

# Setting the Scene: An Overview of Byzantine-Bulgar Relations between the Eighth and the Eleventh Centuries

By all accounts, the establishment of the Bulgar state in the Lower Danube region at the end of the seventh century constituted a major political revolution. For centuries, various tribes and ethnic groups – Goths, Huns, Slavs, Avars – had invaded the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, and some of them had even managed to set up their own ephemeral polities there. However, the peace treaty concluded between the Emperor Constantine IV and the Bulgar Khan Asparuch in the late summer or autumn of 681 was the first in which the Byzantine Empire effectively relinquished imperial territories to a foreign power, although the Byzantines would have argued that Asparuch's acceptance of an annual tribute was a recognition that the Bulgars were only there by permission of the emperor<sup>1</sup>. In any case, the history of the next three-and-a-half centuries is dominated by the political and military competition between the two states – a competition that existed side by side with intense and equally important cultural, religious and economic contacts.

Despite the treaty, the Byzantines continued to regard the whole area south of the Lower Danube as an ancient part of the Empire, and accordingly made repeated attempts to either subdue the newcomers or expel them from their new homeland<sup>2</sup>. For the Empire, however, the demands of the Balkans were secondary to those of the eastern front and the war with the Caliphate. The Byzantines, as a rule, only organised offensive operations in the Balkans during intermissions in the Arabian conflict, when they could re-deploy troops there from other parts of the Empire; a situation that prevailed until approximately the middle of the ninth century<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, due to a combination of geographical and strategic factors, a campaign against the Bulgars was a particularly daunting task

for any emperor at any given time. Indeed, the central lands of the Bulgar state were positioned between two natural protective barriers: the Haimos Mountains (Stara Planina) to the south and the Danube River to the north. The Haimos, it must be noted, is far more difficult to cross from the south than the north, mainly because the southern slopes facing Byzantium rise steeply from the plain of Thrace. In addition, the passes of this mountain are narrow and densely forested, and are, therefore, easily blocked by human agency or weather<sup>4</sup>. To prevent the passage of the Byzantine armies, the Bulgars constructed an elaborate system of earthworks and palisades above or behind these passes, the remains of which are still visible today in several places<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, the Black Sea shore was defended by a series of fortifications and ditches, intended to prevent landing and bar access to the coastal road that afforded easy access to the interior<sup>6</sup>. Along the southern banks of the Danube, another system of earthen ramparts, ditches with embankment, and stone-built defences served as a deterrent to attacks from the north<sup>7</sup>. This defensive system was supplemented by the construction, in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, of a series of monumental barriers of embankments and ditches, which seem to have functioned as both defensive installations and symbolic lines of demarcation<sup>8</sup>. Along the southern frontier, facing Byzantium, the most important of these was the so-called Great Earthen Rampart or »Erkesija«, which ran for some 130 km<sup>9</sup>. Similar barriers were also built along the northern border<sup>10</sup>.

A key aspect of Bulgar defensive strategy was the movement of population groups to the regions behind the frontier. A number of Byzantine sources report that Asparuch

1 The secondary literature on Asparuch's migration to the Balkans and the subsequent establishment of the Bulgar state is immense. See for instance Beševliev, *Periode* 186-190; Božilov/Gjuzelev, *Istorija* 86-93; Cankova-Petkova, *Beležki* 328-334; Chrysos, *Gründung* 7-13; Dujčev, *Les sept tribus* 100-108; Vojnov, *Za pǎrvija dopir* 453-478; Whittow, *Orthodox Byzantium* 272-273; Ziemann, *Wandervolk* 161-172. – For an overview of developments in the Balkans, see now Prinzing/Sokolov, *Der Balkan* 1104-1115.

2 For an overview of these events, see now Hupchick, *Bulgarian-Byzantine Wars* 47-122; Primov, *Bulgaria* 7-41.

3 Whittow, *Orthodox Byzantium* 274.

4 Penčev et al., *Staroplaninska Oblast* 85-113. – Soustal, *Thrakien* 53-54. – Marinow, *Haemus* 17-18. 25.

5 See for example Rašev, *Ukrepnenija* 55-65, 199; Wendel, *Karasura* 205. 216. 211. 217. 223. – For the fortresses (some of them dating from the late Roman and

Byzantine times) used by the Bulgars in that region, see Rabovyanov, *Kreposti* 45-51.

