ἄφνω Βουλγάρων, ἀνηρέθη ὑπ' αὐτῶν σὺν καὶ ἄλλοις πολλοῖς; Theoph., 463.28–464.2. In the *Chronographia* this episode follows Constantine's wedding in November and precedes the Byzantine campaign in Calabria, which seems to have taken place shortly after the wedding; Speck 1978, 184 n. 30, 187 n. 67.

co-existence between the two powers that had lasted for approximately fourteen years.

All of Theophanes' information—and therefore all of our knowledge—about the subsequent Byzantine-Bulgar conflict concerns two major engagements on the Thracian frontier between 791 and 792. Certainly, during the same period, events of greater importance were happening in Constantinople and the east, to which naturally the author devoted most of his attention. The most significant development was the political struggle between Irene and Constantine VI, which came out into the open early in 790 when the latter was discovered plotting against his mother's chief ally, Staurakios.¹³⁹ Later that year, the *thematic* armies of Asia Minor deposed their *strategoi*, all loyal appointees of Irene's, and proclaimed her son as sole emperor.¹⁴⁰ However, Constantine's rise to power was blighted by the *Armeniac* revolt which destabilized the empire's eastern frontier, leaving Anatolia exposed to repeated Arab devastation.

Although Irene must have expected that the Byzantine expansion in Thrace and Macedonia would provoke a violent Bulgar reaction, she nevertheless wanted to avoid a full-scale conflict in the northern borders. Indeed, the growing threat from Hārūn meant that she could not reinforce her Balkan armies with *thematic* contingents from Asia Minor.¹⁴¹ Meanwhile, the empire had become involved in a dispute with the Franks in Calabria, and after the Byzantine intervention in Benevento in 788, relations between the two powers were expected to deteriorate even further.¹⁴² Under these circumstances, Irene could not risk major military action in the Balkans. Her objectives were limited: to prevent Bulgar encroachment deep into the Thracian Plain, and consolidate her position west of the Hebros River. As has been shown, she was probably responsible for the creation of the *theme* of Macedonia before she was ousted from power.¹⁴³ The new *theme* covered the territory between the Hebros and Strymon Rivers. Its army was drawn from that of Thrace, and probably had its headquarters at Adrianople. Although Irene does not appear to have brought in new *stratiotai* from Asia Minor, by dividing the army of Thrace into two smaller units she increased the flexibility of the empire's defence along the Balkan frontier.

¹³⁹ Theoph., 464.10–465.9.

¹⁴⁰ For a summary of these events, see above 4.3.

¹⁴¹ On the war in the east, see above 4.3.

¹⁴² For this expedition, see Theoph., 464.2–8; *ARF*, 82.

¹⁴³ See 2.4 above.

Over the next year and a half, the Bulgars may have exerted local pressure across the frontier that was not sufficiently dramatic to attract the notice of the chroniclers' sources. Things changed when Constantine VI came to power, late in 790. Eager to show that, unlike his mother, he could lead the army into battle, the emperor decided to make an expedition against the Bulgars, who in the spring of 791 seem to have been causing considerable disruption across the Thracian Plain. In April, Constantine marched to Probaton (mod. Sinnaköy), a fortified town controlling the route from Markellai to Adrianople.¹⁴⁴ He then advanced as far as the stream of St George (Sinan-pasha deresi), not far from where *khan* Kardam—who is mentioned here for the first time—had been operating.¹⁴⁵ The *Chronographia* records a minor confrontation in the evening, after which both sides are said to have withdrawn for fear of the other.¹⁴⁶ It seems that neither the emperor nor the *khan* were willing to risk defeat, which could entail serious political costs for their regimes; Constantine's expedition was mainly a statement of future intent, though he must have been satisfied with holding up the Bulgar advance. On the other hand, by launching what seems to have been the first major raid deep into Thrace since the 770s, Kardam, who could also perhaps be credited with the Bulgar victory on the Strymon in 788, may have been able to rally around him the traditionally anti-Byzantine ruling elite. The booty yielded by these attacks was essential to the *khan* as a symbol of his prestige, but also as a means of rewarding these nobles and thereby securing their support in the future.

The following year the Bulgars returned to ravage the border areas of Thrace.¹⁴⁷ Our sources do not record that they captured any towns on this invasion, but this may well be the occasion when the fort of Markellai was sacked. Markellai was strategically important not just defensively but also offensively, inasmuch as control over the nearby passes of Vărbitsa and Riš could either block an advancing Bulgar army or secure passage to the imperial forces.¹⁴⁸ Its destruction was therefore a major blow to Byzantine power in the region. Meanwhile, Constantine was facing the first serious challenge

¹⁴⁴ Probaton is situated 21 km northeast of Adrianople; Soustal 1991, 415–416.

¹⁴⁵ Theoph., 467.6–8; Ziemann 2007, 235–236. It cannot be known if Kardam had succeeded Telerig in 776/7.

¹⁴⁶ καὶ συναντήσας Καρδάμω, τῷ κυρῷ Βουλγαρίας, μικροῦ πολέμου περὶ τὴν ἐσπέραν γεγονότος, δειλανδρήσαντες οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι διὰ τῆς νυκτὸς ἔφυγον καὶ ὑπέστρεψαν ἀδόξως· καὶ οἱ Βούλγαροι δὲ φοβηθέντες ὑπέστρεψαν; Theoph., 467.9–12.

¹⁴⁷ *Vita Ioannicii B* (Sabas), 337B.

¹⁴⁸ Soustal 1991, 348–349. For evidence of destruction dated to this period, see Momčilov 2009, 201.

of his reign. Early in 792, the *Armeniaks* had mutinied against his order to acclaim Irene as his co-ruler, and demanded that their *strategos*, Alexios Mousele, who had been summoned to Constantinople, be sent back to them.¹⁴⁹ As a result, the emperor had not been able to turn his attention to the Balkans straight away. When he finally set out for Thrace, in the summer, the Bulgars had already retreated across the Haimos. Constantine arrived at Markellai in July, accompanied by the *tagmata* and, presumably, troops from the army of Thrace. He had also brought along a number of high dignitaries, including the *magistros* Michael Lachanodrakon, the *patrikios* Bardas, and the *protospatharios* Stephanos Chameas.¹⁵⁰ Their presence may suggest that the expedition had a ceremonial aspect.

Alarmed by Constantine's arrival, Kardam, who had remained near the border, went forth with a large force and on July 20 is said to have placed himself on the "fortifications"—apparently a reference to the earthen or stone ramparts built by the Bulgars on the southern slopes of the Haimos, quite possibly those guarding the pass of Riš.¹⁵¹ Theophanes reports that an astrologer named Pankratios persuaded Constantine to fight by prophesying victory, but the credibility of this story is illusory. The emperor is more likely to have been influenced by certain senior officials, who probably advised him to attack at once. The suitable terrain was thought to offer the Byzantines an unquestionable strategic advantage over Kardam's army, and this may have been a contributory factor to Constantine's decision. The need to defend Markellai, which his men had in the meantime rebuilt, must have been a further consideration.¹⁵² The account of the subsequent encounter is very sketchy. The Byzantines are said to have sallied out without plan and order, and thus to have been severely beaten. Many were killed, while Constantine fled in panic, leaving behind the imperial tent with all its equipment which was seized by the Bulgars, along with the entire baggage train.¹⁵³ The descrip-

¹⁴⁹ The mutiny preceded the rebellion, which broke out late in the summer of 792; Theoph., 467.17–27.

¹⁵⁰ Theoph., 468.1–3.

¹⁵¹ καὶ τῇ εἰκάδι τοῦ Ἰουλίου μηνὸς ἐξῆλθε Κάρδαμος, ὁ κύρις Βουλγαρίας μετὰ πάσης τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔστη ἐν τοῖς ὀχυρώμασιν; Theoph., 467.28–30. For the defences at Riš, see Rašev, 1982a, 57 and 99, 107–109 on the rectangular embankment in the pass.

¹⁵² The rebuilding of Markellai at this time is confirmed by archaeological evidence; see Shtereva and Aladžov 2000, 295–296. For the embankments surrounding the Byzantine fort, see Momčillov 1999, 219–224.

¹⁵³ θερμοπνοήσας δὲ ὁ βασιλεὺς καὶ ὑπὸ ψευδοπροφητῶν πεισθείς, ὡς αὐτοῦ ἔσται ἡ νίκη, ἀσκόπως καὶ ἀτάκτως συνέβαλε πόλεμον καὶ ἠττᾶται σφοδρῶς. ἐπανέρχεται δὲ φυγὰς ἐν τῇ πόλει πολλοὺς ἀποβαλόν. . . ἐπῆραν δὲ καὶ τὸ τοῦλδον χρήματά τε καὶ ἵππους καὶ τὴν κόρτην μετὰ πάσης τῆς βασιλικῆς ὑπουργίας; Theoph., 467.30–468.7; *Kleinchroniken*, I, 49.13.

tion of the battle may reveal a certain lack of discipline on the part of the imperial army. It is conceivable that many of the troops, particularly those in the *tagmata*, had been insufficiently experienced to face the Bulgars, since they had only been recruited a few years earlier.¹⁵⁴ The same is probably true of the leadership, which evidently failed to maintain the army in good order during the attack. Many leading officers and dignitaries perished in the battle (or during the pursuit), and Constantine himself may have barely escaped with his life.¹⁵⁵

The humiliating defeat at Markellai had important consequences for Constantine and his regime. Shortly after the return of the army to the capital, some members of the *tagmata*, disillusioned with the emperor, tried to proclaim his uncle, the former *Caesar* Nikephoros as emperor. In August, Constantine apprehended and blinded Nikephoros, along with Alexios Mousele, whom he also suspected of plotting against him, but this triggered off the *Armeniac* rebellion, which continued until the summer of 793.¹⁵⁶ The revolt had a considerable effect on the empire's ability to defend itself; between 793 and 794 Hārūn launched a series of raids against the empire, and captured Kamachon and Thebasa, two of the most important border outposts, thereby opening the way for further Arab penetration into the Anatolian Plateau.

During the *Armeniac* rebellion, the Bulgars appear to have remained quiet. One may fairly suppose that in return for a large payment Kardam had agreed to a truce. Constantine must have feared, with some reason after the defeat at Markellai, that the alternative was a long series of Bulgar raids in the vicinity of the capital that could risk serious political and social unrest at home. By comparison, a gift or a periodic payment to the *khan* was somewhat less humiliating, and would have appeared a small price to pay for keeping the Bulgars at arm's length while dealing with the *Armeniacs*.¹⁵⁷

Theophanes' next reference to the Bulgars is under the year 795/6 when Kardam reportedly demanded a tribute from the emperor, threatening to

¹⁵⁴ See 4.3 above.

¹⁵⁵ Theoph., 468.1–6; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 122. For the list of fallen dignitaries provided by the *Chronographia*, an indication that its author was drawing on a well-informed written source, see 1.1.3 (c) above. The *Vita Ioannicii* by Peter (386C–387A), has the saint, who was serving in the *tagma* of the *Exkoubitores*, save the emperor's life; Sabas, writing later, substituted an anonymous dignitary for Constantine VI; *Vita Ioannicii B*, 337B–338A; Sullivan 1994, 287–291.

¹⁵⁶ Theoph., 468.7–469.15.

¹⁵⁷ Zlatarski 1918, 243; Speck 1978, 244, Lilie 1996, 184, Ostrogorsky 1968, 182 n. 4, Bury 1912, 339 and Treadgold 1988, 102, all believe that Constantine paid tribute to the Bulgars between 792 and 796. On the other hand, Beševliev 1981a, 232, suggests that the two sides concluded a peace treaty.

devastate Thrace if it was not paid.¹⁵⁸ It is possible that the payment he demanded was then due under the terms of the agreement. Nevertheless, Theophanes' biased account portrays Kardam as a greedy barbarian who tried to secure these concessions by extortion—a favourite *topos* of Byzantine historians.¹⁵⁹ In response, Constantine is said to have sent the *khan* a package of horse manure, challenging him to come out with his army and meet him at Markellai.¹⁶⁰ This arrogant re-assertion of imperial authority is not surprising. By 796 the emperor felt—perhaps for the first time in his reign—securely in power: not only had the *Armeniac* uprising been quelled, but recently pressure on the empire's eastern frontier had eased, and he had even managed to defeat an Arab army at Anusan—his first ever victory against a foreign enemy.¹⁶¹ Made confident by these successes and knowing that he could now transfer troops from Asia Minor to the Balkans, if necessary, Constantine may have refused to make any payment to the Bulgars.

This decision initiated another short period of conflict between the two powers. Probably in spring, Kardam led a punitive raid into Thrace.¹⁶² The *khan's* movements are related most obscurely by Theophanes who only reports that he advanced as far as the forest Abroleba, close to the Derentski Heights, some 30–40 km north of Adrianople.¹⁶³ Evidently the Bulgar ravaging extended as far south as the environs of the capital of the Macedonian *theme*. Constantine had meanwhile assembled his army, which included large *peratic* contingents, and marched to Versinikia, not far from where the Bulgars had been operating.¹⁶⁴ Although no figures are provided by the *Chronographia*, it is clear that the Byzantines substantially outnumbered their enemy. Wary of meeting them in open battle, Kardam is said to have remained in the forest; there, the Byzantines were at a disadvantage, since they could not come to grips with the Bulgars and force them to a straight

¹⁵⁸ Κάρδαμος δέ, ὁ κύρις Βουλγαρίας, ἐδήλωσε τῷ βασιλεῖ, ὅτι “ἢ τέλεσόν μοι πάκτα, ἢ ἔρχομαι ἕως τῆς Χρυσῆς πόρτης καὶ ἐρημῶ τὴν Θράκην”; Theoph., 470.10–12.

¹⁵⁹ Sinor 1978, 171–180.

¹⁶⁰ ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς βαλὼν καρβαλίνας ἀλόγου εἰς μανδηλὴν ἔπυμψεν αὐτῷ εἰπόν, ὅτι “οἶα μὲν σοι πρέπει πάκτα, ἀπέστειλά σοι. γέρων δὲ εἶ· καὶ οὐ θέλω ἵνα κοπιᾶσης ἕως τῶν ὄδε· ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ ἔρχομαι ἕως Μαρκέλλων, καὶ ἔξελθε...”; Theoph., 470.12–15.

¹⁶¹ Theoph., 469.27–470.1. For the internal crisis in the Caliphate, see 4.3 above.

¹⁶² The date can be inferred from the fact that Theophanes' account of the invasion comes immediately after the report of an earthquake in Crete, which occurred in April 796, but before that of an Arab attack on Anatolia in the summer; Theoph., 470.7ff.

¹⁶³ Theoph., 470.17–18; Anna Komnena refers to Abrolebo as being close to Skoutarion and Agathonike (Orjahovo); Anna Komnena, *Alexiad*, x, 4, 10; Soustal 1991, 159–160.

¹⁶⁴ Theoph., 470.16–17.

fight without risk of being ambushed.¹⁶⁵ Subsequently, Constantine came with his troops to the treeless part of Abroleba and reportedly defied the *khan* for seventeen days.¹⁶⁶ Although well-watered, the area had been extensively devastated by the raid and this must have placed very clear limits on the duration of the Byzantine (but also the Bulgar) stay at Abroleba. Therefore, it is unlikely that the two armies remained facing each other for more than two weeks. Since he was not prepared to fight, Kardam had little choice but to withdraw immediately before the Byzantines cut his line of retreat. Disappointed and perhaps embarrassed by the Bulgar escape, Constantine may have tried to restore his reputation by manufacturing the story reported in the *Chronographia*, which as has been shown in chapter 1, contains obvious signs of imperial propaganda.

A few months later the emperor once more led his army into the Balkans. A brief notice included in the so-called *Chronicle on Leo the Isaurian* records a campaign against the Slavs on the Strymon dated to the fifth indiction, that is to say, between September 796 and August 797.¹⁶⁷ There is good reason to believe that this expedition took place late in 796. Although Constantine had failed to force the Bulgars into battle at Abroleba in spring, he had clearly regained the strategic initiative and must have wanted to maintain the momentum along the frontier. Moreover, winter was regarded as the time of year when the Slavs were most vulnerable to attack. The *Strategikon* specifically recommends winter raids into the northern Balkans since the bare forests could not conceal ambushers or offer protection, and the frozen rivers could easily be crossed by the less mobile Byzantines.¹⁶⁸ Further, in spring 797, Constantine was campaigning against the Arabs, who also invaded the empire in mid summer. By contrast, we know that between October 796 and March 797, he and his forces had not been preoccupied elsewhere.¹⁶⁹ In this light, his expedition against the Slavs should probably be dated to late autumn or early winter of 796. Apart from bolstering Constantine's reputation, this campaign was aimed at re-asserting imperial authority along the Strymon valley which may have been weakened, if not swept away, after 788.

¹⁶⁵ ... καὶ ὁ Κάρδαμος ἦλθεν ἕως τοῦ δασέος Ἀβρολέβα καὶ δειλιάσας ἔμεινεν ἐν τῷ ἄλλσει; Theoph., 470.17–18.

¹⁶⁶ Theoph., 470.18–21.

¹⁶⁷ ἰνδικτιῶνος ε' ἐπολέμησαν μετὰ τῶν Σκλάβων εἰς τὸν Στρυμόνα; *Kleinchroniken*, I, 49.16; Božilov and Gjuzev 1999, 123.

¹⁶⁸ Maurice, *Strategikon*, ix.4.82ff.

¹⁶⁹ In September 796 Constantine went to Prusa, where he remained until October 7 when word came from the capital that Theodote had given birth to a son. In March he set out against the Arabs; Theoph., 471.8–20f.

This recovery may have entailed a large operation of policing, but there were probably no notable military actions to attract the attention of Theophanes.

During Irene's reign as sole empress (August 796–October 802), Byzantium's relations with the Bulgars seem to have been untroubled. Quite possibly, the empress, eager to avoid a prolonged struggle in the Balkans that could destabilize her regime, agreed to pay tribute to the *khan*. It is worth remarking that shortly after her accession to power Irene also concluded a peace with the Arabs, who had been raiding deep into imperial territory.¹⁷⁰ Thus, after 797 the Bulgars may have been satisfied with Byzantine payments, or could have found it more profitable to turn their attention to the west, where the break-up of the *qaghanate*—a stage marked by the sack of the “Ring” by the Frankish armies in 796—opened the way for expansion in that direction.¹⁷¹ It is hard to avoid the conclusion that during this respite, Thrace and the Constantinopolitan hinterland recovered much of their prosperity. Unfortunately, nothing is known about Byzantine involvement in the Balkans until the reign of Nikephoros I.

¹⁷⁰ For the evidence, see above 4.3.

¹⁷¹ The extent of this expansion is often exaggerated by scholars; for a discussion, see 5.2.1 below.

CHAPTER FIVE

EMPEROR VERSUS KHAN: BYZANTIUM AND BULGARIA, 802–811

5.1 THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE UNDER NIKEPHOROS I

The new phase of active Byzantine involvement in the Balkans, which was initiated by Irene in the early 780s, culminated under Nikephoros I in the first decade of the ninth century. Between the years 802 and 809, Nikephoros took spectacular steps to expand imperial authority into southern Greece and to consolidate control in Thrace and Macedonia. The death of Hārūn al-Rashīd and the subsequent civil war in the Caliphate (809–813) then gave him the opportunity to turn directly against the Bulgars, who under the leadership of *Khan* Krum had been interfering south of the Haimos Mountains. The early phases of the Byzantine-Bulgar competition were dominated by a series of inconclusive skirmishes, which slowly escalated into a full-blown conflict for political mastery over the northeastern Balkans. But before we can move to that, we need to look afresh at Nikephoros' regime, thus providing a key background context to developments in Byzantium's northern frontier during this period.

The coup that brought Nikephoros to power in October 802 was planned and executed by high-ranking officers in the army, the court and the bureaucracy.¹ Such a broad range of support among the ruling elite may reflect a general disapproval of the way Irene handled the affairs of the state, particularly of her financial policies which seem to have brought about a serious economic crisis.² In this light, the proclamation of her *general logothetes* is hardly surprising. Nikephoros had evidently served in that post for a considerable time, and this must have provided him with a clear idea of what was wrong with the management of the empire's finances, but also with a general grasp of the administrative problems.³ Although not a soldier by training, he was known to be a strict disciplinarian, and was also admired for his

¹ See 4.3 above.

² For an overview of Irene's financial policies, see Niavis 1987, 48–49.

³ For his background, see Niavis 1987, 41–42; Treadgold 1988, 127–129, and my comments in 4.3 n. 96 above.

resourcefulness, pragmatism and strong sense of duty.⁴ Despite Theophanes' attempt to denigrate him, it is clear that the new emperor was a man of great ability.

Naturally, most of the officers and dignitaries who had helped Nikephoros come to power in 802, including the *patrikioi* Sisinnios Triphyllios, Peter and Theoktistos, continued to hold influential positions until the end of his reign.⁵ Overall, it appears that the new emperor made relatively few changes at the top but relied on the existing hierarchy in the court, the civil service and the army. From these men Nikephoros demanded honesty and efficiency, and as long as they performed their duties well, he would retain them in office. The series of successful fiscal and economic reforms undertaken by his regime is a clear indication that during this period the empire's civil servants gave a fairly good account of themselves.⁶

By contrast, the army, which after the death of Constantine V was increasingly willing to influence the course of the imperial succession, and had played a critical role in the plot that led to Irene's deposition, continued to be a prominent source of unrest. In the summer of 803, four *peratic armies* (all except the *Armeniacs*) rebelled against the central government and proclaimed the *strategos* of the *Anatolikon*, Bardanes Tourkos emperor.⁷ Theophanes continuatus states that the troops resented the fiscal measures taken by the emperor, but his account is not particularly convincing.⁸ The uprising was more probably connected with the general state of affairs in Anatolia in the summer of 803; for earlier that year, Nikephoros had decided to withhold the annual tribute to the Caliph (agreed by Irene in 798), fully aware that this would provoke a violent Arab reaction.⁹ Thus, after enjoying more than four years of peace during which they had undoubtedly benefited by cultivating their land undisturbed, the Anatolian soldier-farmers were now expected to pay a terrible price in human and economic terms. Indeed, in July an Arab army invaded the empire, and when, in response, Bardanes summoned the *Asiatic* forces, apparently to a mustering station in the *Anatolikon*, he found

⁴ *Chronicle of 811*, 216.90–91; Michael Syr., III, 15. Nikephoros was apparently born to a well-to-do provincial family (from Pisidia), and must, therefore, have received at least some basic military training during his youth.

⁵ Sisinnios and Peter were killed along with Nikephoros in Bulgaria; Theoph., 491.6–7. Theoktistos, now a *magistros*, remained in imperial service until 813; Theoph., 476.11; Zacos and Veglery 1972, I/2, no. 2498; *PmbZ*, #8046, 8051.

⁶ For these reforms, see below.

⁷ Theoph., 479.15–17. For a seal of *Bardanes*, see Zacos and Veglery 1972, I/2, no. 1750B; *PmbZ*, #762, 766.

⁸ Theoph. cont., 6.14–18, 8.12–9.2; *Synodicon Vetus*, 129.

⁹ For the peace of 798, see 4.3 above.

them in a rebellious mood.¹⁰ Whether the *strategos* accepted the leadership of the revolt unwillingly, as Theophanes seems to suggest, or simply intended to fulfill his own ambitions, remains unclear.¹¹

The ephemeral nature of the uprising is indicated by its unspectacular progress and abrupt end.¹² Bardanes advanced as far as Chrysopolis, across the strait, and waited eight days in the hope of finding support in the capital. Such support, however, never came, and some of his commanders, including the future emperors Leo V and Michael II, began to desert.¹³ With the help of Joseph of Kathara, who had retired to a monastery near Malagina, the *strategos* entered secret negotiations with the imperial government, and in the end a guarantee was delivered to him assuring him that he and his followers would not be harmed. Early in September, a ship was sent to take Bardanes to his own monastery on the island of Prote where he remained a monk.¹⁴

After the end of the revolt, Nikephoros set about restructuring the military in order to lessen the chances of a similar threat in the future. One step was to dismiss the *thematic* commanders who had participated in the uprising, and replace them with men loyal to his regime.¹⁵ Another step was to offset the power of the *Anatolic* army by transferring to Constantinople one of its most important units, the *Phoideratoi*.¹⁶ The *Phoideratoi* were partially made up of Lykaonians of redoubtable fighting ability, and Nikephoros, who himself had his origins in the region of Pisidia adjoining Lykaonia, seems to have organized them into a separate unit which acted in effect as his personal bodyguard.¹⁷ A contingent of the Lykaonian guard was, according to Theophanes, responsible for blinding Bardanes Tourkos at Prote in 804.¹⁸

¹⁰ al-Tabarī, xxx, 238–239. The invasion is said to have taken place in the month of Shā‘ban, which that year fell between 25 July and 22 August. The uprising broke out on 19 July. This seems to confirm that the rebellious armies (or units) had been stationed at a base camp, strategically located for expeditions aimed against the Arabs.

¹¹ Theoph., 479.17–18. For Bardanes’ imperial aspirations, see Theoph., cont., 6.18–19.

¹² Turner 1990, 175ff.

¹³ Theoph., 479.18–20; Theoph., cont., 9.2–13; Genesios, 8.51–54.

¹⁴ Theoph., 479.20–32; Theoph., cont., 9.13–10.3; Genesios, 8.42–46; Treadgold 1988, 131–132. To reward Joseph of Kathara (who had been defrocked in 797 for performing Constantine VI’s adulterous marriage), Nikephoros restored him to his old position of *oikonomos* of St Sophia (806). In response, the Stoudites broke communion with the newly-elected patriarch Nikephoros I (806–815), but were subsequently persecuted; Alexander 1958, 80–101.

¹⁵ Theoph., 479.32–480.3.

¹⁶ Leo the Armenian was appointed commander of that unit and awarded a residence in Constantinople; Theoph. cont., 9.9–11. On the *Phoideratoi*, see Haldon 1984, 246–250 and n. 673.

¹⁷ Theoph., 488.22–26; the evidence is summarized by Turner 1990, 177–178.

¹⁸ Theoph., 480.16–24; Genesios, 8.46–50.

Towards the end of his reign, Nikephoros went on to create another *tagma*, the *Hikanatoi*, under the command of his grandson Niketas (the future patriarch Ignatios). The new unit must have been created around 809, since the *Vita Ignatii* reports that Niketas was appointed *domestikos* of the *Hikanatoi* some four years before his castration (following the deposition of his father Michael I Rhangabe in July 813).¹⁹ The *Hikanatoi* were apparently a cadet regiment, made up, at least partly, of the sons of dignitaries, aged fifteen and above.²⁰ With the creation of this unit, Nikephoros may have hoped to tighten his control over the *tagmata*, which were active participants in several instances of military unrest between 807 and 809.²¹

One of Nikephoros' most important achievements was the reorganization of the system of recruitment into the *thematic* armies. Indeed, military service was owed by individuals on a hereditary basis, with their families providing their mounts and equipment.²² However, many landholders, although already in the military lists, had become impoverished and were therefore unable to pay for their own gear.²³ In order to counter the subsequent reduction in military manpower, Nikephoros arranged that the village community should cover the cost by an annual contribution of 18½ *nomismata*.²⁴ In addition, the members of the fiscal community (*homochoroi*, lit. "neighbours") were made responsible for the enrolled man's public taxes.²⁵ Thus, Nikephoros ensured both the effective recruitment in the army and the regular payment of the taxes.

Nikephoros also introduced a series of economic and fiscal measures, listed as the "ten vexations" in Theophanes' text, which were aimed at strengthening public finance and securing the treasury against any loss. The emperor mainly targeted the upper class, which was expected to contribute more than it had previously done, as well as rich ecclesiastical institutions, which had

¹⁹ *Vita Ignatii*, 492B; Haldon 1984, 245–246. The actual commander of the *Hikanatoi* seems to have been Peter the *patrikios*; *Synaxarion CP*, 792.

²⁰ *Chronicle of 811*, 210.6–8.

²¹ For the plot of 807 and the mutiny at Serdica in 809, see below 5.2.2.

²² Haldon 1979, 41–50, esp. 48–51. In the tenth century, the property which would form the basis of the soldier's economic existence was at least four pounds of gold; the cost for the horse alone was twelve *nomismata*; *De Cerim.*, I, 459.

²³ As is pointed out by Haldon 1979, 50–51 n. 87.

²⁴ ... προσέταξε στρατεύεσθαι πτωχούς καὶ ἐξοπλίζεσθαι παρὰ τῶν ὁμοχόρων, παρέχοντας καὶ ἀνὰ ὀκτοκαίδεκα ἡμίσιους νομισμάτων τῷ δημοσίῳ καὶ ἀλληλεγγύως τὰ δημόσια; Theoph., 486.23–26; Haldon 1979, 50–51 and n. 87.

²⁵ Mango and Scott 1997, 669 n. 4. The principle of communal solidarity for the payment of taxes was long established, but the extension of that principle to soldiers and their properties was new; Haldon 1979, 50 n. 87. Brubaker-Haldon 2010, 744–755.

been allowed to prosper under the previous regime. As has been shown, this was the most likely cause of Theophanes'/Synkellos' bitterness.²⁶ One of Nikephoros' primary objectives was to counter tax evasion, and to this end he ordered a new census and a general revision of the tax register.²⁷ He then cancelled all remissions granted by Irene, and towards the end of his reign ordered the collection of back taxes long overdue from certain dignitaries.²⁸ At the same time, Nikephoros reintroduced the payment of the *kapnikon* (hearth tax), levied on the tenants of wealthy churches, monasteries and charitable institutions.²⁹ Furthermore, he is said to have confiscated certain ecclesiastical and monastic estates, and to have forced the churches and monasteries to pay land tax on these properties.³⁰ By another measure, the emperor compelled those ship owners who wished to take a loan, to borrow only a fixed sum from the state at a particularly high interest rate (16.67 per cent).³¹ In addition, he established a tax for the household slaves purchased outside the customs station of Abydos.³² Finally, the recovery of taxes on inheritance and on treasure trove was to be more rigorously enforced, and such taxes were even to be exacted from those whose sudden rise from poverty to riches excited suspicion.³³

Although Theophanes/Synkellos bitterly decries Nikephoros' financial policies, there is little doubt that these were sound and that the empire benefited greatly from them. To judge from Michael I's excessive spending between 811 and 813, his predecessor must have left the state treasury full.³⁴ The reorganization of the taxation system, particularly the revision of the tax register which ensured that the government collected an ample share of new revenues on which it had a legitimate claim, seems to have had a lasting effect.³⁵ What is more, the establishment of a new law court at Magnaura, in which

²⁶ For these measures, see Ostrogorsky 1968, 187–191; also Bratianu 1938, 183–216; Treadgold 1988, 149–152; Niavis 1987, 93–113.

²⁷ Theoph., 486.26–28. To finance the census, each household had to pay an extra fee of two *ceratia* (1/12 of a *nomisma*), the so-called *chartiatikon*.

²⁸ ... τοὺς κουφισμοὺς πάντα ἀναβιβάζεσθαι προσέταττεν; Theoph., 486.28–29, 489.27–28. For Irene's remissions, see 4.3 above.

²⁹ Theoph., 486.29–487.2. It seems that the hearth tax was paid by the landlords rather than the tenants of these institutions. The tax had evidently not been collected during Irene's reign, probably as a result of the favour she showed to the clergy; Treadgold 1988, 151.

³⁰ Theoph., 487.2–5. Apparently the churches and monasteries continued to enjoy the usufruct of these lands; Niavis 1987, 100.

³¹ Theoph., 487.17–19.

³² Theoph., 487.11–13.

³³ Theoph., 487.6–11; Oikonomides 2002, 990; Ostrogorsky 1968, 189.

³⁴ For Michael I's excesses, see 6.1 below.

³⁵ Treadgold 1988, 191.

Nikephoros is said to have personally heard complaints by the poor, presumably concerning fiscal matters, indicates that the emperor tried to improve social justice and force his officials into a more rigorous application of laws. The court seems to have fulfilled its objectives, and Nikephoros soon gained a reputation for love of the poor.³⁶

Much like Irene, Nikephoros demonstrated a profound interest in the Balkan provinces of the empire. His government took important steps to proclaim dominion over the Slav tribal unions in mainland Greece and the Peloponnese, and then to incorporate these regions into the Byzantine administrative structure. Once again, the main factor behind this drive was the need to regain control of the fertile local plains, and render them capable of providing the empire with grain and revenue from the land tax. The process is obscure, but by *ca.* 807 Nikephoros seems to have subdued the Peloponnesian Slavs and boosted Christianity in the region by bringing in settlers from other parts of the empire.³⁷ As noted elsewhere, the emperor then went on to create the *theme* of Peloponnese, which had its capital at Corinth.³⁸ A similar process must have taken place in central Greece, but the only evidence for re-established imperial authority there is provided by a number of generally reliable lists of episcopal sees compiled during the patriarchate of Nikephoros I (806–815); these lists refer to Athens, Thebes and Larissa, none of which had sent representatives to the Council of Nicaea in 787.³⁹

In her dealings with the Arabs and Franks, Irene had shown eagerness to avoid conflict, but this policy of appeasement seems to have damaged Byzantium's prestige abroad. The empire's attitude towards these two powers was revised completely by Nikephoros, who pursued a more aggressive policy on both fronts. As noted already, in 803 he stopped payments to the Caliph, an act that resulted in the outbreak of hostilities in the east after a four-year respite.⁴⁰ Over the next few years the Byzantines rebuilt or strengthened several frontier fortresses and, when possible, raided into

³⁶ Theoph., 478.31–479.4; *Vita Nicetae Med.*, App., xxix. For Magnaura, see Oikonomides 1987, 18.

³⁷ *DAI*, c. 49.4ff. The so-called *Chronicle of Monemvasia*, which describes the reconquest of the Peloponnese by Nikephoros, cannot be relied on for specific historical information. However, the main events seem to be corroborated by the account of the *DAI*, and in this light, one would be inclined to believe that the resettlement programme reported by the chronicle has some basis of fact; Charanis 1950, 154–155; Turlej 1998, 446–468.

³⁸ See 2.4 above, n. 508.

³⁹ Parthey, 162–180 (Not. 8); Darrouzès, *Notitiae*, 216–227 (Not. 2); Koder and Hild 1976, 59–60. For the historical value of these lists, see 1.5 above.

⁴⁰ al-Tabarī, xxx, 239; Niavis 1987, 199–205.

Arab territory.⁴¹ The Abbāsids launched a series of counter-attacks, which culminated in the summer of 806 when a massive army, divided into several contingents under the overall command of Hārūn al-Rashīd himself, wreaked havoc on central Anatolia, without, however, making permanent gains.⁴² As things turned out, this was to be the last major campaign against the empire organized by the Arab's central government for many years to come; for already before Hārūn's death (in March 809), the unity of the Abbāsīd state had been seriously undermined by a series of internal uprisings, most importantly in Khurasan, which urgently required the Caliph's attention.⁴³ Shortly after his death, two of his sons, al-Amīn who controlled Egypt, Syria and Iraq, and al-Ma'mūn with Iran as his power base, began a bitter civil war which threw the Caliphate into a prolonged period of instability.⁴⁴ During the civil war there was more license for war action against Byzantium by virtually independent border commanders. The most important incident occurred in February 811, when an Arab raiding party swept down upon the *Armeniac* capital, Euchaita, killing a large number of troops and carrying off the entire payroll.⁴⁵ The Byzantines had evidently grown lax, and this seems to suggest that that region had been free of invaders for quite some time. Overall, it is clear that after 807 the Arabs did not pose a serious threat to the empire, thereby allowing Nikephoros to concentrate his resources against the Bulgars.

In the west, Charlemagne's imperial pretensions continued to poison the atmosphere between the two states. Several embassies were exchanged, but Nikephoros seems to have maintained a diplomatic ambiguity about the question of Charlemagne's title.⁴⁶ Then, around 806, the Dukes of Venice Obelierius and Beatus, together with the Duke of Jadera (Zara) in Dalmatia, renounced their loyalty to Byzantium and made their submission to the Frankish ruler.⁴⁷ When Charlemagne recognized these regions as his fief under his son Pepin, the emperor retaliated by sending a fleet under the

⁴¹ Theoph., 481.7–12; 482.18–19; Michael Syr., III, 16; al-Tabarī, xxx, 261, 267–268.

⁴² The emperor pledged to pay an annual tribute to the Caliph, but as soon as the Arabs had left imperial territory he broke the agreement; Theoph., 482.1–23; al-Tabarī, xxx, 262–264; Michael Syr., III, 16.

⁴³ Kennedy 1981, 129–130.

⁴⁴ Kennedy 1981, 123–148.

⁴⁵ Theoph., 489.17–21. In response, Nikephoros reportedly deposed and exiled the *strategos* of the *Armeniacs* Leo (the future emperor Leo V).

⁴⁶ ARF, 118; *Annales Fuldenses*, 353; Thorpe, *Lives*, 124; Niavis 1987, 177.

⁴⁷ For the internal power struggles in Venice, which seem to have been directly connected with the shift of allegiance to Charlemagne, see Dandolo, *Chronica*, 128; Classen 1985, 91–93.

command of the *patrikios* Niketas.⁴⁸ The intermittent war that followed culminated early in 810 when Pepin's forces captured several settlements of the Venetian Lagoon, and raided the Dalmatian coast.⁴⁹ His sudden death in July 810 stands out as a turning point. The same year, Nikephoros, who was already planning a large-scale offensive against the Bulgars, seems to have attempted a *rapprochement*.⁵⁰ Before long, a compromise was reached whereby Charlemagne renounced his claims to Venice and Dalmatia. In return, the emperor may have proclaimed his intention of recognizing Charlemagne's imperial title.⁵¹ Negotiations were still going on in 811, but by the time a Frankish embassy arrived at Constantinople to finalize the agreement, Nikephoros had already been killed in Bulgaria.

5.2 BYZANTINE-BULGAR RELATIONS FROM 802 TO 810

5.2.1 *The Collapse of the Avar Qaghanate and the Bulgars*

As we noted in previous chapters, the most important development in the western Balkans in the late eighth century was the destruction of the Avar *qaghanate* at the hands of the Franks. The *ARF* and other western sources report that in 795 and 796, Charlemagne's armies broke into the inner nomadic lands (*Hringum*) and carried off a huge collection of treasure.⁵² Soon Avar power disintegrated, first in civil war and then through the escape of sections of the subject population.⁵³ One such group is said to have fled across the Theiss (Tisza), into the eastern stretches of the Hungarian Plain.⁵⁴ Other former elements of the Avar confederation established defined tribal

⁴⁸ *ARF*, 120–122; Dandolo, *Chronica*, 128–129, 131. The emperor even refused the patriarch Nikephoros permission to dispatch the customary letter of enthronement to the Pope (the *συνοδικό*); see Theoph., 494.22–24. Niketas can perhaps be identified with the *strategos* of Sicily in 797; *Vita Nicetae patric*, 315–317, 325; *PmbZ*, #5424, 5465.

⁴⁹ Dandolo, *Chronica*, 132; *ARF*, 124, 127, 130. According to the *ARF*, a fleet under the *dux* or *praefectus* of Kephallonia, Paul, was operating in the northern Adriatic in 809. This suggests, as has been seen, that during the war Nikephoros created the *theme* of Kephallonia, presumably in order to boost the defence of Dalmatia and Venice; Soustal and Koder 1981, 52–53; Niavis 1987, 74–76 with lit.

⁵⁰ *ARF*, 132 and 5.3 below.

⁵¹ *ARF*, 133–134; *Vita Karoli*, 19–20; see also Grierson 1981, 894–895.

⁵² The last significant Avar resistance gave out in 803. Two years later the *qaghan* submitted to Charlemagne; *ARF*, 98–100; *Annales Einhardi*, 99–101; *Annales Laureshamenses*, 36–37.

⁵³ *ARF*, 118–120; *Annales Einhardi*, 101; Pohl 1988, 318–323; Bowlus 1995, 46–58.

⁵⁴ *Pippinus autem Hunis trans Tizam fluvium fugatis*; *Annales Einhardi*, 99; Garam 1995, 416, 430.

areas in the periphery of the *khanate* (in Transylvania and the grasslands east of the Carpathians), and seem to have worked out some kind of political relationship with the Bulgars.⁵⁵ Thus, in 811 Krum asked them for help against the invading Byzantine army, and is also reported to have secured their support for a determined assault on Constantinople three years later.⁵⁶ Although further research is needed to draw firm conclusions, the archaeological evidence that we possess at present seems to suggest that a number of artefacts comparable to those found on Late Avar sites (belt parts, jewellery, ceramic finds) began to appear in the Lower Danube region in the beginning of the ninth century.⁵⁷ It is conceivable that at least some of them had been collected in the former Avar territory where the Bulgars, taking advantage of the collapse of the *qaghanate*, appear to have been raiding, primarily for booty and slaves.⁵⁸ The tenth-century compilation known as *Suidas* falsely credits Krum with the destruction of the Avar state.⁵⁹ The story probably has its origin in the growing Bulgar involvement in that region in the early 800s. Krum is very likely to have imposed tribute on certain groups settled north or northwest of the *khanate*, but in general, Bulgar expansion in this direction was limited.⁶⁰

In an attempt to explain Krum's remarkable success against Byzantium, it has been suggested that certain nomadic peoples within the Avar confederation who may have been genetically and linguistically related to the Bulgars

⁵⁵ As noted already, the existence of independent power centres in the Carpathian basin in the eighth century is visible in the archaeological record through the accumulation of both equestrian graves and rich finds of gold, neither of which occur very frequently during the Late Avar period; see Daim 2001, 163–164, and above 3.2.3.

⁵⁶ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.43–44; Scriptor incertus, 347.11–12.

⁵⁷ Vážarova 1981, 53–55; Fiedler 1992, 155–156, 173–174, 205, 224; Petrova 2007, 316–318; Ovčarov 1973, 225–236; Rašev 1990, 45–50; Minaeva 1996, 22–23.

⁵⁸ There is some evidence to suggest that from the ninth century onwards, if not earlier, Bulgaria supplied slaves to the Byzantine empire. The distribution of Byzantine iron shackles that may have been used to restrain captives is instructive: with one exception, all specimens dated between the eighth and eleventh centuries came from the *khanate* and the Pontic steppes; see Henning 1992, 416, fig. 8. The existence of slaves in Bulgaria is also attested in the *Responsa* of Pope Nicholas I, ch. xxv, 579.

⁵⁹ *Suidas*, I, 483.29–484.12; Olajos 2002; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 126; Schwarcz 2000, 101.

⁶⁰ To be sure, no indication exists in the archaeological record that under Krum the territory of the Bulgar state stretched as far west as the Tisza River, as is maintained by several scholars, most notably Beševliev 1981a, 235–236 and Koledarov 1979, 32f; see Szalontai 2000, 268–274. The claim made in a much later Hungarian chronicle known as the *Anonymus Belae Regis* (eleventh or twelfth century), according to which a certain *Keanus magnus dux Bulgariae* controlled the land between the Danube and the Theiss up to Poland and Ruthenia, has similarly no basis of fact; Schwarcz 2000, 100–101.

moved east to join the latter on the Lower Danube, bringing new military manpower and increasing the Turkic nomad component in the *khanate*.⁶¹ Besides, as W. Pohl has already pointed out, it would have been impossible to keep up an Avar identity after Avar institutions and the high claims of their tradition had failed.⁶² The common lifestyle (i.e. the semi-nomadic economy and the social institutions it creates), the consciousness of a shared past, real or fictitious, and a strong politico-military leadership were important binding factors, and gradually the newcomers would have been given a place in the ethnic history of the Bulgar confederation.⁶³ Unfortunately, there is no evidence to prove any of this. Even so, there can be no doubt that the *khanate* had been strengthened during this period. It seems that sometime before the beginning of the ninth century, Krum's predecessors, among them Kardam, were finally able to halt the fighting amongst the nomad ruling elite, which provided the Bulgar state with its military strength.⁶⁴ Exactly how this happened remains unclear, though it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it was somehow connected with the disintegration of the Avar confederation, for this is likely have to diverted martial energies away from internal conflict towards profitable aggression on the former Avar territory.

It would be reasonable to suppose that Krum's early career was closely bound up in his role as a leader of this offensive. Whether he had come to power long before 809, when he is first mentioned by Theophanes, and if so, whether he was Kardam's immediate successor, cannot be known.⁶⁵ To be certain, Krum enjoyed a broad range of aristocratic support (arguably much broader than any of his mid and late eighth-century predecessors), even under the most adverse circumstances. This support, it may be surmised, stemmed from his sheer military ability, personal stature and charisma, but also from his own skillful manipulation of force within an elaborate tribal

⁶¹ Koledarov 1979, 11–13, 16–20, 32ff. Although some of the newcomers are very likely to have thought of themselves as Bulgars, there is no evidence to suggest that Krum himself was among them, an idea put forward by I. Boba 1982. For the presence of nomadic warriors of Pontic (i.e. Bulgar) origin in Pannonia, see Pohl 1988, 217–218, 227–228, 268–269; Ziemann 2007, 103ff.

⁶² Pohl 1991, 44.

⁶³ The—often fictitious—ethnic ties between the ruling elite and the newcomers were usually supported by traditional myths and rites; see Golden 1982a, 42–44, 61–62. On the question of change of ethnic identity amongst nomads, a very frequent phenomenon in the world of the Eurasian steppes, see Pohl 1991, 44–45.

⁶⁴ For the political infighting in Bulgaria, see 4.2 above.

⁶⁵ Most scholars place his rise to power *ca.* 803. This is not unlikely, though there is no evidence to prove it. Note here that in 796, Constantine VI called Kardam an “old man” (“γέρον δὲ εἶ”). Nonetheless, the latter could still lead an army into Thrace; Theoph., 470.12–15.

network. Equally important was his ability to monopolize revenues yielded by punitive raids into Byzantine and Avar territories, and distribute them as largesse to the nobility. A statement found in the *Chronicle of 811* which suggests that Nikephoros discovered a large amount of treasure at Pliska, including stocks of metal, clothing and other valuables, is particularly important in this respect.⁶⁶ It confirms that the *khan* had build up a reserve of wealth, on which a political mechanism of patronage and rewards would have been based.

Finally, Krum seems to have initiated significant political and military reforms intended to strengthen the state as a whole. The exact nature of the reforms is deeply obscure, glimpsed only as shadows in the much later *Suidas* lexicon, which provides an—arguably spurious—account of the *khan's* legislative activity.⁶⁷ To be sure, these changes may have been made more urgent because of the increased military pressure placed on the *khanate* by Nikephoros. The latter, one should remember, had set about reorganizing the imperial forces and, particularly, the *theme* system. The degree to which Krum's effort at reform was a response to changes in the wider political and military environment is an essential historical question that, nevertheless, cannot be answered on the basis of the existing evidence.

The rise to power of a charismatic ruler, able to attract considerable followers by the promise of booty, coupled with renewed Byzantine pressure under Nikephoros, may have facilitated the development of the aggressive Bulgar “nationalism” which is clearly traceable in the early ninth century. This aggressive nationalism is mainly reflected in Krum's triumphal inscriptions, which commemorate his victories over the Byzantine emperors and his—ephemeral—conquests of large parts of northern Thrace between 809 and 813 (fig. XIII).⁶⁸ It is also reflected in the promotion of Tangra, the almighty sky-god, with his power reaching out over a heavenly empire to the supreme deity of the ruling elite, a process that may well have been initiated by Krum (and continued by Omurtag) in the early 800s.⁶⁹ The notion of a sacral sanction of political rule not only helped maintain cohesion among the warrior aristocracy during Nikephoros' offensive, but also provided one

⁶⁶ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.18.

⁶⁷ *Suidas*, I, 483.30–484.11. According to this moralizing account, the laws promulgated by Krum dealt, among other things, with procedure for prosecutions, prohibition of viniculture and punishment of thieves; see Browning 1975, 124; Angelov *et al.* 1981, 145–146; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 141.

⁶⁸ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 2, 3a–c, 16–38. In this connection, see also Stepanov 2010a, 32.

⁶⁹ See 2.2.2 above.

of the driving forces behind the remarkable Bulgar counter-attack of the years 811–814.

5.2.2 Nikephoros' Balkan Expansion and the War with Bulgaria

Theophanes provides no information about Thrace, Macedonia or Bulgaria during the first half of Nikephoros' reign. Between 802 and 807, the emperor's priorities lay in the east, although at intervals of Arab pressure he is reported to have taken measures to reinforce imperial authority in central and southern Greece. Thus, he reorganized the political and military administration of the region, and subdued the Peloponnesian Slavs, then repopulated the area with settlers from other parts of the empire.⁷⁰ Nikephoros' first campaign against the Bulgars is placed under the year 807.⁷¹ This was probably prefaced by an attempt to strengthen the Byzantine position along the Balkan frontier. It is plausible to suggest that, as in the *theme* of Hellas to the south, Nikephoros carried out small-scale operations against the Slavs, and repaired local defences. These actions would have provoked a violent Bulgar reaction. Fresh from his victories in the west, Krum may have begun raiding along the frontier, terrorizing the (Slav or Byzantine) population and disrupting communications.

It is against this background that one should see the campaign of 807. Nikephoros' objective was probably to repel the invaders and reinforce Byzantine authority in the Thracian Plain, which may have been targeted by the Bulgar raids. The timing of the operation was carefully chosen: Hārūn was preoccupied in the eastern provinces of the Caliphate, a fact that would have allowed the emperor to deploy some of his Asiatic forces to the Balkans.⁷² Theophanes' account is brief and uninformative. At an unspecified date, the Byzantine army is said to have arrived at Adrianople where Nikephoros learned of a conspiracy against him among certain imperial officers and the *tagmata*.⁷³ The plot was foiled and the conspirators, who are not named, were punished with whipping, exile and confiscation of property.⁷⁴ The expedition was subsequently abandoned. However, after his return to the capital,

⁷⁰ Charanis 1950, 154–155; *DAI*, c. 49.

⁷¹ Theoph., 482.25.

⁷² See 5.1 above.

⁷³ ...καὶ καταλάβων τὴν Ἀδριανούπολιν, στάσεως μελετωμένης κατ' αὐτοῦ ὑπὸ τῶν βασιλικῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τῶν ταγμάτων αἰσθόμενος, ὑπέστρεψεν ἄπρακτος μηδὲν ἀνύσας; Theoph., 482.25–28.

⁷⁴ Theoph., 482.28–29. Treadgold 1988, 147, who believes that the “ὁμόφυλλοι” punished by Nikephoros were his fellow countrymen from Cappadocia, is clearly wrong.

Nikephoros reportedly instructed the *spatharios* Bardanios Anemas to round up and transport to Thrace a large number of settlers from elsewhere.⁷⁵ While some of them may indeed have been brought in from abroad, the vast majority of individuals are likely to have been impoverished civilians from Asia Minor. In fact, Bardanios might have rounded up all those who were not registered in the recently revised tax register.⁷⁶ The colonists, who must have come unwillingly to an unfamiliar and dangerous country, were given land to cultivate, but as Theophanes seems to suggest, they were obliged to pay an annual tax or rent to the state.⁷⁷ It might be assumed, however, that they were exempted from paying other taxes.

This process was continued over the next few years. More colonists were transplanted into the Thracian countryside and the Black Sea coastland, perhaps among them the people of Sission in Cilicia, who according to al-Balādhuri, fled the Caliphate and were resettled in Byzantium between 808 and 810.⁷⁸ It is interesting to note, in this context, that several Thracian bishoprics reappear or are mentioned for the first time in the episcopal lists of the early ninth century (reflecting the situation under the patriarch Nikephoros I).⁷⁹ These include Ainos,⁸⁰ Philippoi, Topeiros,⁸¹ Maroneia, Selymbria,⁸² Tzoida⁸³ and Mesene.⁸⁴ The emergence or re-emergence of these towns, most of which lay along the *Via Egnatia* and the Aegean coast, was undoubtedly associated with Nikephoros' resettlement programme.⁸⁵ The same is probably true of some of the *kastra* known from the proto-bulgarian

⁷⁵ ἀποστείλας δὲ Βαρδάνιον τὸν σπαθάριον, τὸ ἐπικλῆν Ἀνεμᾶν, πάντα προσήλυτον καὶ πάροικον ἐπαιχμαλωτεύσας ἐπέρασεν ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ; Theoph., 482.30–31.

⁷⁶ For the tax register, see 5.1 above; Treadgold 1988, 149–150.

⁷⁷ ... οἰόμενος οὐκ ὀλίγην ὀλκὴν χρυσοῦ πορίσασθαι ἐξ αὐτῶν ἐξ ἐτησίων τελεσμάτων...; Theoph., 482.32–483.1.

⁷⁸ Brooks, *Abbasids*, II, 86. For Sission (mod. Sis), see Hild and Hellenkemper 1990, 413–416.

⁷⁹ Parthey, 162–180; Darrouzès, *Notitiae*, 216–227.

⁸⁰ Modern Enez, on the east bank of the Hebros River near its mouth; Soustal 1991, 170–173.

⁸¹ At the junction of the *Via Egnatia* and the Nestos; Soustal 1991, 480–481.

⁸² Modern Silivri, on the north shore of the Sea of Marmara.

⁸³ Listed as a bishopric in the province of Haimimontos. Its exact location is unknown.

⁸⁴ Modern Misisli, situated between Arkadioupolis and Drizipara; see Asdracha 1988, 238–239.

⁸⁵ Building or rebuilding work dated probably to the early ninth century is detectable at several other sites (for instance, Anaktopolis, Poroi and, further west, Kotor); see Dunn 1999, 405; Curta 2006a, 101.

inscriptions. Konstanteia,⁸⁶ Skoutarion,⁸⁷ Boukelon,⁸⁸ and Versinikia may well have been built or reconstructed during this period. Strategically situated in the central and northern part of the Thracian Plain, these forts would have had a double function: in the first instance they were intended to bar access to the naturally unprotected plain and form around it an elaborate system of defence-in-depth; at the same time they could act as refuges for the population in the countryside in case of an attack. This way the imperial government ensured that the rich agricultural zone stretching from the northern edges of the Thracian Plain in the North to the Aegean coast in the south, and from the Black Sea coast in the east to the eastern slopes of the Rhodope in the west was extensively farmed, producing a great part of the grain that fed Constantinople.

By mid or late 808, the Byzantines had expanded their activities into northwestern Thrace and Macedonia. Nikephoros may have hoped to tighten his hold over the local Slavic tribes—against which the imperial armies had repeatedly campaigned in the 780s and 90s—and advance as far as Serdica, which had apparently remained beyond any direct Byzantine control since the early seventh century. Serdica would continue still deeper inland the series of military bases along the northern stretches of the Thracian Plain (Anchialos, Debeltos, Markellai, Beroe, Konstanteia and Philippoupolis), effectively confining the Bulgars north of the Haimos Mountains. To this end, the Byzantines seem to have operated simultaneously along the Strymon valley and the *Via Militaris*, both of which afforded easy access to the Balkan interior.

The first—obscure—references to a Byzantine operation in that region come from two letters of Theodore of Stoudios, securely dated to 808. In these letters, Theodore, who had earlier written to the emperor asking for an audience, indicates that Nikephoros had departed on an expedition along with his son, Staurakios.⁸⁹ It is almost certain that this campaign was in the

⁸⁶ At the junction of the Hebros and Ardos Rivers in northwestern Thrace. It has been identified with the ruins of a fort at Asara, near present-day Simenovgrad. The fort, which was built in late antiquity but was still in use between the ninth and twelfth centuries, covers an area of 50,000 m². Recent archaeological investigation inside the *kastron* has produced evidence of some building activity dated to the late eighth/early ninth centuries; Soustal 1991, 314; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 2; Aladžov 1995.

⁸⁷ Probably to be identified with mod. Štit, 23 km northwest of Adrianople; Soustal 1991, 448; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 31; Gagova 1995, 240.

⁸⁸ Modern Matočina, about 20 km northwest of Adrianople; Soustal 1991, 222; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 30; Gagova 1995, 154.

