

The Relations between the Frankish Kingdoms and Bulgaria (Seventh to Ninth Centuries)

Studying the relations between the Franks and the Bulgarians from the time when they were first attested (from the seventh century until the end of the Carolingian Empire towards the end of the ninth century) requires focusing mainly on political aspects since these are best attested in the written sources. Frankish diplomacy towards Bulgaria has been less studied than Byzantine or papal diplomacy¹. This is partly because the sources are scarcer (we know that the acts of the Aachen chancery are less well preserved than those of Constantinople or Rome) and partly because we often imagine the Frankish world and Bulgaria to be geographically more distant than they actually were, which will be discussed below. The analysis can be divided into several chronological stages that are linked to the progressive weakening of the Avar Empire and, consequently, to the emergence of Bulgaria as an autonomous power.

When the Bulgarians appeared in written sources in the seventh century, the northern shore of the Mediterranean Sea was characterised by a balance between three great powers: the Merovingian Franks, the Avars and the Byzantines (fig. 1). Other less influential groups can be seen along a corridor from Saxony to the Adriatic Sea, including the Germanic peoples on the eastern borders of the Franks (in light blue on the map), and the first known Slavic peoples (in dark green). Within the Avar area, we can also add the Bulgarians to these secondary groups. These peoples tried to develop or survive between the strongholds of the great powers, which, in turn, tried to subjugate them. In this context, for example, the so-called *Fredegar Chronicle*, written in the second half of the seventh century, describes the itinerary of a group of 9000 Bulgarians who fled from the Avar Empire around 630 and took refuge in Bavaria, a region politically subject to the Franks². The Merovingian royalty was embarrassed by these migrants, whose presence threatened to disrupt relations between Franks and Avars, and therefore ordered the Bavarians to kill the 9000 Bulgarians in a single night, which was effectively perpetrated. Thus, as far as we know, the

relations between the Franks and the Bulgarians began with this abominable scene, marked by violence and disdain, since a minority group was obviously sacrificed in order to preserve relations between the great powers.

Things changed radically around 795, when the Frankish kingdom (now under Carolingian rule) won several important victories against the Avar Empire, leading to its collapse³. These military events had two crucial consequences for our purposes: first, they pushed the Carolingian borders far eastwards (fig. 2); second, they freed from Avar control ethnic groups that had hitherto existed only as subcategories of this vast empire. Among these emerging groups were the Moravians and the Bulgarians, who became the two main eastern counterparts of the Franks throughout the ninth century. The exact geography of this Frankish expansion to the South-East is still highly debated among historians; but it seems clear that it created a common border with Bulgaria. At the beginning of the ninth century, the sources located the Franks around the Tisza, Sirmium, and Timok rivers⁴, that is, at the gates of Bulgaria. At the end of the same century, an author called the »Bavarian Geographer« still presented the Bulgarians as direct counterparts of the Franks, on the same basis as the Moravians⁵. Thus, at the turn of the ninth century, the Bulgarians had become both a great power that had to be taken seriously by the Franks, and also their immediate neighbour.

This geographical proximity did not necessarily imply an improvement in relations, at least not at first. Indeed, the first decades of coexistence were still marked by conflicts over common borders, which still had to be defined within the former Avar Empire. In particular, the sources mentioned several peoples who sought to leave the Bulgarian authority and to place themselves under the Frankish influence, which was now very close. This was the case, in particular, of two peoples mentioned in the years 810 and 820 who lived in what is now Serbia: the Timociani (who obviously took their name from the Timok River) and the *Pradenecenti* (who probably gave their name to the present-day Serbian district

1 About the Byzantine relations with Bulgaria, cf. Ziemann, *Wandervolk*. – For the papal diplomacy in that area, see Nikolov, *Bishops; Sansterre, Missionnaires*.

2 *Fredegar, Chron.* 4,72.

3 Pohl, *Avars*.

4 The Tisza and Sirmium are named in 796 by Paulinus of Aquileia about Eric of Friuli's death: Paulinus, *Carmen*. Sirmium is the current Serbian city of Sremska Mitrovica. On the Timok, see below.

5 *Geogr. Baw.* On the text, see Rossignol, *Manuscrit; Betti, Descriptio*.