6 Rašev, *Ukrepnenija* 32-50. – Rašev, *Černomorieto* 20-49. – Georgiev, *Beležki* 167-182.

7 Rašev, *Ukrepnenija* 67-75. – Koledarov, *Structure* 134-135.

8 Squatriti, *Dikes* 65-71. 87-90. – Rašev, *Ukrepnenija* 77-95. 123. – Fiedler, *Datierung* 463. – Curta, *Dyke* 145-146. – Marinow, *Haemus* 26.

9 Rašev, *Ukrepnenija* 60-62. 64-65. – Fiedler, *Datierung* 457. 461. – Squatriti, *Dikes* 34-35. 49. 56-57. – Momčilov, *Erkesijata* 94-96. – Curta, *Linear Frontiers* 19-23.

10 For the so-called North and South Bessarabian Ramparts (the former running for 106 km in all, the latter covering an area of 126 km, see Rašev, *Ukrepnenija* 28-29. 32. 74. 123; Fiedler, *Datierung* 463.

transferred the Slavic tribe of the Severoi from its home to the eastern borders of the state, near the Black Sea coast; another group of Slavs, the so-called »Seven Tribes«, was established on two different parts of the Haimos Mountains<sup>11</sup>. The task of the Slavic populations was, not only to warn of invasion, but also to meet and repel their opponents before they gained access to the Bulgar heartland<sup>12</sup>. On the whole, the fundamental principle of Bulgar strategy was to establish successive lines of defence in order to prevent the Byzantines from reaching the central urban settlements such as Pliska and, later, Preslav. However, an important factor affecting its application was that of human resources. In the eighth and ninth centuries, the Bulgars may have been able to raise armies of several thousand men, but even then the Byzantine forces are very likely to have been greatly superior in numbers. Thus, as successive Byzantine emperors were clearly aware, a co-ordinated assault on Bulgaria from several fronts could easily overstretch the Bulgars' defences. 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 its rulers. Much of the antagonism with Byzantium arose exactly from Bulgar attempts to conquer the Slavic tribes of the southern Balkan peninsula<sup>13</sup>.

From the moment of Asparuch's arrival in the Lower Danube region in the late seventh century and until the final conquest and dissolution of the First Bulgarian state by the armies of Emperor Basil II in the second decade of the eleventh century, the Byzantines mounted dozens of campaigns against the Bulgars. Some of these were particularly successful, while others resulted in spectacular disasters. Given the geo-strategic considerations outlined above, three alternative courses of military action were open to Byzantine emperors operating against Bulgaria, and all three were applied during this period with varying results. The first entailed simultaneous attacks on several fronts along the Thracian border. The army would march across the frontier by different routes, with some of its units moving directly over different mountain passes, and others following the coastal route around the lower, eastern edge of the Haimos<sup>14</sup>. The second alternative constituted a slight variation of the first: a co-ordinated assault by land and sea. One part of the army would move across the mountains, while another, transported by the imperial navy, would land on the Black Sea coast or on the south bank of the Danube,

attacking the Bulgars on their rear<sup>15</sup>. The third option entailed, once again, a synchronised assault from both north and south, only that this time the northern offensive would be carried out by a foreign power, with which the Byzantine Empire would have previously struck a deal. This ally was usually one of the nomadic or sedentary peoples of the south Russian steppes, such as the Magyars, the Pechenegs or the Rus', who could easily be persuaded by Byzantine gifts to attack from the north<sup>16</sup>. However, as the Byzantines were well aware, and the occupation of the Bulgar lands by Prince Sviatoslav of Kiev reaffirmed in 969, these were utterly unreliable partners and any arrangement with them could easily backfire<sup>17</sup>.