⁸⁹ ... ὅσον τὸ μὴ θέλειν τοὺς εὐσεβεῖς ἡμῶν δεσπότης ἐλθεῖν ἡμᾶς κατὰ τὸ σύνηθες, καὶ ἀξιοθῆναι τῆς τιμίας αὐτῶν προσκυνήσεως, καὶ τοὺς προπεμπτικοὺς καὶ εὐκτηρίους, ὡς πάς

Balkans, since the emperor is not known to have personally led an army to the east after 806. The imperial army may have targeted the local Slavonic tribes, though there was probably no dramatic military action to attract Theophanes' attention.

The gradual Byzantine expansion into western Thrace continued over the next few months. Late in 808, an expeditionary force was operating in the Strymon region.⁹⁰ Unfortunately, Theophanes once again omits evidence essential for the understanding of the strategic goals and movements of the Byzantines. He only reports that while the army was receiving its pay, the Bulgars fell suddenly upon it, killing many soldiers and officers, including the *strategos*, and seizing the payroll (some 1100 pounds of gold) along with the army's baggage.⁹¹ The *strategos* in question was probably that of Macedonia, whose territory included the entire length of the Strymon valley.⁹² The force he commanded seems to have been made up of contingents from Asia Minor, for among the dead were senior officers of other *themes*. This could suggest that the Byzantine army was of considerable size. Apart from maintaining pressure on the local Slavs, this operation may have been devoted to constructing or repairing defences, strategically located along the river.⁹³ Indeed, Byzantines soldiers on campaign were involved at times in fortress-building, and it would be reasonable to suppose that the 1100 pounds of gold that were about to be distributed to the troops at the Strymon represented a sort of stipend for their construction work.⁹⁴ Whether open hostilities between Byzantium and the *khanate* had already resumed, remains unclear.

τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὴν ἔξοδον αὐτῶν ἀποδοῦναι λόγους; Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, I, no. 23; ... καὶ οὐκ ἔχομεν λέγειν διὰ τὸ τοὺς κρατοῦντας τὸ νῦν φοσσατεύειν; Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, I, no. 26.

⁹⁰ The Byzantine campaign on the Strymon and Krum's capture of Serdica, although edited together, do not seem to have taken place in quick succession. Since the latter is securely dated to March 809, the former must have taken place no later than January or February of that year. I would agree with Bury 1912, 340 n. 3, who places the campaign to the last months of 808; see also the comments at 1.2.3 (b) above.

⁹¹ Τῷ δ' αὐτῷ ἔτει ρόγας διδομένης τῷ λαῷ ἐν τῷ Στρυμῶνι ἐπιεσόντες οἱ Βούλγαροι ταύτην ἀφείλαντο χρυσίου λίτρας ἀρ' καὶ πολλὴν λαὸν κατέσφαξαν σὺν τῷ στρατηγῷ καὶ τοῖς ἄρχουσιν. ἦσαν γὰρ καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν θεμάτων ταξάτοι ἄρχοντες οὐκ ὀλίγοι, καὶ πάντες ἐκεῖ ἀπώλετο. ἔλαβον δὲ καὶ τὸ τοῦλδον ὅλον καὶ ὑπέστρεψαν; Theoph. 484.29–485.4.

⁹² Certainly, the phrase “τῷ λαῷ ἐν τῷ Στρυμῶνι” should be translated as “the army at Strymon” rather than “the army of Strymon” (the *theme* of Strymon was only created in the mid-ninth century; see 2.4 above).

⁹³ For instance, archaeologists believe that the *kastron* (and later bishopric) of Kaisaroupolis, situated on a hill within the alluvial plain of the Lower Strymon (near the modern site Yilan Kale), was founded in the early ninth century; see Dunn 1990, 327.

⁹⁴ Some inscriptions from the ninth, tenth and early eleventh centuries suggest the involvement of soldiers in building and fortification work; see Haldon 1999, 237.

One thing we can say for certain is that at that particular moment the Byzantines did not anticipate an attack. It may only be assumed that the Bulgars, alarmed by the presence of the *strategos* in the region, had been shadowing the imperial army. Quite possibly, the Byzantines had encamped without due precaution, a fact that would have enabled a mobile Bulgar force to fall suddenly on them. Theophanes reports that many officers, among them the *strategos*, perished at the scene of the attack; it is very likely that they were specifically targeted by the Bulgars. Similar tactics were used against the Byzantines near Pliska in 811, when Krum's forces fell on the imperial camp, killing Nikephoros and many of his senior commanders.⁹⁵ The precise site of the attack is not given by Theophanes. However, an inscription carved on a marble column at Pliska commemorates a Bulgar victory near Serres, on the Lower Strymon.⁹⁶ It may therefore be conjectured that the assault took place in the vicinity of that Byzantine town.⁹⁷

Nikephoros' response is not known. The *Chronographia* only reports that shortly before Easter, Krum captured Serdica, which is said to have been defended by a strong garrison. According to Theophanes, the Bulgars killed nearly all the soldiers, reportedly numbering six thousand, along with an unspecified number of civilians.⁹⁸ Unfortunately, the chronicler fails to explain how and when the Byzantine garrison was stationed in Serdica, and whether its civilians were recently transferred colonists or descendants of the late-antique population of that city. At this point it is worth remembering that Serdica's history between *ca.* 618, when some of its inhabitants are reported to have taken refuge in Thessalonike, and 809 remains obscure.⁹⁹ Although it had disappeared beyond the horizons of Byzantine vision, there is some evidence to suggest that, in fact, it had a continuous history. According to archaeologists, the walls of the city, strengthened by Tiberios I Constantine (578–582) in the end of the sixth century, were still standing after the Avaro-Slav and Bulgar invasions, and continued to be in use until the high Middle

⁹⁵ For these events, see 5.3 below.

⁹⁶ +Πόλεμος τῆς Σέρρας; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 16. The inscription was found in the ruins of the Great Basilica, northeast of the "Inner Town"; Božilov and Gjuzev 1999, 127.

⁹⁷ Serres, some 95 km northeast of Thessalonike, is not mentioned in the eighth- and ninth-century *Notitiae* or in the proceedings of the Council of Nicaea in 787. However, sometime in the second half of the ninth century it was raised into an archbishopric.

⁹⁸ τῷ δ' αὐτῷ ἔτει πρὸ τῆς ἑορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα Κροῦμμος, ὁ τῶν Βουλγάρων ἀρχηγός, παραταξάμενος κατὰ Σερδικῆς ταύτην παρέλαβεν δόλω καὶ λόγῳ στρατεύματα Ῥωμαϊκὰ κατασφάζας χιλιάδας ζ', χωρὶς ἰδιωτικοῦ πλήθους; Theoph., 485.4–7.

⁹⁹ For the refugees of *ca.* 618, see *Miracles of St Demetrius*, I, 200. This is the last reference to Serdica—which was not represented in the Church Councils of 680, 692 or 787—for nearly two hundred years.

Ages.¹⁰⁰ The same is true of the road network, as well as several public and private buildings within the city walls.¹⁰¹ The survival throughout this period of the Church of St Sophia, which lies outside the walls, is another important piece of evidence. The continuous repair and rebuilding work there strongly suggests that a sub-Roman, Christian population had survived in Serdica and its environs in the seventh, eighth and possibly early ninth centuries.¹⁰²

It may only be assumed that shortly after the Bulgar attack on the army at Strymon, the Byzantines, following the main military highway, advanced as far as Serdica—an isolated pocket of sub-Roman culture—where they installed a garrison. Theophanes reports that six thousand troops were in the city at the time of Krum's siege. It looks as if this figure is inflated, although it may include both regular soldiers and elements of the citizen militia. Whatever the case, around March 809 Krum drew up his army before the city. What happened next is unclear. According to the *Chronographia*, the *khan* captured Serdica by “negotiations and deceit”, after which many Byzantines, soldiers and civilians alike, were executed.¹⁰³ Surrounded by what seems to have been a superior force, and suffering from lack of supplies, the Byzantines may have been tricked into making terms with the Bulgars. Theophanes claims that a few days later the emperor refused to grant a promise of immunity to certain officers who had escaped the massacre.¹⁰⁴ If true, the report could suggest that these men had carried out the negotiations with the *khan*. In any case, the latter did not intend to occupy Serdica. Archaeologists believe that a section of its western walls, repaired and patched up with new material by the Bulgars in the ninth or early tenth century, had suffered considerably at the hands of Krum's forces.¹⁰⁵ Thus, although not completely destroyed, Serdica could no longer serve as a safe base for the Byzantine

¹⁰⁰ Stančeva 1968, 373–374; Stančeva 1978, 211–228; Stančeva and Dončeva-Petkova 1979; Bavant 1984, 248; Biernacka-Lubańska 1982, 218–219, 256. Tiberios' repairs are commemorated by an inscription: Beševliev 1964, no. 3.

¹⁰¹ Bavant 1984, 248.

¹⁰² Stančeva 1978, 221; Hoddinott 1975, 271–277; Howard-Johnston 1983, 247–248; Zuckerman 2006, 206. By contrast, Florin Curta (pers. comm.) does not see solid archaeological evidence for a continuity of occupation that would justify Howard-Johnston's and Zuckerman's interpretation.

¹⁰³ Theoph., 485.4–7. An inscription carved on the right side of an ancient altar at Malamirovo in Thrace (about 40 km southeast of Diampolis) commemorates the conquest of several Byzantine towns by Krum, including Serdica; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 2.

¹⁰⁴ ... τοῖς δὲ περισθεῖσιν ἐκ τῆς σφαγῆς ἄρχουσιν αἰτοῦσι λόγον σωτηρίας ἀπαξιώσας δοῦναι, τοῖς ἐχθροῖς προσφυγεῖν ἐβιάσατο, ἐν οἷς ἦν καὶ Εὐμάθιος ὁ σπαθάριος μηχανικῆς ἔμπειρος; Theoph., 485.9–11. The officers, among them the *spatharios* Eumathios, an expert on engines, are said to have subsequently deserted to Bulgaria.

¹⁰⁵ Stančeva 1976, 34–35.

army from which to protect the surrounding countryside and control movement along the main military highway.

Nikephoros reacted at once. On April 3, the Tuesday of Holy Week, he is said to have set out for the Bulgar frontier, accompanied by the *tagmata*.¹⁰⁶ His main objective was to reach Serdica, which he wanted to rebuild and garrison once again. And yet, Theophanes reports that the emperor, presumably before his return to the imperial capital, issued an official communiqué in which he claimed that he had celebrated Easter in Krum's *aule*.¹⁰⁷ The chronicler, who thinks that Krum's seat at Pliska is meant here, accuses Nikephoros of trying to deceive his subjects, since it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to cover that distance (some 350 km) in so short a time.¹⁰⁸ It is, of course, conceivable that the emperor never made such extravagant claims. Nevertheless, it might seem more reasonable to suppose that he was simply trying to extract the maximum political benefit from a relatively minor victory against the Bulgars. In all likelihood, the Byzantines did not capture Pliska but another fortified encampment, conveniently referred to in the communiqué as "Krum's *aule*".¹⁰⁹ This must have been situated in the southwestern part of the *khanate*, not far from Serdica where the imperial army is reported to have eventually arrived. Interestingly, the remains of a quadrangular camp, defended by an earthen rampart, are still visible today some 35 km northeast of Serdica, near the town of Botevgrad.¹¹⁰ In this light, it may be conjectured that the Byzantines conducted a brief retaliatory raid across the Haimos Mountains, and destroyed a military settlement before returning to imperial territory.

Nikephoros marched back to Serdica, which he intended to rebuild by using soldiers' labour. According to Theophanes, the emperor, realizing that orders to reconstruct the city would have been unwelcome to the *tagmata*, tried to appeal to their *esprit de corps* by having their officers persuade them to volunteer.¹¹¹ However, the soldiers, who were unaccustomed to heavy construction work, somehow discovered his intentions and mutinied against

¹⁰⁶ Theoph., 485.7–8.

¹⁰⁷ ὁ δὲ Νικηφόρος πρὸς τῇ πολλῇ ἀδοξίᾳ σάκραις ἐνόρκους τὴν βασιλίδα πόλιν πείθειν ἐσπούδαζεν, ὅτι τὴν τοῦ πάσχα ἑορτὴν ἐν τῇ αὐλῇ τοῦ Κρούμμου ἐώρτασεν; Theoph., 485.12–14.

¹⁰⁸ In 811, Nikephoros seems to have marched from Constantinople to Pliska (with a much larger force) in more than 3 weeks; see the discussion below.

¹⁰⁹ Beševliev 1981a, 139 n. 1; Angelov *et al.* 1981, 314.

¹¹⁰ The fortified encampment is situated a few kilometres north of a ditch defending the narrow pass of Botevgrad on the Haimos Mountains; Rašev 1982a, 57, 59, 199. Wendel 2005, 153.

¹¹¹ Theoph., 485.14–17.

both Nikephoros and their officers.¹¹² They are reported to have torn down the officers' tents, and to have shouted curses at the emperor for his deviousness.¹¹³ Theophanes, whose account is apparently due to an eyewitness, claims that Nikephoros confronted the mutineers and was eventually able to calm them with oaths and promises.¹¹⁴ The following day the army turned back to Constantinople, where the emperor punished the leaders of the mutiny with whipping, tonsure and exile.¹¹⁵

The recent military disasters at the hands of the Bulgars proved the weakness of Byzantium's Balkan defence. The army of Macedonia had been ineffective and, to make matters worse, was now seriously depleted. Without a loyal population of sufficient size to hold the land, this region could not be expected to produce enough revenue to pay for its own defence in the near future. The mutiny of Serdica at the same time had made another point. As a result of the growing Bulgar threat, the Balkans had become an unattractive place of service for the elite guards regiments and, no doubt, the armies of Asia Minor and Anatolia. To overcome these difficulties and make the frontier more secure, Nikephoros ordered the resettlement of that region by *stratiotai* from other *themes* and their entire families.¹¹⁶ According to Theophanes, the transfer began in September 809 and was completed by Easter, March 31, 810. The colonists were compelled to sell their possessions, but in exchange were granted new lands in western Thrace and Macedonia.¹¹⁷ Most of them, it may be inferred, were settled along the Strymon valley, where Byzantine control had been weakened, if not swept away, after 808.¹¹⁸ It is no surprise, therefore, that the transfer proved to be extremely unpopular. Theophanes describes graphically the grief of the *stratiotai*, who were closely attached to their ancestral homes.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, the fact that he speaks

¹¹² Treadgold 1988, 158.

¹¹³ Theoph., 485.17–22.

¹¹⁴ Theoph., 485.22–486.1; Niavis 1987, 65–67.

¹¹⁵ Theoph., 486.1–8. Some of the mutineers were transported to Chrysoupolis in Bithynia. Treadgold 1988, 259, suggests that they may have been assigned to the army of the *Optimatoi*.

¹¹⁶ Τούτω τῷ ἔτει Νικηφόρος μετὰ τὰς ἀθέους ὑπεξελεύσεις τὰ στρατεύματα πάντη ταπεινώσαι σκεψάμενος Χριστιανούς ἀποικίσας ἐκ παντὸς θέματος ἐπὶ τὰς Σκλαυινίας γενέσθαι προσέταξεν, τὰς δὲ τούτων ὑποστάσεις πιπράσκεσθαι; Theoph., 486.10–13.

¹¹⁷ Theoph., 486.17–19.

¹¹⁸ Theoph., 484.29–485.4.

¹¹⁹ ...καὶ ἦν αἰχμαλωσίας οὐκ ἔλαττον τὸ πρᾶγμα, πολλῶν ἐξ ἀνοίαις βλασφημούντων καὶ ἐχθρῶν ἐφόδους αἰτούντων, ἐτέρων δὲ περὶ τοὺς γονικούς τάφους θρηγούντων καὶ τοὺς ἀποθανόντας μακαρίζόντων· εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ καὶ ἀγχόνας ἐχρήσαντο πρὸς ἀπαλλαγὴν τῶν δεινῶν....καὶ πᾶσα τοὺς πάντας εἶχεν ἀμηχανία, τῶν μὲν πενήτων ἐν τούτοις καὶ τοῖς ἐξῆς ρυθισμένοις, τῶν δὲ ὑπερεχόντων συμπασχόντων αὐτοῖς καὶ μὴ δυναμένων βοηθῆσαι ἀπεκδεχόμενοι τε βαρυτέρας συμφορὰς; Theoph., 486.13–22.

only of spiritual suffering is telling: it strongly suggests that the imperial government had taken all the necessary measures to ensure the security and well-being of the settlers.

Protecting particularly vulnerable territories was one way of strengthening the Byzantine position in the Balkans. At about this time, Nikephoros, determined to inflict a humiliating blow on Krum, also set about organizing a major campaign against the Bulgars. This was, undoubtedly, the most important in a series of assaults, which came during a time of Arab pressure in the east, and whose immediate target was the Bulgar heartland, the Dobrudja—with serious consequences for both sides.

5.3 THE CAMPAIGN OF 811

As we have already seen, from an early stage Nikephoros had demonstrated a strong interest in the northern Balkans. A number of military operations against the Bulgars (807, 808/9) are reported in brief uninformative notices by Theophanes, who, however, pays considerable attention to the transfer of military families from Asia Minor to western Thrace and Macedonia between late 809 and early 810.¹²⁰ The colonists were compelled to sell their possessions, but in exchange were granted new lands in a region of vital strategic importance, which Nikephoros had hoped to safeguard against the constant threat of Slav or Bulgar attacks. The measure itself seemed to have been unpopular but effective; the colonists quickly overcame the difficulties of establishing themselves in their new homes, which they only abandoned at the eve of Krum's great offensive in late 812.¹²¹

The two main narrative sources for the Byzantine campaign, the *Chronographia* and the so-called *Chronicle of 811*, say nothing about the Bulgar reaction to the resettlement of the *Sklaviniai*.¹²² A short notice, included in Sabas' *Vita Ioannicii*, offers the only available evidence. Sabas, who drew his information from a larger work, reports that in the ninth year of Nikephoros' reign the Bulgars went forth to ravage Thrace and, in response, the

¹²⁰ Theoph. 486.10–23.

¹²¹ Theoph., 496.5–6.

¹²² A number of additional sources refer in some detail to the campaign, but little historical value can be attributed to them; see for example, Michael Syr., III, 17; *Chronicle of 1234*, 4; 346B–C; Rochow 1991, 297–301. For the tale of the soldier Nicholas, see *Synaxarion CP*, 341–344 (24 Dec.). A similar story is found in the *Vita Nicolai Stud.* (ca. 910–950), 893A–896C; Wortley 1980, 550–555; Kominis 1969, 313–318.

emperor took up arms against them.¹²³ Judging from the fact that it was recorded by Greek sources, this raid must have been on a considerable scale. However, it was probably not an isolated incident. There is every reason to believe that the Bulgars had been raiding into Thrace and Macedonia systematically since late 809 or early 810. Their objective must have been to undermine Byzantine power by devastating the land, harassing the colonists, and reinforcing their own influence over the local Slavs.

There is much that is conjectural in this interpretation. What is certain is that by spring of 811 Nikephoros was already preparing an expedition against the *khanate*. The timing appeared to be right: between 803 and 809 his priorities lay in the east, but the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd and the outbreak of a civil war between his successors in 809 allowed the emperor to switch his attention to the Balkans. The internal divisions had weakened the Caliphate to such an extent that by 811, Byzantine-Arab hostilities had stopped almost entirely. The almost unopposed sack of the capital of the Armeniac *theme*, Euchaita, by an Arab raiding party in February 811 can be explained by the fact that the Byzantines had grown lax, as the *theme* had been free of invaders for quite some time.¹²⁴

Meanwhile, a Frankish-Byzantine *rapprochement* was attempted. Following the sudden death of Pepin in July 810, both sides seemed to have desired reconciliation and a final settlement with regard to the question of Charlemagne's imperial title. Embassies were exchanged, and Nikephoros is said to have made an urgent request for peace.¹²⁵ The emperor had little choice but to make concessions. Although the literary evidence is not very helpful, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he proclaimed his intention of recognizing Charlemagne as *basileus*. In return, the latter renounced his claims to Venice and Dalmatia (autumn of 810).¹²⁶ Military co-operation was not outside the framework of conciliatory developments. According to a plausible conjecture, Nikephoros, who was already planning to deliver a decisive blow to Krum, may have requested Frankish assistance in doing so. Western sources seem to support this hypothesis: the *ARF* reports that directly after the customary general assembly was held at Aachen in spring of 811 (and while negotiations with Byzantium were still going on), Charlemagne sent

¹²³ τῷ οὖν εννάτῳ ἔτει Νικηφόρου τοῦ βασιλέως, οἱ τὸν Λίβρα οἰκοῦντες βάρβαροι Οὔνοι στρατοπεδεύσαντες καθ' ἡμῶν καὶ τὴν Θρακῶν γῆν ἐξελθόντες λεηλατῆσαι, τοῦ βασιλέως αὐτοῦ σὺν πολλοῖς ἀντιπαραταξαμένον καὶ κατὰ κράτος ἠτήσαντος; *Vita Ioannicii B*, 346B.

¹²⁴ Theoph., 489.17–21.

¹²⁵ *ARF*, 132.

¹²⁶ *ARF*, 133–34; *Vita Karoli*, 25, 18.

his armies into three provinces of his empire; one of them went into Pannonia to bring to an end the quarrels between “Huns” (i.e. Avars) and Slavs, an action that would have undoubtedly alarmed the Bulgars who, as noted above, had demonstrated a profound interest in the former Avar territories.¹²⁷ It may not be a coincidence that three years later Leo V sent an embassy to the Franks requesting help against the Bulgars, who were planning an assault on Constantinople.¹²⁸ This may well suggest that Charlemagne had earlier accepted a similar invitation for an anti-Bulgar coalition by Nikephoros.

A further step taken by Nikephoros in preparation for the campaign involved the collection of money. However, the only available report, that of Theophanes, appears to have been tampered with. The chronicler indicates that as he was setting out, the emperor ordered the *general logothetes* to raise the taxes of churches and monasteries, and exact eight years’ arrears from the households of dignitaries—a measure that reportedly caused general protest.¹²⁹ The chronicler claims to have heard the *patrikios* Theodosios Salibaras criticizing Nikephoros for this decision, although, as we have already pointed out, Salibaras was killed in Bulgaria and could therefore not have been the source of the *Chronographia* for the events of July 811.¹³⁰ The exact nature of the new financial measures remains unclear. Earlier the chronicler records the “fourth vexation” of Nikephoros, according to which all remissions granted by Irene were to be cancelled.¹³¹ The term *hopisthoteleias* may thus refer to back taxes long overdue by certain dignitaries, who had been offered tax exemptions by the previous regime.¹³² In any case, it seems unlikely that the emperor would have risked alienating the elite on the eve of such an important campaign, as Theophanes wants us to believe. The author or the editor of the *Chronographia* (the argument applies equally to both) had good reason to place the report of the new taxes immediately before the departure of the imperial army, for this served perfectly the scenario of divine punishment. It thus seems reasonable to think that at least the measures against the

¹²⁷ ARF, 134–135. Note that Nikephoros set out against Bulgaria before the arrival of the delegates dispatched by Charlemagne in autumn 810 (a clear sign that negotiations were still going on), but soon after the Frankish intervention in Pannonia. Interestingly, this was the first Frankish campaign in that region since 803; ARF, 118.

¹²⁸ *Annales Laurissenses minores*, 122; *Annales Hildesheimenses*, 15.

¹²⁹ καὶ τῇ * τοῦ Μαΐου μηνὸς τῆς βασιλίδος ἐξιῶν ἐκέλευσε Νικήτα, πατρικίῳ καὶ γενικῷ λογοθέτῃ, τὰ δημόσια τέλη τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν καὶ μοναστηρίων ἀναβιβάσαι καὶ ὀκτὼ ἐτῶν ὀπισθοτελείας τοὺς τῶν ἀρχόντων ἀπαιτηθῆναι οἴκουσ. καὶ ἦν θρῆνος μέγας; Theoph., 489.25–28.

¹³⁰ See also my comments at 1.1.3 (c) above.

¹³¹ Theoph., 486.28–29.

¹³² Treadgold 1988, 170; Niavis 1987, 97.

dignitaries were taken long before the expedition, and in a way that would not have provoked widespread popular outcry.

So far we have looked at Nikephoros' preparations for the campaign against Bulgaria. Their scale was such as to leave no doubt about the importance he placed on the undertaking. The moment of the attack was carefully chosen: hostilities in the east had stopped, and a *rapprochement* with the Franks had been achieved. At the same time, the emperor had managed to raise the necessary funds without alienating the elite. This brings us to the question of the composition, size and supply of the expeditionary force.

Both sources indicate that Nikephoros assembled a large army, and although the number of troops is not given, the list of dead dignitaries at the end of Theophanes' account seems to verify this suggestion.¹³³ The force was made up of *themes* from Asia Minor, supplemented by troops from the Balkans and the imperial guard units.¹³⁴ Whether the emperor deployed all the *peratic* armies remains unclear. Only one eastern *strategos* is named among the dead—Romanos of the *Anatolics*—though it is not possible to determine which *themes* participated in the expedition on the basis of a selective list of notables killed in Bulgaria. The list indicates that certain units were present (in this case the *Anatolics*), and therefore we may assume that large *thematic* forces were transferred from Asia Minor, especially now that hostilities in the east had stopped almost entirely. A possible exception is the army of the *Armeniakon*, which must have still been recovering from the sack of its headquarters by an Arab raiding party in February 811.¹³⁵ As far as the Balkan armies are concerned, we only know about that of Thrace, whose *strategos* is listed among the dead. Troops from the *theme* of Macedonia may have been called up, although they too had suffered considerable losses at Strymon and Serdica two years earlier. It is possible that they were assigned to keep an eye on the restless Slavs of Macedonia while the invasion was still in progress.

The imperial guard regiments, heavily-armed, well-trained, and more loyal and disciplined than the rest of the troops, made up the core of the expeditionary force and, consequently, seem to have suffered the heaviest blow.¹³⁶ Among the fallen were two of their commanders, the *domestikos of the Exkoubitores* and the *drungarios of the Vigla*, as well as many low-ranking

¹³³ Theoph., 491.4–14.

¹³⁴ ἐπισυνάξας δὲ τὰ στρατεύματα, οὐ μόνον ἐκ Θράκης, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν περατικῶν θεμάτων; Theoph., 490.4–5.

¹³⁵ Theoph., 489.17–21.

¹³⁶ Haldon 1999, 132–133, 232.

officers. Another commander, the *domestikos of the Scholai* Stephanos, barely escaped with his life.¹³⁷

Besides the soldiers of the different *thematic* contingents and the *tagmata*, a number of courtiers and palace officials also accompanied the army; they included the emperor's son Staurakios, his son-in-law (and *curopalates*) Michael Rhangabe, the *magistros* Theoktistos, the *patrikioi* Aetios, Peter, Sisinnios Triphyllios and Theodosios Salibaras, as well as the *Prefect* of Constantinople, whose name we are not told.¹³⁸ Nikephoros also assigned the sons of notables aged fifteen and above to a new *tagma*, the *Hikanatoi*, under the command of Staurakios.¹³⁹ This glittering array of dignitaries strongly suggests that the expedition had a ceremonial aspect. Nikephoros was evidently planning to hold a ceremony rich in symbolism at the Bulgar capital, and wanted these dignitaries present to witness it.¹⁴⁰ Allegedly the emperor also summoned many poor men (*penetas*) armed at their own expense with slings and sticks, but this is clearly part of Theophanes' unjust slander of Nikephoros.¹⁴¹ Indeed, it is inconceivable that an expeditionary force made up of the finest troops available in the empire and led by the emperor himself, would have also relied on destitute peasants.¹⁴² Possibly the author of the *Chronographia* extends here his criticism over a measure introduced earlier by Nikephoros, that made poorer peasants liable for military service by arranging that the village community should cover the cost of their equipment by an annual contribution of 18^{1/2} *nomismata*.¹⁴³

The total number of troops assembled by Nikephoros is not given, though when the *Chronographia* or other narrative sources from the late eighth and

¹³⁷ Theoph., 492.5–7.

¹³⁸ Theoph., 491.4–14. For some of these dignitaries, see 5.1 above. The *Eparch* (or *Prefect*) of Constantinople was one of the three officials who acted on behalf of the emperor during his absence from the capital; *De Cerim.*, I, 503; Mango and Scott 1997, 676 n. 21.

¹³⁹ ... ἄρας μεθ' ἑαυτοῦ Σταυράκιον τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ Μιχαὴλ τὸν γαμβρὸν αὐτοῦ, τὸν καὶ Ῥαγγαβὲ ἐπονομαζόμενον, καὶ πάντας τοὺς πατρικίους καὶ ἄρχοντας καὶ ἀξιωματικούς, καὶ ὅλα τὰ τάγματα, καὶ τῶν ἀρχόντων τὰ τέκνα ἀπὸ δεκαπέντε τυχάνοντα ἐτῶν καὶ ἐπάνω, οὓς καὶ ἐποίησεν ἑταιρείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, ἐπονομάσας αὐτοὺς ἱκανάτους; *Chronicle of 811*, 210.3–8. For the *Hikanatoi* (founded ca. 809), see my comments in 5.1 above. According to the *Synaxarion CP*, 792 (1 Jul.), they were commanded by Peter the *patrikios*.

¹⁴⁰ There is no evidence to support the claim that Nikephoros took these dignitaries along as a security measure after the alleged financial measures against them. The court officials in Theophanes' list were the emperors' closest associates—loyal friends rather than feared enemies.

¹⁴¹ ... πένητάς τε πολλοὺς ἰδίους ὀψωνίους σφενδόνας καὶ ῥάβδοις ὀπλισμένους; Theoph. 490.5–6.

¹⁴² See here *Peri Strategikes*, 15.

¹⁴³ Theoph., 486.23–26.

early ninth centuries record any figures, these must be treated with caution as they range from the fantastic to the entirely plausible.¹⁴⁴ Thus Theophanes reports that in 773 Constantine V marched against the Bulgars with a force of 80,000 men made up of the *themes* and the *tagmata*.¹⁴⁵ This figure seems to be hugely exaggerated, although it has been suggested that it actually reflects the nominal total of the provincial and Constantinopolitan units at the time.¹⁴⁶ For our purposes it would seem more appropriate to rely on later evidence, namely the military treatises of the second half of the tenth century. Indeed, the *De re Militari*, which is concerned with operations against the Bulgars in the Haimos Mountains, and envisages the army as commanded by the emperor himself, as well as the *Praecepta Militaria*, which deals with the problems facing an army invading Arab territory, describe a force of about 18,000–25,000 men.¹⁴⁷ Armies of about this order of magnitude were on a par with those drawn by John I Tzimiskes and Basil II for their grand operations in Syria and the Balkans at a time that has been generally described as the “golden age” of the Byzantine empire.¹⁴⁸ Thus, a somewhat smaller figure must be suggested for the expedition of 811, perhaps a force of about 15,000–20,000, although this was undoubtedly a very large army by the standards of the early ninth century.¹⁴⁹

It entailed a huge logistics effort to provision such an army. The availability of supplies would have placed very clear limits on the size of any force operating on enemy territory. J. Haldon has suggested that a 15,000 man army would require at the very least some 300,000 kilos of provisions for a period of two and, in exceptional cases, three weeks.¹⁵⁰ However, even for a small army to attempt to carry all its supplies with it for more than a few days was almost impossible. Regulations in the *Codex Theodosianus* state that soldiers on the march should carry 20 days’ rations with them, and it seems that once into hostile territory, 20–24 days’ supplies was the standard limit

¹⁴⁴ Haldon 1999, 101.

¹⁴⁵ Theoph., 447.19–21.

¹⁴⁶ Treadgold 1995, 64; Haldon 1999, 102.

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, *De re Militari*, 269, 275. However, it has been suggested that the somewhat smaller figures in the *De velitatione bellica*, 137ff., are more realistic. For the *Praecepta*, see Whittow 1996, 187–193.

¹⁴⁸ Haldon 2001, 98. For the campaign of 995 Basil II supposedly set out for Aleppo with a force estimated at 40,000; for the Arab estimates, see Forsyth 1977, 477ff.

¹⁴⁹ For similar conclusions see Whittow 1996, 181–190 and Haldon 1999, 101–103; see also Nedevev 1977, 122.

¹⁵⁰ Haldon 1997, 125.

before foraging would have become unavoidable.¹⁵¹ It is also worth mentioning in this context that the rate of march of the troops involved restricted both the size and duration of the expedition: a large army was assembled and moved more slowly than a small one (since all the units had to be kept together), while unaccompanied cavalry was considerably faster. Thus Haldon estimates the average length of a day's march for infantry or combined forces to be no more than 12–14 miles.¹⁵²

In turn, local variations in climate, the terrain on which an army operated, as well as the quality of the roads used by it, all affected the rate of march.¹⁵³ It is clear, for instance, that some of the roads close to the Bulgar border, particularly those crossing the Haimos range, were (or had become) little more than paths or tracks, easily blocked by enemy forces or the weather. Thus, the *De re Militari* advises the emperor not to bring a useless crowd or more baggage than is needed into Bulgaria, where “there are very rugged, wooded mountain passes and very narrow roads”.¹⁵⁴ The need for scouts with local knowledge of roads is stressed in the military treatises, and highlights the sheer difficulty of mounting an operation in a context in which local routes and tracks were of poor quality.¹⁵⁵

Nikephoros, then, assembled a highly competent and mobile force, made up of all *tagmata*, most the *themes* of Asia Minor, the army of Thrace and possibly that of Macedonia. It was a force capable of countering the difficulties offered by the rugged terrain as well as the poor condition of roads and tracks in Bulgaria. Once into enemy territory, the Byzantines would have had to rely for their provisions on a relatively small baggage train, and when these supplies were exhausted, on foraging. The available evidence seems to suggest that the imperial army, whose total strength could not have been more than 15,000–20,000 men, could not operate in Bulgaria for more than 2–3 weeks. The march itself (to and from the *khanate*) would take at least

¹⁵¹ *Codex Theodosianus*, c. 7.4.5. Haldon 1997, 124, 132; Engels 1978, 17–18, 20–22; see also Leo, *Tactica*, ix, 1–3; xviii, 36, where the emperor advises generals to forage on enemy territory rather than prey upon the citizens of the empire.

¹⁵² Unaccompanied cavalry can achieve distances up to 40 or 50 miles a day, provided the horses are regularly rested and well watered. Similarly, small units can move much faster than large divisions: distances of up to 30 miles per day for infantry have been recorded, though the average marching speed is 3 miles per hour on even terrain, 2.5 on uneven or broken/hilly ground; Haldon 1999, 164–165; Luttwack 1976, 185; Junkelmann 1990, 84; Nicasie 1998, 37–38.

¹⁵³ For an overview of the road network, see Soustal 1991, 132–146, esp. 139–146.

¹⁵⁴ *De re Militari*, 287–289.

¹⁵⁵ *De velitatione bellica*, 153, 163; *De re Militari*, 291; Const. Porphy., *Treatises*, 90 (B), 116–121 (C), 131, 564–565; Haldon 1999, 53–54.

another 3–4 weeks, as the distance between Constantinople and Pliska is more than 350 km.¹⁵⁶

Oddly, there is disagreement between the various manuscripts of the *Chronographia* about the date of departure of the imperial army from the capital. Almost all Greek manuscripts have “May”, although the numeral indicating the exact date has dropped out.¹⁵⁷ Christ Church, cod. Wake 5 of the late ninth century (one of the two oldest surviving Greek texts) has “June” instead, while in the other manuscript from the same period these pages are missing (Vatic. gr. 155, down to p. 461.10).¹⁵⁸ On the other hand, the Latin translation of Anastasius, based on a Greek manuscript of much better quality than the entire Greek tradition, gives “Iulio mense”.¹⁵⁹ However, it must be noted that the deterioration of the Greek text had taken place much earlier, towards the middle of the ninth century, that is, as soon as it was published, and may be explained by the assumption that the chronicle enjoyed a wide diffusion from the start.¹⁶⁰ Still, the disagreement is rather puzzling. To make things even more complicated, Theophanes reports that the Byzantines only entered Bulgaria on 20 July, just six days before Krum’s final assault, although the *Chronicle of 811* says twice that Nikephoros spent at least fifteen days in the *khanate*.¹⁶¹ In other words, Theophanes’ narrative is too fast (there is a significant gap between the departure and the disaster), as if a film has been speeded up.

It is difficult to determine which reading is correct. In the first place, the date of the catastrophe seems to be firmly established (Saturday, July 26). Certainly, among all the dates given by our sources, that of the defeat is the one least likely to be mistaken. Such was the scale of the disaster that the date was deeply impressed upon the memory of the Byzantines.¹⁶² It can be further suggested that the month of departure from the imperial capital

¹⁵⁶ The precise distance ranges between 350 and 380 km, depending on the route. Dividing this by the average march rate for combined forces (approx. 21 km) gives the total duration of the march, 16–18 days. Of course, this figure could be reduced if the force was divided into smaller units, and if it also marched at night.

¹⁵⁷ καὶ τῆ * τοῦ Μαΐου μηνὸς τῆς βασιλίδος ἐξιὼν...; Theoph. 489.25.

¹⁵⁸ For a partial collation of the Oxford manuscript, corresponding to de Boor’s 461–503, see Wilson 1972, 357–360, esp. 360.

¹⁵⁹ Mango and Scott 1997, xcvi.

¹⁶⁰ Mango and Scott 1997, xcvi.

¹⁶¹ ...εἰσέρχεται εἰς Βουλγαρίαν τῆ κ’ του Ἰουλίου μηνός; Theoph., 490.11–12; γέγονε δὲ ταῦτα τῆ κς’ του Ἰουλίου μηνός; Theoph., 491.16–17; καὶ ποιήσας ἡμέρας ιε’...; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.28, 212.44–45.

¹⁶² Note that the *Chronicle of 811* mistakenly has Saturday, July 23. Obviously, oral tradition had above all preserved the day of the disaster (Saturday).

was May. Despite the fact that the oldest surviving Greek manuscript has “June” and the generally superior Latin translation “Iulio”, May seems to fit better into the context of the expedition and, thus, it should be kept. This would give enough time for Nikephoros to undertake the huge logistic effort of assembling and provisioning the army (which was partly done at Adrianople, where the Balkan and Asiatic contingents met), march to the *khanate*, defeat the Bulgars, sack their capital, and fall, several days later, into the deadly trap. The *Chronographia* speeds these developments up (it speaks only of three days of success and two of indecision), and one might naturally suspect Theophanes of trying to conceal Nikephoros’ successful advance between May and July 26; with this end in mind, the Confessor kept the correct date of departure from Constantinople (May), and invented (or changed) the date of entry into Bulgaria (July 20), without, however, explaining what happened in between.¹⁶³ This was later noticed by a more attentive copyist who tried to fill the gap in the narrative by substituting “May” for “June” or “July”. As this seemed to make more sense, the latter must have thought he was restoring the correct date, although, ironically, he was the one responsible of corrupting it.¹⁶⁴

The Asiatic and Balkan sections of the army probably met at Adrianople, where part of the logistics work was carried out. After spending several days there, the army set out and is next reported to have arrived at Markellai.¹⁶⁵ The Bulgars had every reason to be apprehensive when they first heard that the Byzantine forces were advancing against them. This may also have had something to do with the fact that a Frankish army was still operating in the periphery of the *khanate*. Indeed, it is possible that Krum, who had demonstrated a profound interest in developments in the former *terra Avarorum*, had mobilized part of his troops there. He thus sent an embassy to Markellai to sue for peace in an attempt to prevent the invasion and gain time.¹⁶⁶ However, the emperor, who seemed determined to crush the Bulgars, rejected the offer.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Treadgold 1988, 170 and n. 231, suggests that we are faced with a mistake in the copying of the *Chronographia*, which perhaps should be emended from July 20 (given in letters, that is, κʹ) to 11 (ιʹ).

¹⁶⁴ Once the date was corrupted into “June”, a simple copyist’s error was enough to turn that into “July”. Scholars have tried to explain in many different, though rather unsatisfactory, ways the problem with dates of the campaign; see Bury 1912, 343; *Chronicle of 811*, 238 n. 141, 254 (commentary); Rochow 1991, 297–298; Mango and Scott 1997, 675 n. 8.

¹⁶⁵ Theoph., 490.8.

¹⁶⁶ Κροῦμμος δὲ τὰ πλήθη φοβηθείς, ὄντων αὐτῶν ἐν Μαρκέλλαις, ἤτεῖτο εἰρήνην; Theoph., 490.7–8.

¹⁶⁷ Theoph., 490.8–10.

It is not known how long the Byzantine army remained stationed at Markellai, but it would seem reasonable to suppose that Nikephoros wanted to strike before the enemy regrouped. After turning down the Bulgar overtures, the Byzantines reportedly entered the *khanate* by making several feints across the rugged frontier.¹⁶⁸ Their aim was probably to avoid a concentrated resistance along the Haimos passes. There, in addition to the natural obstacles, the Bulgars had constructed an intricate system of earthworks and palisades, guarded by the local Slavic tribes.¹⁶⁹ If the distant defence was neutralized, the “inner land” (Pliska and the surrounding plain) could be protected by the circumferential fortifications of the capital and—above all—the actions of the mobile Bulgar cavalry.

The Byzantine army was divided into two columns, each of which marched across the frontier by different routes, one column moving directly across the mountains, another perhaps following the coastal route up around the eastern edge of Haimos.¹⁷⁰ The first column may then have been subdivided into several units, each of which could have marched over different mountain passes, one over Vărbitsa, another over Riš, and possibly a third through the pass of Djoula (4, 3, 2 on Map I).¹⁷¹ Although these were highly predictable invasion routes, it appears that the Bulgars did not have the manpower required to oppose a co-ordinated assault from several fronts, especially if part of their army was employed elsewhere.

Divided into small, flexible units, the Byzantines may have hoped to take the enemy by surprise. Indeed, upon the Byzantine entry to the *kleisourai*, the Bulgars are reported to have fled to the mountains, leaving behind only a detachment of a few thousand troops.¹⁷² This, however, may have been a feigned retreat: the *Chronicle of 811* suggests that the Bulgars pretended they

¹⁶⁸ ...καὶ μετὰ πολλὰς περιαγωγὰς δι' ἀβάτων τῶπων ῥιψοκινδύνως ὁ θρασυδείλος εισέρχεται εἰς Βουλγαρίαν τῇ κ' τοῦ Ἰουλίου μηνός; Theoph., 490.10–12.

¹⁶⁹ See 2.4 above.

¹⁷⁰ Hence the remarks about “feints across impassable territory” in Theoph., 490.10–11.

¹⁷¹ The distance from Markellai to Pliska through the Vărbitsa pass is approximately 140 km; through the pass of Riš about 110 km; and through the pass of Djoula, 145 km; see Nedev 1977, 120. If we assume that only the *tagmata* went through the mountains, marching approximately 25 km a day, it can be estimated that it took them at least five days to reach Pliska. However, one must take into consideration the physical obstacles encountered by the army on the way, which may have significantly prolonged the march.

¹⁷² Εἰσερχομένου δὲ αὐτοῦ εἰς τὰς κλεισοῦρας, ἀκούσαντες οἱ Βούλγαροι τὸ πλῆθος τοῦ λαοῦ ὅπερ ἐπεφέροντο, ὡς δῆθεν μὴ δυνάμενοι ἀντιστῆναι, καταλιπόντες πάντα ἅπερ εἶχον, ἔφυγον εἰς τὰς ὄρη; *Chronicle of 811*, 210.8–10. The story of the soldier Nicholas, *Synaxarion CP*, 343–344, provides a verbal parallel (ἀνῆλθον οἱ Βούλγαροι εἰς τὸ ὄρος), which must suggest that its author was drawing from the *Chronicle of 811*. The same source talks about a Bulgar detachment of 15,000 men, a figure greatly inflated.

could not resist, and this seems to be corroborated by developments later in the course of the campaign.¹⁷³ As it was not possible to halt the Byzantine advance towards Pliska, they decided to retreat to the mountains, where they could be safe, and make only a “moderate” attempt to defend their capital. Should that fail, as it was likely to, they would remain hidden until more auspicious circumstances made them hopeful of having another chance to attack the Byzantines.¹⁷⁴

The *khan* sent two armies against the advancing Byzantines, but the *Chronicle of 811* gives only a vague report of these engagements: the first was an elite garrison force of 12,000 men, a number which is certainly exaggerated. Although mounted and well armed (*epilekton enoplismenon*), they were annihilated by the imperial army.¹⁷⁵ Then, according to the same source, Krum dispatched a 50,000-strong relief force, which was also overwhelmed and destroyed.¹⁷⁶ This figure too is grossly inflated, as it reflects neither the historical nor the military nor the economic realities of the world of the Danube Bulgars.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, it is inconceivable that Krum would ever have been able to assemble a force of that magnitude when Byzantium, a militarized state with far greater resources than the *khanate*, could hardly field an army of 15,000–20,000 men for such an important undertaking. It is worth noting at this point that the *Chronicle of 811* does not explain where exactly the two battles were fought: after crossing the *kleisourai*, Nikephoros is reported to have encamped at Krum’s *aule*, where he found the garrison force waiting for him.¹⁷⁸ The two armies must have met at the plain of Pliska, most probably within the central fortified encampment (enclosing an area of about 22 km²), where the superior numbers of the Byzantines, as well as the suitable terrain, offered them an unquestionable strategic advantage over the Bulgars. It has been postulated that following this victory, Nikephoros

¹⁷³ *Chronicle of 811*, 210.9–10.

¹⁷⁴ For a somewhat different interpretation of Krum’s course of action, see Beševliev 1981a, 243–244.

¹⁷⁵ Αὐτός δὲ εἰσελθὼν ἐσκήνωσεν εἰς τὴν αὐλὴν τοῦ πρώτου τῆς Βουλγαρίας, ὀνόματι Κροῦμου, καὶ εὗράν τινα στρατὸν τῶν Βουλγάρων ἐπιλέκτων ἐνωπλισμένον, ἀπομεινάντων πρὸς φυλακὴν τοῦ τόπου, ἕως δώδεκα χιλιάδας συμβαλὼν μετ’ αὐτῶν πόλεμον, πάντας ἀπέκτεινεν; *Chronicle of 811*, 210.10–13.

¹⁷⁶ ὁμοίως δὲ πάλιν καὶ ἄλλας πενήτηνκα χιλιάδας συναντήσαντας αὐτῷ συμπλακεῖς αὐτοῖς, πάντας ἀπώλεσεν; *Chronicle of 811*, 210.13–15. Rašev and Stanilov 1987, 67–68, assumed that the 25 young warriors buried in a mass grave at Kjulevča, in the plain of Pliska, were killed during these engagements. See also Stanev 2008, 55–62. However, a later date (end of ninth century) has also been proposed; see Fiedler 1992, 316–318.

¹⁷⁷ For a discussion, see Sinor 1972, 181–183; Noonan 1992, 124–125; and 2.2.1 above.

¹⁷⁸ *Chronicle of 811*, 210.10–11 (see n. 175 above); Ziemann 2007, 258–263, for the identification of the *aule* with Pliska.

put the population to flight and stormed Krum's palace, killing the relief force that arrived the next day.¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, it would be difficult to imagine that the Byzantines had already established themselves at Pliska when the second engagement took place.¹⁸⁰ A possible solution is that the *Chronicle of 811* refers to two Bulgar armies met by two different Byzantine columns on their march by separate routes to the Bulgar capital. One of them (the largest), made up mainly of lightly-armed Slavs, may have been encountered by the column marching along the coast, while part of the elite force, which was entrusted with the defence of the capital, remained in the environs of Pliska, where the Byzantine forces had been reunited before launching their main assault. Although the size of the Bulgar armies is exaggerated by the author, it is clear that the Byzantine victories were convincing, if not complete. However, the *khan* had not thrown into battle all his available forces; most of the Turkic-Bulgar cavalry had fled with him to the mountains before the enemy arrived at Pliska.

Following his triumph, Nikephoros was able to enter Pliska and install himself at Krum's residence. The hostile account of Theophanes, as well as the rather unreliable Syrian sources, report that in the capital the victorious Byzantines committed a series of atrocities: men, women and children of all ages were put to the sword, as was the livestock.¹⁸¹ However, these written testimonies are not corroborated by archaeological evidence. Excavations at Pliska have revealed a secret underground passage linking the palace and the royal private quarters (close to the northern gate of the "Inner Town"), which probably dates from the period preceding the reign of Omurtag.¹⁸² This was for use when danger was imminent, and in it archaeologists discovered hidden a table set comprising some 50 vessels of fine yellow clay covered with red paint or glaze.¹⁸³ The set was put there hurriedly by the residents of the palace as they were leaving, and this must be taken as an indication that they managed to escape before the Byzantine forces arrived. These findings come to illustrate the account of the *Chronicle of 811* which, unlike the other sources, reports that the Bulgars fled to mountains when the Byzantines crossed the *kleisourai*.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ Treadgold 1988, 171; Niavis 1987, 241.

¹⁸⁰ It is equally unlikely that the Byzantines simply waited outside Pliska for a second force to arrive.

¹⁸¹ Infants were reportedly passed through threshing machines; Michael Syr., III, 17; Bar Hebraeus, 214; Theoph., 490.21–22; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 129.

¹⁸² See my comments in 2.1 above.

¹⁸³ Petrova 2007, 322ff.

¹⁸⁴ *Chronicle of 811*, 210.8–10.

Having made a thorough search of the palace, Nikephoros discovered the *khan's* treasure, on which a political mechanism of financial rewards was partly based. He then proceeded to assign shares in the booty to his troops, although Theophanes claims, unconvincingly, that the emperor kept all the spoils for himself, “amputating the ears or other parts of the body of the Christians who laid hands on them”.¹⁸⁵ The booty included Krum’s stock of metal, clothing and other valuables.¹⁸⁶ The distribution was made according to a register of those participating in the expedition (the term used by the *Chronicle of 811* is “*en katagraphe*”, which most probably refers to a *stratitotikos katalogos* or muster roll).¹⁸⁷ This was an effective way of preventing troops from running off to sack the city and search for spoils, but also of avoiding anger and mutinous response provoked by an unfair distribution of booty. To be sure, the military treatises of the tenth century insist upon the fair distribution of booty in an orderly manner after victory has been secured, but also prescribe severe punishments for acts of indiscipline.¹⁸⁸ Thus, bearing in mind that discipline was indeed enforced by punishment, it may be suggested that Nikephoros did take action against transgressors; however, his financial generosity ensured good order, and generated a high level of morale and self-confidence among his troops. Finally, it must be pointed out that the distribution of Krum’s treasure also had symbolic significance, as it represented the breakdown of his authority, his submission to the emperor, as well as a legitimate change of ownership.¹⁸⁹

This process seems to have taken a few days. In a triumphant mood, Nikephoros is reported to have opened Krum’s cellar and distributed wine to his men.¹⁹⁰ He naturally took special pride in the fact that he had, seemingly,

¹⁸⁵ ... ἐρευνήσας τὰ ταμειῖα αὐτοῦ καὶ εὐρὼν σκύλα πλεῖστα, ἤρξατο διαμερίζειν τῷ λαῷ αὐτοῦ ἐν καταγραφῇ χαλκόν τε καὶ ἐσθητάς καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ εἶδη διάφορα; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.18–20; Theoph., 490.24–26.

¹⁸⁶ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.19–20. In addition, Nikephoros may have discovered Byzantine money, seized during Bulgar raids into imperial territory, or attacks on Byzantine armies such as that operating at Strymon in 808. There is some archaeological evidence to support this hypothesis, namely the significant number of coins of Nikephoros recovered in Bulgaria and Romania; see now Žekova 2000; Sophoulis 2009b; Atanasova 2009.

¹⁸⁷ *Chronicle of 811*, 227–228 (commentary).

¹⁸⁸ Haldon 1999, 204; Dennis 1997, 177–178.

¹⁸⁹ Perhaps this was the reason Nikephoros placed seals and locks on Krum’s treasury, a symbolic act which was intentionally or unintentionally misinterpreted by the author of the *Chronographia*.

¹⁹⁰ ... ἀνοίξας τε τὰς ἀποθήκας τῶν οἴνων αὐτοῦ, δίνεμιε πᾶσι τοῖς αὐτοῦ, ὥστε πειν εἰς κόρον; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.20–21; *Menologion Basilii*, 556B. The sources are clearly exaggerating. Wine may have been distributed, but undoubtedly any excesses would have been severely punished.

conquered all of Bulgaria, and this may well explain what the *Chronicle of 811* describes as an outburst of arrogance on his part.¹⁹¹ At the same time, the emperor sent dispatches to Constantinople reporting the triumph over the Bulgars, which he seems to have attributed to the good fortune and judgment of his son Staurakios.¹⁹² However, these significant gains needed to be consolidated and for this reason Nikephoros announced that he intended to build a city named for himself on the site of the *khan's* residence.¹⁹³ Given that his aim was to eradicate the Bulgar threat, we can safely assume that he was planning to create or rebuild a series military posts in the interior of the Balkan Peninsula.

When the imperial army was ready to leave the Bulgar capital a few days later, Nikephoros ordered Krum's residence and the associated buildings to be burned.¹⁹⁴ Excavations have demonstrated that the destruction was complete: traces of the severe fire have been detected in many different parts of the complex, particularly below the foundations of the new palace which was built over the burned remains of the old one. In one of the burned enclosures, archaeologists found a large number of pots that bore signs of Slav tradition, as well as fine grey polished pottery destroyed by the fire.¹⁹⁵ The debris of the building material was thrown out in a dump into the outer city, where it was found by archaeologists, covered by a thick layer of ash.¹⁹⁶ To be sure, the sack of the Bulgar capital seems to have generated a strong belief among the Byzantines that their victory was complete and irreversible. Krum's desperate appeal to the emperor to take everything he desired and depart in peace must have boosted their self-confidence even further.¹⁹⁷ Thus, according to Theophanes, the emperor refused to listen and came hurriedly out of Pliska. This notice is not corroborated by the *Chronicle of 811*, and it is tempting to reject it as yet another fabrication of the author of the *Chronographia*, who

¹⁹¹ Λοιπὸν οὖν ἐπαρθεῖς τῷ φρονήματι καὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ ὁ ταλαίπωρος, ὡς ἤδη διὰ τὰς δικαιοσύνας αὐτοῦ τοῦτο πεπονηκῶς—ὃ δὴ καὶ ἔλεγε πρὸς τοὺς σὺν αὐτῷ ὄντας· “Ἴδού”, ἔφη, “ἡ δικαιοσύνη τὴ κατεργάζεται”; *Chronicle of 811*, 210.15–212.18; Prinzing 2007, 242–243.

¹⁹² Theoph., 491.19–20. According to Beševliev 1981c, 143 n. 21, the exaggerated figures of the Bulgar forces come from a war-bulletin sent to the capital after these victories.

¹⁹³ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.21–24.

¹⁹⁴ Theoph., 490.26–27; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.24–26.

¹⁹⁵ Rašev 1983, 261–262; Mihajlov 1955, 176–177; Stančev 1964b, 29–30. Most large stone blocks were dug out of the foundations and used for the reconstruction of the *khan's* residence. For the traces of fire on the tower guarding the western gate of the wall around the new residence, see Mihajlov 1974, 221.

¹⁹⁶ Mijatev 1940–1942, 133; Stančev 1964b 29–30.

¹⁹⁷ ... ἐκείνου σφόδρα ταπεινουμένου καὶ δηλοῦντος, ὅτι “ἰδού, νενίκησας, λάβε οὖν, εἴ τι σοι ἀρεστόν ἐστιν, καὶ ἔξελθε ἐν εἰρήνῃ”; Theoph., 490.28–29.

is trying to blame the Bulgar debacle on divine punishment for Nikephoros' arrogance. Still, unwise though it is to trust this uncorroborated testimony, it is worth doing so in this case since there is nothing else to go on.

