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## BETWEEN REBELLION AND STATESMANSHIP: ATTEMPTING A BIOGRAPHY OF IVANKO, 1196/1200 (?)

**Abstract.** The paper analyses the actions of Ivanko, a Bulgarian nobleman, possibly a member of the ruling family of the Asenides, who in 1196 killed the ruling tsar, Asen, and escaped to Constantinople once his plan to take control of the country failed. Owing to the benevolence of Alexios III Angelos, he joined the Byzantine military and very quickly rose through its ranks until he became the military commander of the region of Philippopolis. In 1198 or 1199 he defected and created an independent dominion on the slopes of the Stara Planina massif, precariously balanced between Bulgaria and the empire, exploiting to his own advantage the constant state of warfare between the two polities. His adventure was short-lived: in 1200 he was captured through deception by the Byzantines, taken prisoner, and presumably executed. While his political career was very short, his importance for the history of medieval Bulgaria is not to be underestimated. It is a testimony of the fluidity of the political situation at the Bulgaro-Byzantine border, whose instability often allowed ambitious and cunning local commanders to carve up autonomous dominions, and of the difficulties experienced by the central power in keeping control of the peripheral areas of the state. It is also proof of the constantly shifting ethnic and cultural allegiances of the citizens of those polities, entangled between different and often conflicting identities, usually regarded as irreconcilable but that were actually the object of a continuous negotiation and adjusting. Ivanko is an interesting case study in regard to all of those factors, especially when considered within the larger phenomenon of provincial separatism in the imperial (and Bulgarian) lands between the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Byzantine history, medieval Bulgaria, ethnicity, royal power in the Middle Ages, subversion and separatism

In 1196, on a night that, following Niketas Choniates' theatrical description of the events, we are supposed to imagine dark and stormy, the ruling tsar of the so-called second Bulgarian kingdom, Asen, was murdered in his apartments in the capital, Tărnovo<sup>1</sup>. He had recently returned from a campaign in Macedonia,

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<sup>1</sup> *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. J.L. VAN DIETEN, Berlin–New York 1975 [= *CFHB*, 11] (cetera: CHONIATES, *Historia*), p. 469–470. English edition and translation, *O City of Byzantium. Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. H.J. MAGOULIAS, Detroit 1984 [= *BTT*]. Translations from Choniates, where not otherwise specified, are of the author.

where his army had inflicted a series of defeats to the Byzantines, carrying home a large amount of plunder and prisoners. One of them was the *sebastokrator* Isaakios Komnenos, who commanded the Byzantine forces at Serres<sup>2</sup>; another one was an unnamed priest, who asked Asen, *in the language of the Vlachs*, to be released<sup>3</sup>. Asen refused, mocking the unfortunate captive, and the priest, crying pitifully, prophesied him that very soon he would die as well: not peacefully, but like violent men do. And according to the providential chain of cause and effect related by Choniates, this is precisely what happened<sup>4</sup>.

The unexpected death of Asen was, potentially, a catastrophe for a state that had regained its independence from the Byzantine empire only for about ten years, and whose survival, even after a series of successful campaigns that enlarged its boundaries and secured a relatively large portion of territory, was still insecure. The name of the man who killed the tsar was Ivanko (Ἰβανκός): regrettably, one of the very few details we know about him. We do not know when he was born, nor where, and we know nothing about his life and deeds except for a short period of four years, covered by a handful of foreign and biased sources relying, at best, on second-hand accounts<sup>5</sup>. Admittedly, not the most encouraging basis to attempt a biography.

<sup>2</sup> On Isaac's unfortunate expedition, see CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 465–468.