Without going into much detail, it should be noted that between the late seventh and early eleventh century there were four main waves of Byzantine aggression against Bulgaria. The first wave came about right after the establishment of the Bulgar state by Asparuch, when the imperial government at Constantinople organised a series of unsuccessful military expeditions in order to expel the Bulgars from the Lower Danube region<sup>18</sup>. The second wave coincided with the second half of the long reign of Emperor Constantine V (741-775). Taking advantage of the Abbāsid revolution in the Caliphate, and having already banned icon veneration, Constantine V diverted his military resources to the Balkans in a concerted effort to eradicate the Bulgar state<sup>19</sup>. Thus, from approximately 760 to 775 he launched at least nine campaigns, winning a number of major victories, which threw the Bulgars into a prolonged period of instability. Nevertheless, he was unable to deal the final blow and either conquer the Bulgar state or impose a lasting peace<sup>20</sup>. The third wave was initiated by the Byzantine emperors of the late eighth and early ninth centuries and culminated in the year 811 with the grand expedition of Nikephoros I, which ended in complete disaster, with the death of that emperor and thousands of his troops in the narrow defiles of Haimos<sup>21</sup>. The final wave extended from 966 to 1018, covering the period in which successive emperors of the Macedonian dynasty – Nikephoros Phocas, John Tzimiskes and Basil II – once more attempted, and eventually accomplished in two stages (in 971 and again in 1018) the complete subjugation of the Bulgar polity<sup>22</sup>.

For their part, the Bulgars frequently launched raiding expeditions into Byzantine territory; on three occasions these developed into prolonged phases of large-scale mili-

11 Theoph. Chron. 359,12-17. – Nikēphoros, Short History 36,23-26. – Obolensky, Commonwealth 64-65. – Dujčev, Les sept tribus 100-108. – Ziemann, Wandervolk 167-179.

12 Nicol. resp. 581.

13 See for instance Theoph. Chron. 447,10-13, for the unsuccessful attempt of *khan* Telerig to resettle in Bulgaria the tribe of the Slav Berzitai.

14 As was the case with Nikēphoros I's disastrous campaign in the summer of 811; see in particular Theoph. Chron. 490,10-11.

15 A strategy frequently applied by Constantine V; for instance, see Nikēphoros, Short History 73,11-20.

16 For the collaboration with the Magyars in 894 (including the references to the sources describing these events), see Kristó, Hungarian History 183-190; Mladjov, Magyars 63-84. – For the alliance with the Pechenegs, see Const. Porph. admin. imp. 52,3-13; Theoph. Cont. 389,22-390,12. – For the Rus, see Leon. Diac. hist. 63,5-12. – See also Stephenson, Balkan Frontier 30-31. 39. 48.

17 For a discussion, see Stephenson, Balkan Frontier 49-51; Hanak, Sviatoslav 138-151.

18 For an account of these events, see Hupchick, Bulgarian-Byzantine Wars 50-52; Ziemann, Wandervolk 180-184.

19 For the prohibition of icon veneration, see in particular Rochow, Kaiser Konstantin V. 43-72. For the downfall of the Ummayyad dynasty, see Kennedy, Prophet 112-123.

20 For this phase of the conflict, see Božilov/Gjuzelev, Istorija 114-120; Rochow, Kaiser Konstantin V. 89-105; Primov, Bulgaria 24-35; Soustal, Thrakien 79-81; Ziemann, Wandervolk 213-234.