Undoubtedly Krum's overtures were not sincere. They must have been part of a specific course of action targeted at making the Byzantines believe that they had inflicted such a severe blow on the resources and infrastructure of the *khanate* that its central authority had already collapsed. These successes had grossly boosted the confidence of the imperial army, which could now continue its operations in Bulgaria (perhaps in pursuit of the *khan*), or march back to Byzantine territory without threat of an attack. Thus Krum's appeal must have also been designed to delay the departure of the Byzantine forces from Pliska, for this would have enabled the *khan* to gain time and provide an effective military response. For the time being, he would remain hidden in the surrounding mountains, where he could carefully observe the movements of the Byzantines. Then, he might hope to trap the imperial forces along the route by hurriedly building a barricade across the mouth of a narrow defile, and destroy them by making a surprise attack on their camp.

If intelligence gathering was a key prerequisite for the successful implementation of this plan, the reorganization of the, no doubt seriously depleted, Bulgar army was an equally important factor. The sources that describe these events indicate that Krum sought armed assistance from his Slav and Avar neighbours. These reinforcements are likely to have decisively shifted the balance of war in Krum's favour, but what needs to be stressed in this context is that, despite the successive defeats at the hands of the enemy and the capture of Pliska, the basic government (i.e. administrative, military, diplomatic) apparatus continued to operate. This is in sharp contrast to other contemporary or near contemporary nomadic states, most notably the Avar confederation and the Khazar *qaghanate*, which embarked on a period of violent disintegration after the sack of their capital. To be sure, Pliska, the seat of the *khan* and central urban settlement, was not essential to the survival of the Bulgar state. This is a strong indication that the Bulgar aristocracy in the early ninth century—as opposed to the largely sedentarized Avar and Khazar elites of the eighth and tenth centuries respectively—had retained its steppe-nomad character, skills and ideology. In these “traditional”, so to speak, nomadic societies, central to the formation and survival of any political structure was the figure of the *khan* who personified the state; his power was purely personal and stemmed, as noted already, from his own skillful manipulation of force within the tribal system, and his ability to attract followers with the prestige and booty gained through military

successes.¹⁹⁸ It should also be remembered that in such societies, an external threat would often bring about a higher degree of “supra-tribal” unity and cohesion, a point illustrated most clearly by Constantine V’s vain attempt to conquer Bulgaria in the third quarter of the eighth century.¹⁹⁹ It has always been possible, then, when led by a charismatic ruler, for a nomadic state to survive the fall of its capital and loss of its wealth.²⁰⁰ Krum’s escape effectively guaranteed the survival of Bulgar political structure and central authority, as long as enough members of the ruling class continued to support their *khan*. The preparation and execution of Krum’s elaborate stratagem clearly indicates that they did.

After turning down Krum’s overtures, Nikephoros came hastily out of Pliska, which now lay in ruins. Our sources report that he intended to reach Serdica, and although several scholars came to think that he was, in fact, heading back to Constantinople, this notice may be kept.²⁰¹ The emperor was probably planning to rebuild Serdica, a task that had remained unfinished since his last visit to that city in 809.²⁰² If the Bulgar assault took place in the plain of Pliska, as the evidence seems to suggest, the Byzantines must have started marching in a SW–W direction; they may have hoped to cross the Haimos Mountains, perhaps through the pass of Värbitsa, and then follow the main road connecting the coast with Serdica.²⁰³ The duration of the march itself cannot have been more than a week. It may be surmised, then, that the imperial army set out from the Bulgar capital around July 20.

The *Chronicle of 811*, our principle source for the final stage of the campaign, relates that the Byzantines pillaged the land systematically as they went. A Bulgar inscription found not far away from the Thracian border confirms this claim.²⁰⁴ Settlements and the still unharvested land were torched, while the livestock was slaughtered or hamstringed. The author ascribes all this to the fact that discipline among the imperial army had become lax, but he is

¹⁹⁸ Krader 1979, 228; Barfield 1989, 5–6; Mori 1981, 47–75.

¹⁹⁹ Barfield 1989, 7; Khazanov 1984, 208–222.

²⁰⁰ Khazanov 1984, 231–232.

²⁰¹ Καὶ λοιπὸν μηκέτι φροντίσας τοῦ ἐξελεθεῖν διὰ τάχους, διήρχετο διὰ μέσου τῆς Βουλγαρίας, βουλόμενος ἀπελθεῖν ἕως Σερδικῆς, νομίσας ὅτι ἐξήλειπεν πᾶσαν τὴν Βουλγαρίαν; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.26–28; Nedev 1977, 125; Korres 1995–1996, 181–184.

²⁰² For these events, see 5.2.2 above.

²⁰³ The latter was a route running parallel and between the Haimos and Sredna Gora mountain chains (see Map I).

²⁰⁴ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.34–38. The relevant part of the long inscription from Malamirovo reads: ... {τ} ὄπου ἐ[ξ]ῆλθε(ν μὲ) τὸν ὄλον λαὸν κὲ ἔκα(α)ψ(εν τὰ) χορήα ἡμῶ{ν} α[ὐ]τὸ(ς) ὁ γέρον ὁ βασιλεὺς[ς] ὁ φαρακλὸς [κ] ἐ ἐπῆρεν ὄλα κὲ τοὺς ὄρκους ἐλησιμόνησεν κὲ ἐξ[ῆ]λθεν ἐπὶ (αὐτὸν) ὁ ἄρχον {ὁ ἄ} ὁ Κρο[ῦ]μος πρὸς [τ]ὸ πολ(εμῆσε) ...; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 2.

clearly mistaken. As Krum was still alive, it was the emperor's intention to inflict the greatest possible scale of destruction on the land. In other nomadic societies of Eurasia this would be taken as a sign that the ruler had lost his divine mandate and ability to distribute good fortune to his subjects (*ulug*), and it is not implausible to posit a similar kind of connection in Bulgaria.²⁰⁵ Nikephoros may have thus hoped to either incite an uprising against Krum or force the *khan* to come out and engage in battle.

Despite all the destruction there was still no sign of the enemy. The rather relaxed march across the *khanate*, and the lack of any sort of military reaction from the Bulgars immeasurably strengthened the belief that victory had already been achieved. Peace in the east, and the presence of Frankish forces close to the northwest border of the *khanate* (the army dispatched by Charlemagne in Pannonia was still operating in July) added a greater sense of security to the over-confident Byzantines. At that point, one may venture to suggest, a number of senior commanders, including Staurakios, tried to persuade the emperor to cut short the campaign, convinced that this was brought to a successful conclusion with the sack of Pliska.²⁰⁶ Tensions may have temporarily risen high, yet it is unlikely that they ever developed into a serious argument, as the *Chronicle of 811* would have us believe.²⁰⁷ The report that Nikephoros started behaving in an awkward fashion, refusing to issue any orders or leave his tent, is likewise far-fetched.²⁰⁸ Keeping one's distance was something expected from an emperor, particularly a strict disciplinarian like Nikephoros, but this may have come as a complaint after the disaster. Certainly, the emperor stayed firmly attached to his plans, even though some of his associates might have thought otherwise. Similarly, the claims made by the *Chronicle of 811* that some troops grasped the opportunity to desert should be dismissed. Nikephoros might have instructed some columns to disperse in order to expand their destructive work, and some soldiers may have seized the chance to forage for supplies or collect booty, but this was

²⁰⁵ In these cases, the *qaghan/khan* would usually be overthrown or killed; Golden 1992, 240.

²⁰⁶ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.32–33.

²⁰⁷ Nikephoros is even reported to have tried to hit his son when the latter came to persuade him to come out of his tent; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.33–34.

²⁰⁸ Καὶ πόησας ἡμέρας ἰε΄ ἠλόγησε τῶν κατ' αὐτοῦ πραγμάτων παντελῶς καὶ τραπεὶς τὰς φρένας καὶ δίκην ἐξεστηκότος γεγονῶς, οὐκ ἔτι ἦν ἐν ἑαυτῷ, ἀλλ' ἦν πεφυρμένος διὰ παντός, κατεχόμενος τῷ καιρῷ τῆς ἀλλαγνοείας, καὶ μὴ ἐξερχόμενος ἐκ τῆς σκηνῆς αὐτοῦ, μηδὲ διδοῦς τινι λόγον ἢ διαταγὴν; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.28–32.

done on a minimal scale and did not affect the *esprit de corps* and confidence of the expeditionary force.²⁰⁹

The army continued marching in a southwesterly direction until it entered one of the valleys that lay between Pliska and the northern slopes of the Haimos Mountains. The order was given to halt, and a camp was hastily set up. Surrounded by hills, the site was exposed to attack from above and the flanks, although a river that ran a winding course through the valley, possibly the Tiča, afforded a good supply of water. A number of Byzantine military treatises describe in detail the standard marching camp layout. The imperial tent, or *bassilikon phossaton*, was customarily pitched in the middle of the encampment, with the *tagmata* and the supreme commanders around it within this central section, while the various *thematic* units were stationed further away, at some distance one from another. However, in this case it appears that not all normal arrangements were put into practice: although the imperial guard regiments and the supreme commanders were indeed encamped around the emperor, it is by no means certain that the imperial party was established at the centre of the camp, and that inner and outer perimeters were marked out.²¹⁰ Moreover, it is evident from the sources that insufficient attention had been paid to patrolling the site. This could hardly be called an organized marching camp, but as the enemy had already been defeated, the over-confident Byzantines felt that no precaution was necessary.

Meanwhile, scouts had been sent to conduct reconnaissance, and they reported that a palisade blocked one of the defiles lying further away.²¹¹ A ditch was dug on the southern side (facing Thrace), from which an enemy attack was always expected.²¹² The emperor decided that no action was necessary, for he was tricked into believing that this was the inner side of a defensive installation designed to prevent access to (rather than deny exit

²⁰⁹ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.38–40. Deserting from the army cannot have been easy. Mango 1983, 401, 403–404, has suggested that St Ioannikios was a deserter who went into hiding because he feared arrest, and that for this reason no abbot in the area of Mount Olympos was willing to bestow the tonsure on him.

²¹⁰ The usual arrangement was to have the infantry around the outer perimeter; within the infantry formation the cavalry and their horses were stationed; at the centre, the emperor and the various elite units encamped around him; Haldon 1999, 152–154, 211; *Praecepta Militaria*, 55–57, 348–352; *De re Militari*, 247–261, 333–335 (including diagrams); Maurice, *Strategikon*, xii. B 22; xii C.

²¹¹ For scouts and spies in Byzantine expeditions, see Maurice, *Strategikon*, x 3; xii B 22; for later references, see McGeer 1990, 331–332, 211–212, 300–302; Haldon 1999, 155, 163.

²¹² Concerning the side of the embankment on which a ditch was normally erected, see the comments of Fiedler 2008, 163, 167. For a different interpretation, see Squatriti 2005, 68–69.

from) the *khanate*.²¹³ The imperial forces had managed to overcome similar obstacles on their inward march, and may have expected to encounter others on the way back. Had the Byzantines realized they were marching into a trap, they would have kept alert and on their guard; yet, the manner of the defeat, particularly the failure to establish a proper camp, strongly suggests that they did not feel threatened by the discovery of the palisade.

There is much that is conjectural in this interpretation. Two things, however, are certain. Firstly, at the end of the valley, across the mouth of a narrow defile, the Bulgars had constructed a wooden palisade. It was thick and sound, for the Byzantine cavalry could not penetrate it, while the ditch that lay on its outer side was deep enough to kill anyone who could manage to clamber over the fence and fall into it.²¹⁴ Part of the defensive system is likely have been erected at an earlier stage; but one can put forward the hypothesis that the wall itself was constructed hurriedly right before the Bulgar attack—a task that would have required considerable control over both manpower and resources.

Secondly, besides his regular army, Krum now had Slav and Avar troops at his disposal.²¹⁵ The Slavs of the “surrounding *Sklaviniai*” should not be confused with the Moesian Slavs who were subjugated by Asparuch and were subsequently settled on the periphery of his realm, as guardians of the frontier.²¹⁶ Instead, they must have been among the Avar dependents who after 626 were able to break away from the *qaghan*’s authority to establish defined tribal areas in the inner Balkans.²¹⁷ Much of the same is true of the “Avars”: they were the remnants of a Turko-Mongolic people, the dominant group of the Avar federation who now dwelt in the vicinity of the *khanate*—in parts of Pannonia, Transylvania and the grasslands east of the Carpathians.²¹⁸ To be certain, thanks to the assistance provided by his allies, the *khan* was able to put together a small, mobile force of a few thousand men.²¹⁹

Events were now approaching a climax. Despite the discovery of the palisade, no action seems to have been taken against a possible assault on the

²¹³ Stanev 2007, 1–4. Nikephoros’ words upon the discovery of the palisade (“κᾶν περωτοὶ γενόμεθα, μηδεὶς ἐλπίσοι διαφυγεῖν τὸν ὄλεθρον”) are patently untrue; Theoph., 490.33–34.

²¹⁴ *Chronicle of 811*, 214.58–69.

²¹⁵ ...μισθωσάμενοι Ἀβάρους καὶ τὰς πέριξ Σκλαβηνίας; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.43–44; ... καὶ τὰ ὄμορα μισθωσάμενοι ἔθνη...; *Vita Ioannicii B* (Sabas), 346B.

²¹⁶ Obolensky 1971, 64–65.

²¹⁷ See the discussion in 3.2.3 and 3.2.4.

²¹⁸ Pohl 1988, 320–324.

²¹⁹ According to the *Chronicle of 811*, 212.44, Krum even mobilized women in his army: ... καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας ἀνδρικῶς καθοπλίσαντες; Georgieva 1996, 110.

camp. This may simply suggest that the Bulgars attacked immediately, in which case the report that a panicked Byzantine army awaited developments for two days must be discounted.²²⁰ It would also be ingenuous to believe that a few hours before the attack everyone in the imperial camp was unnerved by the tumult of Bulgar armed contingents.²²¹ If this was true, we might have expected the Byzantines to have been on their guard; and yet, when the assault was finally launched most were still asleep.

Shortly before dawn on Saturday July 26, the Bulgars fell suddenly upon Nikephoros' camp, which scouts in the hills had clearly identified. By targeting the enemy's leadership, the assailants may have hoped to demoralize the Byzantine troops, and throw the entire camp into chaos and confusion.²²² Indeed, as the Bulgar troops rapidly penetrated the undefended camp, the imperial party was taken completely by surprise (some were just waking up, others were still asleep).²²³ In any event, it seems that there was not much they could do. They armed hastily in a brief and disorganized resistance, but were soon overcome and finally massacred. The slaughter was relentless and Nikephoros, along with most of his closest advisors, was among the fallen.²²⁴ There is enough evidence to suggest that the imperial *tagmata* stood by the emperor and paid a heavy price for it; two commanders, the *domestikos of the Exkoubitores* and the *drungarios of the Vigla*, as well as many low-ranking officers perished at the scene of the attack. The rest of the imperial party, including the *domestikos of the Scholai*, Stephanos, the *magistros* Theoktistos, Michael Rhangabe and Staurakios, who was gravely wounded, abandoned the camp, took to their horses and fled.²²⁵ News of the emperor's death prompted the *thematic* soldiers, who were not faced with an attack, to join the flight as well. Thus, the panic-stricken Byzantines scattered in different directions.

²²⁰ Theoph., 490.34–491.3.

²²¹ Theoph., 491.1–3.

²²² For similar surprise attacks against the Byzantines in 789 and 808, see Theoph., 463.28–464.2 and 484.129–485.4. In both cases, the heaviest blow was inflicted on the Byzantine commanders, against whom the main attacks were apparently directed.

²²³ ... ἐπέπεσον αὐτοῖς ἔτι κοιμωμένοις σχεδόν; *Chronicle of 811*, 212.44–214.45.

²²⁴ ... ἐπελθόντες οἱ βάρβαροι κατὰ τῆς Νικηφόρου σκηπῆς καὶ τῶν σὺν αὐτῷ μεγιστάνων ἀναιρουσὶ τοῦτον οἰκτρῶς, ἐν οἷς ἦν καὶ Αἰτίος πατρίκιος, καὶ Πέτρος πατρίκιος, καὶ Σισίνιος πατρίκιος ὁ Τριφύλλης, καὶ Θεοδόσιος πατρίκιος ὁ Σαλιβαράς, ὁ πολλὰ λυπήσας καὶ κακὰ ἐνδειξάμενος τῆ μακαρίᾳ Εἰρήνῃ, καὶ ὁ ἔπαρχος πατρίκιος, καὶ Ῥωμανὸς, πατρίκιος καὶ στρατηγὸς τῶν ἀνατολικῶν, καὶ ἕτεροι πολλοὶ πρωτοσπαθάριοι καὶ σπαθάριοι, καὶ τῶν ταγματῶν οἱ ἄρχοντες, ὁ τε τοῦ ἐκσκουβίτου δομέστικος, καὶ ὁ δρουγγάριος τῆς βασιλικῆς βίγλας, καὶ ὁ τῆς Θράκης στρατηγὸς, καὶ πολλοὶ ἄρχοντες τῶν θεμάτων σὺν ἀπείροις λαοῖς, πᾶσά τε ἡ τῶν Χριστιανῶν καλλονὴ διεφθάρη; Theoph., 491.4–14.

²²⁵ Theoph., 492.2–6; *Chronicle of 811*, 216.47–50, 214.79–216.81.

The flight is graphically described by the *Chronicle of 811*:²²⁶ with Bulgar soldiers in their midst cutting down those they could reach, the whole army rapidly disintegrated. In a frenzy, the Byzantines, who had encamped along one side of the valley, tried to ride across the river that ran through it, but those in front sank into the marshy banks, while those immediately behind tumbled in on top. As the fugitives were coming in waves, the river was soon filled up with men and horses, so that eventually the rest of the Byzantine soldiers and many of the Bulgars who were pursuing them, were able to pass safely over them. Nonetheless, many dignitaries perished in the marshy river.²²⁷

After crossing the river, the surviving Byzantines thought that their route was finally open, but then they reached the large wooden palisade on the other side of the valley. Some had evidently managed to ride across the river and now tried to make a breach in the logs with their horses, but in vain. They dismounted and clambered over the wall, throwing themselves violently into the deep ditch on its outer side. Some died instantly, others suffered serious injuries, and being unable to walk away, died from thirst and starvation. In despair, the Byzantines set fire to parts of the wall, and when sections of it began to collapse across the ditch, they rode onto them. However, while the refugees were still crossing it in waves, the ropes that tied the timbers together were loosened by the fire and plunged men and horses into the blazing ditch. This seems to have completed the disaster.

The Byzantines had miscalculated the situation. The leadership had allowed the troops to become grossly over-confident about their successes and therefore nobody seems to have anticipated a Bulgar assault, even when the palisade was discovered. However, perfect confidence is one thing and lack of discipline another; discipline may have been relaxed among some *thematic* units during the march, yet the “core” *thematic* contingents, and particularly the *tagmata*, had maintained an *esprit de corps*, as demonstrated by the fact that the latter stood by the emperor. Being over-confident, the Byzantines failed to establish a secure camp, but had the basic precautions been taken they would clearly have been able to resist the Bulgar attack.

The Byzantine defeat has been described as a disgraceful rout under terrible circumstances. The imperial retinue and the *tagmata*, which were targeted and attacked first, suffered heavy casualties. This is attested by the list of the dead dignitaries which, besides the emperor, includes the *patrikioi*

²²⁶ *Chronicle of 811*, 214.50–69, 239–241; Beševliev 1981a, 245–246; Haldon 2001, 73–75.

²²⁷ Ἐκεῖ οὖν πάντες οἱ πατρίκιοι καὶ λοιποὶ ἄρχοντες πεπτώκασιν; *Chronicle of 811*, 214.57–58.

Aetios, Peter, Theodosios Salibaras and Sisinnios Triphyllios, the Prefect of Constantinople and two commanders of the *tagmata*.²²⁸ Many lower-ranking dignitaries and officers, as well as ordinary soldiers of the imperial guard, were among the fallen, while it seems that the young notables of the *Hikanatoi* were particularly hard hit.²²⁹ By contrast, only two *theme* commanders are named among the dead, Romanos of the *Anatolics* and the *strategos* of Thrace.²³⁰ To be sure, as the numerically inferior Bulgar forces centered their assault on the imperial camp, some of the *thematic* troops stationed further away might have been able to ride out of harm's way.²³¹ But although many managed to make good their escape, large numbers clearly perished, and the slaughter was immense.²³² Unfortunately, there is no reliable evidence as to whether Byzantine soldiers were taken alive by the Bulgars. The *Chronicle of 811* refers to prisoners of war put to death in a brutal fashion for refusing to denounce their faith, but this report appears to be based on a popular legend that came into existence shortly after the disaster of 811.²³³

One question that still remains unanswered concerns the site of the disaster.²³⁴ While there can be no doubt that the wooden barricade was built across the mouth of a pass, the account of the *Chronicle of 811* makes it abundantly clear that the Byzantines had set up their camp in a valley, some distance

²²⁸ Theoph., 491.4–14. The *Synaxarion CP*, 791, contains a highly unlikely account of a certain Peter, *patrikios* and commander of the *Hikanatoi*, who was taken prisoner by the Bulgars along with fifty other dignitaries, miraculously escaped, and lived on incognito as a monk next to St Ioannikios; see Wortley 1980, 558–560; Mango and Scott 1997, lx and 658 n. 4.

²²⁹ Τά δὲ τέκνα τῶν ἀρχόντων, ἀρχαίων τε καὶ νέων, εἰς πλήθος ὄντα...πάντες ἐκεῖ ἀπέθανον; *Chronicle of 811*, 214.70–77.

²³⁰ Theoph., 491.4–14.

²³¹ The *Synaxarion CP*, 835–837, indicates that those who escaped to the forests and mountains were saved.

²³² This is also illustrated by the fact that upon his accession, Michael I donated five talents of gold to the widows of the *thematic* soldiers killed in Bulgaria; Theoph., 494.3–4.

²³³ *Chronicle of 811*, 216.81–86. In this connection, it is worth emphasizing that although there is some evidence to suggest that the practice of drinking from a human skull was common among some Eurasian nomads, the story reported by Theophanes, 491.17–22 (i.e. that Krum turned Nikephoros' skull into a cup and made the archons of the *Sklaviniai* drink from it) seems far-fetched and should probably be rejected as fictitious. For a discussion, see Beševliev 1962, 20–21; Sinor 1993, 447–452; Wortley 1980, 541–542; more recently, Nikolov 2009, suggested that the tale of Nikephoros' skull originated in ecclesiastical or monastic circles opposing the emperor.

²³⁴ Most scholars agree that the final battle was fought in a narrow defile on the Haimos mountains. For the pass of Vărbitsa: *Chronicle of 811*, 251 (commentary); Bury 1912, 344; Runciman 1930, 57; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 129. Pass of Riš (Verégava): Beševliev 1981a, 247; Beševliev 1981c, 150. Pass of Veselinovo: Nedev 1977, 123; see also Dermendžiev 2003, 401–407, for a location near the Jantra and Rositsa Rivers. On the other hand, Draganov-Vassiliev 1993, 187–189, believes that the site of the attack was nearer to Pliska.

from the defile which was not visible from the encampment.²³⁵ A fragment of an inscription found at the palace of Pliska commemorates a Bulgar victory at the River Tiča (Kamčija), and it has been thought that it actually refers to the battle of July 26.²³⁶ In any case, it would be hard to imagine that the Bulgar triumph was only commemorated by a mere inscription; something “grand” would have been expected. Another inscription, discovered at the village of Khan Krum (former Čatalar, Šumen distr.), can perhaps provide an answer. It was carved on a tall marble column by order of Omurtag on the occasion of the construction of an *aule* and a bridge on the Tiča.²³⁷ Initially scholars had associated this inscription with the founding of Preslav, which lies only 8 km north of Čatalar, although it has been pointed out that because of its size (over 6 metres) the column could not have been removed from its original position without being broken into pieces.²³⁸ Then, excavations near the site where the column was discovered, at the right bank of the Tiča, some 2 km south of Čatalar, brought into light a fortified settlement, which can safely be identified with the *aule* of the inscription. The architecture of the *aule* of Omurtag, as it subsequently became known, is very similar to that of Pliska, the main resemblance lying in the fact that we have here an outer earthen fortification, though in a far smaller scale than that of Pliska (515 × 405 metres), and an inner stone fortress measuring 113 × 93 metres (fig. IX).²³⁹ In the inner fortress the remains of a number of buildings made of large, well-hewn stone blocks, including a bath with hypocaust heating, suggest that this was not simply a military camp but a small fortified palace.²⁴⁰ Two fragments of a marble statue of a lion have been discovered inside the

²³⁵ Thus after the Bulgar assault, those trying to escape galloped forward with their horses without seeing the river and the fence which lay further away. This was clearly a wide valley; *Chronicle of 811*, 214.56–60; McGeer 1990, 348.

²³⁶ +Π]όλεμος τῆς Τούτζας; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 17. The Tiča is generally marshy and difficult to cross, just as described by the *Chronicle of 811*, 214.51: ποταμὸς τελματώδης λίαν καὶ δυσδιέξοδος.

²³⁷ The full inscription reads: Κανα συβιγι Ομουρταγ, ις τιν γῆν ὅπου ἐγενίθιν, ἐκ Θεοῦ ἄρχον ἐστίν. ις τῆς Πλσκας τὸν κἀνπον μένοντα ἐπίσειεν αὐλιν ις τιν Τουτζαν κὲ με[τίγαγεν] τὴν δύναμιν του [ις τοὺς] Γρικουὺς κὲ Σκλάβους κὲ τεχνέος ἐπίσειεν γέφυ[ραν] ις τιν Τουτζαν μὲ τὸ αὐλιν στύλους τεσάρις κὲ ἐ[πάνο τὸν] στύλον ἔστισην λέοντ[ῆς] δύο. ὁ Θεὸς ἀξίόσι τὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἄρχονταν μὲ τὸν πόδα αὐτοῦ τὸν βασιλέα καλο[πατοῦντα] ἕως [τρέ]χει ἡ Τουτζα κὲ ἕως [...] τοὺς πολλοὺς Βούλγαρις ἐπέχον[τα,] τοὺς ἐχθροὺς αὐτοῦ ὑποτάσσοντα χέροντα κὲ ἀγαλιόμενος ζῆσιν ἕτι ἑκατόν. ἴτο δὲ ὁ κερὸς, ὅταν ἐκτιστῖν, βουλγαριστὶ σιγορ ελεμ, γρικιστὶ ἰνδικτιόνος ιε΄; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 57; for an English translation of the text, see now Prinzig 2007, 245–246.

²³⁸ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, 207.

²³⁹ Antonova 1961; Antonova 1963, 49–56; Antonova and Dremsizova 1960, 28–39; Fiedler 2008, 193–195.

²⁴⁰ Dremsizova 1965, 5ff.; Rašev 1982a, 126.

wall.²⁴¹ It is likely that they stood on the massive stone bridge built over the Tiča, which is also mentioned in the Čatalar inscription;²⁴² the remains of the bridge, thrown into the river, are partly visible today. The construction of the new *aule* was completed by 821/2 (15th indiction), when the dedicatory inscription was carved.²⁴³

The *aule* stands on a small plain, such as that described by the *Chronicle of 811*, on the right bank of the Tiča, and near one of the main roads leading from Pliska across the Haimos to the south. The area immediately west of the plain is dominated by a number of narrow passes, notably the pass of Preslav (Preslavski prohod), where the Bulgars could have built a palisade. The plain itself, fertile and rich, was certainly among the agricultural regions devastated by the Byzantines on their way to Serdica. This seems to be corroborated by archaeological evidence: recent investigations carried out by a German-Bulgarian team in the area of the fortified settlement of Čatalar revealed the existence of a rectangular double palisade line (250 × 350 m), which was most probably constructed several decades before 821/2. Inside the rampart fortification, archaeologists found the remains of a number of sunken-floored buildings, the latest of which may be dated to the late eighth and early ninth centuries. The palisade installation most probably served as a refuge for the local population and its livestock before it was destroyed by an enemy attack.²⁴⁴ There is, thus, good reason to believe that Nikephoros' troops marched through the plain of Preslav, and may even have encamped inside the Bulgar palisade line. A decade later, it may further be suggested, Omurtag set up an *aule* at the same spot in order to commemorate the Bulgar triumph. A fortified palace, a symbol of the *khan's* military power, is what one would have really expected to find there. The inscription of Čatalar has a triumphal tone, and though it does not mention Krum, it clearly alludes to his victory when it envisages Omurtag in a similarly dominant position vis-à-vis the Byzantine emperor (ὁ Θεὸς ἀξιόσι τὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἄρχονταν μὲ

²⁴¹ Antonova and Dremsizova 1960, 54–55; Antonova 1961, 151–152.

²⁴² Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 57.

²⁴³ ἴτο δὲ ὁ κερὸς, ὅταν ἐκτιστῖν, βουλγαριστὶ σιγορ ελεμ, γρικιστὶ ἰνδικτιῶνος ιε'; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nr 57. The author wrongly believes that the 15th indiction coincides with the year 822/3. His calculations are based on Grumel's chronological table, which does not, however, take into consideration the fact that the indiction began on 1 September. Thus, the disaster of 26 July 811 corresponds to the fourth indiction of this 15-year cycle, although Michael I's accession to the throne three months later (October 811) coincides with the fifth; see here Runciman 1983, 232–241.

²⁴⁴ Henning *et al.* 2007, 437–439.

τὸν πόδα αὐτοῦ τὸν βασιλέα καλοπατοῦντα ἕως τρέχει ἡ Τουτζα..... κὲ μετίγαγεν τὴν δύναμιν του ἰς τοὺς Γρικοὺς κὲ Σκλάβους).²⁴⁵

The magnitude of the defeat and Nikephoros' death at the hands of the Bulgars came as a devastating shock to the Byzantines. The blow to the imperial prestige was tremendous; it was the first time an emperor had fallen in battle since 378 when Valens was slain by the Visigoths on the field of Adrianople, though now the reversal of the Byzantine fortunes, from an easy victory to a catastrophe under horrific circumstances, made this an even more humiliating setback.²⁴⁶ However, there were other, more dramatic consequences. The serious wounding of Staurakios, who lingered for several months in his deathbed, threw the empire into dynastic struggle and a prolonged period of instability, which continued through the disastrous two-year reign of the incompetent Michael Rhangabe. Several thousand men perished in the slaughter, including a number of distinguished generals and court officials. More importantly, as a result of the disaster the psychological advantage swung back in favour of Krum, who in the next three years learned how to use fear as a weapon against the numerically superior but dispirited Byzantines.

For the *khan*, victory was costly though. He lost part of his army, his capital was razed to the ground, and his palace perished in the flames. The land was extensively devastated (and this must have had a lasting impact on the predominantly agricultural economy of the *khanate*), while his legitimacy to rule may have been temporarily questioned. However, the extraordinary Bulgar resilience in the face of adversity enabled Krum to emerge triumphant from this great test. To be sure, he made the most of his victory. The internal turbulence in Byzantium allowed him to gain the strategic initiative and become, for the next three years, the most dangerous enemy the empire had to face.

²⁴⁵ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 57. Note that the expression καλοπατεῖν or καλοπατοῦντα refers to the *calcatio*, a traditional Roman triumphal custom, which Krum replicated in 813 by ritually trampling the archbishop of Adrianople, Manuel. In the Catalar inscription, Omurtag's appeals to God to grant him the opportunity to perform the *calcatio* on the emperor. Beševliev, among others, wrongly associates the inscription with Omurtag's victory over Thomas the Slav. He goes as far as to identify the emperor with Thomas (who was crowned in Antioch) and the "Γρικοὺς κὲ Σκλάβους" with his army of rebels. However, as is shown in chapter 8, Omurtag set up the inscription before his campaign against Thomas in the winter of 822/3; for the chronology of the rebellion, see Bury 1912, App. V.

²⁴⁶ Treadgold 1988, 174.

CHAPTER SIX

THE BULGAR OFFENSIVE, 811–814

6.1 THE EMPIRE UNDER MICHAEL I (811–813)

In the summer of 811, Nikephoros I led a grand expeditionary force in Bulgaria. The Byzantines defeated Krum's armies and sacked the Bulgar capital but, made grossly over-confident by their successes, they failed to take the basic precautions on their way back, and as a result, were ambushed by the enemy and cut to pieces on 26 July. The slaughter was immense. The emperor himself and several high-ranking dignitaries and officers were among the fallen, while Staurakios, Nikephoros' only son and heir, was severely wounded. His deteriorating health threw the empire into a dynastic struggle and a prolonged period of instability, which continued through the reign of Michael I Rhangabe. Because of the anomalous internal situation in the east, the Bulgars became, for the next three years, the main adversary of Byzantium, pushing as far as Constantinople and besieging the city.

Nikephoros' immediate successor was his son Staurakios, who managed to escape the slaughter and arrive a few days later at Adrianople. However, he had received a fatal blow to the right of his spine, and as a result his thighs and limbs were paralysed.¹ In strict conformity with the principle of legitimacy, he was proclaimed emperor, but as there was little hope for his recovery, a struggle for his succession soon began. The main candidate for the throne was his brother-in-law, the *curopalates* Michael Rhangabe who was supported by Nikephoros' leading officers, the *magistros* Theoktistos and the *domestikos of the Scholai* Stephanos, as well as the patriarch Nikephoros.² Staurakios is reported to have planned to secure the empire for his wife, Prokopia, but on 2 October Michael was eventually proclaimed emperor by the *tagmata* and the Senate.³ Staurakios withdrew to a monastery, where he lingered for another three months and then died on 11 January 812, after a nominal reign of two months and six days.⁴

¹ Theoph., 492.2–6.

² Michael was married to Staurakios' sister Prokopia; for Stephanos, see *PmbZ*, #7057.

³ Theoph., 493.9–23.

⁴ Theoph., 495.15–18.

Although the Church, the *tagmata*, the bureaucracy and the people all supported Michael, it is clear that he never felt securely established on the throne. From the outset he sought to disassociate himself from the previous regime by reversing some of the most unpopular measures of his father-in-law. He began with Nikephoros' policy of saving money: at every opportunity Michael distributed largesse to churches, monasteries, the Senate, the army, the poor, and even the widows of those killed in Bulgaria, thus purchasing his popularity.⁵ He also recalled all those whom Nikephoros had exiled, among them Leo the Armenian, the former *strategos of the Armeniakon*, who was now promoted to commander of the *Anatolics*,⁶ as well as Theodore of Stoudios and the other Stoudite monks.⁷

Michael I deserves credit for restoring peace in the Church by ending the "Moechian controversy", the religious and legal dispute over the second marriage of Constantine VI.⁸ In 812, the patriarch, with Michael's consent, dispatched the customary synodal letter to the Pope (the emperor Nikephoros, it must be remarked, had been refusing his namesake permission to do so for six years), and Leo III decided for the Stoudites and against Joseph of Kathara, who was thereafter deposed and excommunicated.⁹ A fervent iconophile, Michael naturally turned for advice to the patriarch Nikephoros and Theodore of Stoudios. These two men (but especially the latter) had the last word on ecclesiastical matters, and were even involved in the affairs of the state, although the influence they exerted on the emperor has been, at times, exaggerated.¹⁰

The Bulgar military domination in the years 811–813 was ultimately the result of Michael's problematic relations with his army. With little military experience, charisma or personal dynamism, the new emperor lacked the confidence of his demoralized troops, who soon became exasperated with

⁵ ἐποίησαν δὲ καὶ ἐλεημοσύνας πολλάς, διασκορπίσαντες τὰ χρήματα ἄπερ ὁ Νικηφόρος δι' ἐμμελείας ἐσώρευεν...; Scriptor incertus, 335.8–336.1; Theoph., 494.8–11, 493.32–494.5, 494.15–18, 500–9.10.

⁶ Scriptor incertus, 336.5–7; Treadgold 1988, 197–198. Leo had been exiled after the Arab sack of Euchaita in February 811; he was now replacing the *strategos* Romanos, a casualty of the Bulgar campaign. For Leo's origin and family, see Turner 1990, 172–187; Adontz 1927; Korres 1996, 71–76.

⁷ Theoph., 494.17–20; *Vita Theod. Stoud. B*, 272D.

⁸ Alexander 1958, 80–101; Treadgold, *Revival*, 103–108, 153–157; see also above 4.3 and 5.1 n. 14.

⁹ Theoph., 494.22–24; *ARF*, 136; *Vita Theod. Stoud. B*, 272D–273A.

¹⁰ For Theodore's influence on Michael see Theoph., 494.33–495.15, and Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, II, no. 94; Treadgold 1988, 179, 195; Korres 1996, 41–42, 59–65; Ostrogorsky 1968, 198.

his inability to take any decisive action against the enemy. Michael failed to inspire the loyalty and respect of the army, particularly the *peratics* who felt especially uncomfortable operating in Thrace, and looked instead to their divisional commanders for leadership. Leo the Armenian was by far the most prominent and influential military figure of his age. A successful commander with a good record of victories in the east (especially between the years 812–813), he inevitably attracted the enthusiasm and support of the powerful *Asiatic* troops who found in him an ideal imperial candidate.¹¹ Much the same is true of the armies of Thrace and Macedonia, whose loyalty focused on their own *strategos*, John Aplakes. Unfortunately, nothing is known about him before 813, although it may be assumed that he had had a long and distinguished career as an officer in the Balkans.¹²

Like some of his predecessors, Michael tightened his control over the imperial guard regiments by purging them of potential opponents. In one of his works, the patriarch Nikephoros refers to a large number of iconoclast soldiers discharged from the *tagmata* before 815, whose discharge can only be dated to during Michael's reign.¹³ At the same time, Theophanes describes Michael's measures against a disappointed faction of heretics (including Athingans, Paulicians and iconoclasts) in 812.¹⁴ The Athingans came originally from Phrygia and Lykaonia, and may be identified with Nikephoros' Lykaonian guard.¹⁵ A corrupted form of the name of the heretical sect was later applied to the Gypsies (*Atsinganoi*) because both groups enjoyed a similar reputation for fortune telling and sorcery.¹⁶ After the death of their benefactor and his son Staurakios, the Lykaonians felt isolated and threatened, especially as Michael I was striving to disassociate himself from the previous regime.¹⁷ In the summer of 812 they seem to have tried to overthrow the

¹¹ Theoph., 497.6–9.

¹² Haldon 1999, 228–231. For Aplakes, apparently the *monostrategos* of Thrace and Macedonia, see *PmbZ*, #3197.

¹³ καὶ μέρος οὐκ εὐαρίθμητον τῶν ἐν στρατιωτικοῖς τάγμασι τελούντων ποτὲ, ὧν οἱ μὲν ἄτε παρηβηκότες τὴν ὥραν καὶ, ἀφήλικες, οἱ δὲ ἐπ' αἰτίας τισὶ πεφωραμένοι καὶ αἰσχροῦσι, τῆς μοίρας τῆς ἐνοπλίου ἀπελήλανται; Nikeph., *Apologeticus*, 556B–D; Nikeph., *Antirheticus*, iii, 492A–493B; Alexander 1958, 167–173 and 113–125. For the date of the discharge, see Treadgold 1988, 413 n. 249.

¹⁴ Theoph., 496.8–497.6. For the Paulicans, see Lemerle 1973.

¹⁵ Theoph., 495.2–3; Turner 1990, 177ff.; see 5.1 above.

¹⁶ The Gypsies only entered Byzantium in the late tenth or early eleventh century; see in particular Soulis 1961, 145–146; Rochow 1983a, 166–170; Starr 1936, 93–106. For the fortune telling and sorcery of the Lykaonians, see Theoph., 488.24–33.

¹⁷ For Michael's measures against the Paulicans and Athingans of Phrygia and Lykaonia, see *Vita Niceph.*, 158.30–32; Theoph., 494.33–495; Korres 1980. Some Paulicans are said to have fled to Melitene; the local *emir* eventually resettled them in the city of Argaun (Arguwān),

emperor in favour of one of the sons of Constantine V.¹⁸ However, the plot was foiled and the Lykaonians were sent back to the *Anatolikon*.¹⁹ Thereafter, the imperial guard regiments seem to have remained faithful to the emperor, though it is certainly worth stressing that they were not prepared to begin a civil war to defend his right to rule after the battle of Versinikia.²⁰

During Michael I's reign, the Frankish-Byzantine *rapprochement*, initiated by Nikephoros in late 810, was completed. In 812, Michael recognized Charlemagne's imperial title, ratified the peace treaty, including the recognition of Byzantine rights in Venice and Dalmatia, and sought to arrange a marriage contract for his son Theophylaktos.²¹ In the east, the civil war between the successors of Hārūn al-Rashīd was still going on.²² The internal divisions had weakened the Caliphate to such an extent that, by 813, the hostilities between the Arabs and the Byzantines had almost entirely stopped. The only serious incident involving the two states took place in August 812, when the Arabs under the command of the *emir* of Tarsos mounted a raid of moderate size on the *Anatolikon*. However, the invaders were put to flight by the *strategos* Leo, who reportedly killed some two thousand.²³ The Byzantines may have followed up their success with the capture of Kamachon, which is reported to have taken place sometime between October 810 and September 813.²⁴

and soon they set about raiding into the empire; Peter of Sicily, c. 175–178; Photios, *Diegesis*, c. 133–138; Huxley 1984, 81–82.

¹⁸ Theoph., 495.4–6, 496.16–21.

¹⁹ Theoph., 497.4–6, who claims that the conspirators had their property confiscated. This is confirmed by Nikephoros who in his *Apologeticus*, 556C, indicates that the discharged soldiers were deprived of the imperial doles so that they reached the limit of poverty and were left to live by begging; Turner 1990, 180f; Haldon 1984, 249–250.

²⁰ Nevertheless, the *megas domestikos* (*domestikos* of the *Scholai*) is reported to have tried to dissuade Michael from abdicating; Theoph., 502.8–10.

²¹ ἀπέστειλε δὲ καὶ πρὸς Κάρουλον, βασιλέα τῶν Φράγγων, περὶ εἰρήνης καὶ συναλλαγῆς εἰς Θεοφύλακτον, τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ; Theoph., 494.20–22; Michael's ambassadors acclaimed Charlemagne "*more suo, id est Graeca lingua*", as "*imperator et basileus*" without, however, specifying of whom or what; ARF, 136; *Annales Xantenses*, 4; Classen 1985, 94ff. In response to the recognition of Charlemagne's imperial dignity, the Byzantine emperors emphasized the additional qualifier "*ton Rhomaion*" (used occasionally in the seventh century). This title (*basileus ton Rhomaion*) was henceforth reserved in Byzantine protocol for the emperor in Constantinople, and was introduced into the inscription on imperial coins (*miliaresia*); see Grierson 1981, 910–911.

²² Theoph., 497.9–14; Kennedy 1986, 149–151.

²³ Theoph., 497.6–9; Brooks, *Abbasids*, I, 747.

²⁴ Brooks, *Abbasids*, II, 88; Michael Syr., III, 8; Treadgold 1984b, 218 n. 28.

6.2 THE BYZANTINE-BULGAR WAR DURING THE REIGN OF MICHAEL I

6.2.1 *From Nikephoros' Defeat to the Fall of Mesembria*

Very little is known about the situation in the Bulgar border area between July 811 and June 812, when Michael I set out against Krum who had already captured Debeltos. Thrace and Macedonia had been protected by the local *thematic* armies, especially after the arrival of *stratiotai* from Asia Minor in 809/10, but these units seem to have suffered considerable losses in the Bulgar debacle: Theophanes names the *strategos* of Thrace among the fallen, and it would be reasonable to suppose that many of his subordinate officers and men had also perished.²⁵ Although not directly threatened by the Bulgars in the autumn and winter of 811, the *themes'* inhabitants were certainly unnerved by the recent developments north of the border. Michael I tried to ease their anxieties by distributing donatives to them,²⁶ but does not appear to have taken sufficient precautions to protect these regions against future Bulgar raids; there is no evidence, for instance, for the transfer of troops from other parts of the empire to the Balkans.²⁷

No source tells us about the *khan's* movements after July 811. There is good reason to believe that he spent the next few months recovering from the Byzantine invasion. To be sure, with his land extensively devastated and his army seriously depleted, it would have been extremely difficult to put together, let alone provision, an expeditionary force during the winter. A brief respite would have enabled him to make up his losses, and reinforce his army with Slav and Avar contingents from the inner Balkans. The *khan* could also rely on a growing number of Byzantine immigrants or refugees with organizational and technical skills not readily available in Bulgaria.²⁸ These men with their expertise seem to have contributed greatly to his military successes in the years 812–814.

²⁵ Theoph., 494.12–13. For the transfer of the *stratiotai*, see Theoph., 486.10–23, and 5.2.2 above.

²⁶ ... στρατευομένους τε καὶ πτωχοῦς, τοὺς τε κατὰ τὴν βασιλίδα πόλιν καὶ ἐν τοῖς θέμασι κατεπλούτισεν; Theoph., 494.9–11.

²⁷ Evidence for the assemblance of a significant Byzantine force in Thrace is only attested after the Bulgar attack (in late 812/early 813); Theoph., 500.2–4.

²⁸ Thus, Theophanes speaks of an engineer who helped the Bulgars capture Mesembria in 812. He may or may not be identified with the *spatharios* Eumathios, who allegedly fled the empire after the sack of Serdica in 809; Theoph., 485.9–11, 498.7–14; for a discussion, see Browning 1988, 32–36. For evidence showing Byzantine specialists carrying out the construction of a number of forts in Bulgar northern Thrace, see Rabovjanov 2008.

In the spring of 812, all the preparations had been completed, and as the frontier region remained defenceless, Krum decided to act. By the beginning of June he is reported to have already captured Debeltos and transplanted its population to Bulgaria.²⁹ This could suggest that operations had begun in April or May 812. Situated about 20 km southwest of present-day Burgas, Debeltos commanded the north-south coastal road connecting the towns of Mesembria, Anchialos and Sozopolis with Constantinople. By capturing Debeltos, Krum may have hoped to cut off land communications between the other coastal cities and the imperial capital, minimizing Byzantium's ability to threaten the *khanate* from the east. Ultimately, his objective was to deport the inhabitants of these cities to the north in order to weaken Byzantium's frontier district and strengthen Bulgaria, whose urgent requirement after Nikephoros' invasion was, no doubt, for people.³⁰

The Bulgars probably arrived before Debeltos in May. They encircled the city, cut off its supplies and bombarded the garrison from a distance with siege engines of various types.³¹ At the same time they tried to demoralize the besieged population by devastating the fertile districts around the city. Theophanes reports that its inhabitants defected to Krum together with their bishop, but it might be more reasonable to suppose that they were starved into submission and had no other choice but to accept resettlement in Bulgaria.³²

The news that Debeltos was under siege alarmed the inhabitants of Anchialos, who are reported to have evacuated their homes. Clearly, the city's defences were not as strong as those of Mesembria or Sozopolis, where the terrified refugees may have initially fled.³³ The siege of Debeltos also alarmed Michael I who prepared an expedition against the Bulgars. The force he assembled was made up from the *tagmata* and contingents from the *themes* of Asia Minor, including the *Opsikians* and *Thrakesians*.³⁴ On 7 June he set out for the frontier, accompanied by his wife, Prokopia, and a number of officials from the civil service who must be identified with the "mis-advisors" mentioned by Theophanes.³⁵ The emperor probably wanted to avoid a con-

²⁹ Theoph., 495.22–24.

³⁰ Beševliev 1981a, 264–265.

³¹ For the siege machinery that might have been used by the Bulgars, see Scriptor incertus, 347.13–22; Haldon 1999, 184–189; Chevedden 2000, 74–75.

³² τοῦ δὲ Βουλγάρων ἀρχιγοῦ Κροῦμμου ἐλόντος τὴν Δεβελτὸν πολιορκία καὶ τοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ σὺν τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ μετοικίσαντος προσρυνέντας αὐτῷ; Theoph., 495.22–24; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 2.

³³ Theoph., 496.2–3. For Sozopolis, see Velkov 1964.

³⁴ Theoph., 495.26.

³⁵ ... τῶν παρασυμβούλων τοῦ βασιλέως; Theoph., 495.20–25.

frontation with the enemy, and may have hoped that the *khan* would abandon the siege as soon as he received word that a sizable army was marching against him.

The Byzantines followed the main arterial route running west from Constantinople and are next reported to have arrived at Tzouroulon, where they received the news that Krum had already taken Debeltos and transplanted its population to Bulgaria.³⁶ The emperor and his advisors had miscalculated the situation. They must have believed that Debeltos would hold out until they advanced to its relief, underestimating Krum's military technology and ability to exploit human weakness. At that point the *thematic* officers and troops, particularly the *Opsikians* and the *Thrakesians* who represented the core of the expeditionary force, are said to have become exasperated with Michael's advisors.³⁷ They refused to follow orders, and are even reported to have uttered insults at Michael. Gifts and promises on the part of the emperor eventually calmed the troops, but under these circumstances the army could not advance any further.³⁸

What happened next is described in some detail by Theophanes, though the exact order of events is unclear. Moreover, one receives the impression that the Confessor is speeding things up: the Bulgar onslaught on Thrace and Macedonia, the flight of the inhabitants of these areas, the unsuccessful coup against Michael, are all placed before the return of the army to the imperial capital, and, as a result, there is a gaping hole in the narrative (for instance, nothing is said about Byzantine-Bulgar relations between June and October 812, when we hear of Krum's embassy to Constantinople).

It is safe to infer that Michael and the imperial army returned to Constantinople immediately after the end of the mutiny. In the capital, the news of the fall of Debeltos and the army's mutiny made a strong impression. Some blamed Michael's religious views, which did not seem to be winning divine favour, remembering that the iconoclast Constantine V had repeatedly defeated the Bulgars.³⁹ A group of conspirators, among them Nikephoros'

³⁶ Theoph., 495.20–22; Tzouroulon (mod. Çorlu), some 30 km northwest of Heraclea, was an imperial *curatoria* (imperial estate) and bishopric; Ševčenko 1965, 564–574.

³⁷ Theoph., 495.22–26.

³⁸ ... οὐς κατευνάσας Μιχαὴλ δωραεῖς παραινέσει κατεσίγησεν; Theoph., 495.25–27. The word "παραινέσει" should perhaps be translated as "praises" or "promises" rather than "admonitions" (the latter suggested by Mango and Scott 1997, 679).

³⁹ ... κατὰ τῶν θεῶν καὶ σεπτῶν εἰκόνων καὶ τοῦ μοναδικοῦ σχήματος ἐκίνουν τὰς γλώσσας, μακαρίζοντες Κωνσταντῖνον τὸν θεοβδέλυκτον καὶ τρισάθλιον ὡς κατὰ Βουλγάρων ἀριστεύσαντα δι' ἧν, ὡς ἐκεῖνοι ἄσεβῶς ἔλεγον οἱ τάλανες, εἶχεν εὐσέβειαν; Theoph., 496.13–16; Treadgold 1988, 181–182.

Lykaonian guard, are said to have planned to release the blind sons of Constantine V, who were imprisoned at Panormos, and bring them to the army so that it could proclaim one of them as emperor.⁴⁰

Michael I learned of the plot while still in Thrace, but kept his nerve and did enough to ensure the loyalty of the troops. He is even reported to have given a speech in defence of Orthodoxy—an indication that iconoclastic sentiments existed among some army elements, most likely in the *tagmata*.⁴¹ Thereafter, the emperor turned back to the imperial capital and, eventually, apprehended the plotters.⁴²

Naturally, the news that the army had mutinied and was now returning to Constantinople terrified the Byzantines who lived close to the frontier. The inhabitants of Beroe, Philippoupolis, Nike,⁴³ Probaton and several other *kastra* are reported to have fled south (perhaps towards Adrianople), although no one was pursuing them. Their flight left exposed Nikephoros' recent settlers on the Strymon, who then seized the opportunity to return to their original homes. They, in turn, induced panic in settlements which they passed in their flight, such as Philippi, which was also evacuated by its inhabitants.⁴⁴

At that point, the Bulgars began to move into the empty territory to the southwest.⁴⁵ This, however, was not simply another punitive raid, but an obvious attempt to extend Bulgar rule south of the Haimos Mountains: Krum occupied Beroe and the territory to the west as far as the Upper Strymon valley, including Serdica which had fallen beyond any effective imperial control after 809. He may have also captured Konstanteia, which seems to have been

⁴⁰ Theoph., 496.18–21.

⁴¹ διαλεχθεῖς γὰρ τὰ εἰκότα περὶ πίστεως τοῖς λαοῖς...; Theoph., 496.23; Nikeph., *Apologeticus*, 556B–D; *Antirrheticus*, iii, 492A–493B.

⁴² Theoph., 496.24–497.6; see 6.1 above.

⁴³ Also known as Nikaia, a bishopric on the Military highway in Thrace, 26 km southeast of Adrianople; Soustal 1991, 374–375.

⁴⁴ τότε καὶ Ἀγχιάλον καὶ Βέροϊαν ἀφέντες Χριστιανοὶ ἔφυγον, μηδενὸς διώκοντος, Νικαϊάν τε καὶ τὸ Προβάτου κάστρον καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ ὄχυράματα, ὡσαύτως καὶ τὴν Φιλιππούπολιν καὶ Φιλίππους· καὶ οἱ τὸν Στρυμῶνα οἰκοῦντες μέτοικοι προφάσεως δραξάμενοι ἐν τοῖς ἰδίῳις φεύγοντες ἐπανήλθον; Theoph., 496.2–6; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 2. Codex Monac. gr. 391 (16th century) altogether omits 'Philippoupolis', while Par. gr. 1711 (11th century) has 'Philippou polin'. Karayannopoulos 1986, 104–106, subsequently suggested that 'Philippoi' is a scribal error for 'Philippou polin'. However, the oldest surviving manuscript of the *Chronographia*, Christ Church, cod. Wake 5, mentions both cities, as does Anastasius' translation (334.4). Although not named, Sozopolis must have also been abandoned at that point. On the other hand, the flight of the citizens of Anchialos seems to have taken place earlier, as I noted already. For the settlement of the Strymon, see Theoph., 486.11–12.

⁴⁵ οἱ δὲ Βούλγαροι τὰ τῆς σάσεως μαθόντες τῶν στρατευμάτων, καὶ ὅτι πτοούμενοι τὸν πόλεμον καὶ τῶν ταξιατῶνα ἀτακτοῦσιν, πλέον κατίσχυσαν Θράκης καὶ Μακεδονίας; Theoph., 495.27–496.2.

defended by a garrison.⁴⁶ In addition, the Bulgars annexed Debeltos, Anchialos and Sozopolis. The only frontier point that remained in Byzantine hands was Mesembria, which was now cut off by land from the rest of Thrace. Krum had therefore managed to neutralize every single Byzantine outpost between the Black Sea coast and Serdica, minimizing Michael's ability to threaten Bulgaria by land or sea. This effectively meant that the first line of Bulgar defence had shifted from the *kleisourai* of Haimos to the northern stretches of the Thracian Plain. More importantly, from Beroe, Debeltos and Sozopolis, Krum was able to threaten the Thracian hinterland directly, and may have hoped to use this strategic advantage as a means of exerting political and military pressure on the empire.

The Bulgar operations in Thrace and Macedonia lasted longer than Theophanes seems to suggest, and were probably completed towards the end of the summer of 812. Krum's next step was to officially establish his authority in the conquered territories, which could now serve as a buffer zone against future Byzantine aggression. The initial arrangements for its military control are preserved in a long inscription, traditionally interpreted as describing the Bulgar army in order of battle (fig. X); the reason for this is the word "σάρακτος/ον", the literal meaning of which is indeed "army".⁴⁷ However, it is important to point out that in the militarized world of the Turkic nomads, the territorial organization of the state (with the subdivision of its provinces into two "wings" and a "centre") was commonly modelled on the division of an army in battle array.⁴⁸ Therefore, the term "σάρακτος" would have been used to designate both an army and a territory.⁴⁹ The inscription is, in effect, a list of newly conquered Byzantine cities and its commanders, and it certainly describes the political and military administration of the buffer zone. This was subdivided into defined areas with their own military leaders,

⁴⁶ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 2. This inscription (carved on the right side of an ancient altar in Malamirovo) divides the *kastra* taken by the Bulgars between 809 and 814 into two groups: i) the so-called ἔτυμα, i.e. those captured with their populations or their garrisons, a fact which in the case of Serdica, Debeltos and Adrianople is confirmed by the written sources; and ii) those evacuated by the Byzantines (τὰ δὲ λυπὰ κ[ά]στρα ἔ[δο]κεν ὁ Θε[ὸ]ς φόβον καὶ ἄ[φ]ηκ[α]ν καὶ ἔ[φυ]γαν); Konstanteia belongs to the first group.