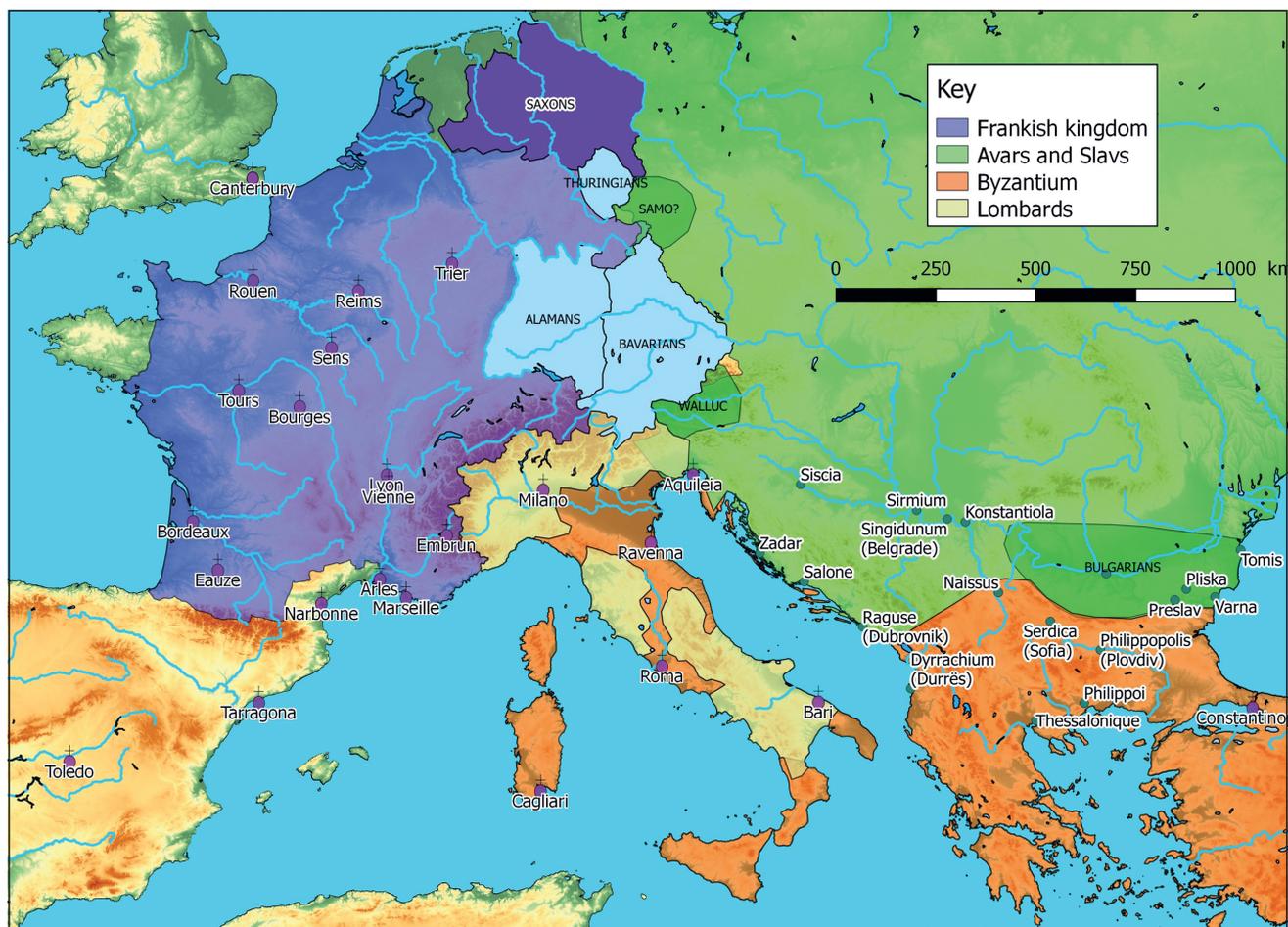


Fig. 1 Main European kingdoms and empires in the seventh century. – (Map T. Lienhard).

of Braničevo)⁶. We do not know why these groups preferred Frankish domination over that of the Bulgarians. Nevertheless, the Bulgarians opposed it, first through diplomatic channels by protesting to the Franks, then by launching a vast and victorious military operation against the Carolingians in 827⁷. At that time, the Timociani and Praedenecenti were forced to return under the authority of Khan Omurtag and the disputed territory returned to the Bulgarian orbit throughout the ninth century. In the longer term, this event marked the region's embeddedness in the Eastern world (especially the Orthodox world, once that category became a reality) for the subsequent centuries.