21 For a detailed survey, see Sophoulis, Byzantium and Bulgaria 146-216.

22 Stephenson, Balkan Frontier 48-55. 62-66. – Hupchick, Bulgarian-Byzantine Wars 247-319. – Holmes, Basil II 395-420.

tary aggression against Byzantium. The first phase occurred following the unsuccessful Byzantine campaign of 811: for the next five years, Krum and his successor Omurtag took the strategic initiative, temporarily annexing large parts of Byzantine Thrace and Macedonia<sup>23</sup>. The second and most important phase came about during the reign of Symeon (894-927), when Bulgaria emerged as the greatest power in the Balkans<sup>24</sup>. The third was under Samuel (997-1014), who not only led the uprising against Byzantine authority (c. 976), but also managed to re-establish the Bulgar state, incorporating territories controlled by the Byzantines in the southern and western Balkans<sup>25</sup>. The strategic objective of the Bulgars seemed to be different in each of these phases. In the case of Krum, the goal was to stabilise the frontier and secure, through a policy of aggression, a peace settlement with favourable terms<sup>26</sup>. Symeon, on the other hand, is known to have harboured imperial ambitions. He envisaged, not necessarily the subordination of Byzantium to Bulgaria, but the creation of a unified empire with himself at its head<sup>27</sup>. Samuel may have temporarily created a huge state, but his vision appears to have been more modest – and perhaps more realistic – than that of Symeon. His primary objective was to retain independence from Byzantium, and for this reason, he relocated the centre of his state to the west, in Macedonia, further away from the imperial capital<sup>28</sup>.

As is well known, despite his military successes early on, Samuel's position was bound to become insecure once Basil II, determined to restore Byzantine control over Bulgaria, transferred the bulk of his military resources from the East (c. 1001). Although for more than a decade none of the two sides could deliver a decisive blow, the Byzantine victory at the battle of Kleidion in October 1014 and the death of Samuel, shortly thereafter, effectively signalled the collapse of Bulgar resistance and the beginning – officially from 1018 – of almost 170 years of Byzantine rule<sup>29</sup>.

Even though the relations between the two powers were dominated throughout the period in question by political competition and warfare, economic and cultural contact also played a major role, leaving a deep imprint on the history of

both states. Indeed, traders from both countries engaged in a lively and wide-ranging commercial activity that seems to have continued even during the most troubled times. Items of exchange included, on the one hand, foodstuffs, raw materials and possibly slaves from the Black Sea steppes, and on the other, Byzantine manufactured goods<sup>30</sup>. Examples are finds of seals of Byzantine *kommerkiarioi* (the officers charged with the collection of the imperial sales tax) who were stationed in several cities across Thrace and the Black Sea coast until the mid-eighth century and again from the early ninth century onwards, and also finds of Byzantine coinage, glass and ceramic vessels in the territories controlled by the khans. They constitute significant evidence for the existence of direct trade between Byzantines and Bulgars, both on an official level and among the ordinary population<sup>31</sup>. At the same time, Christianity was gradually gaining ground in Bulgaria, and in the 860s, Khan Boris finally decided to convert to the new faith<sup>32</sup>. While the Bulgar ruler seriously considered the possibility of receiving baptism from Rome, he was eventually forced to adopt the Orthodox creed, a decision that, inevitably, opened up another avenue for Byzantine cultural influence on his realm<sup>33</sup>. Closely connected with this event was the Bulgar's adoption of the Glagolitic script (*glagolitsa*) and, somewhat later, the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet, both of which served as cultural intermediaries between Byzantium and the Slavic world, particularly Bulgaria, as well as becoming vehicles for the development of a unique literary tradition<sup>34</sup>.

To conclude, the relations between Byzantium and Bulgaria were always vibrant, multifarious and ambivalent. They were characterised, on the one hand, by mutual suspicion and hostility, and, on the other, by interdependence and co-operation. They ranged, during this period, from reciprocal respect and admiration to fear and distrust. Perhaps more than anything else, this inherent contradiction in the attitudes of Byzantine and Bulgar elites towards each other that varied widely according to circumstances represents an important area of research to which more attention needs to be devoted in the future.

23 A detailed discussion in Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria* 221-245. 249-264. 265-269.

24 See in particular Božilov/Gjuzelev, *Istorija* 246-260; Stephenson, *Balkan Frontier* 18-28; Hupchick, *Bulgarian-Byzantine Wars* 149-210; Shepard, *The Other Balkan Empire* 570-571. 574-576; Obolensky, *Commonwealth* 97-115.

25 Božilov/Gjuzelev, *Istorija* 308-326. – Stephenson, *Balkan Frontier* 58-79. – Pirivatrić, *Samuilova država* 57-132. – Hupchick, *Bulgarian-Byzantine Wars* 247-307.