⁴⁷ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 47. On this, see Golden 1981, 73–77. For a different interpretation, see Rašev 2007b, 120–125, who claims that the term σάρακτον in the inscription should be read as "charaktos" (from the Greek χάραξ, "rampart", "dyke") and must thus be identified with the Great Earthen Rampart of Thrace or Erkesija which, he believes, was built by Krum in summer or autumn of 812.

⁴⁸ For a perfect illustration of this, see Pritsak 1975, 12–13.

⁴⁹ See now Georgiev 2007a. Georgiev, however, believes that σάρακτον is derived from the Greek τεσσαράκοντα/σαράκοντα, traditionally used to denote a depth of 40 miles in the border region.

under the overall command of Krum's brother (two "wings" and a "centre").⁵⁰ The inscription was found at Malamirovo in Thrace, some 40 km southeast of Diampolis. It was carved on the left side of an ancient altar, and after an initial lacuna reads:

.....
 . . ΤΟ . . . Ν ἐπόησα
 τὸν ἀδερφόν μου κ-
 10 ἐ ὁ στρατηγός ὁ Λέον
 ἦνα ἦν ὑποκάτο αὐτ-
 οῦ. Ἀπὸ Βερόην κέ
 Δ ΟΔΥΚΑΤΟΥC Δ-
 ουλτροηνοὺς ἐστήν
 15 πρῶτος ὁ Τουκος ὁ η[ζ-]
 ουργου βουληα δ[ηά]
 τὸ δεξήον μέρ[ος κ-]
 ἐ ὁ Βαρδάνης κέ ὁ Η-
 ανῆς ὁ στρατυγὺ ὑπ[ο-]
 20 κάτου αὐτοῦ κέ δη[ά
 τ]ὸ ἀρηστερόν μέρ[ο-]
 ς τοῦ σαρακτου μου
 τὴν Ἀνχηάλον, τὴν
 Δεβελτόν, τὴν Σοζ-
 25 ὀπολην, τὴν Ρανουλ-
 ην ἐστήν κεφαλή ὁ Η-
 ραταης ὁ βοηλα καυχ-
 ανος κέ ὁ Κορδύλης κέ
 ὁ Γρηγοράς ὑποκάτο
 30 του στρατηγύ.

This stone inscription is commonly dated to between 813 and 814, that is, immediately after the Bulgar invasion of southeastern Thrace and the fall of Adrianople, since Krum's brother (who is mentioned in the text) is known to have besieged that city with his own army.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the Byzantine towns and forts named in the inscription are not located in southeastern Thrace but in the central and northern part of the plain, an area targeted by

⁵⁰ Stepanov 2010a, 37; Georgiev 2007a, 194–195 and fig. 2, claims that the entire buffer zone was some 200 km long, and was probably divided into two halves along the Tundža River.

⁵¹ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, 191–192; Grégoire 1934a, 768–769; Treadgold 1988, 205 and n. 274; Georgiev 2007a, 202. For Krum's brother (who can perhaps be identified with Dukum of the *Synaxarion CP*) and the siege of Adrianople, see Theoph., 503.6–7; see 7.1 below. In this connection, see also Gjuzev 2007.

the Bulgars in 812.⁵² Another clue for dating the text into the summer or early autumn of 812 is that it makes no mention of Mesembria, which was only taken by the Bulgars in November of that year.⁵³ The fact that the *khan* gave important administrative roles to Byzantines (as shown by the Christian—Greek or Armenian—names of the *strategoi*) may further suggest that many Christians remained in this formerly imperial territory. They probably lived in rural settlements along the northern part of Thrace and Macedonia, and lacked either the means or the desire to flee south at the eve of the Bulgar incursion.⁵⁴

Apart from a vague comment (that the Bulgars “extended their power in Thrace and Macedonia”), Theophanes says nothing about the state of affairs in the Balkans during the summer of 812.⁵⁵ Instead, he concentrates on Michael’s seemingly comfortable suppression of the iconoclast/Lykaonian uprising, and the Byzantine victory in the east against an Arab raiding party in August.⁵⁶ This is not coincidental: the author, who is favourably disposed towards Michael I and may be using official sources here, is trying to exaggerate the importance of his successes and play down, if not conceal, the most embarrassing setbacks. To be sure, the Lykaonian uprising may not have been as easily suppressed as Theophanes wants us to believe, while the collapse of the Balkan frontier and the arrival of some of the refugees at Constantinople must have contributed to a general climate of dissatisfaction that destabilized Michael’s regime during the summer of 812. The social upheaval in the capital, coupled with the growing military unrest, may well explain Michael’s inability to react to the Bulgar invasion.

After completing his occupation of parts of northern Thrace and Macedonia, Krum arrived with his army before Mesembria, which had been cut off by land following the fall of Debeltos, Anchialos and Sozopolis. The *khan* brought with him siege engines, presumably siege towers and stone-throwing artillery, which he positioned in front of the city.⁵⁷ However, before beginning the assault, he sent an embassy to Constantinople under Dargamir,

⁵² There is considerable disagreement about the present-day location of the town of Ranoule, mentioned in the text. Perhaps it can be identified with the fort at Vălčanovo kale (near the mouth of the River Rapotamo, on the coast road, some 10 km south of Sozopolis); Soustal 1997a, 63; Gagova 1995, 230; Wendel 2005, 253. For the site of Dultrouini, see Aladžov 2008, 187.

⁵³ Theoph., 499.8–10; Rašev 2007b, 124.

⁵⁴ For the officers mentioned in the inscription, see Gjuzev 2007, 51–55.

⁵⁵ Theoph., 496.27–497.2.

⁵⁶ Theoph., 496.21–497.9.

⁵⁷ Theoph., 498.7–13.

one of his trusted Slavic officers.⁵⁸ He arrived at the imperial capital in September and presented a written offer from Krum to revive the peace treaty agreed at the time of Theodosios III (715–717) and the patriarch Germanos with Kormesios, the Bulgar *khan*.⁵⁹ Several sources describe these events but Theophanes, who has integrated in his text information derived from an official document, is the most reliable.⁶⁰ Four terms were requested: first, that the boundary should be established at Meleenes in Thrace; second, that every year the Byzantines would give a tribute of vestments and dyed red hides to the value of 30 pounds of gold; furthermore, that refugees from either side, including those wanted for treason, should be returned; and finally, that traders in both countries should carry an authorized permit (certificates and seals), and if they did not, their goods would be confiscated.⁶¹ Krum concluded his message with an ultimatum: if the emperor did not agree with his terms, he would attack Mesembria.⁶²

Although nothing is known about the agreement of 716 (a brief reference to it is made in a badly preserved inscription around the Madara relief), the fact that Krum sought its renewal strongly suggests that it had been favourable to the Bulgars.⁶³ It is worth remarking that in 716/7 Theodosios III had found himself confronting in the east both a massive Arab invasion, as well as the continuing rebellion of the *strategos of the Armeniakon*, Leo, who had

⁵⁸ Theoph., 497.16–18. The correct form of his name is Dragomir, an unmistakably Slavic name; Beševliev 1981a, 249, 264; Vasmer 1941, 289.

⁵⁹ Τοῦτω τῷ ἔτει Κροῦμμος, ὁ τῶν Βουλγάρων ἀρχηγός, διὰ Δαργαμηροῦ τὰ περὶ τῆς εἰρήνης αὐθις πρὸς Μιχαὴλ τὸν βασιλέα ἐπρεσβεύσατο, ζητῶν τὰς ἐπὶ Θεοδοσίου τοῦ Ἀδραμυτινοῦ στοιχηθείσας καὶ Γερμανοῦ τοῦ πατριάρχου σπονδὰς πρὸς Κορμέσιον, τὸν κατ’ ἐκεῖνο καιροῦ κύριον Βουλγαρίας; Theoph., 497.16–20. The term “αὐθις” (“new”) does not mean that Krum had earlier sent another embassy to Constantinople, as suggested by Oikonomides 1988, 30. Instead, it refers to Krum’s overtures to Nikephoros I in 811 (Theoph., 490.7–8, 490.27–29); Mango and Scott 1997, 686 n. 3.

⁶⁰ For a complete list of the sources, see Rochow 1991, 310.

⁶¹ αἱ τοὺς ὅρους περιεῖχον ἀπὸ Μηλεῶνων τῆς Θράκης, ἐσθῆτάς τε καὶ κόκκινα δέρματα ἕως τιμῆς λ’ λιτρῶν χρυσίου· καὶ ἐπὶ τούτοις τοὺς πρόσφυγας ἑκατέρων ἀποστρέφεσθαι πρὸς ἑκάτερον, κἂν τύχωσιν ἐπιβουλευόντες ταῖς ἀρχαῖς, τοὺς δὲ ἐμπορευομένους εἰς ἑκατέρας χώρας διὰ σιγίλλων καὶ σφραγίδων συνίστασθαι, (τοῖς δὲ σφραγίδας μὴ ἔχουσιν ἀφαιρεῖσθαι) τὰ προσόντα αὐτοῖς καὶ εἰσκομίζεσθαι τοῖς δημοσίοις λόγοις; Theoph., 497.20–26 (the very last detail—that traders were not to remove the seals from their goods—makes this report all the more striking for its precision); ὅθεν ἄρτι Κρούμμου τοῦ τῶν Βουλγάρων ἡγεμόνος συμβάσεις καὶ φιλίας ὑποκριναμένου καὶ σπονδὰς ζητοῦντος εἰρηνικάς, εἰ μόνον τὰ κατ’ ἔτος διδόμενα εἰς τὰξιν οἶμαι δοθῶσιν φόρου αὐτῷ, ὡς τοῖς πρότερον ἔδοξε, καὶ προστιθέντος ὡς καὶ τοὺς πρόσφυγας Βουλγάρων, πρὸς δὲ καὶ Ῥωμαίων εἰς τοῦπίσω ἐκδίδοσθαι τῷ ἑαυτῶν ἔθνει; Theoph. cont., 12.17–22.

⁶² ἔγραψε δὲ καὶ κατακρίσεις πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα, ὅτι· “εἰ μὴ σπεύσῃ πρὸς τὴν εἰρήνην τῷ κρίματι σου παρατάσσομαι κατὰ Μεσημβρίας”; Theoph., 497.27–28.

⁶³ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 1 IIa–b; Tsankova-Petkova 1963, 42–45.

been acclaimed emperor by the *peratic* armies.⁶⁴ Isolated as he was, Theodosios, one may conjecture, tried to secure the support of the Bulgars by offering generous terms.

It is still not clear how many of the clauses proposed by Krum were included in the original agreement. Some scholars believe that in 812 the *khan* added two new terms of his own (the last two), but the phrase “*epi toutois*”, which they translate as “on top of it”, that is, on top of the treaty of Theodosios III, may have been used by Theophanes to highlight two clauses which were contentious.⁶⁵ In any event, among the four clauses recorded in the *Chronographia*, the first concerned the frontier, which was established at Meleones in Thrace. The exact location is unknown but several suggestions have been made: some have identified the site with the mile markings (*milliarium*) along the old Roman highway running south of the Haimos;⁶⁶ others believe that a number of villages called Jabalkovo (from “jabalka”—Bulgarian for apple) may claim descent from Meleones (lit. apple orchards).⁶⁷ To be certain, as Krum’s intention was to consolidate his recent territorial gains, the boundary he requested (and hence that of 716) must have followed a line running roughly from Sozopolis and Debeltos to Beroe, the Sredna Gora and the Upper Strymon valley. The territory between Meleones (in the northern stretches of the Thracian Plain) and the *kleisourai* of Haimos would have thus served as a buffer zone, which can perhaps be identified with the region of Zagora (lit. “beyond the mountain”).⁶⁸

The second clause concerned a tribute of vestments and dyed red hides to the value of 30 pounds of gold.⁶⁹ Oddly there is a disagreement between Theophanes and Anastasius Bibliothecarius about the “ceiling value” of these luxury items. All manuscripts of the *Chronographia* have 30 pounds of gold while Anastasius, who for the rest faithfully translates the clause,

⁶⁴ Theoph., 385.15–390.26; Nikeph., c. 52.1–20; Michael Syr., II, 484–485. For these events, see also Summer 1976, 291–294.

⁶⁵ Theoph., 497.21–21; Theoph. cont., 12.19–21; Oikonomides 1988, 29.

⁶⁶ Tsankova–Petkova 1960, 132–134; Koledarov 1973, 92–98; Soustal 1991, 353; Angelov *et al.* 1981, 115.

⁶⁷ Zlatarski 1918, 241–243; Philippou 2001, 58–59; Gagova 1986a, 67; Gagova 1995, 197–198.

⁶⁸ Theoph. cont., 162.3–13, describes Zagora as a desolate and deserted region between the pass of Sidera (Veregava?) and Debeltos, which was ceded to Boris in exchange for the Bulgar conversion in 864. Some scholars have suggested that Justinian II had earlier rewarded Tervel with Zagora, but it has been shown that all references to such a grant are in sources written after 864; see Tsankova–Petkova 1960, 135; Koledarov 1973, 95–99; Kyriakes 1993, 175, 207–209 and figs. 3–4.

⁶⁹ Theoph., 497.21–22.

speaks instead of 50 pounds.⁷⁰ This discrepancy is puzzling, but should not be explained by the assumption that Krum sent two embassies to Constantinople requesting different terms each time.⁷¹ It might seem more reasonable to suppose that we are faced with a mistake in the translation of Anastasius, who must have confused the Greek numeral λ' (30) with the Latin L (50). Hence "30" should be kept.⁷²

Two additional points must be made with regard to the second clause of the treaty. Firstly, Theophanes, who is drawing on an official document, is reluctant to acknowledge that in 716 Theodosios III had agreed to make payments in cash and kind to the *khan*. He has subsequently removed all the offensive terms ("*pakta*", "*dora*") and simply refers to the clause in the vaguest of ways.⁷³ By contrast, Theophanes continuatus reveals the real nature of the agreement by talking explicitly about an annual tribute.⁷⁴

Secondly, it remains unclear whether Krum requested the aforementioned vestments as a personal, symbolic "gift" from the emperor or as part of a commercial deal between the two countries. It has been suggested that the "ceiling value" of these goods (30 pounds of gold) represented an "export license" or a quota for the Bulgar merchants trading with the empire, and that, subsequently, the treaty of 716 was meant to regulate the volume of the silk trade. A similar approach, it is argued, is attested in the treaty of 944 between Byzantium and the Rus: each Kievan merchant who went to Constantinople was entitled to buy and export silk items worth not more than 50 gold coins.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, it is extremely unlikely that Krum would have ever permitted the circulation of silk in the Bulgarian market. This was an indispensable symbol of political authority and its control would have been a powerful weapon in the hands of the *khan* who could bestow it upon his officers, both as a sort of investiture and as a bounty.⁷⁶ Clearly, then, the precious cloth to the value of 30 pounds of gold was meant to be a personal "gift" to the *khan*. His request in 813 for a tribute paid in gold, robes (*imatismōn polun arithmōn*) and maidens seems to corroborate this suggestion.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ ... *vestimenta seu concineas pelles usque ad pretium quinquaginta librarum auri*; Anastasius Biblioth., 335.16–17; Oikonomides 1988, 29–30.

⁷¹ See my comments in n. 59 above.

⁷² Litavrin 1999, 231.

⁷³ Theoph., 497.21–22.

⁷⁴ ... *εἰ μόνον τὰ κατ' ἔτος διδόμενα εἰς τάξιν οἴμαι δοθῶσιν φόρου αὐτῷ, ὡς τοῖς πρότερον ἔδοξε*...; Theoph. cont., 12.19–20; Leo Gram., 206.14–15.

⁷⁵ *Povest' vremennykh let* (trans.), 75; Oikonomides 1988, 30; Lopez 1945, 32, 34–35 n. 2. For the restrictions of exports, see *Book of the Eparch*, ix, 6.

⁷⁶ Beševliev 1971b, 85.

⁷⁷ Scriptor incertus, 342.13–15.

There were two additional clauses which were contentious upon which Krum insisted. The first stipulated that refugees from either side, including those wanted for treason, should be returned to their respective homes.⁷⁸ This clause was directed specifically against the Byzantines, whose predilection for maintaining pretenders and dissident elements for possible future use against other states was well known.⁷⁹ Theophanes talks about a multitude of Byzantines living “within the *aule*”, presumably Pliska or the “inner lands” in general, and a lesser number of Bulgars that had taken refuge in the empire.⁸⁰ The latter must have constituted a considerable threat to the *khan*. Skylitzes reports that they had fled to Byzantium *paggeni*, which seems to suggest that we are not dealing with mere individuals, but with tribal leaders and their clansmen who, no doubt, had good reasons for leaving Bulgarian territory with what haste they could.⁸¹ A letter written by Theodore of Stoudios between 821 and 826 is addressed to a certain Theodotos, a Bulgar noble who had fled to Byzantium a few years earlier.⁸² Like the Bulgar *khan* Telerig in the last quarter of the eighth century, Theodotos was converted to Christianity and appointed *patrikios* by the emperor.⁸³ Prominent political immigrants were thus allowed to prosper in Byzantium, and Krum may have feared that, much like Theodotos, other disaffected members of his elite might be tempted to desert and take service with the emperor. In exchange for the immigrants, Krum was evidently ready to release Byzantine war prisoners and civilian captives, among them the inhabitants of Debeltos who had been transplanted to Bulgaria in June 812.

The last clause specified that those who traded in both countries should carry an authorized permit (diplomas and seals), and that if they did not, their goods would be confiscated.⁸⁴ It is important to point out that the author is not quoting the entire provision but only what appears to be its conclusion, and little can be made of it. At the moment it is only possible to note that it was meant to normalize the commercial relations between the two states, which had been disrupted by constant warfare since the reign of Constantine V.

⁷⁸ Theoph., 497.21–22; Theoph. cont., 12.21–22.

⁷⁹ See, for instance, the sixth article of the treaty of 562 between Byzantium and Persia; Menander Prot., 72.340–347; Miller 1971, 70–71.

⁸⁰ Theoph., 498.25–28.

⁸¹ Βούλγαροι τινες ἐξ ἠθῶν ἀναστάντες τῶν πατρίων τὴν Ῥωμαίων καταλαμβάνουσι παγγενεὶ...; Skylitzes, 12.7–8.

⁸² Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, II, no. 479.

⁸³ Gjuzelev 1976, 124–125; Božilov 1995a, 353f; Winkelmann 1985, 63; Dujčev 1961, 74–80, believes that Theodotos was one of the refugees in question, and places his baptism and appointment as *patrikios* during the reign of Michael I.

⁸⁴ Theoph., 497.24–26.

It is no mere coincidence that the last preserved seals of the *kommerkia* of Mesembria, the place where precious commodities were officially exchanged, date from the reign of this emperor.⁸⁵ In spite of this, Byzantines and Bulgars had continued to trade along the frontier, as is apparent from the large quantities of gold, silver and other goods discovered at Mesembria in 812.⁸⁶ The clause was, therefore, meant to control and regulate their behaviour, but also extend their rights: merchants were to be allowed to cross the border freely and, presumably, exchange in the market of their choice as long as they complied with customs regulations. In fact, one of Krum's main concerns may have been to prevent Byzantine spies from entering Bulgaria as merchants.⁸⁷

In the beginning of October, Michael submitted Krum's ultimatum to his advisors.⁸⁸ According to our sources, Krum's proposal was rejected, chiefly on account of the clause relating to refugees. The government at Constantinople was not prepared to give them up, presumably because it intended to use them in the future against the Bulgar state (as agents, missionaries, etc.). It was also argued that the repatriation of the runaways would have been immoral.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, one may reasonably attribute far greater weight to the fact that Michael's shaky regime, which resulted from Krum's successes, could not have survived the political humiliation of agreeing to the Bulgar terms and recognizing the losses of territory in Thrace. In an attempt to protract the negotiations until the campaigning season was over, so as to prevent the Bulgars from fulfilling their threat, Michael is likely to have deferred his response to the *khan*.

Aware of Michael's intentions, Krum decided to attack. Mesembria was a well-protected fortress, situated on a peninsula linked to the mainland by a narrow strip of land. However, it had been cut off by land since the fall of Sozopolis, Anchialos and Debeltos, and was now surrounded by a sizable Bulgar army. Technical expertise, however transmitted, was also available to the Bulgars, who in the middle of October started bombarding Mesembria with siege engines of various types.⁹⁰ Without a fleet, Krum's forces could not besiege the city on the relatively exposed seaward sides, and inevitably concentrated their assault on the powerful western walls (facing the mainland).

⁸⁵ Zacos and Vegler 1972, I/1, no. 265a–c; Brandes 2002, 388–390.

⁸⁶ Theoph., 499.10–15.

⁸⁷ According to Arab sources, the Byzantine government encouraged merchants to travel into Muslim territories to collect intelligence; see Vasiliev 1968, 416; Litavrin 1999, 234–235.

⁸⁸ Theoph., 497.28–498.4; Skylitzes, 12.4–23; Genesios, 12.1–11; Theoph. cont., 12.17–13.6.

⁸⁹ The “evil counsellors”, presumably among them the *magistros* Theoktistos, are said to have quoted the Scripture: “τὸν ἐρχόμενον πρὸς με οὐ ἐκβάλλω ἔξω”; Theoph., 498.3–4.

⁹⁰ Theoph., 498.4–14.

On the basis of the extant material evidence it has been suggested that the walls suffered severe damage after the restoration of the fifth/sixth centuries, although not to the extent of wholesale destruction; archaeologists have even claimed that the breach effected in one part of the wall was more than four metres wide.⁹¹ The city appears to have been well provisioned, but there was little its defenders could do against the continuous bombardment.

With Mesembria hard pressed, on November 1 the emperor again summoned his advisors to confer about peace. Because of the difficult moral issue involved in the return of the refugees, he also invited the leading clergy, headed by the patriarch Nikephoros and the bishops of Nicaea (Peter), and Kyzikos (Aimilianos), who urged for the acceptance of Krum's terms.⁹² Michael reportedly shared their views. Theodore of Stoudios was also present but, like Theoktistos and most of the civil officers, he argued for the vigorous prosecution of war. Theophanes indicates that the refugee issue was once again the stumbling block of the negotiations.⁹³ Theodore in particular is said to have vociferously opposed their extradition as unethical, an argument that was, conveniently perhaps, endorsed by the civil servants. Nonetheless, the author of the *Chronographia*, who was in favour of peace and openly hostile to the Stoudite monks, exaggerates Theodore's role in the debate; his theological arguments alone could not have persuaded the emperor to reject the Bulgar offer. It was, instead, a series of political and strategic considerations, most notably the fact that this regime could not survive the political humiliation of accepting the ultimatum, which eventually forced him to do so. Theoktistos' influence on the emperor and the Senate should also be stressed.⁹⁴

Although not reported in the sources, Michael I must have hastily begun preparations for a naval campaign against the Bulgars. He may have hoped that Mesembria, with its particularly strong defences, would hold out until he arrived. However, four days later, on November 5, the news reached the capital that the city was finally taken. The siege had lasted approximately two weeks. Mesembria had been stocked with large amounts of gold, silver and other supplies (presumably grain), an indication that it had not been evacuated. Unfortunately, we are not told what fate awaited its inhabitants. The Bulgars had also captured 36 bronze siphons and a considerable quantity

⁹¹ Venedikov 1969b, 155–163, esp. 157–159; Venedikov 1969a.

⁹² For Peter, see *PmbZ*, #6067; for Aimilianos, *PmbZ*, #153.

⁹³ *Theoph.*, 497.14–498.4.

⁹⁴ ἀλλ' ἐκράτησεν ἡ βουλή, Θεόκτιστον μάγιστρον ἐπικυροῦντα καὶ συντιθέμενον ἔχουσα τῇ δόξει, καὶ διελύθησαν πάλιν εἰς ἔργα πολέμου...; *Theoph. cont.*, 13.3–5.

of the liquid fire that was projected from them, yet because of the difficulty attendant upon the operation of this weapon they were apparently unable to make much use of it.⁹⁵

Whether Mesembria was occupied or abandoned by the Bulgars after its capture remains unclear. As noted already, archaeologists have shown that the western wall had suffered severe damage, but was not completely destroyed. An inscription engraved on two marble slabs attests that it was only repaired (with bricks) by Basil I, probably between 879 and 886 (fig. XII).⁹⁶ On the other hand, it was specifically noted by contemporaries that Michael I made no attempt to recover Mesembria in 813.⁹⁷ One year later, Leo V arrived with his army before the city but did not attempt to take it by force; instead, he built a fortified camp nearby and, with a stratagem, is said to have defeated a Bulgar army.⁹⁸ All of this seems to suggest that Krum had installed a garrison in Mesembria, which was evidently strong enough to discourage a Byzantine assault.

6.2.2 *The Byzantine Campaign of 813 and the Battle of Versinikia*

Michael responded to the fall of Mesembria by beginning preparations for a major expedition against the Bulgars in the spring. It is worth remembering that the civil war in the Caliphate was now reaching its climax (in late 812 Ma'mūn's army was besieging Amīn in Baghdad), and the emperor could transfer large *thematic* contingents from Asia Minor to the Balkans.⁹⁹ The recent successes against the Arabs had generated a high level of morale and self-confidence among the *peratics*, and it was hoped that with their arrival in Thrace the psychological advantage would swing back in Byzantium's favour.¹⁰⁰ Thus, early in 813 Michael made a levy from all the *themes*, among them recent recruits, and ordered them to cross into Thrace before spring.¹⁰¹ According to the *Scriptor incertus de Leone*, he called up "those guarding

⁹⁵ εϋρόντες γὰρ αὐτήν οἱ ἔχθροὶ πεπλησμένην πάντων τῶν ὀφειλόντων πρὸς κατοίκησιν ἀνθρώπων παρῆναι πραγμάτων, ταύτην ἐκράτησαν σὺν τῇ Δεβελτῷ, ἐν οἷς καὶ σίφονας χαλκοῦς εἶδρον λς', καὶ τοῦ δι' αὐτῶν ἐκπεμπομένου ὕγρου πυρὸς οὐκ ὀλίγον, χρυσοῦ τε καὶ ἀργύρου πλῆθος; Theoph., 499.10–15. For the liquid fire, see Haldon and Byrne 1977, 98.

⁹⁶ The city had already returned to the Byzantines in 869, as its bishop assisted at that year's Church Council in Constantinople; Oikonomides 1981–1985, 269–275.

⁹⁷ Theoph., 500.20–23.

⁹⁸ For these events, see Theoph. cont., 24.16–25.3; Genesisios, 10.11–19; and 7.1 below.

⁹⁹ Theoph., 499.15–25; Kennedy 1986, 151–152.

¹⁰⁰ Theoph., 497.6–9. For the Byzantine successes, see Theoph., 497.6–9.

¹⁰¹ ... ἐκ πάντων τῶν θεμάτων στρατολογήσας πρὸ τοῦ ἔαρος εἰς τὴν Θράκην περαιούσθαι ἐκέλευσεν; Theoph., 500.10–13.

the *kleisourai* of Syria”, who are defined as Lykaonians, Cilicians, Isaurians, Cappadocians and Galatians.¹⁰² These names have geographic rather than administrative meaning, although the order in which they are mentioned makes no geographic sense.

Clearly some of the recruits, especially those from the Arab frontier, were unaccustomed to service so far away from home, in addition to being apprehensive at the possibility of a confrontation with Krum’s forces after the 811 debacle. The fact that they were ordered to cross into Thrace so early in the year, when the roads and weather were poor and provisions difficult to secure, further displeased the *thematic* soldiers engaged in agriculture who, no doubt, would have preferred to be supervising the spring planting on their *stratiotika ktemata*.¹⁰³ In this light, it is little wonder that the troops, particularly the *Armeniaks* and the *Cappadocians*, are reported to have openly expressed their resentment of the emperor.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, the *strategos* of Thrace and Macedonia, John Aplakes, in close co-operation with the government in Constantinople, was re-organizing his forces. It is safe to infer that through the usual system of recruitment in the *themes* these armies had been able to make up most of their losses, though, as later events showed, they were still quite weak.¹⁰⁵

The Bulgars could scarcely ignore the growing Byzantine activity in the frontier region. From their newly established bases in northern Thrace they subsequently started ravaging the countryside. In February 813, two Christian refugees from Bulgaria are said to have informed the emperor that Krum was now planning a surprise attack on the troops stationed in Thrace.¹⁰⁶ Without wasting any time, Michael assembled the *tagmata* and set out against him on February 15. Unfortunately, Theophanes’ coverage of this campaign is uninformative and cannot be trusted. We are only told that Krum withdrew empty-handed after losing many of his men.¹⁰⁷ Michael is then said to have proceeded to Adrianople where “he set things in order” before returning to

¹⁰² Scriptor incertus, 336.17–22.

¹⁰³ Treadgold 1988, 186; Kaegi 1981, 249.

¹⁰⁴ ὥστε πάντα δυσχεραίνειν, μάλιστα τοὺς Καπαδόκας καὶ Ἀρμενιάκους; Theoph., 500.13–14.

¹⁰⁵ For the system of recruitment in the *themes*, see 2.4 above.

¹⁰⁶ τῷ δὲ Φεβρουαρίῳ μηνὶ δύο Χριστιανῶν ἐκ Βουλγαρίας φυγόντων, ἐμήνυσαν τῷ βασιλεῖ Κροῦμμον λοχῆσαι σπεύδοντα τοὺς ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ ἀθρόως; Theoph., 500.2–4.

¹⁰⁷ καὶ τῇ ε΄ τοῦ μηνὸς ἐξῆλθεν ὁ βασιλεὺς τῆς πόλεως, καὶ θεοῦ προνοίᾳ ἄπρακτος ἀνέστρεψε Κροῦμμος οὐκ ὀλίγους ἀποβαλὼν; Theoph., 500.4–6.

Constantinople and visiting the monastery of St Tarasios on the occasion of a service in memory of the late patriarch on February 25.¹⁰⁸

There can be no doubt that Theophanes exaggerates the importance of Michael's victory. The scanty evidence seems to suggest that his forces defeated a small raiding party, possibly the vanguard of the main Bulgar army operating in Thrace under Krum. The emperor then went on to reinforce the garrison of Adrianople, an indication that Bulgar raids had penetrated Thrace as far as the environs of that city. This was the first victory against the Bulgars in almost two years and, naturally, court propaganda portrayed it as proof of God's favour to Michael and his regime. In a triumphal mood, the emperor returned to Constantinople, where he celebrated the feast of St Tarasios along with his success by plating the late patriarch's tomb with 95 pounds of silver.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, for all its bluster, this campaign did little harm to the Bulgars who seem to have continued operating in Thrace throughout the spring.¹¹⁰

Not long after, perhaps around April, the *peratic* armies arrived in Thrace. Even without the *tagmata*, which were still in Constantinople, the force assembled was one of the largest the empire had put into the field in recent years. It may be estimated that some 10,000–15,000 *thematic* troops, including those commanded by Aplakes, were now stationed at major base camps, strategically located for expeditions aimed against the Bulgars. Early in the year and in districts that had been extensively devastated by enemy raids, such as Thrace, provisions were particularly difficult to secure and this must have placed very clear limits on the duration of the expedition. Thus, once assembled, the Byzantine army had to proceed immediately against the enemy because no area could support it for more than a few days.

At the beginning of May, Michael set out for Thrace with the imperial guard regiments and his wife, Prokopia, who accompanied him as far as Heraclea.¹¹¹ However, it is clear that from the outset all was not well with the morale of the *tagmata*. A solar eclipse on May 4 was taken as a bad omen and only lavish largesses could contain the troops' anxieties.¹¹² To make matters

¹⁰⁸ ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς τὴν Ἀδριανούπολιν καταλαβὼν καὶ διευθετήσας τὰ κατ' αὐτὴν ἀνέστρεψε μετὰ χαρᾶς...; Theoph., 500.6–10; Mango and Scott 1997, 662 n. 2. For the cult of Tarasios, see *Vita Tarasii*, 25–27 and c. 64–66. For the location of the monastery (on the Bosphoros), see Janin 1975, 481–482.

¹⁰⁹ Theoph., 500.7–10; Treadgold 1988, 185; Korres 1996, 45.

¹¹⁰ *Vita Niceph.*, 163.4–6.

¹¹¹ Theoph., 500.14–16; Scriptor incertus, 336.22–337.2.

¹¹² Theoph., 500.18–20; Scriptor incertus, 337.2–3. The date of the eclipse given in the chronicle is correct; see Oppolzer 1962, 194.

worse, Prokopia gave a speech urging the army to keep Michael safe in battle, which reportedly provoked the troops to ridicule and curse the emperor.¹¹³ A few days later Michael and the *tagmata* joined up with the *thematic* armies near Adrianople. The Byzantine army is now likely to have numbered some 20,000 troops altogether. In spite of this, it appears that the emperor was not yet resolved on a specific course of action. As a result of his indecision, the army kept moving around Thrace for some two weeks without taking any action against the enemy—a fact remarked on by contemporaries with some astonishment.¹¹⁴

Meanwhile, the troops had nearly exhausted their supplies, and were soon reduced to pillaging the Thracian countryside. According to Theophanes, who surely exaggerates, the local community suffered considerably at the hands of poorly disciplined soldiers who were venting their frustrations on the peasantry and their meagre possessions.¹¹⁵ Finally, the imperial forces encamped at a hilly area overlooking the plain, possibly the Derventski Heights, northwest of Adrianople.¹¹⁶ Beyond that point, on the new Bulgar buffer zone, Krum was amassing his own troops. Though there is no figure in the sources, it is clear that his army was substantially smaller than that of the Byzantines, perhaps 6,000–7,000 men in all. The bulk of the army consisted of light cavalry units and a predominantly Slav infantry. The *khan* himself led an elite force of heavily-armoured horsemen.

At the beginning of June, Krum set out for the frontier. Shortly afterwards he established his camp at Versinikia, some 40 km (30 *semeia*) from the imperial forces, and waited, since it was clear that his army was outnumbered.¹¹⁷ At that point, some of the Byzantine commanders, among them Aplakes, urged the emperor to attack, pointing out that now they had the enemy before them, on lower ground and in the open, and that Byzantine order and discipline always gave them a strategic advantage over the Bulgars in such a situation.¹¹⁸ More importantly, provisions had nearly run out, and

¹¹³ Scriptor incertus, 337.4–6.

¹¹⁴ ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς περιπόλευε τὴν Θράκην σὺν τοῖς στρατηγοῖς καὶ τοῖς στρατεύμασιν, μήτε κατὰ Μεσημβρίας ἀπερχόμενος, μηδ' ἄλλο τι τῶν ὀφειλόντων εἰς καθαίρεσιν ἐχθρῶν διαπρατόμενος...; Theoph., 500.21–23.

¹¹⁵ Theoph., 500.26–28.

¹¹⁶ Scriptor incertus, 338.15–17. For the Derventski Heights, close to the modern Turkish-Bulgarian border, see Soustal 1991, 55, 83.

¹¹⁷ Theoph., 500.28–32; Scriptor incertus, 337.9–11. One *semeion* was calculated as approximately 1,312 m.; *ODB* 2, 1373. Versinikia was located on the right bank of the Tundža, most likely between the Great Fence and the Derventski Heights. It cannot be safely identified with Malamirovo, as suggested by Beševliev 1981c, 134; see Soustal 1991, 346.

¹¹⁸ Theoph., 500.32–501.2; Haldon 2001, 76.

both men and animals in the Byzantine camp were feeling the strain of the heat of the midsummer.¹¹⁹ Any experienced commander would have realized that if the army remained inactive the poor conditions could undermine its morale and battlefield effectiveness. Nonetheless, Michael and most of his advisors were still wary of meeting the Bulgars in battle, and as a result, the two armies remained facing each other for another two weeks.¹²⁰ During that time, Krum tried to deny supplies to the Byzantines by disrupting the work of their forage parties. The tactics employed by the Bulgars are recorded by Skylitzes who talks about “continuous skirmishes and distance-shooting” prior to the battle.¹²¹

Michael’s latest demonstration of indecision contributed to the climate of dissatisfaction and insecurity in the Byzantine camp in Thrace, but also in the imperial capital. Thus, while the patriarch Nikephoros was performing a litany in the Church of the Holy Apostles, a group of iconoclast conspirators is said to have secretly prised open the door leading to the imperial mausoleum and made it open with a crash, as if by a divine miracle, claiming that they had seen the late Constantine V appear on horseback and ride off against the Bulgars.¹²² Eventually, they were arrested by the city *Prefect* who condemned them to be paraded in public proclaiming the reason for their punishment.¹²³ This episode, one may venture to suggest, had a background of social unrest to it which had been building up since the outbreak of the Lykaonian uprising, although Michael’s inability to deal with the heightening Bulgar pressure certainly intensified difficulties. The Bulgar operations in Thrace—one of the main grain-producing areas of the empire—appear to have disrupted the grain supply of the capital, and this may also have contributed to the unrest. To be sure, in his *Antirrheticus*, the patriarch Nikephoros indicates that during the reign of Michael I many in Constantinople complained about the price of grain and other necessities, remembering that under Constantine V, who had successfully defended the Thracian Plain, prices were much lower.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Scriptor incertus, 337.13–16.

¹²⁰ ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ὁ λαὸς τοῦ βασιλείως ἴσταντο καὶ αὐτοὶ παρατεταγμένοι ἕως ἡμερῶν ιε', μὴ τολμώντες ἀλλήλοις βαλεῖν χεῖρα; Scriptor incertus, 337.11–13; Theoph., 501.2–3.

¹²¹ ἀκροβολισμοὶ μὲν ἐγίνοντο συνεχεῖς καὶ ὅσον ἐν ἐκηβολίαις μάχαις καὶ ἐν πάσαις αὐταῖς ἐπικρατέστερα τὰ Ῥωμαίων ἐφαίνοντο...; Skylitzes, 6.86–88.

¹²² Theoph., 501.3–12; Rochow 1991, 314–315; Treadgold 1988, 186–187.

¹²³ Theoph., 501.12–27.

¹²⁴ Nikeph., *Antirrheticus*, iii, 492C and 493A; Alexander 1958, 123–124, 169–172. The price of grain fluctuated depending on weather and other factors affecting supply, such as war. In 766/7 60 *modioi* of wheat and 70 of barley could be bought for 1 *nomisma*; Nikeph., 85.16–19; Morrisson and Cheynet 2002, 720–721.

In Thrace, the two armies had kept their positions for some fifteen debilitating days, during which men and animals felt the strain of heat, anxiety and lack of supplies.¹²⁵ The situation was far worse in the Byzantine camp, and the *peratics*, who were unaccustomed to long service so far away from their homes, seem to have suffered the most. As a result, they became disorderly and openly showed apprehension at the possibility of a confrontation with Krum's forces. They are also reported to have complained against Michael.¹²⁶

Seeing the devastation of the Thracian countryside by the unruly *peratics*, the *strategos* of Thrace and Macedonia John Aplakes forced the issue. Around June 20, he sent a message to the emperor informing him that he would attack and would expect the rest of the army to follow. He is also said to have assured Michael that the Byzantines would win as they substantially outnumbered their enemy.¹²⁷ The other commanders, and even Michael's own advisors, seem to have supported this plan.¹²⁸ The emperor had no other choice but to agree. The attack was subsequently scheduled to begin on June 22.

The *Scriptor incertus de Leone* provides some information about the battlefield formation and tactics employed by the two sides at Versinikia that day. The Byzantines were arrayed in an extended line and on higher ground, which gave them an initial advantage.¹²⁹ Aplakes, with the Thracian and Macedonian contingents, was positioned on one wing, while Leo, with the *Anatolics* and the *Armeniacs* was probably on the other.¹³⁰ Michael I commanded the centre, made up of the *tagmata* along with the remaining *thematic* armies. The Bulgars, on the other hand, had confidence in their battle array because it was flexible.¹³¹ Krum may have put his most unreliable, Slav troops in the front to absorb the initial Byzantine attack, with his best and most mobile units in the flanks to encircle the foe. The elite heavily-armoured cavalry, which was probably positioned at the centre of a second line, would protect

¹²⁵ καὶ λοιπὸν ἐταλαιπωρήθησαν ἐν τῷ καύσωνι στήκοντες τοῦ θέρους ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς οἱ τε ἄνθρωποι καὶ τὰ κτήνη, καὶ ἦλθον εἰς ἀδυναμίαν πολλήν, προσδοκῶντας ὅτι οἱ Βούλγαροι εἶχον βαλεῖν χεῖρα, καὶ πάλιν οἱ Βούλγαροι ὁμοίως· καὶ ἦν ἰδεῖν αὐτοὺς ἐν ἀμυχανίᾳ πολλῇ; *Scriptor incertus*, 337.13–18.

¹²⁶ Skylitzes, 6.91–92.

¹²⁷ ... καὶ δηλοῖ τὸν βασιλεῖα “ἕως πότε στήκομεν καὶ ἀπολλύμεθα; ἐγὼ πρῶτος βάλλω χεῖρα ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ αὐτοὶ μετὰ προθυμίας ἐπεισέλθατε. καὶ ἔχομεν νικῆσαι· πλείους γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐσμέν δεκαπλασίων”; *Scriptor incertus*, 337.19–23.

¹²⁸ *Scriptor incertus*, 338.9–11; Skylitzes, 6.91–93.

¹²⁹ *Scriptor incertus*, 338.15–17.

¹³⁰ καὶ δὴ ὁ Ἀπλάκης ἦν ἐπὶ τὸ ἐν μέρος τῆς ἄκρας, ἔχων τοὺς Μακεδόνας καὶ τοὺς Θρακησιανούς...; *Scriptor incertus*, 337.18–19.

¹³¹ For the battle formations of the Bulgar army, see 2.2.1 above.

the mobile cavalry from counter-attacks, and—if possible—make a final charge to complete the enemy's discomfort.¹³²

As planned, Aplakes, with the troops under his command, launched the initial assault down the slopes of the ridge, driving back the Slav infantry opposite him.¹³³ At this point, the rest of the Byzantine army was supposed to join the Thracian and Macedonian contingents to prevent the Bulgars from regrouping and counter-charging and to complete the defeat. However, this did not happen.¹³⁴ In spite of Aplakes' initial success, the morale of the army was still very poor, and Michael may have hesitated to give the order for an all-out attack. As a result, the uncommitted Bulgar heavy cavalry centre rallied to the support of the troops in the front, who now counter-charged. This in turn allowed the Bulgar mobile cavalry on both wings to act more aggressively, sweeping into Aplakes' rear and completing an encircling movement. Surrounded and outnumbered, the Byzantines began to fall back and, in the end, were cut to pieces.¹³⁵ Aplakes himself was among the fallen, although some of his men were apparently able to make good their escape.¹³⁶

These developments caused the rest of the army to lose heart. As they watched the massacre of Aplakes' division on the one hand and the emperor hesitating to react on the other, some *peratic* troops, most prominently from the *Anatolikon*, abandoned their positions and turned to flight.¹³⁷ Seeing what was happening to his wing, and fearing that it would degenerate into a rout, the *strategos* of the *Anatolikon*, Leo, ordered his panicking troops to withdraw. With a high degree of probability, we may conjecture that his aim was to keep his own forces together in a coherent and tightly-disciplined division, thereby rendering them less vulnerable to a swift mounted Bulgar charge. Indeed, the troops under Leo seem to have withdrawn in order, but this was clearly not the case with the rest of the army: the *thematic* contingents in the centre were rapidly driven to panic and all semblance of cohe-

¹³² Nicolle 1996, 105–107.

¹³³ καὶ ἀρξάμενος τοῦ πολέμου συνεχύθησαν ἐπ' αὐτὸν οἱ Βούλγαροι, καὶ οἱ Θράκης ἤρξαντο κόπτειν αὐτούς; Scriptor incertus, 337.23–338.2; Skylitzes, 6.4–9.

¹³⁴ καὶ λοιπὸν τῆς μάχης ἀρξαμένης οὐκ ἦλθον εἰς βοήθειαν οἱ λοιποὶ λαοί...; Scriptor incertus, 338.2–3; Theoph., 501.27–33. For the battle, see Haldon 2001, 76–78; Treadgold 1988, 187–188; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 134–135; Zachopoulos 1993.

¹³⁵ καὶ καταλειφθέντες μόνοι οἱ τοῦ Απλακίου, καὶ μὴ ἰσχύοντες ἀντιστῆναι, ἤρξαντο κόπτεσθαι καὶ αὐτοί; Scriptor incertus, 338.5–6.

¹³⁶ Scriptor incertus, 338.13–15.

¹³⁷ ...ἀλλὰ δειλιάσαντες ἔδωκαν εἰς τροπήν, πρῶτον τὸ θέμα τῶν ἀνατολικῶν; Scriptor incertus, 338.3–4; Theoph., 501.31–32.

sion was lost as they began to flee. Even the emperor and his elite guards appear to have retreated in some confusion.¹³⁸

Krum seems to have thought at first that the Byzantines, in classic steppe style, had feigned retreat in the hope of drawing the Bulgars out in disorder and then counter-attacking.¹³⁹ But when he realized that the flight was genuine he began the pursuit.¹⁴⁰ The “Scriptor” gives a graphic, rhetorical description of the flight: seized with panic, the fleeing Byzantines trampled each other, and every time they heard the hooves or feet of their comrades behind them they thought it was the Bulgars, inciting them to run even faster until many of the horses, left weak from lack of water and fodder, fell and died.¹⁴¹ The soldiers continued their flight on foot, casting aside their arms and armour which were collected by the Bulgars.¹⁴² The latter, tired from the confrontation and the long wait before it, do not seem to have pressed the pursuit beyond the imperial encampment itself.¹⁴³ They captured the baggage train, which was abandoned as the various divisions and units withdrew, and turned back to their own camp.¹⁴⁴

Later claims that casualties were very high seem largely exaggerated, and the evidence suggests, on the contrary, that overall losses were, in fact, relatively light.¹⁴⁵ To be certain, the elite guard and the *Anatolics* under Leo escaped unscathed and marched back to Constantinople.¹⁴⁶ Some Byzantines, apparently disorderly infantrymen separated from their cavalry support, are reported to have taken refuge in nearby *kastra* that were later captured by Krum’s forces.¹⁴⁷ The actual losses incurred during the battle affected only the Thracian and Macedonian units and may have amounted to some 2,000–

¹³⁸ Scriptor incertus, 338.6–8.

¹³⁹ καὶ τραπέντων αὐτῶν ἐλογίζοντο ὅτι οὐκ ἔφυγον ἀλλ’ ὀπισθοπόδησαν καὶ τροποῦνται αὐτούς· καὶ εὐθέως οὐ κατεδίωξαν αὐτούς; Scriptor incertus, 338.17–19; Theoph., 501.32–34; Theoph. cont., 15.9–12; Haldon 2001, 77.

¹⁴⁰ Scriptor incertus, 338.19–22; Theoph., 501.34–35; Theoph. cont., 15.13–15; Skylitzes, 6.13–15.

¹⁴¹ αὐτοὶ δὲ φεύγοντες ἀλλήλους συνεπάτουν, καὶ ὁ ἔμπροσθεν φεύγων τὸν ὀπίσω οὐ κατενόει· ἀκούων γὰρ τὸν κρότον τῶν ποδῶν τῶν ἵππων ἔλεγεν ὅτι ὑπὸ τῶν πολεμίων καταδιώκεται, καὶ ἕως οὗ ὁ ἵππος πεσὼν ἀπέθανεν, οὐκ εὐμενίδη ἕκαστος τοῦ φεύγειν; Scriptor incertus, 338.22–339.4; Treadgold 1988, 187; Haldon 2001, 77.

¹⁴² Scriptor incertus, 339.4–11. As shown in 1.2 above, the “Scriptor” consciously modelled his description of the flight of the Byzantine troops at Versinikia on that given in the *Chronicle of 811*, which he had at his disposal.

¹⁴³ Scriptor incertus, 339.14–17.

¹⁴⁴ Theoph., 501.35–502.1.

¹⁴⁵ Theoph., 501.35; Theoph. cont., 15.14–15; Skylitzes, 6.17–19.

¹⁴⁶ Theoph., 502.1–10; Scriptor incertus, 339.12–13; Genesisios, 4.33–36.

¹⁴⁷ ἄλλοι δὲ καταφθανόμενοι εἰσήλθον εἰς κάστρα τινά, ὕστερον δὲ παρακαθίσαντος τοῦ Βουλγάρου καὶ παραλαβόντος πάντας; Scriptor incertus, 339.8–10.

3,000 men altogether. Apart from Aplakes, no senior military commander appears to have fallen.¹⁴⁸

Despite the fact that later sources accuse Leo the Armenian of deceiving Michael at Versinikia with the sole purpose of becoming emperor, the evidence of the more contemporary texts, particularly the *Scriptor incertus de Leone* which provides a fuller and somewhat more balanced version of the battle than Theophanes, does not support this suggestion.¹⁴⁹ Although openly hostile to Leo, the “Scriptor” does not accuse him personally of deserting the field, but puts the blame on the *Anatolics* who, in turn, are accused of cowardice rather than deliberate treachery.¹⁵⁰ According to the same author, the emperor blamed the defeat on his own sins and those of his father-in-law, and remarked that despite their numerical superiority over the Bulgars, his troops were not willing to fight and all fled.¹⁵¹ However, Michael is never said to have accused or even suspected Leo of engineering the defeat.¹⁵²

There is little doubt that the flight of the *Anatolics* was genuine. In the first place, they (as indeed all the *peratics*) were unaccustomed to long service so far away from their homes, in addition to being apprehensive at the possibility of a confrontation with the Bulgars. To make matters worse, a substantial portion of their troops consisted either of raw recruits or troops entirely unfamiliar with the fighting methods of the Bulgars.¹⁵³ The appalling material conditions they encountered in Thrace, coupled with the poor leadership that led to the inactivity of such a large force for over a month, further undermined the morale, discipline and fighting capacity of the troops, who were seized with panic when they saw the weak Balkan units breaking up under Bulgar pressure. In order to prevent the complete disintegration of his division, Leo had no choice but to withdraw—a fact that was later used as the basis of accusations against him. To rebut these accusations, Leo commissioned a “sanitized” version of events at Versinikia which laid the blame for the defeat on the *tagmata* rather than the *peratics*. As has been shown, this official communiqué was reproduced by Theophanes and, later, by Genesisios and Theophanes continuatus.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁸ Skylitzes, 6.18–19 (πίπτουσι δὲ καὶ τῶν στρατηγῶν οὐκ ὀλίγοι), is clearly exaggerating.

¹⁴⁹ For a different opinion, see Bury 1912, 352 n. 1; also Runciman 1930, 62; Browning 1965, 397–398; Beševliev 1981a, 253–254; Treadgold 1988, 186.

¹⁵⁰ *Scriptor incertus*, 338.3–4.

¹⁵¹ *Scriptor incertus*, 339.21–340.4; Theoph., 502.2.

¹⁵² For a discussion, see Turner 1990, 193–195.

¹⁵³ Haldon 2001, 77. For the new recruits, see *Scriptor incertus*, 336.17–19.

¹⁵⁴ εἰσὶ δ' οἱ καὶ τὰς δυνάμεις μᾶλλον τῷ Λέοντι διδάσαι διασῶσαι καὶ καρτερῶς ἀγωνίσασθαι, τῶν βασιλικῶν ταγμάτων ἐθελοκακησάντων καὶ τὴν οἰκείαν προσδεδοκότων

The sources provide contradictory accounts about events immediately following the battle of Versinikia.¹⁵⁵ One thing we can say for certain: unrest festered among the frustrated and demoralized *peratic* troops, some of whom turned openly against Michael.¹⁵⁶ Leo certainly shared this resentment and may have let it run its course, but it is unlikely that he had stirred up the troops, as iconodule authors suggest.¹⁵⁷ Instead, it appears that he had little control over the unruly *peratics*, a fact that forced the emperor to leave them outside the city.¹⁵⁸ Being the highest-ranking *strategos*, Leo was designated commander-in-chief and was subsequently instructed to maintain the army in as good condition as possible so as to prevent any further plundering by the enemy.¹⁵⁹

Michael returned to the capital on June 24, and reportedly closed the gates to deter unruly soldiers from causing damage to property or harming civilians.¹⁶⁰ A council was immediately summoned in which the emperor, utterly demoralized, suggested that he should put the crown aside. However, his wife and closest advisors were reluctant to lose their influence, and opposed the abdication.¹⁶¹ In the end, the emperor put off abdicating until two ominous developments outside the city made such a decision inevitable. Firstly, the Bulgars were ready to follow up their victory at Versinikia with a determined assault on Adrianople. At the same time, Michael's hasty return to the capital had intensified the mood of unrest among the *peratics* who were still stationed in the Constantinopolitan hinterland. Frustrated by the fact that he had deserted his men like a coward, and hearing of the imminent Bulgar attack, the troops voiced their desire for an energetic soldier-emperor by acclaiming Leo.¹⁶² The other senior commanders did their utmost to persuade the latter to accept, but Leo is said to have protested his loyalty to

παράταξιν, ἀλλ' οὐ τοῦ κατὰ τὸν Λέοντα μέρους; Theoph. cont., 15.18–21; Genesisios, 4. 28–32; Theoph., 500.32–501.3, 502.3–6.

¹⁵⁵ For a detailed survey of the sources, see Zachopoulos 1993, 76–90.

¹⁵⁶ Theoph. cont., 16.4–6.

¹⁵⁷ Turner 1990, 195–196.

¹⁵⁸ Genesisios, 4.33–36; Theoph. cont., 16.2–4.

¹⁵⁹ Theoph., 502.6; Skylitzes, 6.19–7.22; Theoph., cont., 17.7–11; Genesisios, 4.45–5.55; *Vita Niceph.*, 162.31–163.2 For the ranking of the *strategos* of the *Anatolics*, see Oikonomidès, *Listes*, 47, 101.

¹⁶⁰ Theoph., 502.7; Scriptor incertus, 339.12–14.

¹⁶¹ Theoph., 502.8–10; Treadgold 1988, 188.

¹⁶² ... καὶ μουλτεῦσαντες ἐξευφήμησαν τὸν αὐτὸν Λέοντα εἰς βασιλέα; Scriptor incertus, 340.9–10; Theoph., 502.12–15; Genesisios, 4.36–39.

Michael.¹⁶³ In the end, he accepted on the grounds of the great threat posed by Krum's armies, and early in July he set out for the imperial capital.¹⁶⁴

Michael and his advisors were still deliberating their next move when they received this news.¹⁶⁵ The commanders of the *tagmata*, who had so far remained loyal to the emperor, now seemed unwilling to challenge the *peratic* armies and their imperial candidate. The same is true of the Senate and, no doubt, Michael himself. Their decision to begin preparations for Leo's accession emphasizes the critical political role that Asiatic troops could play when stationed, even temporarily, in Thrace: their power over the government was much greater there than when they were stationed far away from the imperial capital, in Asia Minor and Anatolia.¹⁶⁶ Accordingly, on July 11 Leo was proclaimed emperor at the plain of the *Tribunalion*, where he had encamped, and the following day was crowned by the patriarch in St Sophia.¹⁶⁷ Michael had himself tonsured and retired to the Church of the Virgin of the Pharos, along with his family.¹⁶⁸ He was later transported to the island of Prote, where he died in 844 after having taken the monastic name of Athanasios.¹⁶⁹ His three sons were castrated and sent to monasteries in the Princes Islands, while the empress was confined in the nunnery of St Prokopia in Constantinople.¹⁷⁰

Leo V, then, came to power as a result of a spontaneous mutiny of angry *peratic* officers and soldiers, rather than an organized conspiracy against Michael I. The *strategos* of the *Anatolikon* did not instigate this mutiny, but wisely let it run its course, realizing the strong political role that Asiatic troops could play when concentrated in Thrace. Their military power and subsequent ability to intervene in Constantinople, coupled with the growing Bulgar threat which contributed to the climate of insecurity in the capital, caused the Senate, the Church and the *tagmata* to accept Leo's acclamation,

¹⁶³ Theoph., 502.12–19; Genesisios, 4.41–42; Turner 1990, 195–196.