In these tense relations at the beginning of the ninth century, a striking element is the relative ignorance shown by the Franks towards their Bulgarian counterparts. As mentioned above, the latter had sent several embassies; however, the treatment given to these diplomats was remarkable. The

Frankish Emperor Louis the Pious (813-840) avoided answering for three years, either by making the Bulgarian envoys wait for a long time, or by sending them home with an evasive answer⁸. It was these hesitations that finally led the Bulgarian leader to launch the military campaign of 827, leading to the defeat of the Franks. Why had the Frankish Emperor neglected the Bulgarian ambassadors in that way? As justification, the annalists in 826 proposed the fact that »a rumour said that the king of the Bulgarians had been driven out of his kingdom, or killed, by one of the magnates of his kingdom«. Therefore, the Franks were obviously waiting to know who the actual leader was in order to determine which policy had to be followed. It can be deduced that, for three years, Louis the Pious failed to obtain reliable information about the identity of the Bulgarian king, although this was one of the main military powers in the northern Mediterranean, capable of shaking both Frankish and Byzantine security. Clearly, during

6 The Timociani are mentioned in the Frankish royal annals for the years 818 and 819; the Praedenecenti for the years 822 and 824. *Annal. regni Franc.* 149-150. 159. 165. The identification of the latter with the district of Braničevo had been already suggested by Šafařík, *Starozitnosti* 612 and is still generally accepted. The Timok is a tributary on the right of the Danube in modern Serbia.

7 *Annal. regni Franc.* 173.

8 *Annal. regni Franc.* 164. 167-168. 173 (for the years 824 to 827).