26 See Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria* 251.

27 Dölger, *Reg.* 1,2 n° 606. – Obolensky, *Commonwealth* 104-106. – Pavlov, *Beležki* 199-207.

28 Shepard, *Communications* 218-219.

29 For the battle of Kleidion, see *Io. Scyl. syn. hist.* 348,9-349,4; *Io. Zonar. Epit. Hist.* 563,6-564,10. – Tomov, *Bitkata* 142-169; Stephenson, *Bulgar-Slayer* 2-7. 33-34.

30 See for instance Theoph. *Chron.* 497,24-26; Dölger, *Reg.* 1,1 n° 276; *Io. Camen. expugn. Thessal.* 10,57-11,66. – Marinow, *The Economy* 217-220; Berov, *Ikonomičeskoto razvitiie* 29-30; Curta, *Southeastern Europe* 219. 224; Primov, *Certain Aspects* 195-197. – For the slave trade, see Henning, *Gefangenensesseln* 416; Simeonova, *Pätuvane* 137-140; Vučetić, *Novelle*.

31 Dujčev, *Treaty* 217-295. For the seals of *kommerkiarioi* (at Mesēmbria, Adrianople, Didymoteichon Debeltos and Thessalonikē), see Brandes, *Finanzverwaltung in Krisenzeiten* 393; Ivanov, *Komerkiarii* 17-24; *Oikonomides, Kommerkiarioi* 33-53. – For the discovery in Preslav of the seal of a certain Philotheos, a Byzantine official in charge of supervising the export of silk robes, see Kiučukova/Jordanov, *Vizantijskite tākan* 155-165. – For the numismatic evidence, see Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria* 139-141; Oberländer-Tärnoveanu, *Monnaie* 344-447. 376-377. – For the Byzantine pottery/glassware in Bulgaria, see Manolova, *Kām vāprosa* 1-15; Vogt/Bouquillon, *Technologie* 105-116; Kostova, *Polychrome Ceramics* 97-98.

32 For a general outline of these events, see Božilov/Gjuzelev, *Istorija* 169-175; Cankova-Petkova, *Contribution* 21-39; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans* 117-120; Shepard, *Slavs and Bulgars* 238-241; Podskalsky, *Theologische Literatur* 48-58.

33 Gjuzelev, *Christianity* 128-159. – Curta, *Southeastern Europe* 169-174. – Sullivan, *Conversion* 60-74.

34 Obolensky, *Commonwealth* 95-96. 324-336. – Podskalsky, *Theologische Literatur* 53f. and further. See also Dobrev, *Kirilo-Metodievite učenitsi* 25-48, for the work of Cyril's and Methodios's disciples in Bulgaria. Furthermore, see M. Garzaniti's contribution in this volume.

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## Summary / Zusammenfassung / Résumé

### Setting the Scene: An Overview of Byzantine-Bulgar Relations between the Eighth and the Eleventh Centuries

This chapter provides a brief overview of the relations between the Byzantine Empire and the first Bulgarian state from the eighth to the eleventh centuries, focusing in particular on the geo-strategic framework of the military and political confrontation between the two powers. Throughout this period, the Byzantines continued to regard the whole area south of the Lower Danube as an ancient part of the empire due for re-conquest and accordingly made repeated attempts to subdue them. Attempts to that effect were mainly made during interruptions of Arab pressure, when the imperial government could transfer troops from the eastern front to the Balkans. Nevertheless, due to the strategic advantage, which the Haimos Mountains and the Danube River offered to the Bulgars, any campaign against them was bound to be a particularly difficult and risky affair. For the Byzantines, the preferred course of action entailed a co-ordinated assault from both north and south, for which a military alliance with one of the peoples of the south Russian steppes was usually necessary. However effective, such alliances often backfired, as Prince Sviatoslav's occupation of Bulgaria in 969 clearly demonstrates.

The Bulgars themselves also took the initiative to attack the Empire, and in three cases, under Krum, Symeon and Samuel, their aggression culminated in full-scale war with Byzantium.

Nevertheless, the frequent and intensive warfare reported in the sources is only one side of the story. There is sufficient evidence pointing to a growing economic and cultural interaction across the Byzantine-Bulgar border – an interaction that existed side by side with the political and military competition between the two neighbours.