¹⁶⁴ Theoph., 502.19–22.

¹⁶⁵ Scriptor incertus, 340.4–10.

¹⁶⁶ Kaegi 1981, 260–261. According to the author, this is one of the reasons why Leo V's "revolt" succeeded and that of Bardanes Tourkos (centred in Asia Minor) did not.

¹⁶⁷ Theoph., 502.22–25, 30–31; George Mon., 776.18–20; *Vita Niceph.*, 164.8–19; Scriptor incertus, 340.16–19; Genesisios, 14.13–15; Rochow 1991, 318. For the *Tribunalion*, see Janin 1964, 450.

¹⁶⁸ Theoph., 502.26–29; Scriptor incertus, 340.12–14. For the Church of the Virgin, see Janin 1975, 232–236.

¹⁶⁹ Theoph. cont., 19.21–22, 20–14; Skylitzes, 8.81–86; Grierson 1962, 19, 56. According to later sources, Leo provided Michael with a pension; Genesisios, 6.94; Theoph. cont., 19.22–20.1.

¹⁷⁰ *Vita Ignatii*, 492A–B; Scriptor incertus, 341.10–11; Theoph. cont., 20.2–5, 7–9; Bury 1912, 29–30. For the nunnery of St Prokopia, see Janin 1975, 442–443.

and Michael to agree to abdicate. Naturally, some of Leo's contemporaries may have considered his accession illegal; it is little wonder, therefore, that the official version of these events, commissioned by the new emperor in late 813 or early 814, and reproduced by Theophanes shortly afterwards, emphasizes Leo's loyalty to Michael I and presents the accession as a provident act of God.¹⁷¹

6.3 THE WAR IN LEO V'S REIGN

6.3.1 *Byzantium under Leo V (813–820)*

Leo V was the first emperor to have been chosen from the ranks of the army since Leo III almost a century earlier (717) and, naturally, enjoyed the confidence and support of his troops for the better part of his reign. It is not a coincidence that while the period between *ca.* 780 and 813 was one of the most turbulent for the armies in the history of the Byzantine empire, during the reign of Leo not a single incident of military unrest is known to have occurred.¹⁷² This can be partly explained by the fact that, unlike some of his predecessors, Leo showed sensitivity to the feelings of his troops. Thus he avoided the unpopular and often frustrating long campaigns in the Balkans and the east which in the past had resulted in military dissatisfaction or rebellion, and may well have improved the conditions of service.¹⁷³ He took measures to rebuild the morale, discipline and fighting capacity of his troops, but more importantly, cultivated loyalty and maintained close ties with them (for instance, he is said to have supervised their training throughout his reign).¹⁷⁴

Finally, Leo sought to establish tighter imperial controls over the army. To this end, he filled the empire's most important commands with men of his confidence. He thus appointed as *domestikos* of the *Exkoubitores* his friend Michael the Amorian, who had been serving under him as a leading officer (*komes tes kortes*) in the *Anatolikon*.¹⁷⁵ Another former member of Tourkos'

¹⁷¹ Theoph., 500.32–501.3, 502.3–6.

¹⁷² Kaegi 1981, 254–261, esp. 254–256; Lemerle 1965, 228f, 283–284, has convincingly argued that the revolt of Thomas the Slav began after Leo's murder; for a different opinion, see Afinogenov 2001, 329–338; Treadgold 1979, 167; see also 8.2 below.

¹⁷³ καὶ περὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς δὲ καὶ ἡγεμονίας, οὐ τὰς πολιτικὰς δὴ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς στρατηγικὰς, διεπτόητο ἰσχυρῶς; Theoph. cont., 30.16–17.

¹⁷⁴ ... τὸν στρατιώτην τε ὄχλον γυμνάζων αὐτός...; Theoph. cont., 30.10.

¹⁷⁵ Both men had deserted Bardanes in mid-rebellion; Genesisios, 8.51–54, 9–10.1–3, 9.96–10.2, 17.44–4; Theoph. cont., 9.9–12, 23.21–24.1.

entourage, Thomas the Slav, was now appointed *tourmarches* of the *Phoid-eratoi*.¹⁷⁶ Leo also seems to have promoted to senior military commanders several Armenians, presumably trusted friends or kinsmen, including Manuel the *patrikios* and *strategos* of the *Anatolikon* (or the *Armeniakon*),¹⁷⁷ and a certain Olbianos who may have been appointed *strategos* of Macedonia, replacing John Aplakes.¹⁷⁸

At the same time, the new emperor tried to minimize the influence of Michael I's closest advisors in the capital. Stephanos, the *domestikos* of the *Scholai*, may have been forced into honorary retirement, while the *magistros* Theoktistos was apparently tonsured and confined to a monastery near Chalkedon.¹⁷⁹ It would be safe to infer that many others were, likewise, deposed. Still, most civil servants that had served under Michael, Leo seems to have left in office. A good example is Leo the *patrikios* and *sakellarios* who corresponded with Theodore of Stoudios between *ca.* 815 and 823.¹⁸⁰ Leo was an iconophile whose career in the civil service had started before 813, though he should probably not be identified with the eunuch from Sinope who was first appointed by Irene and then helped Nikephoros overthrow her.¹⁸¹ Much of the same is true about the *general logothetes*, Democharis who was still in office in early 821.¹⁸² It becomes evident, therefore, that most civil servants, including very high ones, went on serving despite dramatic changes in government and church doctrine.

This brings us to the problem of icon worship. On April 1, 815 the Church Council that met at St Sophia endorsed iconoclasm officially, recognized Constantine V's Council of Hieria of 754 as the seventh Ecumenical

¹⁷⁶ Theoph. cont., 52.10–11; Skylitzes, 13.25–28; Oikonomides, *Listes*, 55, 59. Thomas had remained loyal to Bardanes; he was either exiled by Nikephoros I or fled to the Caliphate to escape arrest. He may have returned to Byzantium *ca.* 812; Lemerle 1965, 283ff.; *PmbZ*, #8459.

¹⁷⁷ Theoph. cont, 110.3; Skylitzes, 65.54 (*strategos* of the *Anatolics*); Theoph. cont., 24.2–4, 149.5 (*strategos* of the *Armeniacs*); Genesis, 36.1–2; Michael Syr., III, 36; *PmbZ*, #4707.

¹⁷⁸ For an early ninth-century seal of Olbianos, see Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1991, 43.31. Other relatives of Leo in the government include his nephew Gregorios Pterotos, and Bardas, *strategos* of the *Thrace*.

¹⁷⁹ For Theoktistos, see Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, I, 442–443, and II, no. 485; *Vita Theod. Stoud.* B, 220A. For a possible identification of the *magistros* Stephanos in one of Theodore's letters (I, no. 420) with the *domestikos* in question, see Treadgold 1988, 198 and n. 265.

¹⁸⁰ Theod. Stoud., *Epist.*, II, nos. 86, 293, 400, 478, 521; Efthymiadis 1995, 157–158.

¹⁸¹ For the eunuch, surnamed Klokas, see Theoph., 477.1f and Kedrenos, II, 29.3–15. The identification is impossible because Theodore's correspondent had a son.

¹⁸² Ignatios, *Correspondence*, nos. 21–24, 178–179; Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, II, no. 426; Efthymiadis 1995, 162–163.

Council, and accordingly repudiated that of 787 in Nicaea.¹⁸³ In the place of the patriarch Nikephoros, who had already abdicated, Leo appointed the *spatharokandidatos* Theodotos Melissenos, son of the *patrikios* Michael, a brother-in-law of Constantine V.¹⁸⁴ The renewal of iconoclasm divided the society and stirred up violent controversy, but this does not seem to have destabilized Leo's regime. Having ensured the support of the army and the tolerance, if not co-operation, of the civil service, he was able to pursue his ecclesiastical policy with evident success, even though he faced an extremely determined opposition led by the patriarch Nikephoros and Theodore of Stoudios. Leo tried every means in his power to win over the orthodox.¹⁸⁵ Church officials were only asked to hold communion with the patriarch Theodotos, and most eventually obeyed.¹⁸⁶ The enforcement of iconoclasm was erratic and Leo restricted his penalties to those who resisted actively, among them Joseph of Thessalonike, Michael, ex-bishop of Synada, Niketas of Medikion, Theophanes the Confessor, and a large number of clergymen and nuns; most of them were whipped and exiled, and only two Stoudite monks are known to have been martyred for the cause.¹⁸⁷ However, iconophiles looking back over the period from 815 to 842 had a strong interest in exaggerating the opposition to iconoclasm, and an incentive to disguise the degree of support iconoclasm enjoyed among the clergy and the populace at large.¹⁸⁸ Thus, behind the hostile accounts of the *Lives* and the widespread rewriting of history after 843 may have been a great deal more genuine support for iconoclasm than imagined, especially during the reign of Leo V, when peace and stability were temporarily restored in the empire.¹⁸⁹

The obvious question to be posed is "why did Leo ban icons in the first place"? It is important to emphasize that to the Byzantine mind correct observance of religious doctrine was closely associated with military and political

¹⁸³ For the decree of the Council of 815, see the edition in Alexander 1953, 58–66; Alexander 1958, 242ff.; also *Vita Niceph.*, 202.6–205.5; Scriptor incertus, 360.15–361.10; *Vita Nicetae Med.*, c. 37. Treadgold 1988, 207–214, esp. 212–213; Thümmel 2005, 231–245; Korres 1996, 98–143.

¹⁸⁴ Scriptor incertus, 359.20–360.8; *Vita Niceph.*, 202.30f; Genesisios, 13.79–82; *PmbZ*, #7954.

¹⁸⁵ See *Vita Macarii*, c. 10, where Leo is said to have tried to win over his opponents by promises and bribes.

¹⁸⁶ ... πᾶσα ψυχὴ σχεδὸν ὄκλασε, χειρόγραφα τοῖς ἀσεβέσι δῶσασα; Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, I, no. 112; Treadgold 1988, 213; Alexander 1958, 141–142.

¹⁸⁷ Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, II, nos., 186, 441; *Vita Theod. Stoud. A*, 204D; *Vita Theod. Stoud. B*, 300D; *Synaxarion CP*, 353–356. For the individual cases of persecution, see Bury 1912, 71–76; Alexander 1958, 140–145.

¹⁸⁸ Whittow 1996, 146–159; Bury 1912, 74–75.

¹⁸⁹ Brubaker and Haldon 2010, 650–664.

success. The belief that setbacks at all levels, most notably defeat at the hands of unbelievers, were allowed by God was widespread. Such defeat was seen as punishment for sins committed or heretical views held.¹⁹⁰ The principal charge of the iconoclasts in the 720s, at a time when the empire was beset by grave external threats, was that the Byzantine attitude to images amounted to idolatry that violated the Second Commandment.¹⁹¹ In the circumstances of early ninth-century defeat and insecurity, the veneration of icons was—likewise—identified by many as the cause of divine displeasure.¹⁹² The fact that every ruler since the restoration of icons in 787 had been defeated by the Bulgars or Arabs and had come to a bad end, either slain in battle or deposed, seemed to confirm this view.¹⁹³

It is likely, therefore, that Leo perceived a connection between iconoclasm, victory and imperial longevity; as a soldier-emperor intent on reviving the power and prestige of his office, he undoubtedly looked up to the iconoclasts Leo III and Constantine V who had enjoyed long and successful reigns, and went as far as to rename his son Constantine in order to emulate them.¹⁹⁴ However, the decision to prohibit icons also represented a reassertion of imperial authority. It was a statement by Leo that he held the position of supremacy in mediating between God and men, and that, consequently, bishops, monks and icons themselves were no longer to be the dominant force they had become under Irene and Michael I, but were to come under the control, and if necessary, the ban of the emperor.¹⁹⁵

The Bulgar threat played a key role in the re-establishment of iconoclasm as an imperially-sanctioned doctrine. Certainly, by the time Leo initiated his iconoclastic programme, the immediate danger had been averted and, in fact, the imperial forces had already regained the strategic initiative on the Balkan front.¹⁹⁶ Yet in December 825 when the emperor took the first indirect step in this direction by renaming his son Constantine (and therefore imitating

¹⁹⁰ Mango 1977a, 1–6, esp. at 2.

¹⁹¹ Exodus 20: 4–5. For the controversial words *proskynesis* (adore) and *latreusis* (worship), see Cormack 1985, 109.

¹⁹² Cormack 1985, 95–117; Barnard 1977, 7–13; Whittow 1996, 140–142.

¹⁹³ ... διότι ἐλέγομεν αὐτῶ περι τῶν εἰκόνων, ὅτι κακῶς προσκυνοῦνται, καὶ ὅτι διὰ τοῦτο τὰ ἔθνη κυριεύουσιν ἡμῶν; Scriptor incertus, 359.11–13.

¹⁹⁴ ... ἔστειπεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ μικρὸν ὄντα, καὶ ἐπονομαζόμενον Συμβάτην, ἐψεύσατο λέγων ὅτι Κωνσταντῖνος καλεῖται. καὶ σαρεύσας τὸν περισωθέντα λαὸν ... ποιήσας αὐτοὺς εὐφημήσαι Λέοντα καὶ Κωνσταντῖνον, μιμούμενος τοὺς πρόην βασιλεύσαντες Λέοντα καὶ Κωνσταντῖνον τοὺς Ἰσαύρους ὧν καὶ τὴν αἵρεσιν ἀνανεώσατο, βουλόμενος ζῆσαι ἔτη πολλά, ὡς καὶ αὐτοί, καὶ γενέσθαι περίφημον; Scriptor incertus, 346.3–10, 349.7–15; Mango 1977a, 5.

¹⁹⁵ Cormack 1985, 115–116.

¹⁹⁶ For these events, see 7.1 below.

the Isaurians), the threat posed by Krum's armies was still at its height and the Byzantines desperately cast around for a means to regain divine favour. Krum's sudden death in April 814 provided him with the ideological justification to proceed: it was recognized by contemporaries as an "unexpected miracle" which was naturally portrayed by court propaganda as proof of God's support for Leo and his government.¹⁹⁷ As it turned out, iconoclasm helped raise morale in the army, where it evidently enjoyed widespread support, and the subsequent victories against the Bulgars enabled Leo to portray his regime as a return to the era of iconoclast success in the eighth century.

For most of his reign, Leo faced no major opposition from the Arabs. The continuing internal divisions in the Caliphate seem to have discouraged them from mounting large-scale operations against Byzantium, and only the Paulican refugees at Argaun are reported to have raided into the *Armeniac* and *Anatolic themes*.¹⁹⁸ The conclusion of the peace treaty with the Bulgars allowed Leo to pursue a more aggressive policy in the east. Thus around 816 a Byzantine fleet raided the port of Damietta in Egypt.¹⁹⁹ In addition, the emperor led several campaigns on the eastern frontier, and in 817 is reported to have captured and rebuilt Kamachon in the upper Euphrates.²⁰⁰ Although not particularly impressive, these victories restored Byzantine self-confidence and helped Leo associate himself with the traditional image of the successful iconoclast emperor. Meanwhile in the west, relations with the Franks remained peaceful, despite a local dispute that arose in Dalmatia.²⁰¹ Perhaps more disturbing for the emperor was the fact that Pope Paschal I (817–824) refused to receive envoys from the iconoclast patriarch Theodotos Melissenos, and corresponded on friendly terms with Theodore of Studios, who tried to secure his support.²⁰²

6.3.2 *The Bulgar Siege of Constantinople*

Krum's movements following the battle of Versinikia are reported in brief notices included in the *Chronographia* of Theophanes and the account of Leo V written by the "Scriptor incertus". For the first few days, the *khan* devoted

¹⁹⁷ Scriptor incertus, 348.16–18.

¹⁹⁸ Peter of Sicily, c. 178; Photios, *Diegesis*, c. 138 and 217 n. 17; Kennedy 1986, 152–154.

¹⁹⁹ al-Maqrīzī, *Khītat*, Part 2, c. 61.9, 40; Vasiliev 1968, II/2, 261–262.

²⁰⁰ Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, II, no. 297; Step'annos of Taron, 107; Samuel Anec'i, 421; Treadgold 1984b, 219 n. 28. The Byzantines had taken Kamachon in 812, but by 817 it had evidently been recaptured or destroyed by the forces of Omar, *emir* of Melitene.

²⁰¹ ARF, 145, 146; *Annales Fuldenses*, 20; *Vita Hludow.*, 621; Treadgold 1988, 219.

²⁰² Theod. Stud., *Epist.*, II, nos. 271–272.

himself to capturing and destroying several *kastra* in Thrace in which disorderly Byzantine troops had taken refuge after the battle.²⁰³ These may have included Skoutarion, Boukelon, Tzoida and Versinikia, whose fall is commemorated by triumphal inscriptions found in or near the Bulgar capital.²⁰⁴ At the same time he set about organizing a major assault on Adrianople.

Although strongly fortified and defended by a substantial force, Adrianople was swollen with refugees from other parts of Thrace, and Krum had good reason to believe that if he cut off its supplies the capital of the Macedonian *theme* would not hold out for long.²⁰⁵ Accordingly, in the beginning of July his army encircled the city. The Bulgars do not seem to have made a serious attempt to capture it at this stage. Instead, they severed its communications and tried to demoralize the besieged population by devastating the fertile districts around the city. At this point, the *khan* must have received the news of Leo's acclamation by the *peratics*.²⁰⁶ Before long, the *strategos* of the *Anatolics* and the rebellious troops were on their way to the imperial capital, leaving the Constantinopolitan hinterland, where they had been stationed, virtually undefended. Realizing that the Byzantines were no longer capable of active resistance, Krum decided to take his chances. He left his brother with his own force to besiege Adrianople, and on July 12 or 13 set out for the imperial capital.²⁰⁷

Leo had already been crowned by the patriarch when he received word that Krum was advancing on Constantinople. Although the Byzantine forces inside the city substantially outnumbered their enemy, morale was extremely low and any military undertaking would have involved a great deal of risk. Besides, Leo, whose position was still uncertain, needed the Asiatic forces in the capital to establish his authority firmly, balance the power of the *tagmata*, and suppress potential uprisings. Having thus decided to remain behind the walls, the emperor is said to have spent the next few days on inspection tours of the city's defences in an attempt to stiffen the morale of the troops, who had good reason to feel apprehensive when they heard that the Bulgar *khan* was advancing against them.²⁰⁸

Constantinople seemed to be adequately prepared to withstand a siege. What then can be learned from the sources about the *khan's* intentions?

²⁰³ Scriptor incertus, 339.8–10.

²⁰⁴ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 2, 30, 31 and 33 (possibly Tzoida). See also Borisov 2009, for signs of Bulgar occupation of the fort of *Kastra Rubra* (Kastrazarva).

²⁰⁵ For the refugees from Thrace, see 6.2.1 above.

²⁰⁶ See 6.2.2 above.

²⁰⁷ Theoph., 503.5–7.

²⁰⁸ Theoph., 502.31–503.5.

Although an ambitious and capable military commander, Krum had not planned an expedition against the imperial capital in the first place; this had only been made possible following the battle of Versinikia and the subsequent internal turbulence within Byzantium. Without the advantage of a supporting fleet, and no more than 5,000–6,000 men at his disposal, he had no realistic chance of bringing any serious military pressure to bear on the defenders.²⁰⁹ In addition, the problem of provisioning his army would have placed very clear limits on the duration of the expedition. Therefore, the limited resources available to Krum might suggest that his principal aim was not to capture Constantinople, but to intimidate the Byzantines and extract the maximum political and ideological benefits from a siege. Specifically, the *khan* may have hoped to exact a peace treaty on favourable terms, and if Leo had no intention of negotiating, to devastate the unprotected Constantinopolitan suburbs, carry off prisoners and booty, and, on his way back, to capture and destroy as many *kastra* as possible, thereby exposing the fertile Thracian Plain to future Bulgar attacks.

The *khan* closed in on the city on 17 July and encamped near the monastery of St Anargyroi on the hill of Kosmidion by the Golden Horn.²¹⁰ First, he paraded with his army from one side of the land walls to the other to impress and demoralize the Byzantines.²¹¹ In front of the Golden Gate, he sacrificed men and animals, and then proceeded to the coastal meadow where he performed a pagan ritual.²¹² The daunting sight evidently impressed itself on the citizens of the capital. The author of the *Scriptor incertus de Leone*, drawing on an informed source, later recorded that Krum waded into the Sea of Marmara and sprinkled his men, then marched in state through a line of concubines who praised and glorified him.²¹³ His troops encircled the city and dug a ditch around the land walls to prevent sallies from the Byzantines,

²⁰⁹ For example, in 626 the Avars reportedly besieged Constantinople with some 80,000 troops; George of Pisidia, *Bellum Avaricum*, II.217–219.

²¹⁰ *Scriptor incertus*, 342.1–2. Theophanes, 503.7–9, places his arrival six days after Leo's assumption of the imperial office. Most scholars have taken that to mean after his proclamation rather than his coronation, that is, on 17 July; Beševliev 1981a, 254; Korres 1996, 81. For the Bulgar camp at Kosmidion, see *Scriptor incertus*, 343.3–4; for the monastery, see Janin 1975, 287–289.

²¹¹ Theoph., 503.8–10.

²¹² ... καὶ ποιήσας ὁ Κροῦμμος θυσίαν κατὰ τὸ ἔθος αὐτοῦ ἔξωθεν τῆς Χρυσῆς πόρτης ἔθυσεν ἀνθρώπους καὶ κτήνη πολλά; *Scriptor incertus*, 342.2–4; Theoph., 503.10–12; Leo Gram., 207.12–15; George cont., 765.14–19; ... ἐνίκισ[ε]ν ὁ Κροῦμμος κὲ ἀπιλ[θεν].... ἐπίσι] εν [θ]υσίαν ἰς τὴν θα[λασσαν]; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 3b.

²¹³ καὶ εἰς τὸν αἰγιαλὸν τῆς θαλάσσης βρέξας τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ καὶ περικλυσάμενος, καὶ ραντίσας τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ, καὶ εὐφημισθεὶς ὑπ' αὐτῶν, διήλθεν μέσον τῶν παλλακίδων αὐτοῦ, προσκυνηθεὶς ὑπ' αὐτῶν καὶ δοξασθεὶς, καὶ ταῦτα θεωρούντων ἐκ τῶν τειχῶν πάντων...;

while the *khan* is reported to have requested the emperor to affix his spear to the Golden Gate, no doubt as a symbolic act of submission to Bulgar power.²¹⁴ When the proposal was refused, Krum retired to his tent.²¹⁵

The *khan's* strategy over the next few days was to bring steadily increasing psychological pressure to bear on the Byzantines. Hoping to force the emperor to negotiate, he sent a cavalry detachment to sack the outskirts of the imperial capital.²¹⁶ To heighten the impression as much as possible, he may have also ordered his troops to begin constructing siege engines out of timber stripped from buildings in the suburbs. Before long, he stated his demands. Theophanes refers to them in the vaguest of ways.²¹⁷ The *Scriptor incertus de Leone*, however, elaborates: the *khan* requested a substantial tribute (*pakta*) to be paid in gold, robes and maidens.²¹⁸ These terms were certainly more generous than those offered by Krum in 812, which included the recognition of his recent territorial gains in Thrace and an exchange of political refugees.²¹⁹ Krum may have realized two things by now: first, that a total Bulgar victory was in practice unattainable because of Constantinople's impregnable walls, and that minor victories, however wide-ranging, would not bring him closer to the achievement of a stable peace; second, that Leo could not expect to establish a secure regime, if he accepted a costly and humiliating agreement.²²⁰ In view of these considerations, Krum saw no alternative but to make concessions.

In an attempt to end the destruction of the Constantinopolitan suburbs which went on for several days, Leo eventually agreed to discuss the terms. In reality, he had no intention of negotiating with the *khan*, but hoped to lure him into a trap and assassinate him instead. The plot is described in detail by the "Scriptor": the emperor suggested that Krum come with three unarmed men to the coastal meadow near Blachernae, where he would arrive

Scriptor incertus, 342.4–9; Pseudo-Symeon, 612.16–10; Treadgold 1988, 200; Božilov and Gjuzelez 1999, 135; Philippou 2001, 88–89.

²¹⁴ ... ἤτήσατο τῷ βασιλεῖ πῆξαι τὸ δόρυ αὐτοῦ κατ' αὐτῆς τῆς Χρυσῆς πόρτης; Theoph., 503.12–13; *Scriptor incertus*, 342.10–12; Pseudo-Symeon, 612.12–13; Angelov *et al.* 1981, 135–136; Beševliev 1981c, 162.

²¹⁵ Theoph., 503.13–14.

²¹⁶ *Scriptor incertus*, 342.12–13.

²¹⁷ ... καὶ τῆς ἐπιζομένης αὐτῷ πολιορκίας ἀπογνοὺς ἐπὶ συμβάσεις τρέπεται καὶ περὶ εἰρήνης πειραστικούς λόγους ἐποιεῖτο; Theoph., 503.14–17.

²¹⁸ ... ἤρξατο ζητεῖν πάκτα χρυσοῦ καὶ ἱματισμῶν πολλὸν ἀριθμὸν, καὶ κοράσια ἐπίλεκτα ποσότητα τινά; *Scriptor incertus*, 342.13–15; Pseudo-Symeon, 612.14–16.

²¹⁹ See Theoph., 497.16–20.

²²⁰ Whittow 1996, 276–277.

by boat with three unarmed retainers of his own.²²¹ The night before the meeting, Leo secretly sent several armed men to a house at *ta Galles* outside the Gate of Blachernae, and instructed them to attack Krum when the sign was given by one of his attendants.²²² The next day Krum rode down to the shore, accompanied by his “*logothetes*” (obviously a translation of a high Bulgar title), Constantine Patzikos—a Byzantine deserter who had married Krum’s sister—and his son by her.²²³

Given the diplomatic context, it is likely that the title “*logothetes*” is used here for a senior official, quite possibly Dargamir, Krum’s chief envoy to Constantinople in the autumn of 812.²²⁴ On the other hand, nothing is known about Krum’s brother-in-law, Constantine, apart from what is reported in this confusing notice. He was, evidently, the son of a certain Patzikos (*tu Patzikou*), and had fled to Bulgaria “many years ago”.²²⁵ The flight must have taken place before 800; for in 813 the son that Constantine had by Krum’s sister must have been old enough (at least in his teens) to accompany his father on a campaign. The fact that Constantine was married into Krum’s family may further suggest that he had been a high Byzantine official or dignitary.²²⁶

In any event, although unaware of the ambush, Krum and his companions mistrusted the Byzantines and must have subsequently taken some basic precautions against them. Leo approached by boat with his retainers, among them the *komes ton teichon* John Heksaboulios.²²⁷ As they landed, Krum dismounted and sat on the ground, while his nephew, who stood nearby, held his horse ready, “saddled and bridled”.²²⁸ Just as they had started conversing, Heksaboulios, who must have been wearing a helmet, suddenly uncovered

²²¹ Scriptor incertus, 342.15–19; Pseudo-Symeon, 612.16–20.

²²² Scriptor incertus, 342.20–343.2; Pseudo-Symeon, 612.20–613.3. For the exact location of *ta Galles*, see Janin 1964, 458.

²²³ ... κατήλθεν ὁ Κροῦμμος ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν κατὰ τὴν συνταγὴν μετὰ ἄλλων τριῶν, τὸν λογοθέτην αὐτοῦ καὶ Κωνσταντῖνον τὸν λεγόμενον τοῦ Πατζικού, φυγόντος εἰς Βουλγαρίαν πρὸ πολλῶν ἐτῶν, ἔχοντα καὶ τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ὄντα ἐξ ἀδερφῆς τοῦ Κροῦμμου; Scriptor incertus, 343.4–8; Pseudo-Symeon, 613.5–8.

²²⁴ For whom see Theoph., 497.16–18. The term “*logothetes*” is usually identified with either the *ičirgu boila* or the *kavkhan*; see Zlatarski 1918, 273 n. 1; Browning 1965, 400; Beševliev 1981a, 350; Beševliev 1981c, 163; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 136; Gjuzelev 2007, 91–92.

²²⁵ Scriptor incertus, 343.6–7.

²²⁶ Browning 1988, 35, thinks he may have fled to Bulgaria after the battle of Markellai in 792; see also Winkelmann 1987, 159.

²²⁷ Later appointed *logothetes* of the *dromos*; Genesisios, 4.45–5.55, 15.60–16.71, 31.54–59.

²²⁸ Scriptor incertus, 343.13–15; Pseudo-Symeon, 613.13–15.

his head, thus giving the signal for the attack.²²⁹ This gesture seems to have alarmed Krum and his men who had been keeping a vigilant eye upon the Byzantines. The *khan* was instantly helped onto his horse and, as the ambushers rushed out from their hiding place, rode away towards the Bulgar camp at Kosmidion.²³⁰ Those watching from the walls are reported to have shouted, “The cross has conquered”, but by the time the would-be assassins had run to the spot, Krum had already made good his escape.²³¹ The Byzantines pursued the fleeing *khan* and shot arrows after him, which they thought had wounded him.²³² Then they fell upon his retainers, who must have also been trying to escape, killing the “*logothetes*” and capturing the other two.²³³

It may confidently be suggested that the *khan* had not been seriously wounded, if he had been hurt at all, for he campaigned energetically for another month, wreaking havoc on the Constantinopolitan hinterland. Indeed, incensed at the treacherous attack, Krum sought to avenge himself upon whatever Byzantine property and subjects he could seize. The next day he sent a raiding party to lay waste the suburbs of the imperial capital. From their camp at Kosmidion, the Bulgars moved down the eastern shore of the Golden Horn, destroying houses, palaces and monasteries, as well as several sizeable churches that Irene, Nikephoros and Michael I had recently restored.²³⁴ They arrived at the suburban imperial residence of St Mamas near the mouth of the Golden Horn (at mod. Beşik-taş), which they likewise sacked. They smashed the ornamental columns, burned the imperial bedchambers, and

²²⁹ καὶ διαλεγόμενων αὐτῶν ἐποίησεν ὁ εἰς τῶν ἐκ τῆς πόλεως τὸ σημεῖον, ὃς ἦν Ἐξαβούλης, τῇ χειρὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀποσκεπάσας; Scriptor incertus, 343.16–18; Pseudo-Symeon, 613.15–17.

²³⁰ ὃν ἰδὼν ὁ Κροῦμος καὶ σκανδαλισθεὶς ἀνεπήδησεν, καὶ ἔχων ἕτοιμον τὸν ἵππον, σηκώσαντες αὐτὸν οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ, ἐκαβαλλίκευσαν... καὶ αὐτὸς ἤρξατο φεύγειν; Scriptor incertus, 343.18–20; Pseudo-Symeon, 613.17–19. The ambiguous term “σκανδαλισθεὶς” is usually interpreted as “offended” or “horrified” by scholars; see for instance, Bury 1912, 354, Treadgold 1988, 201 n. 268, and Browning 1965, 400. However, “alarmed” seems to be more appropriate in this case.

²³¹ Scriptor incertus, 343.20–21; Pseudo-Symeon, 613.19–20.

²³² καὶ ἐξελθόντες οἱ ἐνωπλισμένοι ἐκ τῶν δωμάτων κατεδίωξαν ὀπίσω τοῦ Κροῦμου, καὶ ἀπολύσαντες αὐτῶν τὰ βέλη ὡς φήθησαν ὅτι ἐπλήγωσαν αὐτόν; Scriptor incertus, 343.21–24; Pseudo-Symeon, 613.21–23; Theoph., 503.20–21. This was the official version of events, and was reproduced by the *ARF*, 139; the *ARF* report that Leo ordered a sally in which Krum was severely wounded and forced to return home. The report probably came to the Carolingian court with the Byzantine embassy that arrived at Aachen early in the spring of 814 (see below).

²³³ Scriptor incertus, 344.2–3; Pseudo-Symeon, 613.24–614.2.

²³⁴ Scriptor incertus, 344.4–9; Pseudo-Symeon, 614.3–8; for the route followed by the Bulgars, see Bury 1912, 355 n. 2.

plundered the *hippodrome* attached to the palace.²³⁵ After killing all living creatures, they loaded the sculptured bronze lion, bear and dragon, as well as some marble statues, onto carts, and extended their ravages northwards along the shores of the Bosphoros and the inland region behind.²³⁶

Next, the Bulgars returned to the Golden Gate and began devastating the countryside to the west as far as the suburb of Rhegion.²³⁷ They then moved along the northern shore of the Sea of Marmara, following the eastern extension of the *Via Egnatia*. The “Scriptor”, who draws on a very informative source, records the towns and forts sacked by Krum’s armies as they went, and his account is corroborated by a number of epigraphic finds at Pliska.²³⁸ First, the Bulgars destroyed the *kastron* of Athyra, on the bank of the River Athyras, some 15 km west of Constantinople, as well as its impressive stone bridge;²³⁹ then they razed the fort of Selymbria, with its churches and houses, to the ground, and pulled down Daonion, a fortified town and bishopric just outside the Long Walls of Thrace.²⁴⁰ The Bulgars were unable to enter Heraclea, which they besieged next, and contented themselves with burning the suburbs and the houses in the harbour.²⁴¹ Continuing their course, they captured the *kastron* of Rhaidestos, burned its churches and houses, and slaughtered its defenders.²⁴² Panion, southwest of Rhaidestos, had particularly strong defences as well as a large garrison, and was subsequently able to resist the sacking. The Bulgars destroyed its suburbs and then went on to take the nearby fort of Apros.²⁴³ In the next ten days they seem to have operated in the area between the *Via Egnatia* and the northern shores of the Sea

²³⁵ Theoph., 503.21–22; Scriptor incertus, 344.9–11; Pseudo-Symeon, 614.8–10. For the palace of St Mamas, see Janin 1964, 91, 141, 146; Bury 1912, 355 n. 3.

²³⁶ ... καὶ τὸν χαλκοῦν λέοντα τοῦ ἵππικοῦ σὺν τῇ ἄρκῳ καὶ τῷ δράκοντι τοῦ ὑδρίου καὶ μαρμάρους ἐπιλέκτοις ἐν ἀμάξαις φορτώσας...; Theoph., 503.23–24; Leo Gram., 208.2–6; καὶ διελθόντες πᾶσαν τὴν παραθαλασσίαν τοῦ Στενοῦ καὶ τὴν ἄνω, πάντα τὰ ἐμπόρια κατέκαυσαν, καὶ ἄραντες σκύλα πολλὰ ὄχοντο; Scriptor incertus, 344.11–16; Pseudo-Symeon, 614.10–14. In this connection, see Rašev 1997b, 49–53.

²³⁷ Scriptor incertus, 344.16–18; Pseudo-Symeon, 614.14–16. Rhegion (mod. Küçük Çekmese) was situated on a lake connected by the narrow Myrmex canal to the Sea of Marmara.

²³⁸ Scriptor incertus, 344.18–346.1; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 20–31.

²³⁹ Scriptor incertus, 344.18–20; Pseudo-Symeon, 614.16–18. For the fort of Athyra (near mod. Büyükçekmese), see Jireček 1877, 53, 102; Papazotos 1989, 550–551.

²⁴⁰ Scriptor incertus, 344.20–23; Pseudo-Symeon, 614.18–21; Dirimtekin 1955, 127; Papazotos 1989, 550.

²⁴¹ Scriptor incertus, 344.23–345.2; Pseudo-Symeon, 614.21–23. The powerful walls of Heraclea probably date from the mid-fourth century; Papazotos 1989, 549–550.

²⁴² Scriptor incertus, 345.2–4; Pseudo-Symeon, 614.23–615.2; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 22.

²⁴³ καὶ ἐλθόντες εἰς τὸ Πάνιον κάστρον εὗρον αὐτὸ ἠσφαλισμένον, ἔχοντα λαῖον πολύν; Pseudo-Symeon, 615.2–6; Scriptor incertus, 345.5–7 (Panion omitted).

of Marmara. Using Apros as their base, they razed several *kastra*, including Theodosiupolis, and hunted down civilians who had taken refuge in the nearby mountain of Ganos with their flocks.²⁴⁴ The refugees were rounded up, the men were killed on the spot, and the women, children and livestock sent back to Bulgaria.²⁴⁵

Finally, the Bulgars made an excursion to the Gallipoli Peninsula as far as Abydos. Then, they retraced their steps to the isthmus at Heksamilion, marched northwest to strike the Hebros and advanced along the river valley, sacking many *kastra* as far as Adrianople, among them Garela and Didymoteichon.²⁴⁶ Towards the end of August they arrived before Adrianople, which had been under siege by Krum's brother since July. With no more than 1,000–2,000 troops at his disposal, the latter had made no attempt to take the city by storm, but rather hoped to starve the defenders into submission. It may be worth remembering that Adrianople was full of refugees from other parts of Thrace. By the time Krum and his army arrived, supplies are thus very likely to have run out. The city held out for a few more days until the Bulgars started attacking it with siege engines.²⁴⁷ Realizing that no relief was forthcoming, and fearing that if they resisted they would be killed, the defenders finally decided to surrender.²⁴⁸ Accordingly, Krum is said to have put his foot on the neck of the local archbishop, Manuel, replicating the *calcatio*, a Byzantine triumphal custom.²⁴⁹ The inhabitants of Adrianople were reportedly resettled on the northern part of the Bulgar state beyond the Danube, quite possibly in Oltenia, Wallachia and Moldavia, near the mouth

²⁴⁴ Scriptor incertus, 345.7–8; Pseudo-Symeon, 615.6–7. Theodosiupolis seems to have been a minor fort in the vicinity of the ancient town of the same name, situated between Panion and Apron (it has been identified with both); Asdracha 1988, 235 n. 55, 249 n. 138. For its capture by the Bulgars, see Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 24. Mount Ganos (mod. Gaziköy) is situated some 15 km southwest of Rhaidestos.

²⁴⁵ Scriptor incertus, 345.8–13; Pseudo-Symeon, 615.7–11.

²⁴⁶ Scriptor incertus, 345.13–16; Pseudo-Symeon, 615.11–14; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 21, 25. Garela should be identified with mod. Altinyazi, 24 km northeast of Kypsela; for the ruins of the fort, see Papazotos 1989, 555.

²⁴⁷ καὶ ποιήσαντες ἡμέρας πολλὰς καὶ μὴδὲν ἰσχύσαντες ἀπὸ τοῦ παρακαθισμοῦ, στήσαντες μαγγανικὰ ἐπολέμουν τὸ κάστρο; Scriptor incertus, 345.17–19; Pseudo-Symeon, 615.15–17.

²⁴⁸ Scriptor incertus, 345.19–21; Pseudo-Symeon, 615.17–19; Theoph., 503.25. The *Synaxarion CP*, 414–415, reports that Adrianople was captured three days after Krum's arrival. In the *Chronographia*, the fall of the city is placed in the entry for A.M. 6303; this might suggest that it was captured before September 813; Treadgold 1988, 416 n. 269. It should be also noted that Dandolo, *Chronica*, 140, who reproduces Leo's "official" version of events, dates the fall of Adrianople before Michael's abdication.

²⁴⁹ *Synaxarion CP*, 415; McCormick 1986, 144. For Manuel's fate, see 7.1 below.

of the Siret River.²⁵⁰ A hagiographical source estimates that some 40,000 people were captured, while Symeon Logothetes indicates that 10,000 adult males were deported to Bulgaria.²⁵¹ These figures, however, are inflated. The Logothete's chronicle also reports that the "Macedonians", as they came to be called, formed a self-governing borderland of the *khanate*, under the supervision of the local governor, the *komes*.²⁵² They are said to have remained north of the Danube until the later 830s when Theophilos sent out a naval expedition to bring them home, although the account of their escape cannot be taken at face value.²⁵³

By the time Krum withdrew to the *khanate* in September, much of southern Thrace, including the Constantinopolitan hinterland, lay in ruins: the most productive part of the plain had been almost completely devastated, and thousands of civilians—most of them farmers—had either been slaughtered or moved to Bulgaria, as was the fate of large number of farm animals. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, as a result, the price of grain and other agricultural products rose precipitously in the following months.²⁵⁴ More importantly, the imperial capital was now exposed to future Bulgar attacks; for a series of fortified settlements and *kastra* which covered the approaches along the main routes and served to hinder or obstruct an enemy advance on the city had been destroyed (see Map II). Humiliating though all this had been for Leo V, by remaining behind the walls of Constantinople he was able to consolidate his hold on power. Indeed, it is important to point out that while the "Scriptor" accuses the emperor of doing nothing to stop the Bulgars, he does not report any incidents of unrest in the city as a result of the invasion. The presence of the *peratics* had evidently discouraged potential rioters or rebels.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ For the evidence pertaining to the presence of Byzantine populations in those regions, see Damian 2003, 484–487, 491; Madgearu 2002–2003, 44–45; Comşa 1987, 39–44; see also 8.1 below. Many scholars have claimed that the Byzantine captives were settled in southern Bessarabia (Budżak region, in present-day Ukraine), but this interpretation is not supported by the archaeological record which is at best inconclusive; see Tăpkova-Zaimova 1970, 64–65; Brezeanu 1984, 128–129. For an overview of the literature, see Spinei 2009, 56–57.

²⁵¹ *Synaxarion CP*, 415; Scriptor incertus, 345.21–346.1; Pseudo-Symeon, 615.19–21; Leo Gram., 208.6–9, 231.11–13; George cont., 765.12–14, 817.21–22.

²⁵² For the administration of frontier districts, see 2.2.1 above.

²⁵³ George cont., 817.10–819.15; Leo. Gram., 231.1–233.5. Among those who returned was reportedly the future emperor Basil I. His parents are said to have been captured at Adrianople in 813; see Treadgold 1988, 290–291 and n. 397; Moravcsik 1961, 116–119; Tougher 2008, 294.

²⁵⁴ Morrisson and Cheynet 2002, 720–721.

²⁵⁵ Scriptor incertus, 346.1–2.

6.3.3 *The War until the Death of Krum (April 814)*

The fall of Adrianople is the very last event described in the *Chronographia*, and our only literary source for Byzantine-Bulgar relations until Krum's death is the nearly contemporary *Scriptor incertus de Leone*. According to the detailed, lively account conveyed by the anonymous author, hostilities resumed soon after the coronation of Leo's son at Christmas of 813. Between September and December, Leo V, who was too weak to risk a campaign against Krum's over-confident forces, remained in the capital and concentrated on strengthening his regime.²⁵⁶ Thus, after appointing relatives and friends to key commands, he crowned his son Symbatios as his co-emperor.²⁵⁷ At the time of the coronation he took the first, indirect step towards the revival of iconoclasm—his ideological response to the crisis—by instructing his troops to acclaim him and his son as “Leo and Constantine”. By comparing his family to the Isaurian dynasty, Leo was, in effect, declaring his intention to repeat the Isaurians' victories against the Bulgars, but also implying that he approved of their iconoclasm which, in his mind, had made these successes possible.²⁵⁸ Meanwhile, he set about rebuilding the numbers of the heavily-depleted armies of Thrace and Macedonia; Olbianos may have now replaced John Aplakes as *monostrategos* of the two *themes*.²⁵⁹ Nonetheless, the local population seems to have remained very nervous at the prospect of another Bulgar invasion. The case of Sisinnios, *curator* of Tzouroulon, is instructive: shortly before Krum's invasion, in the summer, he had retired to Heraclea, the closest well-fortified town which successfully resisted the onslaught. But although Krum's armies withdrew in September, Sisinnios remained in Heraclea, where he eventually died on 7 December, 813, a refugee waiting for the Bulgar storm to pass.²⁶⁰

Nothing is known about Krum's movements during the autumn and winter of 813. It may be assumed that he was preoccupied with resettling the Byzantine captives on the northern border of the Bulgar state and preparing another campaign against the empire. Indeed, around January a substantial force of heavily armoured troops crossed the frontier, although the figure

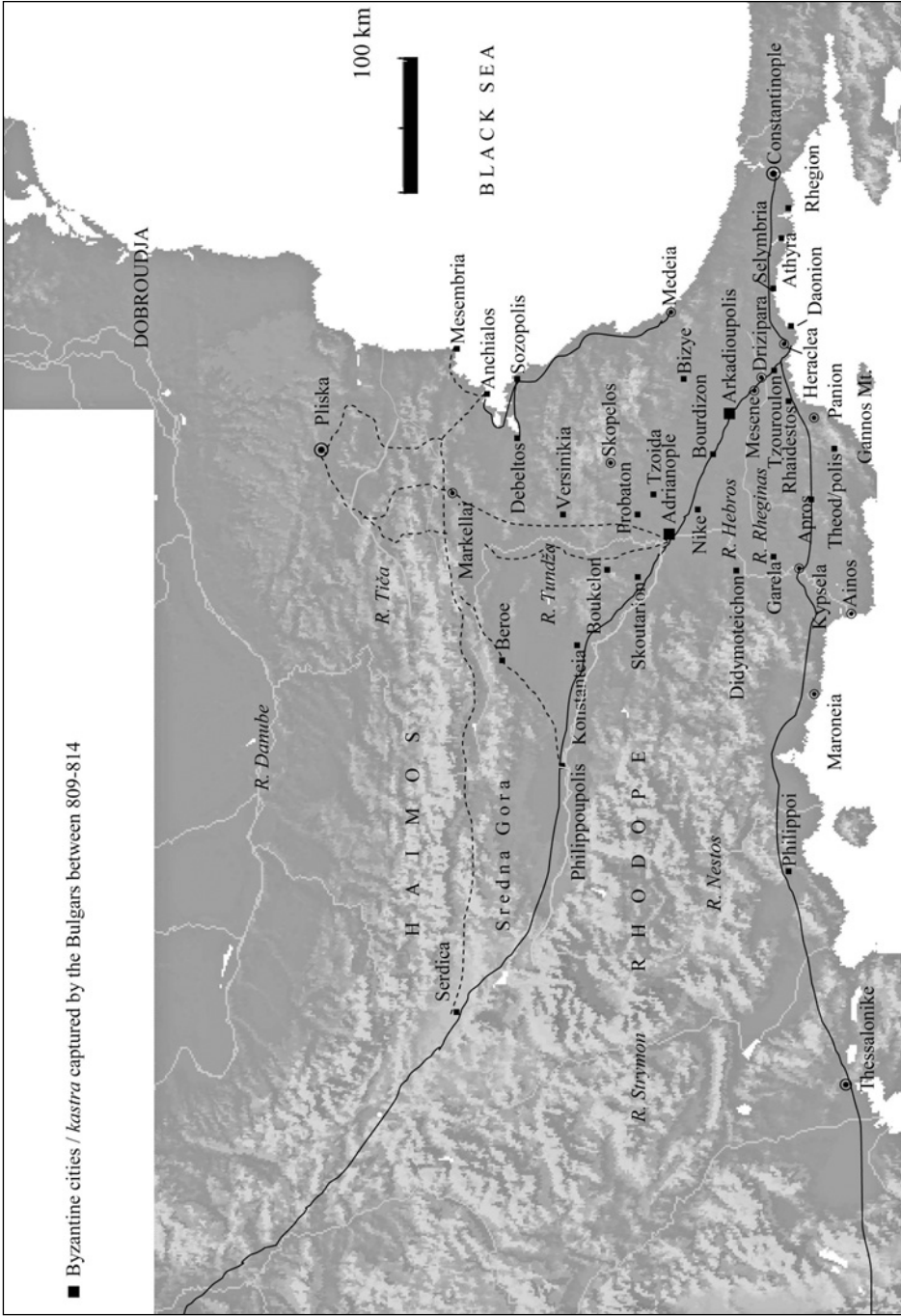
²⁵⁶ For a different opinion, see Bury 1912, 356–357, esp. n. 7; Runciman 1930, 66–67, 290–292; Korres 1996, 87–91.

²⁵⁷ *Scriptor incertus*, 346.2–3. For some of Leo's appointments, see 6.3.1 above.

²⁵⁸ *Scriptor incertus*, 346.3–10; Treadgold 1988, 203–204.

²⁵⁹ Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1991, 43.31.

²⁶⁰ A funerary inscription dedicated to Sisinnios was found at an ancient cemetery in Heraclea; Ševčenko 1965.



Map II: Byzantine cities in Thrace and Macedonia, ca. 780-814

provided by our source (30,000 men) is implausibly large.²⁶¹ At the head of this army, Krum, who is not mentioned in the report, probably placed one of his senior officials.

Following an old military road leading southeast from the Fakijska River (near Debeltos), the Bulgars first arrived at Bizye, the seat of a *tourmarches*, which they subsequently sacked.²⁶² They then proceeded to Arkadioupolis, whose inhabitants had evidently fled across the River Rheginas (mod. Ergene).²⁶³ The Bulgars forded the river and made many captives, but on their way back they found out that eight days of heavy rain had rendered the Rheginas impassable.²⁶⁴ They were thus forced to wait for two weeks on the left bank of the river for its swollen flow to subside; in the meantime they may have sacked the nearby city of Tzouroulon which, like Arkadioupolis, had been evacuated by its inhabitants.²⁶⁵ Although the Bulgars were all this time cut off from retreat deep into Byzantine territory, Leo did not risk attacking them, a fact remarked upon by his critics.²⁶⁶ Either because his position on the throne was still uncertain, or because of the low numbers, morale and effectiveness of his troops, he deemed it unsafe to leave the capital. Thus, when the waters finally subsided, the Bulgars forced their captives to build a wooden bridge over the river and returned to the *khanate*, sacking several small forts on the way, including Bourdizon.²⁶⁷ They led a great number of Byzantine prisoners (50,000 according to our source, but this figure cannot be taken at face value), along with all their movable property, which was carried in carts, as well as herds of sheep and cattle back to Bulgaria.²⁶⁸

Before long (presumably around February 814), Leo received word that the *khan* was preparing another expedition against Byzantium. It was reported

²⁶¹ καὶ δὴ λοιπὸν γεγονόςτος εὐδίου τοῦ ἀέρος τῷ χειμῶνι, καὶ τῶν ποταμῶν μὴ ἔχοντων ὕδωρ πολὺ, ἐξῆλθον οἱ Βούλγαροι χιλιάδες τριάκοντα ὀλοσίδηροι...; Scriptor incertus, 346.12–14; Pseudo-Symeon, 616.13.

²⁶² Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 27; Soustal 1991, 224. For this road, see Mango and Ševčenko 1972, 384–392; *Idrisi*, 131–132.

²⁶³ Scriptor incertus, 346.14–15; Pseudo-Symeon, 616.13–14; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 26.

²⁶⁴ ... καὶ περάσαντες τὴν Ῥηγίναν (ποταμὸς δὲ οὕτως ἐστὶ λεγόμενος) εὗρον λαὸν πολὺν, καὶ ἡχμαλώτευσαν αὐτούς. καὶ πρὸ τοῦ περᾶσαι αὐτούς τὴν αἰχμαλωσίαν ἐγένετο ὑπεὶς πολλὰς ἡμέρας ὄκτω, καὶ ὄγκωθεις ὁ ποταμὸς ἐγένετο ὡς θάλασσα; Scriptor incertus, 346.15–19; Pseudo-Symeon, 616.14–17.

²⁶⁵ See my comments above.

²⁶⁶ Scriptor incertus, 346.21–23; Pseudo-Symeon, 616.19–21.

²⁶⁷ Scriptor incertus, 346.23–347.2; Pseudo-Symeon, 616.21–617.1; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 20. For Bourdizon (Boulgarophygon), also on the Military highway, some 20 km northwest of Arkadioupolis, see Soustal 1991, 223–224; Beševliev 1971a, 6–7.

²⁶⁸ Scriptor incertus, 347.2–8; Pseudo-Symeon, 617.1–7; Browning 1965, 402; see also Belke 2002, 77–78, for some interesting remarks.

that this time Krum's intention was to capture Constantinople itself. The "Scriptor", who seems to rely, at least to a certain extent, on unsubstantiated rumour, relates the scale of these preparations: Krum had assembled a huge army, made up of Bulgar, Avar and Slav contingents from the surrounding *Sklaviniai*.²⁶⁹ At the same time, a full array of siege engines was being prepared: stone-throwers (*petrovoloi*, identified as traction-powered trebuchets), arrow-shooting devices known as scorpions or three-spans, catapults for flaming and spiked bolts, platforms for the machines, battering rams and penthouses or "tortoises" to protect those attacking the walls, and presumably siege towers. The *khan*, who is said to have planned to deploy his artillery against the western section of the walls around Blachernae, where he had been ambushed in 813, also collected siege ladders, slingshots and pickaxes.²⁷⁰ To transport this equipment as well as their supplies, the Bulgars had reportedly prepared 5,000 ironbound wagons and gathered 10,000 oxen.²⁷¹

Needless to say, the scale of Krum's preparations as reported by our source is, once again, exaggerated. In 814, the *khan* probably had more territory and people under his control than ever before, but could still draw on far fewer resources than the Byzantine emperor, who could hardly have organized such a massive undertaking. Nonetheless, there is nothing remarkable about the Bulgars conceiving the idea of a determined assault on Constantinople. For, as has been seen, they had inherited the ideology and grand political ambitions of the nomad empires of the Eurasian steppe. Furthermore, Krum had become over-confident following his recent successes, and may have sincerely believed that he would somehow force his way through the triple land walls of the imperial capital.

Leo's response was such as to leave no doubt that a Bulgar attack on Constantinople was, indeed, imminent. Once his spies confirmed the news, he

²⁶⁹ Scriptor incertus, 347.11–13.

²⁷⁰ πρὸς δὲ τούτοις παρασκευάζει διαφόρων ἐλεπόλεων ὄργανά τε καὶ μηχανήματα, καὶ μαγγανικὰ παμμεγέστατα, τριβόλους τε καὶ πετροβόλους, καὶ χελώνας καὶ ὑψηλοὺς κλίμακας, σφαίρας τε καὶ μοχλοὺς καὶ ὄρνυγας, κριοὺς τε καὶ βελοστάσεις, πυρόβολά τε καὶ λιθόβολα καὶ σκορπίδια εἰς τὸ βαλέσθαι βέλη, καὶ σφενδόνας, πάντα μηχανήματα κατὰ τῶν ἐπάλξεων τοῦ ἐλεῖν τὴν πόλιν ἐπὶ τὸ δυτικὸν δὲ μέρος τῆς πόλεως κατὰ τοῦ τείχους τῶν Βλαχερνῶν. ταῦτα πάντα βούλεται προσαγαγεῖν τὰ μηχανήματα ἔνθα καὶ ἐτοξεύθη...; Scriptor incertus, 347.13–22; Pseudo-Symeon, 617.12–20; Chevedden 2000, 74–75; Marsden 1969, I, 77, 109, 180, 188; Haldon 1999, 186–189; Božilov and Gjuzev 1999, 138.

²⁷¹ Scriptor incertus, 347.22–348.2; Pseudo-Symeon, 617.21–23. The local production of iron artefacts is attested by the discovery of smithies in Pliska and Preslav. However, archaeologists believe that Bulgaria depended upon supplies of imported iron; see Curta 1998–1999, 28–30; Vitliyanov 1989–1990, 149–150, 165; Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 34; and my comments above at 3.2.4.

took a set of measures to strengthen the city's defences and delay the attack for as long as possible.²⁷² Firstly, he started gathering his own troops. This may have involved the transfer of some *thematic* contingents from Asia Minor. At the same time, he brought together a large number of workmen to build a new wall outside the wall of Blachernae.²⁷³ Its poorly-preserved remains, mostly obscured by later buildings, show that it began at the junction of the Pteron with the walls of Blachernae, and ran parallel to the former for about 80 metres, incorporating four small towers; it then proceeded eastward for a short distance to join the walls of Heraclius, near the shore of the Golden Horn, thus strengthening the defence of the vulnerable northwestern corner of the city.²⁷⁴ The emperor also instructed his men to dig a broad moat in front of the new wall.²⁷⁵

Meanwhile, Leo attempted a *rapprochement* with the Bulgars. The evidence comes from a notice included in Theophanes continuatus' description of events before the battle of Mesembria (or battle of "Leo's Hill"). Specifically, the author reports that when the emperor heard that the *khan* was once again ravaging parts of Thrace, pillaging the fields and carrying off many men and cattle (apparently a reference to the winter raid of 814 also mentioned by the *Scriptor incertus*), he sued for peace.²⁷⁶ Leo's offer is usually assigned to the latter half of 813, not long after his accession to the Byzantine throne, although a later date, at some point following Krum's death, has also been suggested.²⁷⁷ However, an important clue appears to have passed unnoticed: Theophanes continuatus indicates that when the Byzantine offer was rejected, Leo "rebuilt the parts of the walls that had been destroyed"

²⁷² ταῦτα ἀκούσας Λέων, πέμψας τε κατασκόπους καὶ μαθὼν τὴν ἀλήθειαν...; *Scriptor incertus*, 348.2–3.