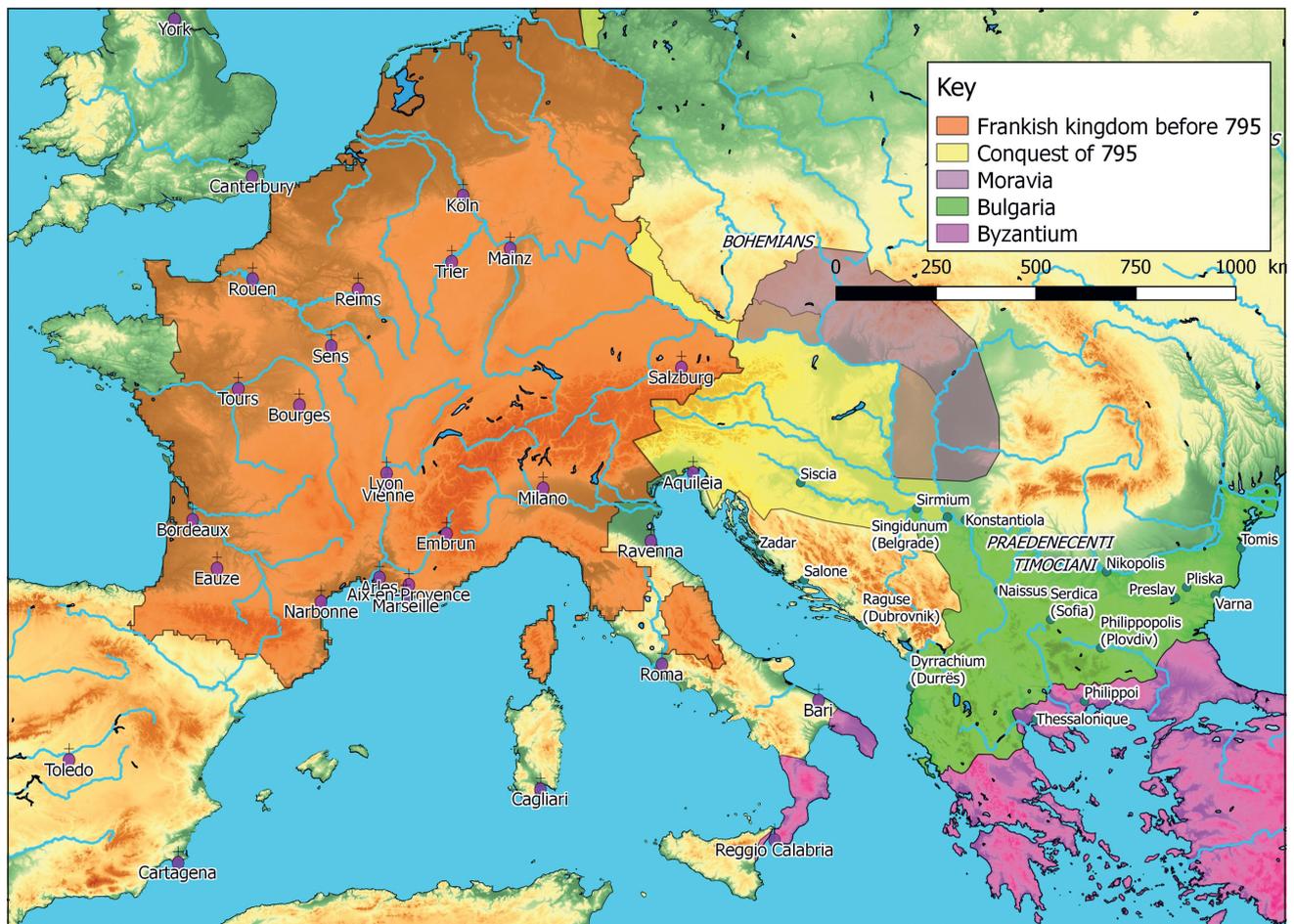


Fig. 2 Franks and Bulgars after 795. – (Map T. Lienhard).

the 820s, the Carolingians still had difficulty in understanding and properly assessing the powers in the region they had wrested from the Avar Empire, and that lack of knowledge influenced their diplomatic practices.

However, in the following decades of the ninth century, relations between Franks and Bulgarians became more normal. The territorial question was now settled and the Carolingians had become aware of the military importance of this adversary. They were too busy with other eastern conflicts, particularly against the Moravians, to hope to expand into the Balkans. This led to relations, which were characteristic for great powers seeking mutual recognition as such, despite Bulgaria not being a Christian realm, theoretically a *sine qua non* for the Franks to accept lasting peace.

The recognition of the *de facto* status was based on several aspects: first, Bulgaria at times served as a refuge for the Franks when they were in dispute with their own authorities. For example, towards the end of the 830s, a Moravian aristocrat named Priwina managed to be accepted into the Frankish world, but for unknown reasons, he quarrelled with

the count who had welcomed him and fled to the Bulgarians for a while before reconciling himself with the Carolingians⁹. Such behaviour certainly did not promote diplomatic relations between the Frankish and Bulgarian rulers, but it at least showed that the Franks did not consider it possible to pursue such a fugitive in the Bulgarian kingdom, which was a form of minimal recognition between two states. It may be pointed out in that respect that the fugitive's Moravian origin may not have been insignificant. Priwina certainly spoke a Slavic language, which could have facilitated his integration into Bulgaria and, more generally, he was undoubtedly in a situation of relative familiarity with that kingdom as it neighbored Moravia. At least for the Franks, Bulgaria therefore represented a region that Carolingian authority could not encroach.

In the same decade, an allusive source sheds some light on exchanges that were both diplomatic and religious. A Saxon monk named Gottschalk had fled to the court of the duke of Friuli to escape persecution for his theological views¹⁰. In doing so, he travelled into Bulgarian territory, although we do

9 Libell. Baw. et Car. 10-11. See Wolfram, Weißbuch 166-211.

10 Pezé, Virus 55.

not know whether this was a religious mission, or, more likely, whether he was accompanying a Frankish embassy. In any case, according to him, »one day, in the land of the Bulgars, a powerful and noble pagan asked me to drink in homage to this god who transformed wine into blood«¹¹. Clearly, the Bulgarian had launched a joke as a pretext for a drink, and Gottschalk used it to suggest that the idea of transubstantiation was gaining ground among pagans¹². The mention is fleeting and reflects some misunderstandings, but also illustrates the possibility of dialogue across religious differences.