### Die Ausgangslage: Ein Überblick über die byzantinisch-bulgarischen Beziehungen zwischen dem 8. und 11. Jahrhundert

Dieses Kapitel vermittelt eine kurze Übersicht über die Beziehungen zwischen dem Byzantinischen Reich und dem Ersten Bulgarischen Reich vom 8. bis zum 11. Jahrhundert, wobei der Fokus insbesondere auf dem geostrategischen Rahmen der militärischen und politischen Konfrontation zwischen den zwei Mächten liegt. In diesem Zeitraum betrachteten die Byzantiner das gesamte untere Donauebiet als alten Bestandteil ihres Reiches, den es zurückzuerobern galt. Dementsprechend wurden wiederholte Versuche unternommen, die Gebiete zu unterwerfen. Diese Versuche fallen vornehmlich in Phasen nachlassenden Drucks von arabischer Seite, als die kaiserliche Regierung Truppen von der Ostfront abziehen konnte. Dennoch war jeder Angriff auf die Bulgaren schwierig und riskant, weil ihnen das Haimos-Gebirge und die Donau strategische Vorteile bot. Die bevorzugte Strategie der Byzantiner war ein koordinierter Angriff von Norden und Süden, wofür üblicherweise eine Allianz mit Völkern der südrussischen Steppe nötig wurde. Obwohl dieses Vorgehen effektiv war, konnten diese Allianzen auch fehlschlagen, wie die Besetzung von Bulgarien durch Fürst Svjatoslav im Jahre 969 deutlich belegt.

Die Bulgaren selbst ergriffen ebenfalls immer wieder die Initiative und attackierten das Byzantinische Reich. In drei Fällen – unter Krum, Simeon und Samuel – kulminierten die Angriffe in ausgedehnten Kriegen gegen Byzanz.

Nichtsdestoweniger sind die häufigen und intensiven kriegerischen Auseinandersetzungen, von denen die Quellen berichten, nur eine Seite der Geschichte. Hinreichende Belege weisen auf einen florierenden wirtschaftlichen und kulturellen Austausch über die byzantinisch-bulgarische Grenze – ein Austausch, der parallel zu den politischen und militärischen Rivalitäten der zwei Nachbarn stattfand.

### **Plantons le décor: Aperçu des relations entre Byzantins et Bulgares entre le VIII<sup>e</sup> et le XI<sup>e</sup> siècle**

Ce chapitre donne un bref aperçu des relations entre l'Empire byzantin et le premier État bulgare du VIII<sup>e</sup> au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle, en se concentrant en particulier sur le cadre géostratégique de la confrontation militaire et politique entre les deux puissances. Tout au long de cette période, les Byzantins ont continué à considérer l'ensemble de la région située au sud du Danube inférieur comme une ancienne partie de l'empire à reconquérir et ont donc tenté à plusieurs reprises de la soumettre. Ces tentatives ont surtout eu lieu lors des interruptions de la pression arabe, lorsque le gouvernement impérial pouvait transférer des troupes du front oriental vers les Balkans. Néanmoins, en raison de l'avantage stratégique que les monts Haimos et le Danube offraient aux Bulgares, toute campagne contre eux était vouée à être particulièrement difficile et risquée. Pour

les Byzantins, la ligne de conduite privilégiée impliquait un assaut coordonné depuis le nord et le sud, pour lequel une alliance militaire avec l'un des peuples des steppes de la Rus' méridionale était généralement nécessaire. Aussi efficaces soient-elles, ces alliances se retournaient souvent contre leurs auteurs, comme le montre clairement l'occupation de la Bulgarie par le prince Sviatoslav en 969.

Les Bulgares eux-mêmes ont également pris l'initiative d'attaquer l'Empire, et dans trois cas, sous Krum, Syméon et Samuel, leur agression a abouti à une guerre totale avec Byzance.

Néanmoins, les guerres fréquentes et intensives rapportées dans les sources ne représentent qu'une partie de l'histoire. Il existe suffisamment d'éléments indiquant une interaction économique et culturelle croissante de part et d'autre de la frontière byzantino-bulgare – une interaction qui coexistait avec la compétition politique et militaire entre les deux voisins.