<sup>3</sup> As it is well known, Choniates consistently calls the rebels 'Vlachs' rather than 'Bulgarians'. This has generated a long, at times ferocious, and often pointless, historiographic debate between Bulgarian and Romanian scholars: a good outline of the diatribe can be found in R. DASKALOV, *Feud over the Middle Ages: Bulgarian-Romanian Historiographical Debates*, [in:] *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, vol. III, *Shared Pasts, Disputed Legacies*, ed. R. DASKALOV, A. VEZENKOV, Leiden 2015 [= BSL, 16], p. 274–354. My position on the matter, which I have already expressed elsewhere (see for instance F. DALL'AGLIO, *The Interaction between Nomadic and Sedentary Peoples on the Lower Danube: the Cumans and the 'Second Bulgarian Empire'*, [in:] *The Steppe Lands and the World beyond them. Studies in Honor of Victor Spinei on his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. F. CURTA, B.-P. MALEON, Iași 2013, p. 299–312, esp. p. 300–304) is that the second Bulgarian kingdom was the joint creation of Bulgarians and Vlachs, while its political ideology and cultural character was predominantly Bulgarian. Therefore, while for the sake of brevity I will be referring to the kingdom as 'Bulgaria' and to its inhabitants as 'Bulgarians', I include the Vlachs in those definitions.

<sup>4</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 468. I. VÁSÁRY, *Cumans and Tatars. Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185–1365*, Cambridge 2005, p. 36–37, takes Choniates' narration at face value and considers it the indisputable proof of Asen's Vlach ethnicity. But the exchange, and possibly the whole episode, is clearly a fabrication of Choniates, since Asen's answer (μηδὴ ποτε προθέσται Ῥωμαίους λύειν, ἀλλ' ἀπολλύειν) makes sense only in Greek.

<sup>5</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 468–473, 509–514, 518–519; *Nicetae Choniatae Orationes et Epistulae*, ed. J.L. VAN DIETEN, Berlin–New York 1972 [= CFHB, 3] (cetera: CHONIATES, *Orationes*), p. 59–65; THEODORUS SCUTARIOTA, *Compendium Chronicum*, ed. C.N. SATHAS, Parisiis 1894 [= MBt, 7] (cetera: SKUTARIOTES), p. 416–418, 424–427, 458; EPHRAEM AENIOTA, *Historia Cronica*, rec. O. LAMP-SIDES, Athenis 1990 [= CFHB, 27], p. 228–229, 231–232; *Georgii Acropolitae Opera*, ed. A. HEISENBERG, rev. P. WIRTH, Stuttgart 1978 [= BSGR] (cetera: AKROPOLITES. English edition and translation: GEORGE AKROPOLITES, *The History*, trans. R. MACRIDES, Oxford–New York 2007 [= OSB]).

Notwithstanding the scarcity of information about Ivanko and the very short time in which his political and military activity unfurled, his importance for the history of medieval Bulgaria is indubitable. For this reason, he has received a great deal of attention, especially, as it would be reasonable to expect, by Bulgarian scholars<sup>6</sup>. However, his assessment has been generally negative, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century general histories of Bulgaria where he is usually characterized as a villain, or an adventurer at best. As a general rule, those works concentrate on the main dynastic line of the Asenids, in an attempt at presenting the rebellion of 1185, the establishment of the second Bulgarian kingdom, or empire, and its subsequent history as a series of events all being part of a coherent and planned state- and nation-building process<sup>7</sup>.

The drawback of this nationalist-oriented approach (which of course is not exclusive to Bulgarian historiography, or to the 20<sup>th</sup> century) is that it tends to be biased against any interference with the 'natural' and progressive development of the nation, and with the dynasty that, in their opinion, embodied the State: and