In the second half of the ninth century, the Bulgarians also became military allies of the Franks, first against the Moravians and then against the Hungarians (the latter sometimes supported by the Byzantines). This partnership is attested as early as 863, when the Franks and Bulgarians launched a joint campaign against the Moravian Duke Rastiz¹³. The date is remarkable, since it predates the official conversion of the Bulgarians to Christianity in 864 and, therefore, confirms the mutual recognition between those two powers notwithstanding the difference of religion. Nevertheless, the military alliance intensified after Boris's conversion in 864, with the Franks now making more frequent use of this eastern ally. For example, around 884, the Moravian Duke Svatopluk explicitly feared such a military alliance between the armies of the Carolingian Arnulf and the Bulgarians¹⁴. In the following decade, Frankish sources still welcomed a success qualified as a »Christian victory« when the Bulgarians won a battle¹⁵.

Should we consider that Boris's conversion was a turning point for our subject? It is worth noting that the Franks played a role in this process, even though to a lesser extent than the Byzantines or the Papacy. First, in 867, Bishop Ermenrich of Passau (866-874), who was under Frankish authority, was sent to Bulgaria where he hoped to participate in the deployment of the clergy as missionaries, which would have amounted to anchoring Bulgaria in the Bavarian obedience. This first attempt was a failure, since Ermenrich was overtaken by the legates of Pope Nicholas I (858-867) who were pursuing the same goal¹⁶. Second, in 875, Charles the Bald made a journey to Rome, where he led a trial between two Roman factions and decided for the faction that was most favourable to Constantinople¹⁷. Indeed, since the early 860s, Roman diplomats active in the Balkans had been divided between »falcons«, very hostile to Byzantine influence in Bulgaria

(Formosus of Porto, Marin of Cerveteri, Paul of Populonia), and »doves«, willing to negotiate with Patriarch Photios I of Constantinople (858-867/877-886) on that subject (Zacharias of Anagni, Gauderich of Velletri)¹⁸. In 875, it was the latter camp that was favoured by Charles the Bald. By doing so in the name of a policy of appeasement with Byzantium, the Frankish emperor had made concessions and encouraged the Western clergy to renounce jurisdiction in the Balkans, thus opposing the grand project of Nicholas I, or Ermenrich of Passau. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction over this area has, therefore, not been a major issue for the Carolingians, even if the Christianisation of Bulgaria officially facilitated exchanges between Franks and Bulgarians.

Finally, it was in this same period (the last third of the ninth century) that the few references to commercial relations between these two kingdoms appeared. The sources are scarce, as always when it comes to the foreign trade of the Franks, but not insignificant. In the text attributed to the Bavarian Geographer mentioned above, the author listed the immediate neighbours of the Franks, probably from a commercial perspective, and included the Bulgarians. The latter were, therefore, considered a possible outlet, but it should be noted that the hopes expressed in this text were low. Indeed, for all the peoples he mentioned in the east, the author indicated a number of cities that probably corresponded to the points of reception known to Frankish travellers, such as commercial counters. For many peoples mentioned in the Geographer, the number of these cities was relatively high, between 20 and 200. For the Bulgarians, on the contrary, it was reported with frustration that, although their region was immense, they had only five cities, which seems to illustrate the paucity of exchanges envisaged by the author¹⁹. Finally, and always on the commercial level, at the very end of the century the Frankish King Arnulf asked the Bulgarians to stop selling salt to the Moravians, hoping to place them in a situation of blockade²⁰. We know that the Franks themselves sold salt to the Moravians²¹, and they were obviously aware that the Bulgarians traded in the same areas, which put the two kingdoms in a situation of competition, but also of possible co-operation when it came to organising an economic blockade. Thus, there were forms of economic exchange, especially at the time when the military alliance also reached its peak.

11 Godesc. Sax. corp. Dom. 325.

12 Gautier, Beowulf 218.

13 Annal. Fuld. II 56 (863). In fact, the campaign was simulated and did not actually happen. In the end, Louis the German attacked his son Carloman rather than the Moravians. However, the alliance between Franks and Bulgarians was strong enough to allow such a situation.

14 Annal. Fuld. Ratisb. 112.

15 Annal. Fuld. Ratisb. 130 (896).

16 Annal. Fuld. II. (Mogunt.) 65.

17 Jégou, Compétition 505.

18 The notions of falcons and doves are inspired by the current diplomacy of the USA and do not appear in the sources. About those bishops, see Nikolov, Bishops; Sansterre, Missionnaires.