²⁷³ ... συναθροίσας λαὸν πολλὸν καὶ τεχνίτας ἤρξατο κτίζειν ἕτερον τεῖχος ἔξωθεν τείχους τῶν Βλαχερνῶν...; *Scriptor incertus*, 348.3–5; Pseudo-Symeon, 618.1–2.

²⁷⁴ The new wall enclosed the Church of St Nicholas of Blachernae, previously described as being outside the city; *Chronicon Paschale*, I, 724.10–11, 725.15–20; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 104, 119f, 156 and plate 41; Foss and Winfield 1986, 42, 50, 66ff.; Tsangadas 1980, 26–32, 154–155. Note that the Pteron, which the *Chronicon Paschale* calls "embolon", is a pre-Heracleian structure, and not a part of the walls of Heraclius. The latter extended from the back of tower 18 on the Pteron, past the vicinity of the Church of St Demetrios, until it met the existing walls of Cyrus on the Golden Horn.

²⁷⁵ ... κόψας καὶ τὴν σοῦδαν πλατεῖαν; *Scriptor incertus*, 348.5–6; Pseudo-Symeon, 618.2–3.

²⁷⁶ ὡς δὲ τὸν τῶν Βουλγάρων ἄρχοντα τῇ προτεραίᾳ νίκη φρονηματιζόμενον διακήκοεν, καὶ αὐθὶς διοῦντα μὲν τὴν γείτονα γῆν, κείροντα δὲ καὶ ληλατοῦντα τοὺς ἀγροὺς, καὶ πολλὰ μὲν σώματα πολλὰ δὲ βοσκήματα καθαρχάζοντα, οἰκήσεις δὲ ἑτέρωθεν κατεμπιπρῶντα καὶ ὄλως ὄντα ἀφόρητον, πρῶτον μὲν δεῖν φήθη διὰ πρεβείας εἰρήνης ἀναμνήσαι αὐτὸν...; *Theoph. cont.*, 24.9–15; for the raid of 814, see *Scriptor incertus*, 346.12–347.8.

²⁷⁷ Bury 1912, 356 n. 7; Runciman 1930, 65; Korres 1996, 86 (for 813); Zlatarski 1918, 297f; Beševliev 1981a, 268f (for mid or late 814); Treadgold 1984b, 220 (for late 815).

and marched out against the Bulgars.²⁷⁸ Given that Leo V is not known to have carried out any other work on the walls of Constantinople, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the building activity mentioned by the chronicler is the same as that described by the *Scriptor incertus*—the construction of an outer wall outside the wall of Blachernae. If so, Leo’s diplomatic initiative must be associated with Krum’s preparations for an assault on the imperial capital in the early months of 814. The emperor’s evident aim was to buy time; his message may have thus been conciliatory. Nevertheless, the *khan* turned down the offer.²⁷⁹

Finally, another embassy set out for the Frankish court to ask for help against the Bulgars. This is confirmed by a number of western sources, including the *Versus Marini* of Amalarius of Metz, Charlemagne’s ambassador to the imperial court.²⁸⁰ Amalarius’ party and two Byzantine envoys left Constantinople early in spring, soon after word had come that Krum was mobilizing his forces for a major operation against the empire.²⁸¹ They reached Aachen in the summer, and when Louis the Pious (Charlemagne had died on 27 February 814) finally received them in August, the Byzantines requested an alliance against the Bulgars and “other barbarian peoples”.²⁸² The emperor, it may be conjectured, proposed a joint attack on Bulgaria. So dangerous a thrust would compel the *khan* to abandon his preparations, giving the Byzantines a much-needed reprieve.

Leo’s defensive measures proved to be unnecessary; for as Krum was completing his preparations, on Maundy Thursday, 13 April 814, he suddenly suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died.²⁸³ The plan for an expedition against Constantinople was subsequently abandoned. In the imperial capital, Krum’s

²⁷⁸ ...ὡς δ’ οὐκ ἔπεισεν, τὰ τῶν τειχῶν διερρηκῶτα δι’ ἑαυτοῦ ἀνοικοδομησάμενος ἐξεβοήθει διὰ ταχέων...; Theoph. cont., 24.15–16.

²⁷⁹ Theoph. cont., 24.15.

²⁸⁰ Amalarius and his fellow ambassador Peter, abbot of Nonantola, arrived in the Byzantine capital after July 813 in order to confirm a peace treaty between the two powers; *Versus Marini*, 426–428.

²⁸¹ They certainly left the capital before Krum’s death on April 13, and arrived in Nonantola (in northern Italy) after May 8; see McCormick 2002, 139–142, and App. 4, nos. 316, 330.

²⁸² *Eo anno placitum suum cum Franciis imperator Hludowihus habuit Kalendis Augusti mensis, et legati Graecorum auxilium petebant ab eo contra Bulgares et caeteras barbaras gentes; Annales Laurissenses minores*, 122; reproduced by the *Annales Hildesheimenses*, 15; see also *Versus Marini*, 428; ARF, 141.

²⁸³ ...περὶ τοῦ τῆ μεγάλης πέμπτη τοῦ πάσχα, ὁ Πρῶτος Βουλγαρίας, ὁ Κροῦμος ὁ περίφημος, ὁ τὴν πόλιν ἔλεῖν βουλευόμενος, τέλει τοῦ βίου ἐχρήσατο ἀοράτως σφαγιασθεὶς, ὃς καὶ ἐξήγαγεν αἱμάτων ὀχετοὺς διὰ τε τοῦ στόματος καὶ τῶν ῥινῶν καὶ τῶν ὠτῶν αὐτοῦ. καὶ οὕτως ἀπερρηξεν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐν κακοῖς; *Scriptor incertus*, 348.11–16; Pseudo-Symeon, 618.8–12.

death was seen by many as a miracle which was naturally portrayed by court propaganda as proof of God's favour to Leo and his regime. In an attempt to extract the full political and ideological benefit, the emperor issued a *sacra*, copies of which were distributed throughout the empire, which proclaimed that the *khan* had died from the effects of the wound that Leo's ambushers had supposedly inflicted on him outside Blachernae the previous summer.²⁸⁴ This version of events had probably no basis in fact, but it may have helped associate the emperor with victory against Byzantium's northern adversaries, an association that neither Nikephoros I nor Michael I had been able to make in the past.

Certainly, Krum's death on the eve of what was expected to be a determined attack on Constantinople boosted Byzantine morale when it had been seriously shaken. Leo V took advantage of the subsequent respite from war to reorganize his army and, when hostilities resumed a few months later, he was able to pursue a more aggressive policy towards the Bulgars. On the other hand, it seems that Krum's sudden death threw the *khanate* into a dynastic struggle and a prolonged period of instability, which continued until Omurtag came to power, around 815. However, by then, the strategic initiative and psychological advantage had swung back in Byzantium's favour. The last phase of the war (mid 814–*ca.* 816), which is largely hidden by the lack of evidence, was characterized by continual small-scale actions rather than decisive battles. A detailed discussion of these events will be presented in chapter 7.

²⁸⁴ ἐπαρθεῖς τοίνυν τῶν φρονημάτων ὁ Λέων, ὡς ὅτι αὐτὸς κατέβαλεν τὸν πολέμιον καὶ οὐχ ὁ θεός, ἐπέμψεν εἰς πάσας τὰς πόλεις καὶ χώρας σάκρας, ἀναγγέλων ὅτι εὔρον τοὺς Βουλγάρους ἐγγὺς ὄντας τῆς πόλεως, καὶ διὰ τῆς φρονήσεως καὶ ἀνδρείας καὶ διαταγῆς μου τεξεύσας τὸν πρῶτον αὐτῶν πάντα ἀπήλασα, ὅς τις καὶ διὰ τὴν πρόφασιν ταύτην ἀποθνήσκει, ἔφη, ὁ ἐχθρὸς ἡμῶν; Scriptor incertus, 348.16–22; Pseudo-Symeon, 618.13–18; Treadgold 1988, 207.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE LAST PHASE OF THE WAR AND THE CONCLUSION OF THE THIRTY YEARS' PEACE

7.1 THE INTERNAL CRISIS IN BULGARIA AND THE BATTLE OF MESEMBRIA

Krum's sudden death in April 814, shortly before completing his preparations for an assault on Constantinople, came as a devastating shock to the Bulgars. Under his leadership they had managed to repel a massive Byzantine invasion, win a spectacular victory against Nikephoros I, and, taking advantage of the political instability which engulfed the empire at this time, expand their authority into the greater part of Thrace. A charismatic ruler, Krum had enjoyed the loyalty and support of the ruling elite, and quite naturally, his premature death at such a critical moment threw the Bulgar state into a period of internal upheaval.

We have no firm information on developments in Bulgaria, except for a brief notice in the Constantinopolitan *Synaxarion* commemorating the martyrdom of several Christians captured after the siege of Adrianople in 813. The notice indicates that when Krum died he was succeeded by a certain Dukum.¹ It has been argued that he is to be identified with Krum's brother, the same man who in the summer of 813 had besieged Adrianople while Krum was advancing on Constantinople, and who had earlier been appointed governor of the Bulgar buffer zone in Thrace.² As discussed in chapter 4, there is good reason to believe that power in pre-Christian Bulgaria was not always passed from father to son. The testimony of John the Exarch, a Bulgarian writer and translator, who was born some forty years after Krum's death and is reasonably assumed to be reliable, can perhaps substantiate this hypothesis: in his *Šestodnev*, he reports that, just as in the Khazar *qaghanate*, in Bulgaria a ruler could be succeeded by either his brother or his son.³ A lateral system of succession, from elder brother to younger brother and then to the sons of the elder brother, also existed amongst other nomadic polities, most notably

¹ Κρούμου δὲ τὸ ζῆν ἀπορρήξαντος, Δούκουμος τὴν ἀρχὴν δέχεται; *Synaxarion CP*, 415. See the discussion above at 1.4.

² Theoph., 503.5–7; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 2, 3c, 47; Beševliev 1966, 96–97.

³ John Exarch, iv, 162–163; Dujčev 1978a, 209; Beševliev 1981c, 176–177; Stepanov 1999, 64; see also 4.2 above.

the Hsiung-nu and the Kök Türks.⁴ If only very cautiously, the identification of Dukum with Krum's brother may thus be upheld.⁵

Dukum was an experienced military commander and administrator, and, judging from the existing evidence, seems to have played a major role in Krum's victories against the Byzantines between 811 and 814.⁶ These successes had taken on a momentum of their own and we can be fairly certain that the new *khan*, seeking to rally around him the warrior aristocracy and consolidate his hold on power, was planning to continue the war. However, the *Synaxarion* indicates that he died almost at once, presumably of natural causes.⁷ This is likely to have occurred during the summer months of 814.⁸ His sudden death, it seems safe to assume, came as a second major shock to the Bulgars and may have inaugurated a period of turmoil rooted in uncertainty about who was to become Dukum's successor.

The circumstances under which Dičevg, the next *khan*, came to power are equally obscure. Some scholars have identified him with Krum's second brother (and therefore next in the line of succession), and others with his eldest son, though there is no evidence for any of this.⁹ It has also been suggested that the name Dičevg (Δίτζεβγος) is, in fact, the corrupted Greek form of the proto-bulgarian title *ičirgu boila*, which at least until 812 was held by a certain Tuk/Tukos (the commander of the "right wing" in inscription no. 47 from Malamirovo).¹⁰ Suffice it to say that the identification of Dičevg with Krum's brother seems to be most likely. It may further be conjectured that the new *khan* was in ill health at the time of his accession; he may have been suffering from visual disorder or a disease, which in the eyes of some of his *boilas* rendered him incapable of governing. Convinced that Krum's son—and Dičevg's rightful heir—was far better suited to rule, these nobles looked up to Omurtag for leadership.

During the rest of 814, Dičevg and Omurtag may have competed behind the scenes for the support of the Bulgar elite. Meanwhile Leo V, taking advantage of this lull, was reorganizing his forces. Depleted and demoralized after

⁴ For an excellent discussion, see Barfield 1989, 41–42, 133–136; Golden 1992, 147.

⁵ Beševliev 1981c, 177. *Contra*: Gjuzelev 1973b; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 144; Gjuzelev 2007, 197–204; Anglelov *et al.* 1981, 147–153. For an overview of the literature, see Ziemann 2007, 290–293.

⁶ See in particular, Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 2, 3c.

⁷ καὶ αὐτοῦ κατὰ πόδας τεθνηκότος...; *Synaxarion CP*, 415.

⁸ This date is also entertained by Beševliev 1981a, 268 and Treadgold 1988, 207.

⁹ *Synaxarion CP*, 415; Beševliev 1966, 98–99; Rašev 2001a, 110.

¹⁰ Zlatarski 1918, 293–294, 424–425 identifies Tuk with Čok/Tzokos of the *Menologion*; Gjuzelev 2007, 130–131, believes that Tuk, Čok and Dukum is the same person; see also Grégoire 1934a, 762–767, and the analysis in Nikolov 2005, 186–187.

the battle of Versinikia, the imperial army had not taken the field against the Bulgars for almost a year. Yet over the last few months, new, loyal recruits were brought in to fill those places that had been left vacant, although the main achievement was probably the psychological boost to morale provided by Leo's inspirational leadership, as well as Krum's unexpected death.¹¹ Early in autumn of 814, and as the internal divisions in Bulgaria were growing, Leo began preparations for an expedition on northeastern Thrace. As has been seen, the Bulgars had incorporated that region into their state, organized it into a buffer zone and installed garrisons in the main towns to consolidate their gains. Leo's primary objective was to deal a blow to the occupying forces, thus undermining Bulgar power on the frontier. The expedition was, in essence, a statement of future intent, while the appearance of the emperor in Thrace was expected to provide a further boost to Byzantine morale.

Before leaving, Leo completed the construction of a new wall outside the wall of Blachernae that he had begun while Krum was preparing his attack on Constantinople in the spring of 814.¹² This is one of the keys for dating the battle of Mesembria; for, as shown in chapter 6, the emperor is not known to have carried out any other work on the city's defences.¹³ No source reports how long the construction lasted, but bearing in mind that the new wall was a relatively small structure, one may reasonably suppose that it could have been built very quickly, in all likelihood within a few months.¹⁴ A firm *terminus ante quem*, both for the completion of the work on the walls and Leo's campaign, is provided by Theophanes continuatus. The chronicler reports that the victory near Mesembria caused the emperor to become "more bold and reckless, and contributed to his natural ruthlessness".¹⁵ He then goes on to describe the story of the monk Symbatios who, along with Theodotos Kassiteras, is said to have convinced Leo V to restore iconoclasm in April 815.¹⁶ Although this account cannot be taken at face value, the evidence it provides is still important as it serves to emphasize that the victory over the Bulgars enabled the emperor to strengthen his position, thereby preparing the way for the renewal of iconoclasm. If this interpretation is correct, then it follows that the battle of Mesembria was fought before April 815. In fact, one could

¹¹ Theoph. cont., 30.10.

¹² Theoph. cont., 24.15–16; Scriptor incertus, 348.3–5.

¹³ See above 6.3.3.

¹⁴ In the light of the archaeological evidence, the suggestion of Treadgold 1988, 216 that the construction of the wall was only completed in late 815 or early 816 must be rejected.

¹⁵ Τοῦτο γοῦν θρασύτερόν πως αὐτὸν καὶ ἱταμώτερον ἐνεργάσατο τὸ προτέρημα, καὶ εἰς τὴν σύντροφον ὁμότητα ἐναπέρραξε; Theoph. cont., 25.20–22.

¹⁶ Theoph. cont., 26.9ff. The same story is also reported by Genesios, 10.20–11.59.

argue that all the circumstantial evidence points towards a rather earlier date, most probably around late 814; for from that point onwards, if not earlier, Leo V was preoccupied with the restoration of iconoclasm, and must have been aware that a possible defeat at the hands of the Bulgars would be taken as a sign that God plainly disapproved of his actions.¹⁷

In view of these considerations, it would seem reasonable to suppose that Leo V set out for the frontier in late autumn or early winter of 814. He was accompanied by a substantial, but mobile, expeditionary force which was probably made up of the *tagmata* and *thematic* contingents from Asia Minor. The imperial army marched along the Black Sea coast, and relied for most of its provisions on a fleet advancing in the same direction. Carrying a smaller baggage train, the troops were considerably faster and were therefore able to cross into the Bulgar buffer zone without giving its defenders time to mass against them. They finally arrived before Mesembria but did not try to take it by force—an indication that a Bulgar garrison of some size had been placed in the city. Instead, the Byzantines built a fortified camp nearby and waited.¹⁸ Soon a Bulgar force arrived and encamped opposite them. Genesisios claims that this army was led by the *khan* himself, but his report must be treated with caution.¹⁹ It is worth remembering that according to the initial arrangements for the political and military administration of the Bulgar buffer zone, the command of its “left wing”, including the towns of the Black Sea coast, was entrusted to the *kavkhan* Iratais and the *strategoi* Kordyles and Gregoras.²⁰ These commanders, along with the *strategoi* John and Leo, may have now been dispatched to Mesembria.

Theophanes continuatus, who provides a more detailed account of the battle than Genesisios, reports that the two armies remained facing each other for several days until the Bulgars began suffering from lack of supplies.²¹ Surprised by the speed of the invasion, they had evidently marched out against the Byzantines without completing their preparations. So late in the year, particularly in a district that had been recently devastated, supplies would have been difficult to secure anyway. By contrast, thanks to their fleet, the Byzantines had, all this time, been short of no necessity.²² Nonetheless, Leo was still wary of meeting the Bulgars in open battle and adapted his strategy

¹⁷ See Sophoulis 2007–2008, 205–206.

¹⁸ Theoph. cont., 24.18–20.

¹⁹ Genesisios, 10.16–17.

²⁰ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 47.

²¹ Theoph. cont., 24.20–22.

²² ...ἐκάστοτε σιτιζόμενος ἀπὸ τῆς ἡμετέρας καὶ λειπόμενος τῶν ἀναγκαίων, ἀλλὰ καὶ πρὸς τρυφὴν, οὐδενός; Theoph. cont., 24.19–20.

accordingly: one night, he and a contingent of picked men secretly left the camp and took up a position behind a nearby hill where they could not be seen. The emperor had evidently instructed the rest of his men on the following day to give the impression that he had departed.²³ As soon as the news reached the Bulgars, they took heart and attacked the Byzantines who appeared to be struggling. Made grossly over-confident by these developments, and expecting an easy victory the following day, the Bulgars failed to take the basic precautions when they returned to their camp.²⁴ The same night, as the Bulgars slept in what they thought was security, Leo emerged from his hiding place and fell suddenly on their rear. At the same time, the main section of the Byzantine army was probably launching itself upon the unsuspecting enemy from the front.²⁵ The Bulgars received such a savage mauling that for years to come they referred to the site of the attack as “Leo’s Hill.”²⁶ Before returning to the imperial capital, Leo is said to have led his troops on a brief raid into the *khanate*, in the course of which they killed and captured many civilians, among them children.²⁷

The consequences of the Byzantine victory turned out to be important for both sides. Leo was the first emperor to have defeated the Bulgars in several years (Michael I’s defeat of a raiding party near Adrianople in February 813 is hardly worth mentioning), and though not reported by our sources, he undoubtedly celebrated his success with a triumph in Constantinople. Much like with Krum’s death, Leo portrayed the victory as proof of God’s favour towards him and his regime, and this, in turn, enabled him to openly pursue a policy hostile to the display and honouring of sacred images. Thus, shortly after the battle, around December 814, the emperor ordered the icon of Christ above the *Chalke*, the main entrance of the Great Palace, to be taken down on the pretext of protecting it from a group of soldiers, who had been instructed to pelt it with stones and mud.²⁸ The icon of *Christ Chalkites*, as

²³ Theoph. cont., 24.22–25.6.

²⁴ ὅθεν ἀναθαρήσαντες οἱ ἐναντίοι μένειν ἐφ’ ἐαυτῶν οὐδ’ ὄλως ἐδύνατο, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατεξάνισταντο καὶ ἐπὶ χειρας ὄοντο τὸ στράτευμα ἔχειν; Theoph. cont., 25.6–8.

²⁵ νυκτὸς οὖν ἐπιγενομένης κάτεισιν ἐκ τοῦ λόχου ὁ Λέων ἀπροσδοκῆτοισι οὖσι κακῶν, καὶ συμμίξας αὐτοῖς ἀνδράσιν ὅπλων γυμνοῖς καὶ διαλελυμένοις ὑπὸ τε καὶ θάρρει τῆς τοῦ βασιλέως φυγῆς τοσοῦτον ἐνειργάσατο φθόρον καὶ φόνον πάντοθεν ἐκχυθέντων τῶν Ῥωμαίων κατὰ τὸ σύνθημα, ὡς πανδημεὶ αἰρήσαι τὸ στρατόπεδον καὶ μηδὲ πυρφόρον, τὸ δὴ λεγόμενον, διασωθῆναι; Theoph. cont., 25.8–14.

²⁶ ... ὅθεν ἔκτοτε ἐκεῖνος ὁ βουνὸς Λέοντος ἐπωνομάσθη; Theoph. cont., 25.16–17.

²⁷ Theoph. cont., 25.14–16; Beševliev 1981a, 268–270; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 144–145.

²⁸ καὶ περὶ τὸν Δεκέμβριον μῆνα δηλοῖ τὸν πατριάρχην ὁ Λέων ὅτι ὁ λαὸς σκανδαλίζεται διὰ τὰς εἰκόνας... καὶ παρασκευάζει δι’ αὐτοὺς τοὺς ἀσεβεῖς στρατιώτας τοῦ λιθάσαι τὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ Χριστοῦ τὴν οὖσαν ἐν τῇ χαλκεπωνύμφῃ πύλῃ τοῦ παλατίου. καὶ λοιπὸν ἤρξαντο

it was known, was a symbol whose significance everyone understood, for its erection by Irene *ca.* 787 had marked the triumphal return to Orthodoxy.²⁹ What is more, the battle of Mesembria had admirably reflected the *esprit de corps*, discipline and morale of the imperial army under Leo V. With a restored confidence and a new enthusiasm for warfare, the Byzantines could now be expected to move on to the offensive.

The state of affairs in Bulgaria after the battle is far more obscure. Although not strategically important, the defeat must have come as a major shock to the Bulgars, who since 811 had had the upper hand in the struggle against Byzantium. Dičevg may have been directly blamed and, as his health deteriorated, some members of the aristocracy are likely to have challenged his authority. There is much that is conjectural in this interpretation. What is certain is that the *khan* initiated what was taken to be a severe persecution of Christians. Two distinct acts have been picked up in the surviving sources: the torture and posthumous mutilation of Manuel, the captured archbishop of Adrianople;³⁰ and the mass execution of another 377 prisoners of war. Before attempting to explain the *khan's* initiatives, the two acts need to be pinpointed in time. Although Manuel and the other 377 Christian captives were commemorated together (on January 22), their execution was separated by some time; for the *Synaxarion*, which provides a more reliable version of events than the *Menologion*, establishes that Omurtag was the ruler who ordered the death of the 377 martyrs.³¹ It has subsequently been assumed that January 22 was the date of Manuel's death, since he is mentioned first and most prominently in both notices.³² Given that Manuel was executed by Dičevg, and that the latter's reign was relatively brief, the execution is most likely to have taken place in January 815.

There are difficulties in establishing a date for the execution of the 377 captives of Adrianople. The only hint provided by the two hagiographical notices is that the *khan* responsible for Manuel's death had, in the mean-

βάλλειν κατὰ τῆς εἰκόνης λίθους καὶ πηλά...; Scriptor incertus, 352.11–354.17; Treadgold 1988, 210.

²⁹ Auzépy 1999, 202–206, has convincingly argued that the story of the removal of the icon by Leo III in 726 or 730, which is thought to have been the first public act of imperial iconoclasm, was, in fact, a late eighth- or early ninth-century fabrication designed to legitimize the empress Irene and the iconophile cause; see also Mango 1959, 108–142, 170–174; Auzépy 1990; Brubaker 1999, 258–285.

³⁰ ...ὃς τὸν μέγαν ἀρχιερέα Μανουὴλ μέσον διχάσας καὶ τὰς χεῖρας τοῖς ὄμοις ἀποτεμῶν, βορὰν τοῖς κυσὶ παρέδωκεν; *Synaxarion CP*, 415; *Menologion Basilii*, 276D.

³¹ *Synaxarion CP*, 415–416. The *Menologion* mistakenly presents Čok, who carried out Omurtag's order, as being the *khan*; Beševliev 1966, 92–93. See above 1.4.

³² Treadgold 1988, 419 n. 291.

time, been killed. However, the evidence to solve this problem comes from Theodore of Stoudios' *Parva Catechesis* which includes the story of a group of fourteen martyrs put to death by the Bulgars during the war. The spirit, phraseology and content of Theodore's account reveals many similarities with that given in the *Menologion*, the only notable divergence being the number of martyrs reported in each case.³³ This may well suggest that the two texts are referring to two separate facets of the same episode. Theodore's sermon, written soon after the persecution, indicates that the fourteen martyrs were executed for refusing to eat meat during Lent. If this statement could be trusted, this would be our evidence that the 377 captives of Adrianople, among them the fourteen commemorated by Theodore, were executed then.

The story of the fourteen martyrs who were put to death during Lent is repeated in a *kanon* attributed to Theodore of Stoudios.³⁴ The *kanon* commemorates the martyrs on 29 February, but this date is problematic since the only Leap year in the second decade of the ninth century in which the beginning of Lent fell before February 29 was 812. Some scholars have subsequently claimed that the *kanon* commemorates the soldiers executed in Bulgaria after Nikephoros' campaign in 811.³⁵ This, however, is impossible, for the text implies that the martyrs were transported to the *khanate* (εἰς γῆν βαρβαρικὴν αἰχμάλωτοι ἀχθέντες), while the *Parva Catechesis* indicates that among the captives were many women and children.³⁶ These were undoubtedly captured in Thrace between 813 and 814. With a high degree of probability we may thus conjecture that the persecution took place in 815, when Lent also began in February.³⁷ The day of the month, which in the single, thirteenth-century manuscript is given in letters (κθ'), is obviously a scribal error.

³³ ἐν τῇ Βουλγαρία... ἐξῆλθε δόγμα πονηρὸν παρὰ τοῦ ἐκεῖσε κρατοῦντος· τοὺς ἐν αἰχμαλωσίᾳ χριστιανούς καὶ ἀδερφοὺς ἡμῶν κατὰ τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ἁγίας τεσσαρακοστῆς κρεωφαγῆσαι· καὶ ὁ λαὸς συναθροίσθη; Theod. Stud., *Parva Catech.*, 149; ... συνήγαγε πάντας τοὺς κρατηθέντας Χριστιανούς... καὶ κατηνάγκασεν ἀρνήσασθαι τὸν Χριστιανισμὸν... καὶ μὴ πεισθέντας, τοὺς μὲν ἀπεκεφάλισε, τοὺς δὲ διαφόρως τιμωρησάμενος καὶ ἀνηλεῶς ἐφόνευσεν; *Menologion Basilii*, 276D–277A; Beševliev 1966, 95.

³⁴ Tomadakes, *Akolouthia*, 333–351, esp. at 343–344. Many verses of the *kanon* (found in a thirteenth-century manuscript at Patmos) paraphrase Theodore's sermon; Tomadakes has thus identified the bishop of Stoudios as its composer.

³⁵ Van de Vorst 1914, 42–43.

³⁶ ... καὶ ὁ λαὸς συνηθρήθησθαι. καὶ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὄδυρμὸς σὺν γυναίξιν καὶ τέκνοις; Theod. Stoud., *Parva Catechesis*, 149; Tomadakes, *Akolouthia*, 347.34–35.

³⁷ Grumel 1958, 250. By contrast, in 816 Lent began in March.

If, as argued above, Manuel was put to death in January 815, his execution may well be linked with the Bulgar defeat at Mesembria in late 814. Although nothing is known about Manuel's activities in Bulgaria, it is very unlikely that he or his associates had somehow contributed to Leo's victory. Nevertheless, the prelate was the most prominent Byzantine captive, and must have provided a handy scapegoat for the Bulgars who were unable to respond with a military operation so late in the year. Another factor that has to be considered is Dičevg's failing health, as a result of which some members of the elite, agitating for the vigorous prosecution of war, challenged his authority. Against this backdrop, the *khan's* decision to execute Manuel can perhaps be seen as part of an attempt to regain the support of these nobles.

Dičevg's hopes were never realized. For as the notice in the *Synaxarion* reports, shortly after Manuel's martyrdom he went blind. In Bulgar minds this was a sign that the *khan* had lost his heavenly-mandated good fortune, and in accordance with Turkic tradition, he was strangled to death by his own men.³⁸ By February 815, Omurtag, the next in the line of succession, had taken over.³⁹ Nothing is known about him before that point. To judge from the available evidence, he was an ambitious and energetic leader who seems to have planned to continue the war against Byzantium. In keeping with this, Omurtag's policy, at least until 816, was overtly and at times violently anti-Christian.

There is nothing to suggest that the violent persecution carried out early on in his reign had anything to do with the spread of Christianity in the Bulgar realm.⁴⁰ Certainly, with the arrival of thousands of captives from Thrace and Macedonia, the Christians in early ninth-century Bulgaria would have been a sizeable minority.⁴¹ Their influence undoubtedly facilitated the spread of the new religion, particularly among the Slavs, who appear to have been

³⁸ καὶ διὰ τὴν ἀμαρτίαν τυφλωθεὶς, ἐμισήθη παρὰ τοῦ οἰκείου λαοῦ, καὶ παρ' αὐτοῦ μετὰ σχοινίου ἀπεπνίγη; *Menologion Basilii*, 276D; *Synaxarion CP*, 415. It is significant to note that the execution of a ruler when a great calamity befell him or his people was customary among other Turkic peoples, including the Khazars and, much later, the Mongols. Given the widespread belief in the Turkic world that royal blood should not be shed, strangulation was an acceptable means of executing a person of noble origin; see Golden 1980, 100; *Secret History*, 140–141; Frazer 1917, 382–394. For the ritual strangulation of the Khazar *qaghan* during his investiture, see Golden 1983, 149–150 n. 67.

³⁹ *Synaxarion CP*, 415.

⁴⁰ A claim made much later by Skylitzes, 117.19–30; in this connection, see also Obolensky 1971, 83; Beševliev 1981a, 270–273; Nikolova 1995, 188–192; Rašev 2004a, 155.

⁴¹ According to recent conjecture, they made up at least fifteen per cent of the total population; Nikolov 2000, 332; see also Nikolova 1995, 190–191; Schreiner 2004, 220.

more receptive to Christianity than their Bulgar overlords.⁴² However, it is important to emphasize that this was a gradual process which culminated in the middle of the ninth century, if not later. Christianity could not possibly have been spreading quickly across the *khanate* as early as 815, less than two years after the arrival of the bulk of the captives. This hypothesis can be corroborated by the lack of any archaeological evidence pertaining to Christian practices in Bulgaria in the eighth and early ninth centuries.⁴³

Some scholars suggested that that Omurtag martyred their Byzantine captives, including the *strategoi* Leo and John, without any provocation.⁴⁴ But this too seems extremely improbable. It is generally believed that the Bulgars took a tolerant and syncretistic approach to religion, similar to that of other Turkic peoples.⁴⁵ Even before the arrival of the prisoners of war, a significant number of Christians—remnants of the late-antique population north of the Haimos Mountains, as well as immigrants and refugees from the empire—had been living in the *khanate*.⁴⁶ These men with their technical expertise, their literary and organizational skills were rapidly incorporated into the central government and the army (and, in fact, played a vital part in the state's survival in the eighth century), but were always allowed to retain their religion and identity. Having said that, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Omurtag had been greatly concerned about the growing number of Byzantines his father had used in running the Bulgar state. The new *khan* had good reason to suspect that Leo's inspirational leadership (and perhaps even his iconoclastic policy) might encourage some of these men to turn traitor.⁴⁷ Personal and political conflicts within the Bulgar elite no doubt contributed to the tenseness of the situation. It is against this background that one should

⁴² Obolensky 1971, 83, notes correctly that this was partly because of the earlier contacts of the Slavs with Byzantine communities in the Balkans, but also because of the greater social and political cohesion of the Bulgar clans; see also Mayr-Harting 1994, 6.

⁴³ The situation in Bulgaria can be compared to that in the northern Crimea, where in the eighth and ninth centuries Christian churches were built in the "Saltovo-Majaki" style—a direct result of the organized Byzantine missionary activity in that region. Such missionary activity was absent in Bulgaria in the first half of the ninth century; see Baranov 1990a, 133–139; Nikolov 2000, 340, 342; Browning 1988, 33.

⁴⁴ See for instance Treadgold 1984b, 220.

⁴⁵ Browning 1975, 281.

⁴⁶ For the Christian immigrants in Bulgaria, see Rašev 2004a.

⁴⁷ In all likelihood, some of the Byzantines living in Bulgaria in the late eighth and early ninth centuries had been loyal supporters of Constantine V and Leo IV, and therefore iconoclasts, who after Irene's accession to the throne and the official restoration of icons had good reason for leaving the empire. As noted in 4.3 above, Irene conducted a purge of the military and civil officers appointed by her iconoclastic predecessors; for a discussion see Lilie 1996, 48–78.

see the execution of the *strategoi* John and Leo early in 815. Both, it may be conjectured, had loyally served Krum for years before being assigned to important military commands in the conquered territories in Thrace.⁴⁸ Following the battle of Mesembria, in which the two *strategoi* are very likely to have fought, Omurtag felt it unsafe to have Byzantines in high positions in the border with the empire, and as their future in Bulgaria looked precarious, John and Leo may have established contact with the emperor, in the hope of returning to their native land.

Apart from that, it is clear that bitter anti-Byzantine feeling, particularly among the militant wing of the Bulgar elite, whose ancient culture became more self-conscious and aggressive as foreign influences grew stronger in the *khanate*, would have welcomed any measures taken against the Christian prisoners or refugees, a fact that Omurtag was eager to exploit in order to strengthen his hold on power. Thus, shortly after the beginning of Lent, in around February 815, he summoned some of the captives, including George, archbishop of Debeltos, and Leo, bishop of Nike in Thrace, along with the two *strategoi* and presumably a number of other Byzantine officers whose loyalty to the *khan* was in question.⁴⁹ According to the hagiographical accounts that describe these events, an attempt to make them abjure their faith failed, and a number of them (some 377 according to an exaggerated report) were put to death in a brutal fashion.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Theodore of Stoudios admits that most eventually avoided execution—a statement which could well suggest that Omurtag was merely trying to intimidate the Christian minority rather than create martyrs.⁵¹ The *khan* evidently punished individual Byzantines who were suspected of conspiracy, as well as several clergymen who

⁴⁸ The evidence comes from the inscription carved on the left side of an ancient altar in Malamirovo; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 47. It is extremely unlikely that John, Leo or the other *strategoi* in that inscription were among the Byzantine officers who had fled to Bulgaria after the sack of Serdica in 809, as Beševliev 1981a, 265, suggests. To be sure, if they had switched sides so recently, Krum would certainly not have entrusted them with these important commands.

⁴⁹ Theod. Stud., *Parva Catechesis*, 149. For the inhabitants of Debeltos, see Theoph., 495.22–24. The citizens of Nike had abandoned their homes in the summer of 812. It may be conjectured that most of them, including their bishop, had taken refuge at Adrianople, which fell to the Bulgars in late August 813; Theoph., 496.2–5.

⁵⁰ Μουρτάγων δὲ τὴν ἀρχὴν δεξάμενος, ἅπαντας τοὺς χριστιανοὺς μὴ πειθομένους τὸν Χριστὸν ἀρνήσασθαι, ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ποιεῖ; *Synaxarion CP*, 415; *Menologion Basilii*, 276D–277A; Follieri and Dujčev, *Acolutia*, 75–85; Tomadakes, *Akolouthia*, 345–351.

⁵¹ τέλος, φεῦ τῆς ἐλκεϊνῆς ἀπαγγελίας, ἠττήθησαν ὑποβληθέντες τῷ ἄσεβεϊ προστάγματι; Theod. Stoud., *Parva Catechesis*, 149.

openly challenged his authority by refusing to eat meat and thus symbolically renouncing Christianity.⁵²

7.2 THE THIRTY YEARS' PEACE

A detailed narrative account of the last year of the war is impossible to create due to lack of evidence, but the main point is clear enough: by 815, after almost four years of fighting, Byzantines and Bulgars alike had realized that neither side could overwhelm the other. Even so, it was in both Leo's and Omurtag's interests to continue the war. The *khan* was, in part, bidding to ensure the support of an influential section of the Bulgar elite which regarded Byzantium as a hereditary foe by explicitly associating himself with their interests. It should be remembered that at the beginning of the ninth century, the hostile attitude towards the empire, which the Bulgars had had ever since they came into the Balkans, and which had helped maintain cohesion among the warrior class, had evidently developed into an aggressive anti-Byzantine movement. This began in response, on the one hand, to the renewed—under Irene and Nikephoros I—Byzantine pressure and, on the other, to the fact that Christian influences were growing stronger in the *khanate*, but was also fuelled by financial considerations. Indeed, Krum's wars were very much still within living memory, and the large influx of booty he had gathered from Thrace and the Constantinopolitan suburbs (which he partly distributed as largesse to the nobility) must have served as an appetizer for further treasure to be had from raiding. Given that Bulgaria's resources had been overstretched by the war, and that the tribute (mainly agricultural produce) extracted from the Slav subjects could not sufficiently support a political mechanism of patronage and rewards, the rich pickings yielded by raids into Byzantine territory came to represent a very important source of revenue for the warrior aristocracy.⁵³

By the same token, Leo V had little choice but to continue the war. Like many of his contemporaries, he had argued that the recent military disasters at the hands of the Arabs and Bulgars were a divine punishment for venerating icons.⁵⁴ Once iconoclasm had been established as an imperially sanctioned doctrine, therefore, God's favour had to manifest itself in the

⁵² ... μηδὲ πείθεσθαι, μηδὲ παρὰ τὸν Χριστιανικὸν νόμον κρεωφαγεῖν; Theod. Stoud., *Parva Catechesis*, 149.

⁵³ For the development of this aggressive Bulgar nationalism, see 5.2.1 above.

⁵⁴ Scriptor incertus, 359.11–13.

battlefield. Indeed, Leo probably intended to follow up his success at Mesembria by launching a series of small-scale raids into Thrace, which imperial propaganda could celebrate with a triumph. This strategy makes a great deal of sense in the light of the military and economic realities of the Bulgar state. Given that a complete Byzantine victory was, in practice, unattainable because of the natural barrier of the Haimos, the emperor may have hoped to strain Bulgaria's remaining resources in a prolonged war of attrition.

Only two episodes of the last phase of the war are recorded by our sources. The first comes from the *Vita Theophanis*, written by Methodios between 823 and 832.⁵⁵ The hagiographer says that after the official restoration of iconoclasm in April 815, Theophanes was summoned to the capital by the emperor, who asked him to pray for him because he was setting out against the "barbarians".⁵⁶ From Theodore of Stoudios we hear that the Confessor arrived at Constantinople some time after June 815 and was interrogated on theological matters by John the Grammarian.⁵⁷ Several other bishops and monks, including Niketas of Medikion, were called to the capital and questioned by John the Grammarian in the winter of 815/16.⁵⁸ There is a strong possibility, therefore, that the events described by Methodios took place at this time. Significantly, Leo is not known to have held any operations on the empire's eastern frontier in late 815 or early 816. If so, it may be confidently asserted that he was setting out against the Bulgars. Nothing is known about the objectives and outcome of the expedition. It would seem reasonable to suppose, however, that it followed an established pattern of swift raids into Thrace which ended with the triumphal return of the emperor to Constantinople.⁵⁹

The second piece of evidence comes again from hagiography, and specifically the *Vita Nicetae Medicii* (written before 844/45),⁶⁰ which relates the following episode: in the winter of 815/16, the saint, who had been exiled to Asia Minor, was abruptly recalled to Constantinople along with other iconophile bishops and monks. After Easter, which in 816 fell on April 20, John the Grammarian tortured them to make them accept communion from the iconoclast patriarch Theodotos, and Niketas eventually did. Soon, however, he repented his lapse and denounced himself to Leo. The emperor put

⁵⁵ See above 1.1 n. 5.

⁵⁶ καὶ πέμπει πρὸς αὐτὸν δολιόλεκτα "ἐλθέ" λέγων "εὐξόμενος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν, ὅτι κατὰ βαρβάρων ἀπαίρομεν"; *Vita Theophanis A*, c. 45.

⁵⁷ Theod. Stud., *Laudatio Theoph.*, c. 13–14.

⁵⁸ *Vita Nicetae Med.*, c. 45; *Vita Ioannis Psich.*, c. 7; *Vita Macarii*, c. 10.

⁵⁹ Treadgold 1988, 216f, mistakenly links this campaign with the battle of Mesembria.

⁶⁰ Ševčenko 1977, 118 and n. 42.

Niketas in the custody of Zacharias, *epitropos* of the imperial estates of the Magnaura, an iconophile, and then exiled him to the island of St Glykeria in the Sea of Marmara.⁶¹ In the meantime, Leo sent Zacharias on official duty in Thrace, where he was captured by the Bulgars and taken off to the *khanate*.⁶² Michael of Synada, who was then in exile at the Opsikian *theme*, sent word to Niketas to pray for the release of their common friend. The saint prayed and assured him that he would see Zacharias again. Indeed, before long, the Bulgars made peace with the emperor, an exchange of prisoners was arranged and Zacharias came out along with the other captives.⁶³ These events are not precisely dated; nonetheless, the hagiographer suggests that the torture of the iconophiles was brief, that Niketas denounced himself to Leo immediately after accepting communion from the iconoclast patriarch, and that the peace occurred soon after Zacharias was captured. All this seems likely to have occurred within a few months, most probably before the end of 816.⁶⁴

This telling episode from the *Vita Nicetae*, one of the most reliable saint's *Lives* of the time, indicates that the Bulgars, confident of their strength, were still raiding into Byzantine territory in mid or late 816. The capture of Zacharias, a high-ranking civil official, is a particularly interesting piece of information. It suggests that the Bulgars were still able to penetrate into Thrace as far as its principal administrative centres (for instance, Arkadioupolis or Bizye), where Zacharias might have been based. Yet, there is another way of interpreting the evidence. Shortly before Krum's death in 814, Byzantine control of Thrace appeared on the brink of collapse. It can be argued that the presence of a civil administrator in the region two years later is a firm indication that, despite the continuing Bulgar incursions, imperial authority was well on the way of being restored.

The picture of Byzantine-Bulgar warfare that emerges from the hagiographical sources, therefore, is one of successive raids and counter-raids, which continued at least until mid 816. Although they did not upset the existing balance of power, these raids certainly accomplished the primary objectives of the two rival rulers. Leo's military endeavours on the Balkan

⁶¹ *Vita Nicetae Med.*, c. 43. For the post of the *epitropos* of the Magnaura, see Treadgold 1984b, n. 17. For St Glykeria, see Janin 1964, 498.

⁶² Ζαχαρίας... πεμθεῖς παρὰ τοῦ βασιλέως πρὸς διοίκησιν δημοσίων πραγμάτων ἐπὶ τὸ Θρακῶν μέρος, βαρβάρους ἀλούς, τοῖς παρακειμένοις ἐκεῖνῳ τῷ μέρει, αἰχμάλωτος εἰς τὴν χώραν αὐτῶν ἀπηνέχθη; *Vita Nicetea Med.*, c. 44.

⁶³ μετ' οὐ πολὺ γὰρ ἔδοξεν εἰρηνεύειν τὸ προειρημένον ἔθνος μετὰ τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ ἀντικαταλλαγῆς γενομένης, ἐξῆλθεν ὁ Ζαχαρίας σὺν τοῖς λοιποῖς αἰχμαλώτοις; *Vita Nicetae Med.*, c. 45.

⁶⁴ Treadgold 1984b, 217.

frontier had apparently been sufficiently successful for him to be able to portray his regime as a return to the era of iconoclast success in the eighth century.⁶⁵ Similarly, Omurtag's frequent forays into Byzantine territory may well have enhanced his standing in the eyes of his subjects and facilitated political unity among the elite. Even so, the war had demanded every resource Bulgaria could find and is likely to have left the state considerably poorer than it had been before 811. The price had also been high for the Byzantines; for between 812 and 816, the Bulgars had inflicted considerable damage on Thrace, effectively depriving the empire of a major part of its resources. It is against this backdrop that the two sides entered into negotiations with the goal of concluding a lasting peace.

The date of the agreement of the subsequent peace treaty remains a much-debated topic.⁶⁶ The *Vita Nicetae*, as has been seen, indicates that it was concluded several months after 20 April 816, if all the intervening events are accommodated.⁶⁷ A brief notice in the chronicle of Step'annos of Taron may help establish a *terminus ante quem*: Step'annos reports that in the year 265 of the Armenian era, that is between 6 May 816 and 5 May 817, the emperor rebuilt Arkadioupolis and Bizye, two of the towns that had been recently sacked by the Bulgars.⁶⁸ It seems improbable that Leo would have initiated an extensive building programme in Thrace during the war, particularly if Bulgar raids penetrated deep into the *theme*'s territory and disrupted communications between the local centres of power and the imperial capital. The restoration of these towns (in fact, the emperor is likely to have been concerned only with their physical defences) cannot have taken more than a few months. Since it was completed before May 817, it must have begun the previous year. This could well suggest that the treaty was concluded in the second half of 816, quite possibly in the autumn or early winter.

The treaty was to last for thirty years, and may have had to be renewed by both sides every ten years after it came into effect.⁶⁹ This is implied by Genesisios who reports that shortly before the end of the rebellion of Thomas the Slav early in 823, Omurtag sent an embassy to Constantinople because

⁶⁵ Genesisios, 13.83–85.

⁶⁶ See, for example Bury 1910, 276–277 (for 814); Dujčev 1959b, 62–64 (814); Runciman 1930, 72 (815/6); Angelov *et al.* 1981, 147 (815/6); Zlatarski 1918, 299 (late 814/early 815); Beševliev 1981c, 184 (late 815/early 816); Bury 1912, 360 (815/6); Treadgold 1984b, 213–220 (816); Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 145 (816).

⁶⁷ *Vita Nicetae Med.*, c. 44.

⁶⁸ Step'annos of Taron, 107; Samuel Anec'i, 421; Grumel 1958, 250.

⁶⁹ καὶ γὰρ τὰς τριακοντούτας σπονδὰς τοῖς Οὐννοῖς δὴ τούτοις τοῖς καλουμένοις Βουλγάροις ἐνωμότως ποιῶν καὶ εἰρηνικὰς συμβάσεις καταπραττόμενος...; Theoph. cont., 31.10–12.

the treaty had almost completed its first decade.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, this passage needs to be treated with caution: both Genesisios and Theophanes continuatus are drawing on official accounts which tried to conceal the fact that Michael II, besieged at the time by Thomas, had appealed to the Bulgar *khan* for help.⁷¹ A statement found in the near-contemporary chronicle of George the Monk confirms that Omurtag attacked the rebel's army on Michael's request.⁷² The emperor later found it necessary to manufacture a story linking the Bulgar intervention, which was said to be against his wishes, with the negotiations for the renewal of the peace treaty, the first decade of which was supposedly approaching its completion.⁷³

The content of the agreement is partly known, thanks to survival of the two inscribed columns found near Pliska.⁷⁴ The incomplete inscription from Sulejmankjoj records only the provisions reflecting the obligations of the Byzantines, while that from Tărgovishte, which is badly damaged, may have given a short summary of the full treaty.⁷⁵ The agreement might have contained as many as eleven clauses, but only four can be reconstructed from the main text (no. 41).⁷⁶ The first concerned the frontier, which was set at a line running from Debeltos to Potamoukastelon, through the two Abrolebas at the Derventski Heights to the Tundža River.⁷⁷ It then ran between the forts of Balzina and Agathonike, on the left bank of the Tundža, to Lefki, Konstanteia and Makrolivada, which were strategically situated on the upper

⁷⁰ Genesisios, 29.87–89; Theoph. cont., 65.7–10. For the rebellion of Thomas, see Lemerle 1965.

⁷¹ Omurtag came to the assistance of Michael II and, in fact, played a major part in breaking the rebel's siege; see the discussion in 8.2 below.

⁷² ...ὁ βασιλεὺς Μιχαὴλ τοὺς Βουλγάρους εἰς συμμαχίαν κατ' αὐτοῦ [Thomas] παρακαλέσατο...; George Mon., 796.24–25; George cont., 788.5–6.

⁷³ It must be pointed out that Omurtag's military aid to Michael II does not appear to have been in fulfillment of a treaty clause. Miller 1971, 61, believes that such a provision may have been negotiated then, since the Bulgars did not have the status of allies by the agreement of 816.

⁷⁴ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 41 from Setsishte (Sulejmankjoj) and no. 42 from Tărgovishte; Petkov 2008, no. 5. For an analysis, see Beševliev 1981a, 276–279; Beševliev 1981c, 183–187; Božilov and Gjuzev 1999, 145–147; Koledarov 1979, 34–41; Ziemann 2007, 301–303.

⁷⁵ At least two separate official documents were drawn up initially, one by the Byzantines, the other by the Bulgars. These were signed and exchanged by the negotiating teams of both sides. The Bulgars then carved the Byzantine obligations on stone as a means of safeguarding the agreement (no. 41); see Miller 1971, 72.

⁷⁶ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 41; Božilov and Gjuzev 1999, 145; Tsankova-Petkova 1976, 43–44, reads this as “τῶν συμφωνιθέντων δ' κεφάλαιον”, claiming that the treaty contained only four articles. This, however, seems unlikely.

⁷⁷ Potamoukastelon can perhaps be identified with the ruins of the fort Kaletto near the village Oman on the Sredetska River; Soustal 1991, 380, 414. For a different opinion, see Koledarov 1980, 56–59; Wendel 2005, 207; Georgiev 1999, 131.

Hebros valley.⁷⁸ The frontier was then to follow the river until an unspecified point when it turned north to the Haimos Mountains (see Map III).⁷⁹

There is considerable disagreement about the present-day location of most of the aforementioned place-names, but the main point is clear enough. The border had moved south, from the *kleisourai* of the Haimos to the northern stretches of the Thracian Plain. The Byzantines had conceded control of Mesembria, Anchialos, Beroe and, presumably, Serdica. To be certain, the course of the frontier was approximately the same as that described by Krum's inscription at Malamirovo (812/13), although Leo retained Sozopolis and Debeltos. As shown below, Debeltos subsequently became an important entrepôt for economic relations with Bulgaria.⁸⁰ If Michael the Syrian is correct, the emperor may also have ceded the marshy territory between Debeltos and the Gulf of Burgas (part of what is today the Mandra Lake).⁸¹ The border determined by the treaty corresponds roughly to the Great Earthen Rampart and trench which the Bulgars constructed against the empire, the remains of which are known as the "Erkesija" ("the place that is cut"). The earthwork, which is still discernible for some 130 km, ran from the coast northeast of Debeltos to the environs of Konstanteia, and was probably raised by Omurtag at this time.⁸²

The next two clauses concerned the Slavic populations of the frontier district. According to the Sulejmankjoj inscription, these Slavs were divided

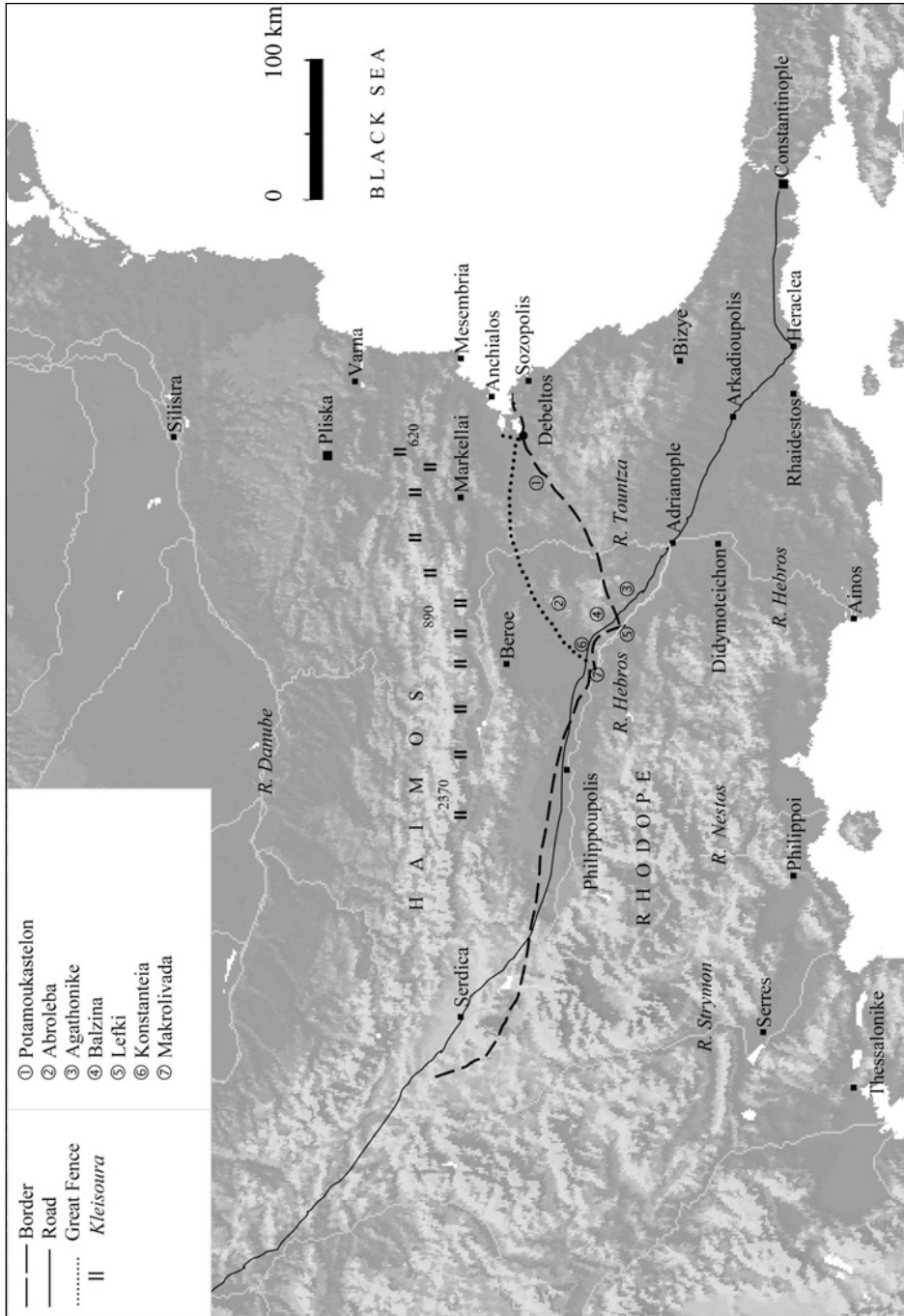
⁷⁸ Neither Balzina nor Agathonike can be safely identified. The former must have been situated north of the latter because the frontier ran between the two forts. If Agathonike is to be identified with Orjahovo, as most scholars believe, the ruins of a fort near Glavan, some 55 km southeast of Konstanteia, may correspond to Balzina; Soustal 1991, 168, 187; Koledarov 1979, 34; Gagova 1995, 119, 148. See, however, Georgiev 1999, 134–135, who identifies Balzina with the rivulet Ovčaritsa and Agathonike with Polski Gradets, near Nova Zagora. For Lefki (perhaps in the ruins of the fort at Altân tepe on the Levčenska River), see Wendel 2005, 193–194; Soustal 1991, 335. For Makrolivada (present-day Uzundžovo), see Soustal 1991, 343.