<sup>6</sup> See especially Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения във възобновеното Българско царство (края на XII – средата на XIII в.)*, София 2011, p. 124–137; М. КАИМАКОВА, *Владетелите на Родопската област (към въпроса за сепаратизма на Балканите през средновековието)*, Rh 1/2, 2002, p. 303–333, here at p. 306–309; R. RADIC, *Обласни господари у Византији крајем XII и у правим деценијама XIII века*, ЗРВИ 24/25, 1986, p. 151–289, here at p. 176–92; Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Образът на трима сепаратисти в произведенията на Никита Хониат*, [in:] *Средновековният българин и «другите»*. Сборник в чест на 60-годишнината на проф. дин Петър Ангелов, ed. А. НИКОЛОВ, Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, София 2013, p. 249–262, here at p. 251–256; J. HOFFMANN, *Rudimente von Territorialstaaten im byzantinischen Reich (1071–1210). Untersuchungen über Unabhängigkeitsbestrebungen und ihr Verhältnis zu Kaiser und Reich*, München 1974 [= MBM, 17], p. 51–55, 92–95; J.-С. СНЕУНЕТ, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)*, Paris 1990, p. 131–34; В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История на Българската държава през средните векове*, vol. III, София 1994 [repr.], p. 89–104, 108–120, 132–134; Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА, *България при Асеневици*, София 1978, p. 41–44; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици (1186–1460). Генеалогия и просопография*, София 1994, p. 27–68, 33–34, 41, 44–45; ИДЕМ, *Българите в Византийската империя*, София 1995, p. 311–312. Ivanko left a trace in Bulgarian literature as well, as the protagonist of *Иванку, убиецът на Асъня I* (Ivanko, the murderer of Asen I), a tragedy written in 1872 by Vasil Drumev.

<sup>7</sup> On the generally negative attitude towards Ivanko (and other separatists) in Bulgarian historiography see also the remarks of Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Образът на трима сепаратисти...*, p. 249. On the 'master narrative' of the national history of medieval Bulgaria, and its emphasis on the continuity and stability of state institutions, see Р. ДАСКАЛОВ, *Големите разкази за Българското средновековие*, София 2018; R. DASKALOV, *Historical Master Narratives and the Master Narrative of the Bulgarian Middle Ages*, SCer 10, 2020, p. 259–280; D.I. POLYVYANNYY, *Dynasticity in the Second Bulgarian Tsardom and its Manifestations in Medieval History Writing*, SCer 9, 2019, p. 351–365 (see especially p. 353: *In the academic historiography of medieval Bulgaria dynasticity was often represented as a natural state of things, beginning with the first Bulgarian rulers [...] and ending with the commonly mentioned "Asen dynasty"*). For two classical examples of this approach, see П. ПЕТРОВ, *Образуване на българската държава*, София 1981; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, *Образуване на българската народност*, София 1987.

much more so when the interference originated from an internal source. Thus, Zlatarski states that Ivanko's motive for the murder was *tribal disagreements*<sup>8</sup>, the impulse of a primitive clansman unable to sacrifice his ambitions for the greater good of the nation; Genoveva Cankova-Petkova suggests that Ivanko and his associates had reached an agreement with Constantinople before killing Asen<sup>9</sup>; Bozhilov does not dedicate a separate entry to Ivanko in his otherwise extremely accurate research on the prosopography of the Asenides, which includes also secondary or marginal characters whose affiliation with the clan is hypothetical, and only covers *the first anti-dynastic conspiracy in the history of the second [Bulgarian] kingdom*<sup>10</sup> in the entries dedicated to Asen, Peter and Kalojan.

We know nothing about Ivanko's life before the fatal night in which he murdered Asen. It is possible that the killer and the victim were relatives. Choniates is not very clear on the matter: according to him, Asen was murdered *παρά τινος τῶν οἰκείων*, *by one of his household*, adding that Ivanko was *ὁμοφυής* and *ὁμότροπος*, of the same nature and habits<sup>11</sup>. Those words do not necessarily indicate a family relationship. Moreover, while discussing the aftermath of the event, Choniates differentiates between the clans, or the associates, of Ivanko and Asen: Ivanko consulted *those related [to him] by blood and [his] friends*<sup>12</sup>, fearing the reaction *of the brothers of the deceased and those close to him by birth and friendship*<sup>13</sup>. Akropolites, on the other hand, writes that Ivanko was Asen's first cousin, *πρωτεξάδελφος*<sup>14</sup>, while Skuthariotes calls him *ὁμογενής*<sup>15</sup>.

Modern historiography is divided on the issue<sup>16</sup>. Related or not to the main line, or dynasty, of the Asenid clan, Ivanko was certainly a man of high standing in Tărnovo, prominent enough to convince a part of the Bulgarian aristocracy to follow him in his risky adventure. Choniates' description of the triggering cause of the murder, fictional and novelesque as it may seem<sup>17</sup>, could be a hint at Ivanko's

<sup>8</sup> *Родова враждебност*: В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА, *България при Асеневици...*, p. 42: *група недоволни боляри*, 'a group of dissatisfied boljars'.