19 Geogr. Bav. 220: *Vulgarii regio est inmensa et populus multus habens ciuitates V, eo quod multitudo magna ex eis sit et non sit eis opus ciuitates habere*. Betti, Descriptio suggests a military (and not commercial) function for that text.

20 AF (Bavarian continuation) 121.

21 Inqu. Raffelst. 252. The document was written around 905.

Conclusion

To summarise these few points, the attitude of the Franks towards the Bulgarians went from disdain in the seventh century to a surprised discovery at the beginning of the ninth century, and then to more frequent and friendly relations during the same century. This process was accelerated by the religious conversion of the Bulgarians, although that was not essential, both because exchanges are attested before that date and because the Christianisation of Bulgaria had placed it under Byzantine obedience, which did not favour exchanges with the Franks, at least on a religious

level. In other fields, at the end of the ninth century, the relations between Franks and Bulgarians were regularly attested as those of great allied powers seemingly destined to last. However, they vanished at the turn of the tenth century, notably under the effect of the Hungarian invasion, which created an intermediate territory between the Bulgarians and Franks, and considerably weakened the latter in the eastern area. The relationship between the Franks and the Bulgarians can therefore be described as a stable but ephemeral idyll.

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Summary / Zusammenfassung / Résumé

The Relations between the Frankish Kingdoms and Bulgaria (Seventh to Ninth Centuries)

The relations between Franks and Bulgarians during the Early Middle Ages can be divided into major phases, whose chronology is linked to the Avar Empire. As long as the latter exists, Bulgarians appear only rarely in Frankish sources, mainly as subjects of the Avars. When these are conquered by Charlemagne's armies around 796, the Franks come into direct contact with the Bulgarians. At first, the relationship is tense, determined by the definition of common borders and, in a large part, by ignorance. In the course of the ninth century, relations normalise, Bulgaria becoming either a reception area for Frankish refugees, a military ally for the Carolingians or a trading partner. Finally, at the end of the century, the Franks participate, actively but unsuccessfully, in the competition between Christian powers for the Christianisation of the Bulgarian kingdom.

Die Beziehungen zwischen Franken und Bulgaren (7.-9. Jahrhundert)

Die Beziehungen zwischen Franken und Bulgaren im Frühmittelalter lassen sich in Hauptphasen einteilen, deren Chronologie mit dem Awarenreich zusammenhängt. Während der Existenz des Awarenreiches erscheinen Bulgaren in fränkischen Quellen nur selten, und dann überwiegend als Untertanen der Awaren. Als diese um 796 von den Heeren Karls des Großen erobert werden, kommen die Franken in direkten Kontakt mit den Bulgaren. Das Verhältnis ist zunächst angespannt, gekennzeichnet durch die Festlegung gemeinsamer Grenzen und zum großen Teil durch Ignoranz. Im Laufe des 9. Jahrhunderts normalisieren sich die Beziehungen, Bulgarien wird entweder Aufnahmegebiet für fränkische Flüchtlinge, militärischer Verbündeter der Karolinger oder Handelspartner. Schließlich beteiligen sich die Franken am Ende des Jahrhunderts aktiv, jedoch erfolglos am Wettbewerb zwischen christlichen Mächten um die Christianisierung des bulgarischen Reiches.

Les relations entre les royaumes francs et la Bulgarie (VII^e-IX^e siècle)

Les relations entre Francs et Bulgares durant le haut Moyen Âge peuvent se décomposer en plusieurs grandes phases, dont la chronologie est liée à celle de l'empire avar. Aussi longtemps que celui-ci existe, les Bulgares n'apparaissent que très rarement dans les sources franques, principalement comme sujets des Avars. Lorsque ces derniers sont conquis par les troupes de Charlemagne vers 796, les Francs entrent en contact direct avec les Bulgares; la relation est d'abord tendue, déterminée par la définition de frontières communes et par une grande part d'ignorance. Dans le courant du IX^e siècle, les échanges se normalisent, la Bulgarie devenant tantôt une zone d'accueil pour les réfugiés francs, tantôt un allié militaire pour les Carolingiens, tantôt un partenaire commercial. Enfin, à la fin du siècle, les Francs participent, activement mais sans succès, à la compétition que se livrent les puissances chrétiennes pour la christianisation du royaume bulgare.