⁷⁹ τὸ ἀ' τῶν [συμφοριθέντων] ἀ' κεφαλέον [ἐστὶν περὶ τῆς ἐνορίας, ἥνα ἐστὶ]ν ἀπὸ Δεβελ] τοῦ κ' ἐπὶ Πο[ταμουκάστ]ελιν κ' μέσον τῶν β' Α[βρολέβον κ' ἐς τ]ὰ πολὰ γεφύ[ρια κ' μέ]σων Βαλζήνας κ' Ἀγαθ[ονίκης κ' ἐς Λεύκι?]ν κ' ἐς Κονσταντίαν κ' ἐς Μακρὴν λιβάδα[ν κ' ἐς Ἐβρον κ' ἐς Ἐ]μον ὄ[ρος. ἕως ἐκὶ γέγονεν ἰ ὀροθεσία; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 41.

⁸⁰ It has been suggested that the easternmost section of the border followed the course of the Sredetska River which runs through Debeltos, thereby dividing the city between the two states; Dimitrov 1997, 38–39. For the border of 812/13, see Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 47.

⁸¹ Michael Syr., III, 26; Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 146; Koledarov 1979, 35.

⁸² The embankment was 3–4 m high and about 16 m wide at its base. The ditch was 1 m deep; Rašev 1982a, 60–62, 64–65; Koledarov 1979, 34; Fiedler 1986, 457, 461; Momčilov 1999, 94–96; Squatriti 2002, 34–35, 49, 56–57; Shepard 1995, 236; Aladžov 2008; Ovčarov 1970, 453, for the discovery of grey ware with burnished decoration (dated to the eighth or ninth centuries) in trial excavations across the rampart near the village of Ljulin. Rašev 2007b, 124–125, who identifies the term σάρακτον in the Malamirovo inscription with the Erkesija, believes that the latter was constructed by Krum between June or July and November 813.



Map III: The Byzantine-Bulgar border ca. 816

into two groups: those who were subject to the emperor, and those who were living in the coastal districts but were not under his authority. The former were to remain “at the place that they had arrived when the war broke out”, while the latter had to be returned to their homes.⁸³ These two provisions need elucidation. Given that the text records only those terms that were favourable to the *khan*, it would seem reasonable to suppose that the Slavs in question were or would become his subjects. Those who were “under the emperor” must have either been forcibly resettled in Bulgaria during the war (possibly from Macedonia) or taken refuge in places that had now passed into the hands of the Bulgars. The treaty provided that they must now remain in the *khanate*. The status of the Slavs “who were not subject to the emperor in the coastal district” is more difficult to determine. The *paralion meros* should probably be identified with the Black Sea coast and specifically the area around Mesembria, Anchialos and the Gulf of Burgas, which was now ceded to the Bulgars. The Slavs living there may or may not have been Bulgar subjects.⁸⁴ One thing we can say for certain is that they had abandoned their homes and fled south, quite possibly along with the local Byzantine population on the eve of Krum’s invasion in the summer of 812.⁸⁵ The treaty required the empire to return these Slavs to their villages where they would now be under the authority of the *khan*.

The fourth clause provided for the exchange of Byzantine officers and soldiers captured during the war. For *tourmarchai*, *spatharioi* and *komites*, the emperor had to pay a certain sum per head; unfortunately, this is not legible in the inscription.⁸⁶ Common soldiers were to be exchanged man for man.⁸⁷ Moreover, a payment of two oxen per head was to be made for those who

⁸³ [β’ κεφάλειον περι τῶν Σκλάβων τῶν ὄντων ὑπὸ τ[ὸ]ν βασιλέαν· ἦνα διαμίνουσιν οὗτος, ὅς ἐφθάστισαν, ὅτε ἐγένετο ὁ π[ό]λεμος. γ’ κεφάλειον περι τῶν λ[υ]πῶν Σκλάβων τῶν μὴ ὑποκίμενον [ἰς τὸν βασιλέαν ἰς το παρ]άλιον μέρος· ἐπιστρέψι αὐτοὺς ἡ[ς τὰ χορία; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 41; Beševliev 1981c, 186; Božilov and Gjuzev 1999, 146.

⁸⁴ Significantly, the fragmentary inscription from Tărgovishte seems to distinguish the Slavs who were subject to the *khan* from those who were “not under the emperor”: β’ (κε) φάλε[ον περι τῶν Σκλάβων τῶν ο[ν]των ὑπὸ τὸν βασι][λέ]α (κὲ) ὑπὸ τὸν α[ρχοντ[αν] (i.e. the *khan*) ἰς-----ἵνα διαμίνουσιν οὗτος. π[ερὶ δὲ τῶν Σκλάβων τῶν μὴ ὑποκίμενον ἰς τὸν βασιλέαν---; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 42.

⁸⁵ Theoph., 496.2–5. Beševliev 1981a, 278, identifies these Slavs with the Severoi, who according to Theophanes, 359.13–14, had been settled by Asparuch on the eastern slopes of the Haimos as guardians of the border.

⁸⁶ δ’ κεφάλειον περ[ὶ] τῶν ἐγαλλότων Χριστιανῶν κὲ κρ[ατιθέντων---(lacuna!)---περὶ] δὲ τρομάρχον, σπαθαρίον κὲ κομίτο[ν]· δόσι (?)...; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 41.

⁸⁷ περὶ δὲ τοῦ πτο[χο]ῦ λαοῦ ψυχῖν ἀντὶ ψυχῖς; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 41; Dujčev 1978b, 500–503.

were captured by the Bulgars inside the forts.⁸⁸ The clause might also have dealt with the Byzantine *strategoi* and, presumably, other high-ranking officials who had deserted, or would desert in the future, to Bulgaria. At that point, however, the inscription breaks off.⁸⁹ There is some evidence to suggest that the agreement also provided for the exchange of civilian captives. As already discussed, the *Vita Nicetae* reports that when the Bulgars made peace with the emperor, Zacharias, a civil servant who had been carried off to Bulgaria, was released with the other captives.⁹⁰ This seems to be confirmed by Theodore of Stoudios, who claims that the story of the fourteen martyrs in Bulgaria, included in his *Parva Catechesis*, is based on eyewitness accounts.⁹¹ These eyewitnesses were presumably clergymen or monks who, like Zacharias, were released by the Bulgars following the peace agreement.

Two further points must be made with regard to the treaty of 816. Firstly, Leo was not required to pay tribute to the *khan*; for this would certainly have been recorded in the beginning of the inscription reflecting the Byzantine obligations. Secondly, measures were evidently taken to normalize the commercial relations between the two states. This is best attested by the discovery of a substantial number of coins of Leo V in northeastern Bulgaria and the Romanian Dobrudja (two specimens included in the hoard of Urluia and 10 stray finds), but also by the presence of imperial *kommerkiarioi* at Debeltos. The latter replaced Mesembria as the official centre of commercial exchange between the two countries by becoming the seat of Byzantine *kommerkiarioi*, known from seals, the earliest of which dates from 832/33.⁹²

The peace treaty was apparently sworn to and ratified first in Constantinople, by the emperor and the Bulgar negotiators, then in Pliska by Omurtag in the presence of the Byzantine envoys.⁹³ The procedure by which the agreement was ratified in the imperial capital is described in some detail

⁸⁸ βουπ(άλια) β' δ[όσι περὶ τῶν κρατι]θέντων ἔ[σοθεν τῶν κάστρον, ἐὰν ἐξα [.]; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 41. The payment may have been subject to certain conditions which are not preserved in the text (ἐὰν ἐξα. . .).

⁸⁹ ἐὰν ἀποφύγι στρατηγός---; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 41. One of the terms proposed by Krum in 812 provided for the mandatory mutual expulsion of all political refugees. It is impossible to know if this clause was repeated here; Theoph., 497.21–22.

⁹⁰ *Vita Nicetae Med.*, c. 45.

⁹¹ Theod. Stud., *Parva Catechesis*, 149; see also above 1.4 n. 166.

⁹² Jordanov 2003, nos. 22.1–2. These seals were discovered, along with coins of Theophilus (829–842), at the foundations of a building complex which archaeologists have identified with the headquarters of the local *kommerkiarios*; see Dimitrov 1997, 39. For Mesembria, see Oikonomides 1981–1985, 269–273. For the numismatic evidence, see the catalogue in Sophoulis 2009b with all the literature.

⁹³ Several other treaties are known to have been ratified in that manner; Miller 1971, 74.

by Ignatios the Deacon in his *Vita Nicephorii*. The treaty is said to have been supported by oaths sworn mutually on the gods of the other.⁹⁴ Leo was reportedly seen pouring a libation of water on the ground with his own hands, turning the saddles of horses upside down, grasping the reins, and lifting grass up on high.⁹⁵ Theophanes continuatus, who supplements Ignatios' account, describes the emperor cutting a dog in two, tasting its blood, and swearing upon his weapons.⁹⁶ By the same token, the Bulgar emissaries took an oath after the Christian rite.⁹⁷ Thus, the agreement was buttressed by the fear and authority of both the Christian god and the Bulgar deities.

The terms granted by the Byzantines were the natural culmination of Bulgar policy since the beginning of the ninth century. Leo had effectively recognized Krum's conquests, which had brought the Bulgars' foothold in the northern stretches of the Thracian Plain. Although the text of the treaty is incomplete, it is likely that the Macedonian *Sklaviniai*, which had served as a buffer zone against Byzantine aggression, were now left largely to themselves.⁹⁸ This gave the Bulgars a free hand to incorporate them gradually into the *khanate*, a process that had apparently been completed by the 860s.⁹⁹ As importantly, the resumption of official commercial exchanges with the empire provided a regular source of revenue for the *khan*, and contributed to the revival of Bulgar economy in the ninth century. The best evidence for Bulgaria's economic prosperity after the return of peace comes from Pliska's "Inner Town" where Omurtag constructed several buildings, including the ruler's residence, distinguished by the skillful mastery of drainage and hot water systems.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ It was very unusual for Byzantines to take their oath by the gods of "barbarians". But as Miller 1971, 74–75, has rightly pointed out, the necessity of convincing the Bulgars of the imperial *bona fides* could have overridden Christian exclusivism. Unsurprisingly, this was produced as evidence for Leo's un-Christian tendencies.

⁹⁵ ἐν αἷς ἦν ὄρῃν τὸν βασιλέα Ῥωμαίων χερσὶν ἐκ κύλικος ὕδωρ κατὰ γῆς ἐπιλείβοντα, ἐπισάγματα ἵππων αὐτουργῶς ἀναστρέφοντα, ἱμάντων ἐντρίτων ἀπτόμενον, καὶ χόρτον εἰς ὕψος αἴροντα; *Vita Niceph.*, 207.2–6.

⁹⁶ Theoph. cont., 31.10–19; in this connection see Sinor 1992, 301–307; Kristó 1996, 177–178.

⁹⁷ ...ἔθνη δὲ τῶν ἡμετέρων θεῶν συμβόλων ἀθεμίτοις χερσὶν ἐπιψαύοντα καὶ κατὰ τῆς αὐτῶν δυνάμεως ἐπομνύοντα; *Vita Niceph.*, 207.6–8; Beševliev 1981a, 376–380; Grumel 1937, 89.

⁹⁸ This is particularly true of the area northwest of the Rhodopes, as well as the Upper Nestos and Strymon Rivers, where Slav pirates were operating in the 830s; *Vita Gregorii Decapol.*, 54–55.

⁹⁹ For the evidence, see Fine 1983, 111; Obolensky 1988a, 22–24; Ziemann 2007, 333ff.; see also Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 14 from Philippoi for an expedition (ca. 836/7) against the Slav Smoleani who are thought to have been living along the Nestos River.

¹⁰⁰ For Omurtag's building projects, see 8.1 below.

Leo's greatest accomplishment was that he had ensured the integrity of the empire's core lands in the Balkans at a relatively small cost. Certainly, no one, including his iconophile enemies, complained about the territorial losses in northern Thrace, and this is significant. The fact that he, unlike some of his predecessors, was not required to pay tribute to the *khan* may have further enhanced his prestige. Perhaps most important of all, however, was the release of a large number of prisoners of war, some of whom had been held in Bulgaria since 811. Their return to Byzantium made a strong impression, as indicated by the creation of several hagiographical legends referring to this event.¹⁰¹

How did Thrace and Macedonia—and therefore the empire as a whole—benefit from the conclusion of peace with the Bulgars, and what evidence is there for that? As has been seen, the fertile plains of these two *themes* produced a great part of the grain that fed the imperial capital, but that process had been severely disrupted as a result of Bulgar incursions during much of the 790s, the last few years of Nikephoros' reign, and, most notably, between 812 and 816. After *ca.* 816 this region recovered its prosperity, as farmlands returned to cultivation and imperial subsidies contributed to the reconstruction of the urban centres destroyed during the war, and it was once again capable of providing the empire with grain and revenue from the land tax. Part of this recovery was undoubtedly the result of population growth.¹⁰² During the late eighth and early ninth centuries, Thrace and Macedonia had become unattractive places of settlement for Byzantine *stratiotai* and their families, but the prospect of a lasting peace with the Bulgars would have certainly changed that. Therefore, Leo V is likely to have started a programme of repopulation of the devastated countryside. The new settlers would have stimulated agricultural production very strongly, and provided enough new wealth to benefit both the state and its subjects.

The surviving sources provide only fleeting glimpses of the recovery. The seals of *kommerkiarioi* of Debeltos, Adrianople, Didymoteichon and (somewhat later) Christoupolis, as well the discovery of many coins of Leo V north of the border, point to an established—and no doubt profitable—trade with the Bulgars.¹⁰³ In addition to Step'annos of Taron, who reports that Leo V

¹⁰¹ See, for example, the story of Peter the *patrikios* in the *Synaxarion CP*, 791.37; a similar story is recorded in the *Vita Ioannicii* by Sabas, 359B–360A; Wortley 1980, 555–562.

¹⁰² For the upward demographic trend in the ninth century, see the discussion in Laiou 2002a, 49, 50; Laiou and Morrisson 2007, 92; Lefort 2002, 269.

¹⁰³ Oikonomides 1991, 247. For the seals of *kommerkiarioi* of Adrianople and Didymoteichon, see 8.2 below. For that of Symeon, *kommerkiarios* of Christoupolis, see Zacos and Vegler 1972, I/2, no. 2404. There is every reason to believe that the picture of Byzantine

rebuilt Arkadioupolis and Bizye, evidence for an extensive programme of reconstruction comes from Genesisios who, in spite of his strongly anti-iconoclastic stance, praises the emperor for “reviving” many towns in Thrace and Macedonia up to the Bulgar border.¹⁰⁴ It has been argued that the prosperity of these towns can also be inferred from the accounts of the revolt of Thomas the Slav, the last phase of which was fought on Thracian soil; these accounts seem to suggest that Arkadioupolis, Bizye, Panion and Heraclaea were all strongly fortified, well-provisioned and populous by the time Thomas used them as bases in 822/3.¹⁰⁵

The overall geopolitical outlook for the empire *ca.* 816 was, therefore, quite positive. In the Balkans, Leo V had put an end to the Bulgar threat, and exacted—on relatively favourable terms—a treaty which brought many years of welcome peace to the rich but war-ravaged *themes* of Thrace and Macedonia. In the east, Byzantium faced no major opposition from the Arabs. Weakened by the continuous internal divisions, the Abbāsids were unable to launch large-scale attacks against the empire and, after the Byzantine-Bulgar treaty, were even forced to go on the defensive.¹⁰⁶ Finally in the west, relations between Byzantium and the Franks remained peaceful, and Leo V was able to strengthen the empire’s position in the Adriatic by cultivating close ties with the Duke of Venice, Agnellus Patraciacus.¹⁰⁷ By the end of the second decade of the ninth century, then, although still beset by internal divisions, Byzantium was clearly entering a period of recovery, expansion and consolidation.

Macedonia following the treaty of *ca.* 816 was very similar to that presented by Kaminiates, 10.57–11.66, who, writing in the early tenth century, indicates that since the time of the Christianization of the Bulgars “there was no war anywhere, peace ruled in the surrounding areas, there was abundance of goods from agriculture and wealth from trade”.

¹⁰⁴ Genesisios, 21.35–36; Step’annos of Taron, 107.

¹⁰⁵ Treadgold 1988, 260.

¹⁰⁶ For Leo V’s eastern campaigns after 816, see 6.3.1 above.

¹⁰⁷ Thus, Leo sent Agnellus the body of St Zacharias as well as money to build a convent to house it; Dandolo, *Chronica*, 142–143; Treadgold 1988, 219.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE REIGN OF OMURTAG AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF EARLY MEDIEVAL BULGARIA

8.1 RECONSTRUCTING OMURTAG'S POWER

The reign of Omurtag (*ca.* 815–831) is commonly viewed as a period of considerable growth and prosperity for the Bulgar polity. It was characterized primarily by the strengthening of royal power, political stabilization and the rapid expansion arising from the conquest of territories formerly controlled by the Avars in the western Balkans and the Carpathian basin. Omurtag himself, as ruler, was the central figure of his realm. Although the strong, divinely-sanctioned leadership was already part of the Bulgar political tradition, he introduced new ways of expressing monarchical power which not only sharpened distinctions between Bulgaria and Byzantium, but also enhanced the ideological basis of his kingship and transformed relations between himself and the nobility. The evidence of his activities, unlike that of his predecessors, is visible throughout the core lands of the *khanate* and gives us precious insight into the political and social world of ninth-century Bulgaria.

As we have seen in chapter 7, the exact circumstances surrounding Omurtag's rise to power remain shadowy. It is safe to infer that the sudden death of Krum, as well as the defeat at the hands of Leo V at Mesembria, had created a serious political and military crisis that Omurtag was able to overcome only with great difficulty. The ambiguity of the system of succession in the Bulgar polity undoubtedly exacerbated these problems. Succession could be formally defined as either linear or lateral, but, in effect, any of the sons or brothers of the deceased *khan* had a legitimate right to succeed him as long as they had enough support among the nobility, especially the leading clan.¹ The available evidence seems to suggest that a leadership struggle between rival groups—each representing a different member of Krum's family—was raging in the *khanate* between 814 and 815. Whereas Dukum, Krum's brother and immediate successor, evidently enjoyed the support of

¹ See Di Cosmo 2002a, 184–185, for the ambiguities of the system of imperial succession in Inner Asian polities, and above 4.2 for Bulgaria.

his nobles, Dičevg, who took over immediately after Dukum's premature death, was unable to entrench himself in power to the complete satisfaction of important political and military circles. Opposition to him is likely to have been motivated by the unfavourable outcome of military developments on the Thracian frontier. The defeat at Mesembria in autumn or winter of 814—the first after more than three years of domination in the war against Byzantium—came as a profound shock to the Bulgars, and as a result, the apparently powerful militant wing of the ruling stratum may have challenged Dičevg's authority. The *khan* responded by ordering the execution of the archbishop of Adrianople, Manuel, held in captivity since Krum's Thracian campaign in 813, but this did little to appease his enemies who quickly rallied to Omurtag's side. Dičevg's deteriorating health was a further cause of concern, and that may have been enough to convince the remaining members of the military aristocracy to switch their political allegiance to Krum's son.² There can be no doubt that the decision-making council (the *κόμβειρον* of the Greek sources), which must have still yielded considerable power during times of political crisis, elevated Omurtag to the position of supreme ruler not simply because of his royal line of descent, but because he was regarded as better suited to defend the interests of the Bulgar polity at that particular moment.

Once he had obtained power, Omurtag made two important political decisions: to continue the war against Byzantium, and to undertake a violent persecution of Christians living in Bulgaria. These measures were arguably essential in allowing the new *khan* to consolidate his position. His political survival clearly depended on the militant warlike aristocracy; therefore he had little choice but to associate himself with the interests of his supporters. Nevertheless, the nobility was not capable of restraining Omurtag's powers for long. It is clear that his reign was marked by episodes of despotic behaviour.³ The construction of palaces and temples, the building of earthworks, the production of stone inscriptions, and, perhaps more characteristically, the orchestration of elaborate public rituals and ceremonies, are all interpreted as explicit statements of power. It is hardly surprising that no *khan* is known to have been murdered in pre-Christian Bulgaria after 815. Evidently Omurtag was able not only to subordinate the nobility to the central authorities, but also to establish an exclusive right to royal power—a strict

² See the discussion at 7.1 above.

³ Curta 2006b, 23.

adherence to a single dynasty whose members continuously ruled the *khan-ate* until the late tenth century.

The basic question to be posed is “how did he exercise such a degree of power over his subjects, especially the militant aristocracy”? In the absence of adequate evidence, any attempt to explain this phenomenon can only be a hypothesis, but it is one constructed in the light of developments in other “barbaric” states comparable, in some respects, to the Bulgar polity. In previous chapters we identified at least one important consideration which forced the nobility to accept the *khans*’ authority as the prime source of political power in the realm: access to the wealth and power which came from entering the ruler’s inner circle and holding office in the civil and military administration. Although tribal and clan affiliations were a central feature of the Turkic nomad political system, many important positions in the state apparatus could still be occupied by “outsiders”, as the examples of Patzikios, Kordyles or Dargamir clearly prove. The *khan* rewarded these men by distributing part of his riches, which probably included precious objects, livestock and slaves won in war, as well as agrarian produce and raw materials extracted from his subjects. It would be tempting to suppose that the Bulgar ruler was also in the habit of making gifts of land to favoured officers. In most nomadic states, land rights were customarily recognized on the basis of lineage, that is to say, they were owned—or at least exploited—by specific clans or tribes; however, all newly-conquered territories automatically became property of the ruler, who in turn could use them to reward his followers and thereby secure their support in the future.⁴ Besides, as has already been pointed out, agriculture occupied a significant place in the economic life of the Bulgar aristocrats, although the latter did not work the land themselves. This process must have strengthened the bonds between the *khan* and the commanders of the “outer” districts, which under Omurtag extended far beyond the boundaries of Thrace and the Dobrudja.

The best evidence for the existence of a special circle around the ruler is provided by several inscriptions carved by order of Omurtag, and later Malamir, to commemorate some of their “nurtured men” (the so-called *θρεπτοί ἄνθρωποι*).⁵ The union between the *khan* and these nobles was forged through initiatory rituals involving food, drink and gift exchange, which provided the opportunity to the participants to publicly communicate

⁴ For the notion of the state as “collective property of the ruling class”, see Golden 1992, 11. On the recognition of land rights on the basis of lineage, see Di Cosmo 2002, 273.

⁵ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 59–69; Stepanov 1999, 92–94; Slavova 2010, 129–142.

their status.⁶ Scholars have often proposed that such interchanges in both pagan and Christian societies functioned as a means of establishing bonds of communal solidarity and accentuating the importance of aristocratic kinship networks.⁷ Indeed, it is interesting to notice that the “nurtured men” in Omurtag’s commemorative inscriptions belong to different tribes or clans (Čakarar, Kubiari, Kurigir, Duar, Ermiar), an indication that the *khan* tried to build some form of group identity that looked beyond the pre-existing, and possibly quite sharp, social/tribal boundaries. Spiritual kinship was thus another medium (besides royal patronage) through which relationships of dependence or alliance between the ruler and his nobles were created.

Another factor that must be taken into account when assessing how Omurtag was able to strengthen his kingship is the development of a more elaborate hierarchy in the civil and military administration. Even before the early 800s, the Bulgar state apparatus was based on a strict and quite complex hierarchy, in which members of the leading tribes and clans were in a commanding position. Indeed, several titles of Turkic origin are attested in the Byzantine sources of the eighth century.⁸ A far greater number is recorded in the proto-bulgarian inscriptions, especially those dating from the reigns of Omurtag and Malamir, among them the titles *kana boila qolovur*, *bagatur boila qolovur*, *ičigru qolovur*, *zera tarqan*, *župan tarqan*, *ik bagain*, *biri bagain* and *bagatur bagain*.⁹ This type of hierarchy was unknown to the written sources of the earlier period, and it was probably introduced soon after Omurtag’s rise to power.¹⁰ The restructuring of the state bureaucracy should be understood as an attempt to redefine political power in a framework set out by the court at Pliska. Omurtag created a “*khan*-centred” descending hierarchy aimed at reducing the powers of the nobility, especially in the rapidly expanding periphery of the realm. So far away from the capital, power could not be delegated and controlled unless it was institutionalized. Thanks to the increasing hierarchization of the state, Omurtag made his nobles directly answerable to and—since wealth was primarily derived from office—dependent on the centre. The new hierarchical system of the Bulgar bureaucracy must have ensured that policies would be implemented

⁶ See Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 58, and my comments in chapter 2.

⁷ Gurevich 1985, 222–233, 244–248; Curta 1998–1999, 37–38.

⁸ See for instance Theoph., 436.11, 447.3; Nikeph., c. 79.9, for *Kampaganos*, probably a title (*kavkhan*?) rather than a proper name; Beševliev 1975; Beševliev 1981c, 249; *contra*: Simeonov 2008, 168–169. It must be noted that according to some scholars, these titles are of Chinese or Sogdian origin and were only adopted by the Türks; see Stepanov 1999, 87, 89–90, 94.

⁹ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 50, 60, 64, 65, 69; Gjuzev 2007, 43–44.

¹⁰ Stepanov 2010a, 122.

through a chain of subordination within which each link was responsible to the higher one. It was on account of its role in this process that literacy was central to Omurtag's regime, for recording and publicizing the services extracted from the nobility. The seven inventory inscriptions discovered in Bulgaria, each listing, under the title of an officer, the number of weapons that he was required to provide (for example, βαγατουρ βαγαίνου λαράκηα ἦν ὀμοῦ νγ', κασίδια με'),¹¹ often under penalty of death,¹² allow us a view of how the *khan's* orders came to be presented in formal, public terms, thereby underlining the legitimacy of royal power.

The *khan's* position as a "ruler by God", a concept which Omurtag carefully cultivated, contributed considerably towards the increased centralization of political power.¹³ We have already seen that he actively promoted the cult of Tangra, with its close association with the ruling dynasty, into the official ideology of the Bulgar state. This is clearly reflected in the archaeological record: the construction of a building complex at Madara (which is commonly dated to the second quarter of the ninth century, and consists of a shrine and what seems to have been a private quarter for the ruler), and the ceremonial sacrifices to Tangra, mentioned in an inscription of Omurtag found at a nearby location, were clearly meant to give an aura of sanctity to his rule.¹⁴ It is certainly no mere coincidence that the title *kana sybigi*, emphasizing the notion of a "mandate" granted to the *khan* by a divine entity, becomes clearly visible during this period. It is attested, in some cases together with its Greek equivalent *ek theou archon*, in several building, memorial and other stone inscriptions, which provided a favourable opportunity for the public display of royal power.¹⁵ Certainly, these inscriptions were meant to propagate the idea of Omurtag as a "divinely-appointed ruler". The same is true for the two one-sided golden medallions from Belogradets (formerly Tiutkarnautlar, near Varna) and Tsarevets Hill in Veliko Tŕrnovo, which combined steppe and Byzantine forms of imperial representation, and were probably struck for distribution among Omurtag's supporters.¹⁶ At the same time, the *khan*

¹¹ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 49.

¹² *Responsa*, chs. xxiii, 579.

¹³ Nikolov 2005, 88ff.

¹⁴ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 6. The marble column had been recycled as building material for a small local church, where it seems to have served as an altar stone. For the building complex at Madara, see above 2.2.2.

¹⁵ Curta 2006b, 26. The title *ek theou archon* also appears in the inscription carved by Omurtag below the relief of the Madara horseman; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 1c.

¹⁶ The specimen from Tiutkarnautlar, which is now lost, was used as a pendant attached to a necklace found around the neck of the individual buried there; Jordanov 2001, 25, nos. 1–2; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 86a–b; Slavčev and Jordanov 1979, 26–27.

succeeded in strengthening his position to an even greater extent by assuming increased priestly functions and laying claim to the right to decide on religious matters.¹⁷ Although the evidence eludes us, there can be no doubt that he also acquired the role of the supreme lawgiver.¹⁸ Omurtag could then convincingly present himself as the ultimate source of authority—political, religious and judicial—in the realm. None of his nobles held a position that even approached his, and he was therefore able to impressively demonstrate his unique position among his people.

The last factor that clearly favoured political centralization in the Bulgar realm was the successful prosecution of war. After concluding a peace treaty with Byzantium, Omurtag engaged in a policy of military expansion that led him to establish his influence, if not his sovereignty, over a vast territory stretching east from the Lower Tisza River in the southern fringes of the Carpathian basin to the Dniester River in the Black Sea steppes. The motives for this course of action were mainly political. We have already seen that offensive campaigns were frequently fought as a means of diverting martial energies away from the internal conflict and centrifugal tendencies—inevitable in nomadic societies—expressed by members of the elite. Some scholars have remarked, and rightly so, that military activity produced a higher degree of political cohesion and ultimately enhanced the power of the ruler who could demonstrate, through victory, that he still enjoyed divine support.¹⁹ War also served the purpose of incorporating other populations into the state's economy as tribute bearers, thereby providing the revenues necessary to maintain an efficient military machine and reward the *khan's* followers.

The political vacuum in southeastern Europe resulting from the disintegration of the Avar confederation and the crisis affecting Khazaria gave Omurtag a rare opportunity to attempt incursions and conquests, and both the Carpathian basin and the steppes north and northeast of the Danube Delta proved perfect targets during his reign. Unfortunately, we have little evidence relating to attempts at expansion in the Ukrainian steppe. Our information is based almost exclusively on a stone inscription commemorat-

¹⁷ Theophylaktos, *Mart.*, 196C–197D; Nikolov 2000, 339.

¹⁸ This is certainly the impression one gets from the *Responsa* of Pope Nicholas I. The earliest record of Bulgar legislation is the entry “*Boulgaroi*” in the *Suidas* which refers to the laws promulgated by Krum—an essentially moralizing account of the reasons for the destruction of the Avar *qaghanate*. Though it cannot be taken at face value, the account provides some insight into the mechanisms for legislation in early ninth-century Bulgaria. Certainly, the decision-making council summoned by the *khan* appears to have played little or no legislative role, leaving all initiative to the ruler.

¹⁹ Andreski 1968, 150–151; Di Cosmo 2002a, 182.

ing a Bulgar officer who drowned in the Dnieper River while on campaign.²⁰ However, through the archaeological material (on rural sites), the Bulgar presence can be discerned particularly clearly on the border between the steppe and steppe-forest belt, on the right bank of the Dniester.²¹ Although within the sphere of Khazar economic (i.e. pastoral) activity, the absence of permanent Khazar settlements in that area strongly suggests that it had represented a buffer or “wasteland” separating the two states. Omurtag’s offensive was perhaps planned to exploit the difficulties created for the *qaghanate* by the Qabar uprising, though it is clear that the Magyar relocation in the Pontic steppes (on both banks of the Dnieper) blocked further advances in that direction.²²

In the case of the Carpathian basin, the process of expansion may be reconstructed in more detail. Already during the reign of Krum, the Bulgars seem to have taken control of the valleys of the Lower Argeş, Dâmbovița (another tributary of the Danube in Wallachia) and Bazău Rivers, which afforded easy access into southern and central Transylvania. Among other things, excavations produced isolated coins of Nikephoros I (at Șirna and Ploiești, Prahova distr.) and Michael I (at Merei, Bazău distr.), as well as pottery remains of Byzantine tradition that can be dated to the ninth and tenth centuries (Bucov).²³ A number of scholars have rightly pointed out that these objects must be associated with the community of Byzantine captives established north of the Danube in the aftermath of Krum’s campaigns in Thrace.²⁴ Somewhat later, Omurtag put their military engineering skills at his service. Archaeological investigation at the fort of Slon in the southeastern Carpathians supports the notion that locally-available Byzantine specialists designed the brick walls and carried out their construction.²⁵ The military presence of the Bulgars also becomes visible further north, along the Middle Mureş, where a cluster of settlements and burial assemblages (Alba Iulia, Blandiana, Sebeş), the earliest of which are most probably dated to the first half of the ninth century, produced artefacts (most notably grey burnished pottery, amphora-like jugs and earrings) with clear analogies in northeastern

²⁰ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 59.

²¹ Kozlov 2007, and the discussion in 3.2.5 above.

²² For the Qabar rebellion, see Róna-Tas 1999, 322–323.

²³ Comşa 1980a, 106–113, 114–115. For the coin finds, see Sophoulis 2009b.

²⁴ Damian 2003, 484–487, 491; Madgearu 2002–2003, 44. For toponymic evidence pointing possibly to old Byzantine settlements in that region, see Diaconu 1976, 936.

²⁵ Damian 2003, 487–491. For similar evidence in Bulgar-held Thrace, see now Rabovjanov 2008.

Bulgaria.²⁶ Judging by the evidence, the Bulgars subdued the local military elites and transplanted from the *khanate* a small number of settlers, thereby securing their control over the salt mine district of southern Transylvania. Nevertheless, neither Omurtag nor any of his ninth-century successors were able to expand their authority into the area north of the Mureş River, where an independent Slav and Romanic political organization (around present-day Cluj) emerged at about this time.²⁷

Textual evidence for Omurtag's expansion into the southern regions of the Carpathian basin, on formerly Avar territory, is attested in western sources. The *ARF* reports that in the autumn of 818, envoys from the tribe of the Timociani (living near the Timok River, a tributary of the Danube running roughly along the modern Serbo-Bulgarian border) appeared at the court of Louis the Pious at Herstal to request his protection against the Bulgars, whose authority they had just thrown off (*qui dimissa Bulgarorum societate*).²⁸ The Timociani were one of the loose political formations that emerged from the collapse of Avar confederacy in the late eighth or early ninth century. It is not unreasonable to infer that it was among the "surrounding *Sklaviniai*" presented in the sources as being allied to Krum against Byzantium and, furthermore, that after 816 Omurtag tried to incorporate it into the *khanate*.²⁹ The Bulgar advance into that region can perhaps be corroborated by archaeological evidence: excavations inside the late-antique fort of Montana, in northwestern Bulgaria, brought to light a rectangular structure, which was quickly interpreted as a Slavic sanctuary.³⁰ Nevertheless, some scholars prefer to ascribe it to the Bulgars on the basis of its close analogy to the pagan sanctuary of Pliska (the "Court Basilica") erected by Omurtag.³¹ It is also important to note in this context that the early medieval occupation of the late-antique fort points to a date within the ninth century, at the earliest, a chronology which fits pretty well with the idea of a Bulgar take-over of the Timok valley.

The widespread Slavic uprising that broke out against Frankish rule in Pannonia and Dalmatia in 819, which destabilized not just those provinces in which the rebel's forces were active, but also the areas beyond the immediate sphere of Frankish influence in the southern Carpathian basin, allowed the

²⁶ See 3.2.4 above.

²⁷ Madgearu, 2002–2003, 56.

²⁸ *ARF*, 149–150; Gjuzelev 1966, 25; Ziemann 2007, 312–313.

²⁹ *Chronicle of 811*, 212.43–44; Scriptor incertus, 347.2–8.

³⁰ Stanilov and Aleksandrov 1983, 40–52.

³¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Florin Curta for sharing this information with me.

Bulgars to continue expanding their hegemony at the expense of their western and northern neighbours.³² Again from the *ARF*, under the year 824, we hear that the Slavic tribe of the Abodrites, “commonly called *Praedenecenti*”, who are said to have lived in Dacia adjacent to the Danube near the *khanate*, complained about the Bulgars.³³ Most scholars locate their settlement area between the Lower Tisza and Timiș region, in present-day northern Serbia and western Romania.³⁴ Their appeal to the Frankish emperor for help is a clear indication of Bulgar encroachment on that territory.

Unfortunately, nothing is known about the outcome of this dispute. Nevertheless, the next two years saw unusually intense exchanges of embassies between the Bulgar and Frankish courts. A Bulgar legation arrived in Francia in the first half of 824 to negotiate a peace treaty with Louis the Pious. The emperor, surprised by Omurtag’s message, is said then to have dispatched his own envoy, a certain Bavarian named Machelm, to accompany the Bulgar representatives to Pliska.³⁵ Around December, another embassy of the *khan* reached Bavaria with demands for the establishment of a fixed border with the Frankish state. It has been rightly pointed out that Omurtag’s insistent demand for the ratification of the frontier is strikingly reminiscent of his preoccupation with the Byzantine-Bulgar border as reflected in the terms of the ‘Thirty Years’ Peace treaty.³⁶ The Sulejmankjoj inscription, one should remember, records two clauses concerning the Slavic populations of the frontier district. The Slavs in question are specifically designated as either Bulgar or Byzantine clients.³⁷ It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the *khan* wanted to work out a similar arrangement with the Franks by assigning spheres of influence—and therefore loyalties—in the former Avar lands. However, Louis did not intend to negotiate. The Bulgar emissaries were ordered to wait in Bavaria “until the right moment”, and when, five months later, they received their summons to the court (in May 825) little progress was made.³⁸ They returned to Pliska with a letter from Louis which

³² For an account of Liudewit’s revolt, which lasted until 823, see Bowlus 1995, 60–71.

³³ *ARF*, 159, 165–166. The identification of the Abodrites, who lived on the territory east of the Elbe and along the Baltic littoral, with the *Praedenecenti* mentioned in the Frankish annals is probably erroneous. Boba 1984, 29–37, suggested that the Abodrites were in fact Moravians and that *praedenecenti* may have been an ethnic slur meaning “booty-taking murders”; see Bowlus 1995, 92–94; Herrmann 1994, 41–46.

³⁴ Curta 2006a, 159 n. 105; Bóna 2001, 264–265, Madgearu 2002–2003, 43.

³⁵ *ARF*, 164.

³⁶ Curta 2006a, 157.

³⁷ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 41 and 7.2 above.

³⁸ *ARF*, 167. Meanwhile, Louis received the envoys of the *Praedenecenti*, who requested protection against the Bulgars.

obviously dissatisfied Omurtag. Another embassy arrived at Aachen in 826, this time with a far more ominous message from the Bulgar ruler, who was threatening war unless a settlement was negotiated without further delay.³⁹ The emperor, acting on a rumour that the *khan* had been murdered or overthrown, gave no reply. Instead, he sent the count palatine Bertrich to confer with Balderich and Gerold, the commanders of the Avar border (*comites et Avarici limitis custodes*) in Carantania (Carinthia). Later in 826, Balderich and Gerold reported back to Louis that no threat was in sight.⁴⁰

Despite these assurances, the following year the Bulgars are reported to have initiated a series of attacks in Pannonia. According to the *ARF*, a fleet sailed up the Drava River and an attempt was made to replace the local Slavic chieftains with Bulgar governors.⁴¹ There is also evidence of military activity elsewhere in the region: a stone inscription found in Provadija commemorates the *zera tarqan* Negavon, a senior military commander and *threptos anthropos* of Omurtag, who drowned on the Tisza during a campaign.⁴² Since the Bulgars had access to both the Drava and Tisza Rivers, they must have also controlled the course of the Danubian watergate in modern Serbia.⁴³ Belgrade, we may suspect, served as the base for these military operations. Strategically located on the Danube, that city had been especially important as a route of communication between the eastern Balkans and the Carpathian basin. In the second half of the ninth century, Belgrade was firmly in Bulgar hands, as attested by the presence of a local governor bearing the title *bori tarqan* (Βοριτακάνω).⁴⁴ On the basis of this information, it is plausible to suggest that the city came under Bulgar control sometime around the year 827. Unfortunately, it is not known how deep into the disputed territory Omurtag's forces penetrated.⁴⁵ But a hint in the *ARF* under the year 828—stating that Balderich, the Margrave of Friuli, was deprived of his command because the Bulgars “had ravaged with impunity the borderland of Upper Pannonia”—permits the suspicion that the invading armies advanced

³⁹ *ARF*, 168–169; Bowlus 1995, 91–92.

⁴⁰ *ARF*, 170.

⁴¹ *Bulgari quoque Sclavos in Pannonia sedentes misso per Dravum navali exercitu ferro et igni vastaverunt et expulsis eorum ducibus Bulgaricos super eos rectores constituerunt*; *ARF*, 173; Gjuzelev 1966, 25–34.

⁴² Κανα συβιγι Ωμου[ρτ]αγ· ὁ Νεγαβον[ση]ς ὁ ζερα ταρκανος θρ[επ]τὸς ἀνθροπὸς μου ἐγένετο [κὲ ἀ]πελθὸν [ἰς] τὸ φουσσάτον ἐπνήγην ἰς τή[v] Τήσαν τὸν ποταμόν. ἦτο δὲ γενεᾶς Κουβιαρης; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 60. For Negavon, see Simeonov 2008, 185.

⁴³ Curta 2006a, 159 n. 105.

⁴⁴ *Vita Clementis*, ch. xvi, 47; Beševliev 1981a, 352; Mladjov 1998, 103–104.

⁴⁵ Despite claims to the contrary (for instance, Fine 1983, 107), there is no evidence that Omurtag's forces took control of Sirmium.

at least as far as the Middle Drava River.⁴⁶ In the opinion of some historians, the difficulties that the Carolingian forces encountered in dealing with the Bulgar attacks also resulted in the reorganization of the military structure of the Bavarian marches.⁴⁷

All the same, the Franks resorted first of all to military means. Although the *ARF* do not inform us as to the specific actions of the Carolingian government, scholars have called attention to a number of documents showing large-scale preparations for an expedition in Pannonia. Under the command of Louis the German, the Franks would bring forces from Bavaria to Carantania in a general drive to expel Omurtag's army from that region.⁴⁸ The campaign against the Bulgars began in July 828, but nothing is known about the outcome. The silence of the sources may itself tell us something about it. Certainly, the following year the Bulgars once again entered the Drava on boats and set fire to a number of Frankish estates on the banks of the river—another indication that the campaign of 828 had failed to produce the results Louis desired.⁴⁹ This is the last we hear of the conflict until 832, when according to a much later chronicle, the *Annalista Saxo* of the mid twelfth century, Bulgar emissaries came to Louis with a message of peace.⁵⁰ It is not unlikely that Malamir's accession marked a major shift in the emphasis of Bulgar foreign policy to the western Balkans.⁵¹ The large dyke at Bačka, in southwestern Vojvodina, which runs across the angle between the Danube and Tisza Rivers (some 25 km in all) and is dated to this period, probably served as a frontier line.⁵² It might be surmised that the various Slavic tribes in the east of that region remained under Bulgar influence.⁵³

There can be little doubt that Omurtag's campaigns in the Carpathian basin produced large numbers of Slavic prisoners that were taken back to the *khanate* and subjected, as slaves, to physical labour; they would farm, serve as domestic servants or be employed in the extensive building programme

⁴⁶ *ARF*, 174.

⁴⁷ Mitterauer 1963, 85–91; Wolfram 1981, 313–317. However, Bowlus 1995, 91ff., suggests that problems of an internal nature involving conflicts within the ruling family were more important factors in the reorganization of the Bavarian marches than were the Bulgars.

⁴⁸ Bowlus 1995, 95–97.

⁴⁹ *Bulgari navibus per Dravum fluvium, venientes quasdam villas nostrorum flumini vicinas incenderunt; Annales Fuldenses*, 25–26.

⁵⁰ *Legati Bulgarorum cum muneribus venerunt; Annalista Saxo*, 574; Curta 2006a, 159; Schwarcz 2000, 103.

⁵¹ See now Rašev 2007a, 90–101.

⁵² Fiedler 1986, 461–462; Fiedler 2008, 165–166; Squatriti 2005, 81–86.

⁵³ For the absence of any finds that can be associated with the Bulgars to the west of the dyke, see Szalontai 2000, 268–274.

initiated by the *khan*. We have already seen that excavations at Khan Krum (former Čatalar), 22 km to the southwest of the Bulgar capital, uncovered a large embankment enclosing the ruins of a stone fortification. Several stone buildings, two of which have been identified as the ruler's dwelling, were erected inside that area. This site was quickly associated with an inscription found in its vicinity which dates the construction of the royal residence to the year 821/2.⁵⁴ As suggested in chapter 5, the *aule* may have been set up by Omurtag to commemorate his father's victory over the Byzantines ten years earlier. In the inscription, triumphant in tone, the Bulgar ruler brags about his military successes over the "Greeks and the Slavs" (ἰς τῆς Πλσκάς τὸν κάμπον μένοντα ἐπίσειεν ἀύλιν ἰς τὴν Τουτζαν κὲ μετίγαγεν τὴν δύναμιν του ἰς τοὺς Γρικουὺς κὲ Σκλάβουσις), a remark that scholars have wrongly interpreted as a reference to his defeat of Thomas the Slav and his army of rebels.⁵⁵ It might seem more reasonable to suppose that the Slavs in question were those living to the north and northwest of the *khanate*, in the small centers of power targeted by the Bulgars since at least 818, as indicated by western sources.⁵⁶

Thanks to his military endeavours, then, Omurtag could successfully extract the labour which enabled the building of palaces, temples, fortifications, bridges and, no doubt, other public works. An inscription on a column now in the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Veliko Tŕrnovo mentions a residence that Omurtag built on the Danube while "living in his old house", apparently Pliska. Not surprisingly, there is a wide divergence of opinion among scholars about the exact location of the Danubian palace. Some think it was built at Silistra, but as of yet there is little corroborating archaeological evidence.⁵⁷ The inscription also informs us that at mid-distance between the two royal palaces (20,000 fathoms or 36 km) the *khan* erected a barrow (τοῦμβαν), but what is perhaps more striking is the statement at the end of the text: "A man, even after having a good life, dies, and let those born later, when looking at this [inscription], remember the one who has created it; and the name of the ruler is Omortag; may God grant him a hundred years of life". These words went beyond simply demonstrating a special concern

⁵⁴ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 57; Prinzing 2007, 245–246.

⁵⁵ Omurtag's campaign against Thomas took place somewhat later, in the winter of 822/3; see my comments above at 5.3.

⁵⁶ It is also important to point out that the inscription cannot be referring to the Slavic populations that had been settled in Bulgaria before the arrival of Asparuch's warriors. These Slavs had already been incorporated into the Bulgar tribal union and state machine.

⁵⁷ Angelova 2003, 191–194; Fiedler 2008, 190, 193. For another possible location, east of Silistra, see Georgiev 2004–2005, 29–31.

for the preservation of social memory. They also conveyed a clear political message; they were designed to inform posterity but, more importantly, contemporaries of Omurtag's legitimacy and political power sanctioned by a higher authority.⁵⁸

The *khan* simultaneously undertook other building projects in Pliska. Although archaeologists attribute to Omurtag the construction of some buildings inside the "Inner Town" that may well have been the work of his successors, there can be no doubt that a great part of the palatial complex was erected during his reign (fig. V). It should be remembered that in 811, the older palace was destroyed by Byzantine troops. Some of the building material, including the thick stone walls, was reused for the construction of a new, smaller structure on top of the ruins. Raised high on a podium, the floor of the "Throne palace", as it is now known, rested on two parallel barrel vaults in the substructure—the only part of the building still visible today. The hall itself, square in shape (23.5 × 23.5 metres), apparently had three aisles and was terminated by an apse to the north.⁵⁹ The rectangular structure located some 50 m to the west of the palace is likewise believed to have been erected at this time. Because it was later turned into a church through the addition of three apses and two transept-like rooms, the "Court Basilica" is commonly interpreted as a pagan temple, and has even been compared, along with other similar monuments in Bulgaria, to a number of sanctuaries built by the Türks for their *qaghans* in Central Asia.⁶⁰ Omurtag may have erected the temple in Pliska to commemorate his father, but he could just as easily be honouring Asparuch, the founder of the Bulgar state in the Lower Danube, or Attila's son Ernak, to whom, as the tradition recorded by later

⁵⁸ +Κα[ν]α συβιγη Ωμορταγ ις τὸν παλεον ὄκον αὐτοῦ μένο[ν] ἐπήσεν ὑπέρφυμον ὄκο[ν] ις τὸν Δανούβην κ[ε] ἀνάμεσα τον δύο ὄκο[ν] τον πανφύμο[ν] καταμετρήσας ις τὴν μέσιν ἐπίσια τοῦμβαν κέ ἀπὸ τὴν αὐτὴν μέσσην τῆς τοῦμβας ἕως τὴν αὐλί[ν] μου τὴν ἀρχέα[ν] ἰσὶν ὀργηῆ μυριάδες β' κ[ε] ἐπὶ τὸν Δανούβιν ἰσὴν ὀργιές μυριάδες β'. τὸ δὲ αὐτὸ τουβι[ν] ἔστιν πάνφυμο[ν] κ[ε] μετρίσα[ν]τες τὴν γῆν ἐπίσια τὰ γράμματα ταῦτα. ὁ ἄνθρωπος κ[ε] καλὰ ζὸν ἀποθνήσκει κέ ἄλλος γενάτε κέ ἴνα ὁ ἔσχατον γηνόμενος ταῦτα θεορὸν ὑπομνήσκετε τὸν πύισα-ντα αὐτό. τὸ δὲ ὄνομα τοῦ ἄρχοντός ἔστην Ωμορταγ καν[ν]α συβιγη ὁ Θεός ις ἀξηόσι αὐτὸν ζῆσε ἔτη ρ'. The closing statement imitates the *Polychronion*, an acclamation asking God to bless the emperor with many years; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 56; Squatriti 2002, 57–58; Nikolov 2000, 327; Prinzing 2007, 246 claims that this inscription is slightly older than that found at the village of Čatalar (no. 57 of 821/2).

⁵⁹ Mijatev 1940–1942, 115–122; Mihajlov 1955, 111–115; Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 20, 73; for a later date of construction, see Fiedler 2008, 178.

⁶⁰ Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 22–23, 71; Ovčarov 1997, 50–58; Fiedler 2008, 178–179; Curta 2006a, 159–160, 161; Georgiev 1989; Brentjes 1971.

sources indicates, the ruling elite traced back its lineage.⁶¹ To be certain, during the reign of Boris, ancestor worship was still an important part of Bulgar religious life.⁶²

To the north of the new palace and the temple, an area of about one hectare was surrounded by a thick brick wall. A number of structures excavated inside the central palatial core have also been assigned to the first quarter of the ninth century. Most important among them is the so-called “Small Palace”, consisting of two main buildings (“eastern” and “western”) which seem to have formed the private residence of the ruler and his family.⁶³ They both had upper floors conveniently reached by staircases in the rear of each building.⁶⁴ Of roughly the same period are several other structures in the northwestern corner of the palatial compound, including two baths and a large water reservoir made of brick. The water was diverted from the River Kriva, east of the capital, through the use of a 4 km-long canal, and was circulated around the palace area by a system of clay pipes.⁶⁵ In the centre of the palatial enclosure, right in front of its main entrance, stood another, rectangular building consisting of two squares, one inside the other. In the middle of the inner room, archaeologists found a square substructure which might have been used as a sacrificial altar. This building too has subsequently been interpreted as a pagan temple.⁶⁶ The remains of several other structures within the brick enclosure have been shown to represent later building phases.⁶⁷ By contrast, the so-called “Boyar’s house”, some 35 m to the north of the enclosure, is commonly dated to the reign of Omurtag. It is similar in layout (although smaller in size) to the two main buildings of the

⁶¹ Pritsak 1955, 35–38; Nikolov 2000, 337. On the other hand, Stepanov 1999, 156–160, who points to parallels from Iranian-speaking areas (in present-day Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, northern Afghanistan etc), believes that the Bulgar temples were dedicated to their god of Heaven and Sun; Ćobanov 2005.

⁶² *Responsa*, ch. lxxxviii, 596.

⁶³ Archaeologists have identified several building phases for these two buildings. The “eastern” building seems to have been the older part of the palace. It measures approximately 14 × 19 m., and consists of an entrance room and a main hall. The layout of the “western” building, measuring 13 × 19 m., is not entirely clear. However, inside archaeologists discovered the remains of a hypocaust; Mihajlov 1955, 74–75, 110–111; Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 20–22, 85–90; Fiedler 2008, 180–185; Georgiev 2004, fig. 24.

⁶⁴ It is interesting to mention that an underground passage, built most probably in the early ninth century, connected the “western” building to the area outside the enclosure; Fiedler 2008, 180 with all the literature.

⁶⁵ Georgiev 1992, 83–90; Georgiev 2000b, 20–21; Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 29–31, 87.

⁶⁶ Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 22–23, 88–89; Fiedler 2008, 183–184.

⁶⁷ Georgiev 1992, 89 with fig. 20; Fiedler 2008, 184.

“Small Palace”, and was clearly part of the palatial core.⁶⁸ Finally, a date in the first quarter of the ninth century has been assigned to the stone wall which delineated the “Inner Town”. It formed an irregular quadrangle (its sides measured 611 m, 787 m, 685 m and 710 m respectively), enclosing an area of some 48 hectares in the middle of the campsite.⁶⁹ There is structural evidence for many towers along the walls, including a circular tower (rising up to 10–12 m) on each corner.⁷⁰

The plan of the residential complex at Pliska is thought to combine two different architectural traditions. The overall design of rectilinear rooms around the perimeter and basilican rooms within, as well as the use of baths with hypocausts and water reservoirs shows reliance on late Roman and Byzantine prototypes.⁷¹ On the other hand, the big, open space between the palatial centre and the walls, but also the inner and outer line of earthworks places the site outside the tradition of Roman cities in the Balkans and links it to the great nomad camps of the Eurasian steppes.⁷² Similarly, while the building technique of Pliska has apparent Roman and Byzantine parallels, the use of large blocks of limestone recalls steppe and, allegedly, eastern (Sassanian, Armenian and Islamic Near Eastern) models.⁷³

In any case, there can be no doubt that for the construction of the new palace, Omurtag employed people with skills normally confined to sedentary populations. Some of these engineers and craftsmen were perhaps imported from Byzantium, although the Bulgars are also likely to have made use of locally-available specialists. There is every reason to believe that, despite the release of numerous soldiers and civilians held in captivity ever since Krum’s campaigns in Thrace, a substantial Christian population remained in the *khanate* after 816.⁷⁴ The best evidence for this can be found in the extensive use of stone inscriptions in Greek during the reigns of both Omurtag and Malamir. Most of these inscriptions, it might be recalled, were written in a language close to the colloquial idiom spoken in Constantinople in the eighth and ninth centuries—a clear indication of the Byzantine origin

⁶⁸ Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 21–22, 73–74.

⁶⁹ Rašev and Dimitrov 1999, 15–16, 71–72. For the positions of the four gates of the enclosure, see Fiedler 2008, 174, 176.

⁷⁰ Dončeva-Petkova 1985; Balabanov 1995.

⁷¹ Fiedler 2008, 184.

⁷² Rašev 1983, 263–265; Whittow 1996, 272.

⁷³ Vaklinov 1977, 92–96, 114–116; Filov 1932, 7–10, 25–28; Ovčarov 1987, 182–183; Čobanov 2009.

⁷⁴ For the clause of the treaty providing for the exchange of war prisoners, see Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 41, and my comments in 7.2 above. For the return of some of these captives to Byzantium, see *Vita Nicetae Med.*, c. 45.

of the scribes. Christian officers serving in the Bulgar army are also attested to in the written sources. Most important among them was the *strategos* Kordyles who had held an important administrative post in Thrace under Krum and was later appointed commander of the Byzantine prisoners settled in the northern borders of Bulgaria, beyond the Danube.⁷⁵ Sabas, the composer of the second *Life* of St Ioannikios, claims that another group of captives, held in prison under guard, succeeded in returning to Byzantium around 825, but perhaps he is not to be trusted on that point.⁷⁶ Whether or not this tale of escape (just as that of Kordyles) is taken at face value, it is plausible to assume that most of these people had willingly agreed to stay in Bulgaria where their technical and administrative skills would have been in high demand. As noted already, even after their incorporation into the state they seem to have maintained considerable internal autonomy and a sense of “regional” Christian identity, although no indication exists in the archaeological record that specific artefact categories operated as markers of distinction from other ethnic groups.