<sup>10</sup> И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията...*, p. 33 (*първия антидинастически заговор в историята на Второто царство*). Ivanko is featured in a separate entry in IDEM, *Българите...*, p. 311–312.

<sup>11</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 469. H.J. MAGOULIAS, *O City of Byzantium...*, p. 257, translates *one of his own kin*.

<sup>12</sup> τοῖς καθ' αἷμα καὶ φίλοις: CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 469. H.J. MAGOULIAS, *O City of Byzantium...*, p. 257, translates *his blood relations and friends*.

<sup>13</sup> τοὺς τοῦ πεσόντος ὁμαίμονας καὶ ὅσον αὐτῷ πρὸς γένους καὶ φίλιον: CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 470. H.J. MAGOULIAS, *O City of Byzantium...*, p. 258, translates *brothers, kinsmen, and friends*.

<sup>14</sup> ΑΚΡΟΠΟΛΙΤΕΣ, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> SKUTARIOTES, p. 416.

<sup>16</sup> For some examples see Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения...*, p. 125, note 4. В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, seems ambivalent: on p. 89 he calls Ivanko *съплеменникъ*, 'fellow countryman', but on p. 100 he is Asen's cousin (*братовчед*).

<sup>17</sup> Choniates' descriptions of historical events, and of the motivations guiding those taking part in them, cannot be taken at face value: and not just regarding Ivanko. On his style and tropes, and on

attempt at becoming more closely associated with the ruling bloodline by courting Asen's sister-in-law<sup>18</sup>: but it also suggests that the murder was not the result of an organized insurrection and happened rather by chance, because Ivanko was forced to kill Asen to save his own life.

According to the historian (again, it must be stressed out that the whole episode is construed more as a novel than as a chronicle of events), when Asen was informed of the affair, he directed his anger towards his wife<sup>19</sup>, accusing her of being an accomplice. He sentenced her to death, but she convinced him that she was not involved in anything suspicious. Asen, more and more outraged, summoned Ivanko in the middle of the night. Evidently worried, Ivanko refused to go, but was summoned again. He consulted with his relatives and his friends, and they advised him to carry a sword, hidden in his mantle: if Asen would limit himself to a reproach, however harsh, he should accept it and beg for forgiveness, but if he were to act violently Ivanko should kill him. The enraged Asen assaulted him once he set foot in the room, but Ivanko stroke him first. He then returned to his accomplices, and they quickly decided that their only hope was open rebellion, since Asen's brothers and kinsmen would surely want to avenge his death. They concluded that this was, after all, for the best, because they would rule the country more justly and rightfully than Asen, who was always ready to resort to the sword<sup>20</sup>. Choniates represents the death of Asen as the inevitable effect of the lack of restraint and reason that he typically attributes to the barbarians, especially to the Bulgarians, and particularly to Asen, whom he always represents as

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his limits as a source, see especially W. TREADGOLD, *The Middle Byzantine Historians*, London 2013, p. 422–456; *Niketas Choniates. A Historian and a Writer*, ed. A. SIMPSON, S. EFTHYMIADIS, Genève 2009; A. SIMPSON, *Niketas Choniates. A Historiographical Study*, Oxford 2013 [= OSB]; IDEM, *Niketas Choniates*, [in:] *Franks and Crusades in Medieval Eastern Christian Historiography*, ed. A. MALLET, Turnhout 2020, p. 93–123; T. URBAINCZYK, *Writing about Byzantium. The History of Niketas Choniates*, London–New York 2018 [= BBOS, 23]; J. HARRIS, *Distortion, Divine Providence and Genre in Nicetas Choniates's Account of the Collapse of Byzantium 1180–1204*, *JMH* 26, 2000, p. 19–31; IDEM, *Looking Back on 1204: Nicetas Choniates in Nicaea*, *Més* 12, 2001, p. 117–124.