Some of the Byzantines living at the time in the *khanate* may well have been absorbed into the Bulgar ruling elite, but as the story of Kordyles clearly demonstrates, ethnic, religious and political loyalties could not be completely forgotten.⁷⁷ We have seen in chapter 7 that among those put to death by Omurtag during the anti-Christian persecutions were the *strategoï* Leo and John who, much like Kordyles, had spent considerable time in Bulgar service. It might not be unreasonable to suppose that these two men—and presumably many other Byzantine immigrants to Bulgaria—were fervent iconoclasts who following Irene’s accession had good reason for leaving the empire with what haste they could.⁷⁸ Even so, they must have wanted to go back to their homes, and Leo V’s rise to power was an opportunity too good to be missed. It may perhaps then be hazarded that they established contact with the imperial government, a move that at a time of internal crisis could not have escaped Omurtag’s attention. After the defeat at Mesembria, the *khan* had every reason to suspect the two *strategoï* of treason. If, as seems quite possible, the Christian community in Bulgaria maintained ties with Byzantines across the border, then Omurtag’s suspicions are thoroughly

⁷⁵ Kordyles and his followers seem to have remained in Bulgaria until 836/7, when Theophilus sent out a fleet to bring them home; George cont., 817.10–819.15; Leo. Gram., 231.1–233.5.

⁷⁶ *Vita Ioannicii B* (Sabas), 359B–360A, and 8.2 below.

⁷⁷ Browning 1988, 35–36.

⁷⁸ On Irene’s gradual purge of the civil and military officers appointed by her predecessors, see 4.3 above.

explicable. In any case, Leo and John were not the only victims in this persecution. Some 377 Christians were reportedly martyred, but that number is surely inflated.⁷⁹ Theodore of Stoudios, drawing on more reliable, eyewitness accounts, indicates that most of those summoned by the *khan* eventually agreed to consume meat during Lent—a symbolic renunciation of the Christian faith.⁸⁰ This remark is strong evidence that Omurtag's goal was not so much punishment as intimidation.

It is not difficult to see why Omurtag might have regarded Byzantine Christianity as a threat that needed to be stamped out.⁸¹ All the same, it would be a mistake to think that political fears were the only motive for persecution. The *khan* may well have hoped to break the exclusive ties between the Byzantine clergy—and therefore the Christian god—and the emperor in Constantinople, and use the power of the Christian deity for his own purposes. This was a characteristic feature of “barbarian” thinking: anthropological studies have shown that the practitioners of animistic and shamanistic cults, such as those attested in Bulgaria at the time, could borrow elements (names, certain practices or cultural *realia*) from other religions, including those of their adversaries, in order to obtain more divine protectors.⁸² The Bulgars certainly recognized, from their experiences with the Byzantine empire, that the Christian god was a force to be reckoned with and may have been needed for dealings with such a powerful neighbour. It is hard to ascertain whether the Bulgar ruler, who as head of the Tangra cult personally took care of ceremonial sacrifices and collective prayers, would also have been keen to direct Christian rituals and practices.⁸³ However, he is likely to have forced the Christian clergy to renounce their allegiance to the Byzantine emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople, and submit to his spiritual authority instead. Certainly, it is no coincidence that from the reign of Omurtag onwards, a significant amount of Christian symbolism becomes evident in the *khanate*. Court ceremonials and acclamations, titles, insignia and other expressions of power that were clearly thought to safeguard and support the *khan's* position

⁷⁹ *Synaxarion CP*, 415; *Menologion Basilii*, 276D–277A; Follieri and Dujčev, *Acolutia*, 75–85. Less than thirty martyrs are recorded by name in these sources.

⁸⁰ Theod. Stud., *Parva Catechesis*, 149.

⁸¹ For a full discussion, see chapter 7 above.

⁸² Bawden 1987, 195. Numerous other examples are offered by Nikolov 2000, 344; see also Stepanov 2010a, 68ff.

⁸³ On the priestly authority of the ruler, see the *Responsa*, ch. lvi, 587–588. For the sacrifices, see Scriptor incertus, 342.2–4.

of dominance over his non-Bulgar subjects imitated Byzantine forms.⁸⁴ Thus on the two gold medallions mentioned already, Omurtag is depicted in the manner of a Christian ruler: with a crown on his head, holding a ceremonial cross in his right hand and an *akakia* in his left hand. He is also wearing a *chlamys*, fastened with a brooch on his right shoulder. The medallions, which imitated *solidi* struck for Constantine V, Nikephoros I, Michael I, Leo V and Michael II, bear the inscription “CAN-ESY-bHPIΩMORTAI” in mixed Greek and Latin letters, pointing to a possible ideological interplay with the Frankish world.⁸⁵

The *imitatio imperii* put into practice by Omurtag, then, became one of the essential sources of Bulgar royal power. At the same time, it facilitated the incorporation of the Christian population into the realm; by imitating the titles, ceremonials and, quite possibly, the fashions of the Byzantine emperors, Omurtag sought to project his authority in a way that was recognizable to his Greek-speaking subjects. But is it possible that a sense of special “Christian-Bulgar” identity operated amongst them at that time? In the inscription found in the Basilica “B” at Philippi (ca. 836/7), *Khan Persian* is designated “ruler by god of the many Bulgars” ([Tō]ν πολῶν Βου(λ) γάρων [ό] ἐκ θεοῦ ἄρχον), an expression which is thought to suggest the existence of a new form of sacral kingship, suited to all Bulgar subjects regardless their cultural or religious background.⁸⁶ Although a shared sense of identity could hardly have derived from a concept of common descent and origin (as was undoubtedly the case with the new nomadic elements absorbed into the state in the late eighth and ninth centuries), it seems very likely that certain institutions, ritual practices or customs created a bond between the ruling stratum and at least some of the Christians living in the *khanate*. This is particularly true of the descendants of the Romanized population north of the Haimos, whose sense of solidarity with the Bulgars must have drawn heavily on a history of co-operation which went back to the late seventh century.

Undoubtedly, Omurtag’s attitude towards Christianity and the Byzantine empire is at best ambivalent. On the one hand, he used Christian and Byzantine symbols to bolster his authority, and during the revolt of Thomas the Slav provided the government at Constantinople with military assistance. But

⁸⁴ Beševliev 1981a, 425–429, for several examples. For a discussion, see Stepanov 2010b. I am grateful to Ts. Stepanov for allowing me access to this article.

⁸⁵ Jordanov 2001, 25; Beševliev, *Nadpisi* nos. 86a–b; Stepanov 2001, 6–7; Stepanov 2010b; Fiedler 2008, 192–193.

⁸⁶ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, nos. 14 and 57 from Čatalar (τοὺς πολλοὺς Βούλγαρις ἐπέχον[τα]); Nikolov 2000, 334. Stepanov 1999, 84; Nikolov 2005, 108.

at the same time, he persecuted some of his Christian subjects, and employed diverse rhetorical devices to spar with the *basileus* and present himself as a ruler of superior stature. An example of this can be observed most clearly in the inscription from former Čatalar, where Omurtag appeals to God to grant him the opportunity to perform the *calcatio* (the Roman ritual trampling of an enemy leader) on the emperor, thereby signifying to all onlookers the totality of his victory.⁸⁷ Omurtag's political message was not much different from that conveyed by Tervel in the fragmentary inscription accompanying the Madara relief: the *khan* mentions the military assistance consisting of 5,000 men he offered to Justinian II, but at the same time calls the latter "slit-nosed" (ρίνοκοπιμένον), a derogatory nickname used primarily by the emperor's enemies in the early eighth century.⁸⁸ Some scholars have recently claimed that the Madara horseman itself appears not simply as a statement of Bulgar royal power, but as a politically motivated, almost sarcastic, reinterpretation of Byzantine art and administrative language.⁸⁹ All of this fits into the pattern of political behaviour outlined above. Apart from enhancing his standing at home, the imitation and adoption of elements from the Byzantine imperial ideology—just like the "appropriation" of the Christian god—would make the *khan*'s position stronger vis-à-vis Constantinople. It is precisely this idea that underlies the Bulgar's ambivalence towards Byzantium and Christianity during the period in question.

Omurtag was responsible for the transformation of the *khanate* from a tribal confederation into a medieval state *per excellence*. The exact mechanism through which this transformation was achieved will inevitably remain shadowy owing to the paucity of literary evidence for the early ninth century. To be certain, Omurtag wielded far greater power than any other *khan* before him, a fact that ultimately enabled him to promote important social and political changes. Nevertheless, there are numerous questions and problems concerning the relationship of the ruler and his nobles. For instance, historians need to explain how the *khan* was able to contain the centrifugal tendencies expressed by members of the elite and establish a virtual monopoly on the exercise of political power in the Bulgar state. At least three crucial factors have emerged in the analysis conducted above: firstly, the access to the power and wealth which came from entering Omurtag's inner circle and exercising command in the civil and military administration

⁸⁷ ...ὁ Θεὸς ἀξιόσι τὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἄρχονταν μὲ τὸν πόδα αὐτοῦ τὸν βασιλέα καλο[πατοῦντα], ἕος [τρέ]χει ἡ Τουτζα κὲ ἕος...τοὺς πολλοὺς Βούλγαρις ἐπέχον[τα]; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 56.

⁸⁸ Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 1, Ic.

⁸⁹ Curta 2006b, 14; Stepanov 2010a, 44–45, 58–59.

in his name. The *khan* exploited the state resources to distribute material benefits (valuable commodities, agrarian produce and, possibly, rights over the exploitation of conquered land), thus binding the elites to the centre. Within this political system, rank and office, and associated wealth and prestige, all emanated from the ruler who reigned on top of a fully developed and stratified hierarchy. Secondly, the further development of the notion of “Heaven’s mandate”, a form of divine legitimation of political rule. It is important to emphasize that literacy (i.e. the numerous stone inscriptions dating from Omurtag’s reign) played a central role in propagating this idea and therefore shaping the perception of kingship in pre-Christian Bulgaria. Thirdly, the prosecution of expansive warfare in the Carpathian basin and the Black Sea steppes, which produced a higher degree of political cohesion and enhanced the *khan*’s standing in the eyes of his subjects. What is more, these campaigns created a pool of slave labour which enabled Omurtag to pursue an impressive building programme in the heartland of the realm.

8.2 BULGARIA AND BYZANTIUM DURING THE REIGN OF OMURTAG

Very little useful information can be extracted from Byzantine sources about relations with the Bulgar state during the 820s. This was only to be expected given the conclusion of the peace treaty of 816, which inaugurated a relatively long period of political stability on the Thracian border. Coverage is limited to a brief report of Omurtag’s campaign against Thomas the Slav in late 822.⁹⁰ The sources describing this event offer two alternative versions. Genesis and Theophanes continuatus report that during Thomas’ siege of Constantinople, the *khan* sent an embassy to Michael II offering an alliance against the rebel. The emperor turned down the offer, arguing that he could not employ pagans to shed Christian blood. All the same, Omurtag invaded Thrace and waited for the rebels at “Ceductus”, near Heraclea. Hearing of their arrival, Thomas drew his troops away from the siege and set out to meet the Bulgars. In the ensuing confrontation, the rebels were badly beaten, and

⁹⁰ For the date of the Bulgar expedition, see Lemerle 1965, 291; Tivčev 1969, 75, places Omurtag’s intervention in spring of 823. Apart from Thomas’ political ambitions, economic and social incentives may have also played a part in the genesis of the revolt; for a detailed discussion, see Kaegi 1981, 261–262, 265–267; Köpstein 1983, 61–87; and Lemerle 1965, 296–297, who, however, does not see any relationship to the issue of iconoclasm (several hagiographical sources claim that in order to enlist supporters, Thomas pretended to favour the restoration of icon worship).

Omurtag's forces returned to the *khanate* with much booty.⁹¹ The near contemporary account of George the Monk contains less information. It states that Michael II, driven by desperation, called on the *khan* for assistance. Thomas raised the siege of the capital and marched with his army against the invaders, who he met and defeated in Thrace before going into winter quarters at Arkadioupolis. Despite the victory, many of his men, realizing that his cause was desperate, began to desert. Finally, Michael blockaded the town, and captured and executed Thomas.⁹²

Little confidence can be placed in the testimonies supplied by Genesisios and Theophanes continuatus. Scholars have long pointed out that the two chroniclers drew on official accounts delivering propaganda in favour of Michael II.⁹³ The propagandists tried to disassociate the emperor from Leo V's murder and blacken the reputation of Thomas the Slav. Among other things, Thomas is accused of apostatizing from Christianity and invading, late in the reign of Leo V, the empire's eastern provinces with Arab help.⁹⁴ By the same token, the report that Omurtag invaded imperial territory and attacked Thomas' army without Michael's consent is highly suspicious. Certainly, George the Monk, writing in the third quarter of the ninth century, seems to provide a more reliable, if somewhat sketchy, account of what actually happened in Thrace in 822.⁹⁵ Besieged from both land and sea, with little support outside the walls of Constantinople, Michael II had little other choice but to appeal to the Bulgars for help. But although relations between the two sides were officially restored with the treaty of 816, the prospect of an emperor allying with a pagan neighbour against his fellow countrymen was bound to be a matter for embarrassment. What lies at the heart of the official version of events, therefore, is a severe distortion of historical truth: Omurtag is presented as spontaneously beginning the negotiations, asking to be allowed to intervene. Michael tried to dissuade the *khan* by sending him lavish gifts, but, according to Michael's propagandists, these were not sufficient to prevent the Bulgar incursion. Omurtag, we are told, thought the opportunity for plunder too good to be missed; besides, the thirty years' treaty required confirmation (as the first decade was allegedly approaching

⁹¹ Genesisios, 29.87–30.11; Theoph. cont., 64.19–66.11.

⁹² George Mon., 796.24–797.16; George cont., 788.4–21.

⁹³ However, these sources also reproduce material hostile to Michael. This material, much like that included in the pro-Michael version of events, combines truth and fiction; Afinog-enov 2001, 336–338.

⁹⁴ Theoph. cont., 50.18–52.7; Genesisios, 25.50–26.83.

⁹⁵ Lemerle 1965, 290–291; see also 7.2 above. According to Treadgold 1979, 168–170, 194, George's information is derived from a reliable chronicle dating from *ca.* 850.

its completion) and the *khan* had hoped to extract, through his interference, more favourable terms from the Byzantines than those agreed six years earlier.⁹⁶

It is not known whether Omurtag's requests, whatever they may have been, were granted by the emperor.⁹⁷ Given the urgency of the situation, this seems very likely. A badly damaged inscription found inside a grave near the village of Sini Vir (Dobrič district) has often been used as evidence for the early renewal of the treaty of 816. Some scholars believe that the inscription refers to a new clause making reciprocal arrangements for military aid.⁹⁸ However, a closer reading of the text would produce a different interpretation: rather than revising the agreement of 816, the inscription simply reminds the emperor of his obligations to respect the promises sworn and not to break them, warning of the divine punishment that would result if he invaded Bulgaria (...ἐὰν ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐξέλθῃ, λισμονὸν τοὺς ὄρκους - - - ἵνα ὁ Θεὸς ἀποδόσῃ αὐτὸν...)⁹⁹ In any case, it is dated to 819–20, that is, at least two years before Omurtag's campaign against Thomas.¹⁰⁰

There can be no doubt that the Bulgar military intervention in late 822 decisively shifted the balance of war in Michael II's favour. Reward on a generous scale was a political necessity by this point, and it is hard to believe that the *khan* would have been content with only a share of the booty taken in Thrace.¹⁰¹ Therefore, it is quite possible that new economic opportunities opened up for the Bulgars through the intensification of trade with the

⁹⁶ ἀκηρῶς δὲ Μορτάγων ὁ κύριος Βουλγαρίας ὅσα τε καὶ οἶα κατὰ τὴν βασιλίδα πόλιν συνηρέθη γενέσθαι, διαπρεσβεύεται πρὸς βασιλέα καὶ συμμαχεῖν αἰτεῖται αὐτῷ· αἱ γὰρ ὑπὸ Λέοντος τοῦ βασιλέως πρὸς αὐτοὺς τριακοντούτεις σπονδαὶ ἤδη τὴν πρώτην δεκαετηρίδα συνεπλήρουν σχεδόν... φιλοφρονησάμενος δὲ αὐτοὺς τῆς προθυμίας ἀξίως πρὸς τὴν ἐαυτῶν ἀποστέλλει; Genesisios, 29.87–95; ἀλλ' ὅ γε Μορτάγων καὶ ἄλλως πολέμοις χαίρων καὶ τὰς ἐκ τούτων λείας καρποῦσθαι φιλῶν, καὶ τὰς πρὸς αὐτὸν δὲ τριακοντούτεις σπονδὰς γεγενημένας παρὰ τοῦ προκατασχόντος Λέοντος ἐπιβεβαιῶσαι καὶ ἰσχυροτέρας ποιῆσαι ζητῶν, τὴν κατὰ τοῦ τυράννου στρατιὰν εὐτρέπιζεν...; Theoph. cont., 65.7–11.

⁹⁷ Treadgold 1988, 240, suggests that Michael II may have rewarded the Bulgars by allowing them to plunder Thrace, which was still under Thomas' control.

⁹⁸ ΑΥΤΟ- - - - ΤΟΝΒ - - - - Ν αὐτοῦ Λ [ἐὰν ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐξέλθῃ], λισμονὸν τοὺς ὄρκους - - - ἵνα ὁ Θε(ο)ς ἀποδόσῃ αὐτὸν - - -]Σ ὁ Τζυκος κὲ - - - - ΣΑΣ ὁ ἀδελφὸς αὐτοῦ - - -] τὸ ὄνομα ἐστίν- - - - ὁ] δὲ χρόνος ἴτο ἀπὸ τιν παρ[ουσί]αν ἀληθινοῦ Θε(οῦ) ωβ', ἀπὸ κτίσεος κοσμ[οῦ] ζτηκ'. ἐπίσαντο τιν ἱρίνιν κέ[θ]μοσαν τὰ ὅλα τὰ ἀναγραφέν[τα] ἐν τα(οῦς) χάρτας τοῦς] παραλί[λους; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 43; Beševliev 1981b, 139. Gjuzelev 2007, 131, identifies this Tzykos with the *ičirgu boila* Čok/Tuk.

⁹⁹ However, Beševliev suggests that the phrase “ἐὰν ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐξέλθῃ” should perhaps be emended to “ἐὰν μὴ βοηθῇ”.

¹⁰⁰ ὁ] δὲ χρόνος ἴτο ἀπὸ τιν παρ[ουσί]αν ἀληθινοῦ Θε(οῦ) ωβ', ἀπὸ κτίσεος κοσμ[οῦ] ζτηκ'; Beševliev, *Nadpisi*, no. 43.

¹⁰¹ For an attempt to connect Theophanes continuatus' *o ton Voulgaron basileus* (64.19–20) with Omurtag's political reward, see Bakalov 1985, 87.

Byzantine world. Indeed, most historians and archaeologists have failed to notice that the earliest surviving seals of *kommerkiarioi* of Adrianople (dated 822/3) coincide in time with the restoration of Michael's effective authority in Thrace.¹⁰² These seals, along with the one belonging to a certain *kommerkiarios* of Didymoteichon named Constantinakios (first half of the ninth century), point to an established trade between the two countries along the Hebros River.¹⁰³ Items of exchange must have included grain, cattle and possibly slaves from the south Russian steppes. It might be reasonable to suppose that the Bulgars were also granted (as in the early eighth century) limited access to Byzantine luxury goods—a proper reward for their assistance in putting down Thomas' rebellion.

The surviving literary sources make no other reference to the Bulgars before the mid 830s, save for a brief remark included in Sabas' *Life* of St Ioannikios. According to the hagiographer, fourteen years after Nikephoros I's Bulgar debacle, that is around 825, the saint liberated a number of prisoners of war held in the *khanate*.¹⁰⁴ Scholars pointed out long ago that the value of Sabas' testimony is highly suspect.¹⁰⁵ To be sure, the treaty of 816 provided for the exchange of Byzantine officers and soldiers captured during the conflict, while there is evidence to suggest that the agreement also called for the exchange of civilian captives.¹⁰⁶ It is certainly reasonable to assume that a significant number of Byzantines still lived within the Bulgar borders in the 820s not because they were compelled to do so, but of their own free choice. Even so, the Bulgars were not prepared to allow them to return to the empire. This is hardly surprising, for a number of strategically-important regions, especially along the frontier, might have been substantially depopulated by such a migration.¹⁰⁷ Clearly, then, there might be a truth behind Sabas' words. A number of former Byzantine captives or refugees could have, somehow, managed to escape and return home, although the story of the saint's intervention is nothing more than a hagiographical cliché.

¹⁰² Christophoros, *hypatos and kommerkiarios of Adrianople* (found in the medieval stronghold near the village of Matotsina, Svilengrad district); Jordanov 2003, no. 3.1; Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1991, no. 44.5.

¹⁰³ Nesbitt and Oikonomides, *Seals*, no. 50.1; Zacos and Vegley 1972, I/2, no. 1438; Oikonomides 1991, 247.

¹⁰⁴ *Vita Ioannicii B* (Sabas), 359B–360A.

¹⁰⁵ Mango 1983, 404.

¹⁰⁶ See chapter 7 for a detailed discussion.

¹⁰⁷ According to the *Responsa* of Pope Nicholas I, one of the tasks of the frontier guards was to prevent slaves and freemen from fleeing the country; *Responsa* ch. xxv, 579.

Nothing else is known about Byzantine-Bulgar relations before 836, when Theophilos sent a fleet to bring back from the *khanate* another group of former Byzantine prisoners who had been settled by Krum in the lands north of the Danube Delta.¹⁰⁸ To some extent, this silence may reflect a gap in our source material. But it also signifies a temporary shift in the emphasis of Bulgar foreign policy. While the northwestern frontier was certainly not a priority for Omurtag, the political vacuum in the formerly Avar territories presented a golden opportunity to expand his dominion at the expense of his Slav neighbours. In such circumstances, his failure to make much of a lasting inroad into the Carpathian basin comes as a major surprise.

¹⁰⁸ Many scholars date to roughly the same period (836/7) the events described in two proto-bulgarian inscriptions. No. 13 from Šumen mentions the capture of the Byzantine forts Probaton and Bourdizon by Malamir and the *kavkhan* Izbul, who are then said to have entered Philippoupolis. No. 14 from Philippoi states that *Khan* Persian sent Izbul against the Smoleani, a Slavic tribe settled near the Byzantine-Bulgar border. For a discussion, see Božilov and Gjuzelev 1999, 157–160; Gjuzelev 2007, 68–75; Ziemann 2007, 337–340; Treadgold 1988, 291–292; Fine 1983, 109; Nikolova 1997, 70–73. Beševliev, Bury and Zlatarski set the events narrated in the Šumen inscription in a different chronological context.

CONCLUSION

The Byzantine-Bulgar wars of the late eighth and early ninth centuries constitute one of the most important episodes in the protracted struggle of the Byzantine empire to re-establish its authority over the whole area south of the middle Danube—a struggle which had begun during the Avaro-Slav invasions of the 580s, and which continued after the creation of Asparuch's state in Lower Moesia in the seventh century had formally removed the northeastern part of the Balkans from imperial control. The years 775 to 816 witnessed both a gradual Byzantine expansion into northern Thrace and Macedonia, as well as a large-scale offensive designed to strike a very damaging blow to, if not destroy, the Bulgar state. This period, however, also constituted a significant stage in the political history of Bulgaria. The failure of Nikephoros I to break Bulgar power, the sustained counter-offensive of Krum's armies, and the conclusion of the Thirty Years' Peace, all provided an unaccustomed degree of security for the Bulgars on their southeastern frontier, and opened the way for the expansion into the western Balkans and the Carpathian basin under Omurtag in the 820s.

The analysis of Byzantine-Bulgar relations undertaken in this study is based upon a close examination and re-evaluation of the surviving evidence, both literary and material. Particular attention has been paid to the *Chronographia* of Theophanes, the only written source for the history of the Byzantine empire, and indeed its relations with the Bulgars, for most of the period under consideration. The importance of the *Chronographia* cannot be overstated. As well as being the only surviving connected narrative of the reigns of Leo IV, Irene, Constantine VI and Nikephoros I, all of whom took a strong interest in Balkan affairs, it is also contemporary with many of the events described, written probably between 811 and 814. In the course of the investigation, it was suggested that although Theophanes made extensive use of materials (that is, files of extracts borrowed from earlier sources, as well as finished notes) collected by George Synkellos in both Palestine and Constantinople, he is very likely to have tampered with them, hence it is impossible to determine whether the account of recent and contemporary history actually reflects the voice of one or the other of the two collaborators. It was also suggested that George handed over his materials *ca.* 811, and that, as a result, the last few entries of the chronicle, dominated by the Bulgar war, were entirely the product of Theophanes' own labour.

The *Chronographia* presents a number of additional problems to the historian of Byzantine-Bulgar relations. First of all, it is a highly tendentious source. Like all the accounts of the iconoclast period that have survived, it presents history in an uncompromisingly Orthodox light, and therefore some of the information relating to the reigns of iconoclast emperors, particularly Constantine V, must be treated with wary caution. Moreover, Theophanes provides a heavily biased account of the reign of Nikephoros I, although in this case no reason for this attitude can be discerned other than the latter's attempts to restrict monastic property. However, more often than not, the ideological programme inherent in Theophanes' narrative is difficult to identify. The chronicle's inconsistent approach towards Irene and Constantine VI, which may be due to a combination of divided loyalties and hidden agendas, if not to a mechanical amalgamation of source materials, highlights some of the difficulties that the historian of the Byzantine empire in the late eighth and early ninth centuries must face.

Another problem is Theophanes' cursory treatment of Byzantium's dealings with the Bulgars during this period. His notices are usually brief and uninformative, and there are gaping holes in the coverage. Nothing, for instance, is said about the state of affairs in the Balkans in the years 796 to 807. In addition, Irene's concerted efforts to re-establish imperial authority in northern Thrace and Macedonia are summarised in four extremely short passages in Theophanes' coverage of her reign. As a result, the treatment of military matters is usually denuded of any sense of long-term strategy or geographical context. An important point that needs to be stressed is the extent to which the chronicler's presentation of events in the Balkans is influenced by imperial propaganda. This is most evident in the case of Constantine VI's campaign at Abroleba in 795/6; Michael I's victory near Adrianople in February 813; and, above all, Leo V's actions on the battlefield at Versinikia immediately before his accession to the throne.

Most of these difficulties, particularly the biases introduced into the text, can become intractable when the historian has no independent sources against which to assess Theophanes' veracity. Unfortunately, no alternative narrative history or chronicle covering the entire period with which this study is concerned has survived. However, it is possible to compare Theophanes' detailed account of the war in the years 811 to 813 with information contained in other written, contemporary sources which also report on the same events. The so-called *Chronicle of 811*, which provides a detailed description of Nikephoros' Bulgar debacle, and the historical discourse conventionally titled *Scriptor incertus de Leone Armenio*, which deals with the political and ecclesiastical history of the years 812 to 814, are two extremely important

texts for the history of Byzantine-Bulgar relations in the early ninth century. The two fragments are probably connected to each other, though they do not necessarily reflect the work of a common author, as was assumed by former research. Close reading of two passages of narrative action that deal with the battles of Pliska and Versinikia reveal striking similarities in character, vocabulary and phraseology. Given that, on the whole, the two texts vary considerably in literary sophistication and refinement, it would seem reasonable to suppose that the author of the *Scriptor incertus*, writing in the 820s, consciously modelled his description of the flight of the Byzantine troops at Versinikia on that given in the *Chronicle of 811*, which he had at his disposal. The same author is likely to have placed together the two fragments into a dossier of loose papers, which subsequently circulated among iconophile circles at Mount Olympos in Bithynia until the monk Sabas, in the 850s, drew on it for the composition of the second biography of St Ioannikios.

The historian of Byzantine-Bulgar relations must, finally, turn his attention to other extant sources of demonstrable worth. Hagiographical texts; acts of Church Councils; lists of ecclesiastical dioceses; letters, histories and chronicles written in other languages; and epigraphic, numismatic and sigillographic material are all worth bringing into play. Pieced together, the fragmentary information which they supply can enrich our understanding of the period in question, and help construct a new, coherent historical narrative.

Turning to the political history of the late eighth and early ninth centuries, the first point which needs to be emphasized is that a combination of internal difficulties and foreign pressure had thrown the empire into a severe crisis, and this was undoubtedly a contributory factor in Byzantium's failure to break Bulgar power. At the heart of the empire's difficulties was the volatility it experienced at the top following the death of Constantine V. As political machinations occupied much of the attention of the governing circles, none of his immediate successors was able to establish a secure regime. Irene's right to rule was always in question because of her gender. During her long reign, her authority was directly challenged by members of her own family, most importantly her son Constantine VI who was blinded on his mother's orders in 797; by the army, especially the elite guard regiments which looked to an active male emperor to lead them; and by her own allies in the civil administration who obtained so much power that they could aspire to overthrow their patroness, as Nikephoros, her *general logothetes*, eventually did in 802. The deposition of Irene, the last member of the Isaurian dynasty, created an even graver crisis of legitimacy than her blinding of Constantine VI. Neither Nikephoros I, who was killed in Bulgaria in 811, nor Michael I or Leo V after him were able to entrench themselves in power to the complete

satisfaction of important political and military interests, and this undoubtedly undermined the effectiveness of the state machine.

Exacerbating Byzantine difficulties—and in part stemming from them—was the growing pressure, both military and political, exerted on the empire by its Abbāsīd and Carolingian neighbours. For much of the period in question, the Muslim world was at peace, and naturally the Caliphs, above all Harūn al-Rashīd whose public image was that of a ruler personally engaged on the Holy War, concentrated their resources against Byzantium. This meant a constant pressure of annual raids into Anatolia, a large part of which remained a war zone until the outbreak of the civil war in the Caliphate in 808/9. In the west, Charlemagne challenged the empire for the control of southern Italy and Sicily, and after his coronation as emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day 800—an event of great significance, marking a crucial stage in the division between Byzantium and the papacy—applied local pressure along the Adriatic in an attempt to force the government at Constantinople to recognize his imperial title.

At the same time as warfare on two—and occasionally three—fronts destabilized the empire and strained its resources, the ideological divide between iconodules and iconoclasts cast its shadow over the whole of Byzantine society. It is important to note in this context that Irene conducted a gradual purge of the military commanders appointed by her iconoclast predecessors, but in so doing greatly weakened the imperial forces. Their inability to hold up Arab encroachment on the fertile coastal plains of Asia Minor, previously well-protected, as well as the repeated defeats at the hands of the Bulgars were clearly symptoms of this process.

The exceptional degree of unrest in the army was another major reason for Byzantium's weakness in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. The worsening crisis of imperial legitimacy, the frustration resulting from military defeats and incompetent leadership, the inability of Constantine V's immediate successors (apart from Leo V) to maintain close ties with the troops, as well as the question of iconoclasm, all led to a breakdown of military solidarity with the throne and the growing reluctance of commanders and soldiers, both in the *tagmata* and the *themes*, to follow the lead of the government in Constantinople. Moreover, the Bulgar military threat, alongside Krum's awesome reputation, but also the hardships involved in campaigning so far away from their homes, contributed to a general disinclination of troops from Asia Minor and Anatolia to serve in the Balkans in those years.

Irene's accession to the throne in 780 marked the beginning of a new phase of active Byzantine involvement in Balkan affairs. During the next thirty years, the imperial government took spectacular steps to re-establish

control over the fluid, fragmentary world in its west and southwest designated as *Sklaviniai*. This process, culminating under Nikephoros in the first decade of the ninth century, provoked a violent Bulgar reaction which slowly escalated into a full-blown conflict for political mastery over the Slavs of Thrace and Macedonia.

Although these events have received considerable scholarly attention, the general thrust of Byzantine strategy in the Balkans is not yet fully understood. More can be said, for instance, about the driving factors behind the active Constantinopolitan involvement in the region. Three such factors have been identified in the course of this study. In the first place, the imperial government never gave up its claim to ultimate authority over the entire area south of the Lower Danube which it had controlled until the arrival of the Slavs and Bulgars in the sixth and seventh centuries respectively. Although by the eighth century most late-antique cities in the northern Balkans had been abandoned, the descendants of the Romanized Christian population still existed as a consciously separate group, and their presence there was a further reminder of a past order. At the same time, the emperors at Constantinople needed victories that court propaganda could portray as proof of God's favour towards them and their insecure regimes, and the easiest way to achieve them was by campaigning against the Slavs who, in spite of their quality as individual warriors, were not regarded as very dangerous opponents. There were, finally, strategic considerations that induced an active Byzantine involvement in that region. After the loss of the empire's wealthiest provinces in the Near East and the repeated devastation of Anatolia, the relatively small but fertile agricultural plains of the Balkans, along with those of Asia Minor, provisioned the principal Byzantine cities, including the capital, and supported state institutions. The imperial government therefore needed to reassert its authority over these territories (some of which had gradually come under complete Slav control), and render them capable of providing the empire with grain and revenue from the land tax, which could then be dispensed as salaries to the civilian and military functionaries at the imperial court.

The Byzantine advance into northern Thrace and Macedonia, particularly the fertile river valleys leading up from the Aegean to the mountainous Balkan interior, constituted a significant threat to Bulgar security. The *Sklaviniai* targeted by the imperial armies served as buffer zones against Byzantine aggression, and in some cases appear to have collaborated politically with the *khans* who, no doubt, had expansionist plans of their own. The subsequent Bulgar attacks south of the Haimos Mountains were principally aimed at disrupting the efforts of the imperial government to consolidate its position

in that region, though they also had an—increasingly—predatory character; by raiding deep into imperial territory, often as far as the Constantinopolitan hinterland, the Bulgars may have hoped to obtain booty and slaves, or force the empire to pay tribute, which was essential to the *khans* as a symbol of their prestige, but also as a means of acquiring cash for their own coffers and to distribute as largesse to the nobility.

The most effective method for neutralizing the threat of Bulgar raids to Thrace and Macedonia was to offer them concessions. The imperial government might pay tribute to keep the Bulgars at arm's length while dealing with Arab or Frankish attacks, but this could seriously compromise the emperor's standing in the eyes of his subjects, and risk serious political consequences for him and his regime. Therefore, a series of strategies were implemented to make the frontier more secure: soldiers and civilians were transferred from other parts of the empire into the conquered territories; a network of towns and fortresses was built or reconstructed, so that a combination of defences and garrisons could prevent encroachment by the Bulgars; considerable work was also carried out at sites in central and southern Thrace—the most fertile part of the plain—to provide security in the interior for occasions when the frontier was penetrated; finally, whenever the pressure from the Arab armies eased in the east, the Byzantines deployed their military resources in the Balkans, and took sustained initiatives against the *khanate*.

The crisis in the heart of the Caliphate following the death of Harūn al-Rashīd in 809 gave Nikephoros I the opportunity to deal a death blow to Bulgaria in 811, but his disastrous defeat in the narrow defiles of the Haimos threw the empire into dynastic struggle and a prolonged period of instability which continued until the accession of Leo V. Because of the anomalous internal situation in the east, the Bulgars became, for the next three years, the most dangerous adversary Byzantium had to face. Krum's successive expeditions against Thrace and Macedonia between 811 and 814 have been described as essentially punitive and intimidatory affairs. Certainly, in 813 the Bulgars were powerless against Constantinople's impregnable defences, and could only hope to extract political and ideological benefit from a siege. This is not to say, however, that they had no expansionist designs at Byzantine expense. The inscription from Malamirovo (no. 47) is clear evidence that Krum was planning to incorporate a series of Thracian cities into the Bulgar state. More importantly, the scale of his preparations in the spring of 814 was such as to leave no doubt that he had the more ambitious aim of capturing the imperial capital.

There is nothing remarkable about the Bulgars formulating such an aim. In the foregoing chapters it was demonstrated that they had inherited the

ideology and grand political ambitions of the nomad empires of the Eurasian steppe, particularly the Kök Türk confederation, of which they had been a part. This inheritance, which had brought the *khanate* the socio-political institutions of a centralized state, and a ruling class with the skills naturally bred by a nomadic way of life, also accounted for the extraordinary Bulgar resilience in the face of adversity. Without drawing on its cultural, administrative and military traditions, the Bulgar state could not have surmounted the crisis of the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Indeed, throughout the period in question, and despite the fact that foreign (that is, Slav and Christian) influences grew stronger in the *khanate*, the steppe past clearly continued to play an important role in shaping the consciousness of the ruling stratum. This would have been impossible without the increase of the Turkic component inside Bulgaria with the arrival of other nomadic peoples from the Avar confederation who may have been genetically and linguistically related to the Bulgars. The control of the extensive stretch of steppe between the northeastern slopes of the Haimos and the environs of the Dniester basin was another crucial factor in the ability of the Bulgars to retain the nomadic nature of their society and army. The loss of these territories to the Magyars in the late 830s appears to have been a decisive catalyst for the transition of Bulgaria from a steppe nomad to a sedentary state.

Important though the preservation of the nomadic skills of the ruling elite was, equally fundamental was the ability of the *khan* to tap the resources and services of his Slav and Christian subjects. These sedentary peoples played a crucial role in the survival of the *khanate*, for it was they who supplied the warrior aristocracy with agricultural produce, and they who provided most of the manpower and technical expertise needed for Bulgaria's defence. Although their participation in the war effort was usually enforced by fear rather than by consensus, these peoples seem to have enjoyed considerable internal autonomy within the state, and during the late eighth and early ninth centuries, a substantial number of Christians, and even a few Slavs, are known to have held important military and administrative roles in the central government. However, it remains unclear whether these men always identified themselves with the *khanate*. From the reign of Omurtag onwards, certain institutions, customs or ritual practices, such as court ceremonials and acclamations, sought to create a bond between the elite and the Christian populations living in the realm. Yet, the example of several Byzantine officers in Bulgar service vividly demonstrates that ethnic, religious and political loyalties could not be easily forgotten.

The events of the years 811 to 814 signalled the ultimate failure of Byzantium's attempts to eradicate the Bulgar threat and establish a lasting control

over the *Sklaviniai* of northern Thrace and Macedonia. The military consequences of this were bad enough; the Thirty Years' Peace moved the frontier to northern Thrace, and Krum's successors were thereafter able to incorporate into Bulgaria a broad swathe of the debatable territories. Yet arguably the political consequences were worse. The Bulgar conquests in the Balkans, coupled with the humiliating defeats at the hands of Harūn al-Rashīd and the huge concessions granted to Charlemagne, struck a hard blow to Byzantium's prestige and reaffirmed what was probably obvious already—that the empire was a highly vulnerable, medium-sized state, fighting a dour battle for survival.

The Bulgar position was even more insecure. For most of the period under scrutiny, the *khanate* was forced onto the defensive in a desperate battle for survival. With far fewer resources, both human and material, than its aggressive neighbours, it was liable to political collapse in the face of inexorable pressure. The *khans* were thus obliged to maintain their entire society on a permanent war footing. This, however, was a society which knew what it was defending and why. The strength of the official ideology was of paramount importance. The certainties which this system of beliefs presented to the elite, if not to the entire population, the "special relationship" between Tangra—the supreme heavenly being—and the Bulgar rulers, and the ideological motivation thus generated to maintain the state in existence, clearly bear much of the credit for the survival of the *khanate* in the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

The reign of Omurtag is rightly viewed as a period of growth and prosperity for medieval Bulgaria. It was characterized by political stabilization, the intensification of royal power, and the rapid expansion of Bulgar influence in the western Balkans and the Carpathian basin. Bulgaria was thus transformed from a tribal confederation into a stable territorial monarchy. Omurtag, in particular, wielded far greater authority than any of his seventh- and eighth-century predecessors, a fact that ultimately came to play a very important role in this transformation. Although the nature of Omurtag's kingship cannot be treated with precision, due to the lack of sufficient evidence, it is possible to identify several factors which contributed fundamentally to the centralization of political power in Bulgaria during his reign: the vigorous prosecution of warfare against Bulgaria's sedentary and nomadic neighbours, which produced a higher degree of political cohesion and secured access to the sources of wealth needed to sustain a mechanism of patronage and rewards; the creation of bonds of political allegiance and spiritual alliance between the ruler and members of his elite; the construction of an elaborate hierarchy in the civil and military administration, which ensured that

policies would be implemented through a chain of subordination from the *khan* downwards; and finally, the development of the notion of a monarchy based on divine sanction, which was fundamental in gathering legitimization amongst the warrior aristocracy, and perhaps to a lesser degree amongst the subject population, and in acting as a unifying factor in what may well be described as a centrifugal society.

Undoubtedly, Bulgaria in the early 830s had changed a great deal since the reigns of Asparuch and Tervel more than a century earlier. A divinely-sanctioned monarchy had replaced the fragile confederation held together by the personal charisma of its leaders, and the once powerful warrior elite had become increasingly dependent on state service to maintain its position. The Bulgars had not lost their taste for war or abandoned their nomadic values and traditions, but were growing more receptive to Byzantine culture and enjoyed many of the benefits of a sedentary life (literacy, urbanism, trade). What is more, Omurtag had finally suppressed factional strife and developed a shared sense of identity among the diverse inhabitants of the realm. It was left to his successors, in the mid and late ninth century, to create on this foundation what was to be one of the most powerful states in Europe.

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Fig. 1: The plain of Pliska

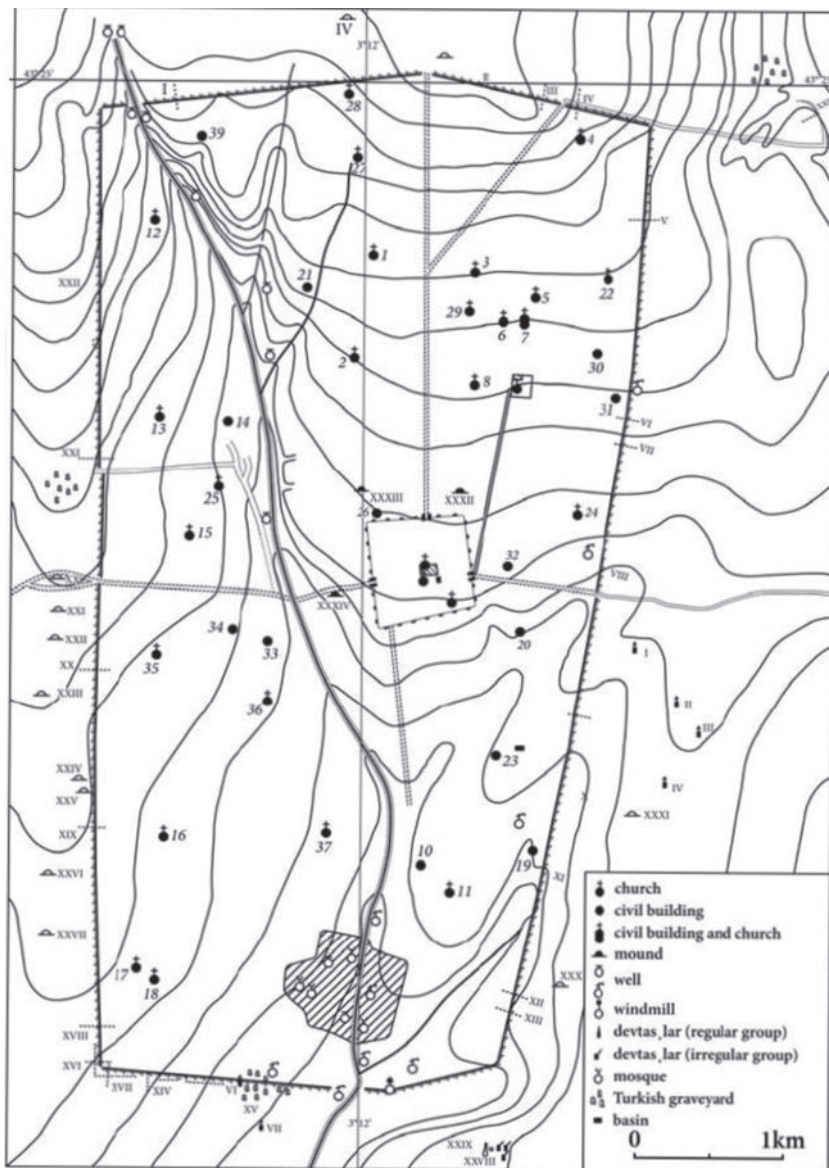


Fig. II: The camp of Pliska, sketch plan (after Fiedler 2008)



Fig. III: Defensive ditch at Pliska



Fig. IV: The palace complex at Pliska (after D. Angelov *et al.* 1981)

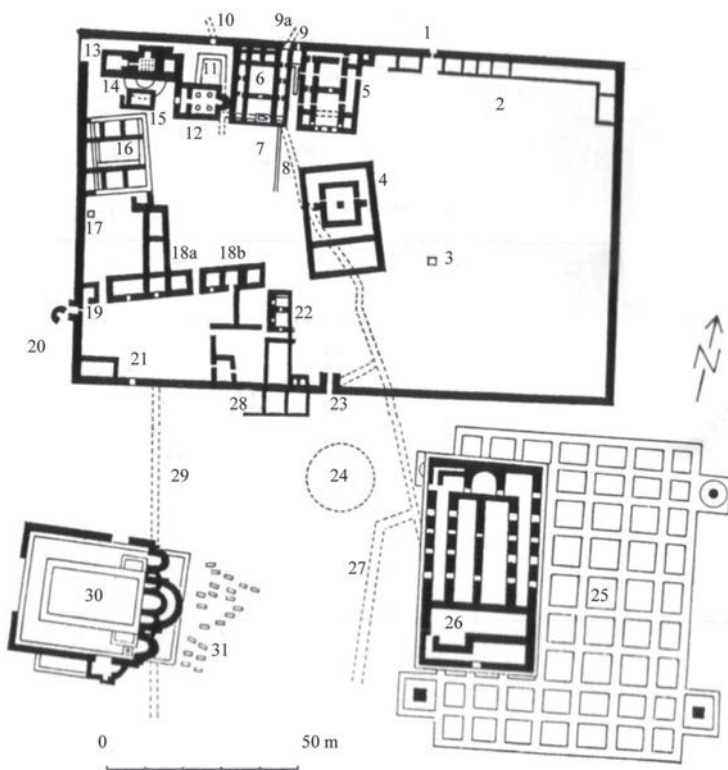


Fig. V: Pliska, palace complex (after D. Ovčarov 1987)

1. Northern Entrance; 2. Buildings used for agricultural purposes; 3. Wells; 4. Pagan temple; 5. Eastern section of "Small Palace"; 6. Western section of "Small Palace"; 7. Dwellings; 8. Underground passage; 9. Gate; 9a and 10. Arched passage; 11. Dwellings; 12. Church; 13. Bath; 14. Round bath; 15. Bath; 16. Cistern and dwellings; 17. Water reservoirs; 18a–b. Dwellings and storage areas; 19. Western Gate; 20. Monumental bastion; 21. Gate; 22. Bath; 23. Southern gate; 24. "Yurt-like" dwelling; 25. Krum's palace; 26. Throne Hall; 27. Underground passage; 28. Buildings on the southern wall of the citadel; 29. Underground passage; 30. Pagan temple and Church; 31. Cemetery

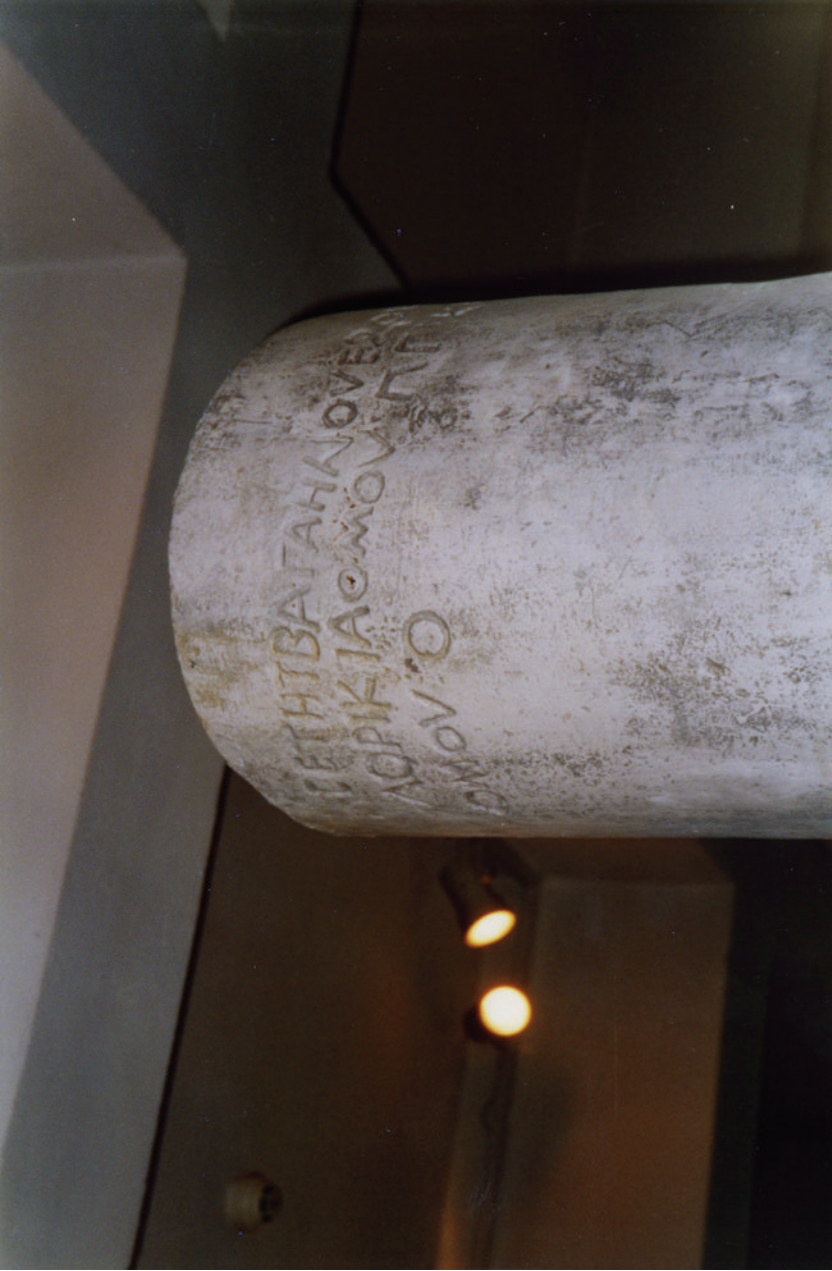


Fig. VI: Inventory inscription from Preslav

ΖΗΤΚΩΗΗΤ ΖΗΡΓ
ΩΥΒΩΥΛΕΧΩΥΜ
ΣΤΗΚΥΠΕ:ΥΝΕ:ΤΩ
ΥΛΣΧΗ:ΦΜ:ΕΣΤΡΩ
ΓΗΝΚΥΠΕ:ΥΚΖ:ΤΩ
ΥΛΣΧΗ:ΩΝΔ:ΤΩΥΡΤ
ΩΥΝΑΠΗΛΕΖΩΠΑΝ
ΕΣΤΡΥΓΗΝΚΥΠΕ:Κ:
ΤΩΥΛΣΧΗ:Μ:ΑΛΧΑΧΗ
ΚΥΠΕ:Α:ΧΛΩ ΥΒΡΗΝ:Α:

Fig. VII: Inventory inscription in the Proto-Bulgarian language
(after Beševliev, *Nadpisi*)



Fig. VIII: The IYI symbol on a stone from Pliska

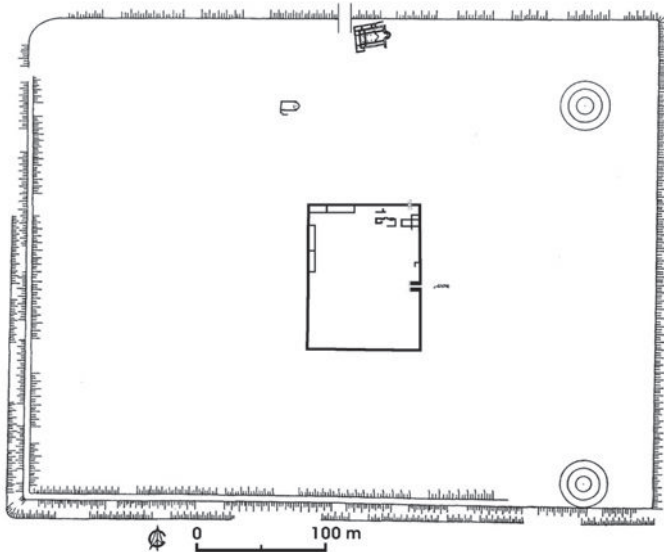


Fig. IX: Sketch plan of the aule of Omurtag (after Fiedler 2008)

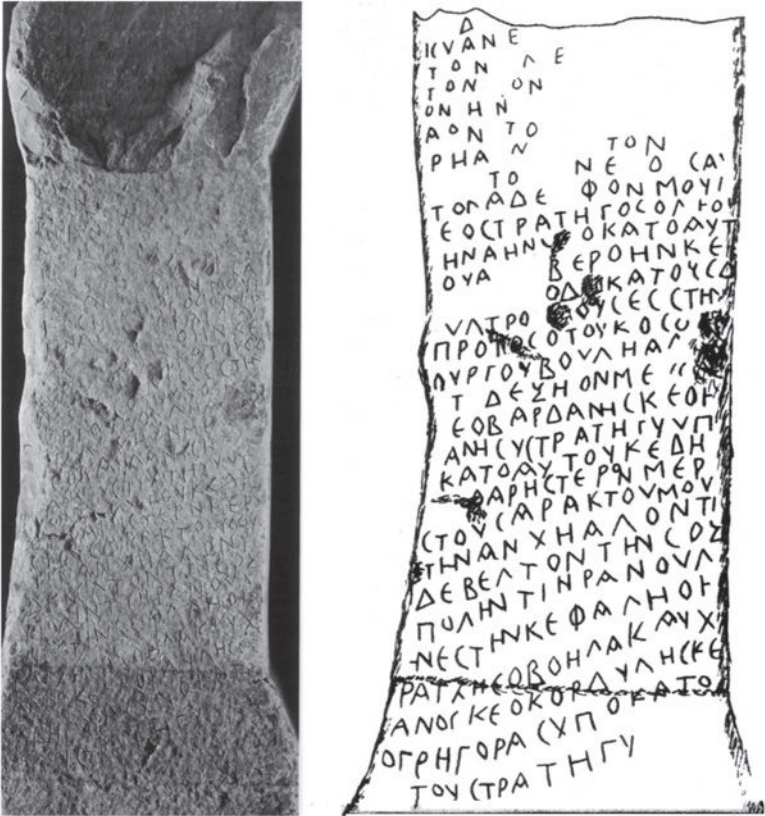


Fig. X: The inscription no. 47 from Malamirovo (after Beševliev, *Nadpisi*)



Fig. XI: The walls of Mesembria



Fig. XII: Inscription commemorating the reconstruction of the walls of Mesembria by Basil I

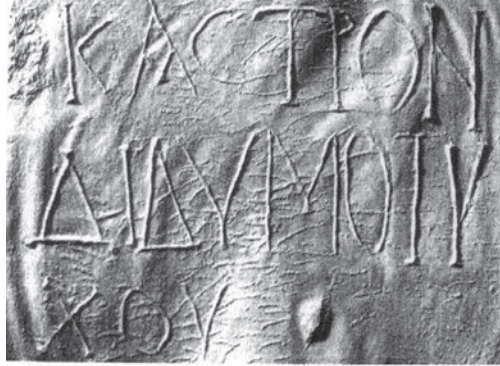


Fig. XIII: Triumphal inscriptions of Krum (after Beševliev, *Nadpisi*)