<sup>18</sup> I am following the hypothesis of Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения...*, p. 126. According to В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, p. 101, Ivanko began his relation with Asen's sister-in-law out of the necessity to find allies at court, and promised to marry her and to make her queen. This is, of course, pure speculation.

<sup>19</sup> Nothing is known about her. The Synodikon of Boril records her lay name, Elena, and the name she took as a nun, Evgenija: *Борилово Синодик. Издание и превод*, ed. А.М. ТОТОМАНОВА, И. БИЛЯРСКИ, София 2010, p. 314, 34a.

<sup>20</sup> This is the sequence of events as related by CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 469–470. According to P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier. A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204*, Cambridge 2000, p. 305, [Asen's] power rested not only with his ability to secure and distribute booty [...] but also to intimidate the natives of Trnovo and its environs. His intimate association with the Cumans must have contributed to this 'reign of terror', if that is what it was. However, judging on the basis of CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 371, the population of Tarnovo does not appear at all intimidated by Asen: on the contrary, they followed him quite enthusiastically.

a man unable to control his anger, arrogance and viciousness<sup>21</sup>. In the historian's account of that fateful night, every action performed by the tsar is driven exclusively by blind rage and violent emotions, with a complete absence of the rational qualities that should characterize a civilized leader: like the priest predicted, his violent death is the fitting consequence of his brutal life. In comparison Ivanko is represented as clever and discerning, and his motivations, apart from the obvious necessity to save his own life, have an evident political undertone, since he aspired to establish a conciliar style of ruling contrasting the autocratic leadership favoured by Asen, that apparently caused dissatisfaction in certain elements of the Bulgarian nobility<sup>22</sup>. Along with his associates, he even devised a contingency plan: should things take a turn for the worse they would request help from the Byzantine emperor.

In that same night, the conspirators gathered some support within the ranks of the aristocracy, took control of Tǎrnovo, and *opposed those siding with Peter*<sup>23</sup>, Asen's elder brother. It is unclear whether this confrontation was of a military or political nature, but apparently Ivanko's attempt at seizing power was immediately opposed by the rest of the Bulgarian aristocracy who recognized Peter as the legitimate tsar<sup>24</sup>. Peter's whereabouts in 1196 are unknown, but he was probably in his appanage in Preslav, where he had retired to, for unknown reasons, between 1190 and 1193, after having been the leading political figure during the first years of the Bulgarian insurrection<sup>25</sup>. Peter, however, *did not find it easy to crush*

<sup>21</sup> See for instance the characterization of Asen in CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 368–369.

<sup>22</sup> According to Zlatarski, who cannot agree with such a characterization of Ivanko as a cunning politician, and of Asen as a tyrant, the Bulgarian aristocracy was unanimous in its support of the Asenides, whose aims and methods it endorsed wholeheartedly: Ivanko was not the interpreter of their dissatisfaction but the tool of a 'Cuman party' that tried to manipulate the Bulgarian court for its own ends: see В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, p. 96–101.

<sup>23</sup> τοῖς περὶ τὸν Πέτρον ἀντέστησαν: CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 470.

<sup>24</sup> According to AKROPOLITES, p. 21, the Bulgarians actually sided with Kalojan, not with Peter, whom they did not want as their tsar. Choniates does not mention anything like this, but the fact that Peter did not enjoy the complete support of the aristocracy is evident by the fact that in the following year he was killed as well. Asen had two children, both minors when he was killed: one of them, Ivan Asen II, would rule Bulgaria from 1218 to 1241, but was not taken into consideration as a successor. See F. DALL'AGLIO, *Tǎrnovo 1218: Coronation or Usurpation?*, [in:] *Цар Иван Асен II (1218–1241). Сборник по случай 800-годишнината от неговото възшествие на българския престол*, ed. В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, И.Г. Илиев, К. НЕНОВ, Пловдив 2019, p. 173–186, at 178.

<sup>25</sup> According to CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 373, Peter was crowned tsar of the Bulgarians shortly after the insurrection of 1185, and it was him who enlisted the help of the Cumans after the first successful Byzantine counterattack (CHONIATES, *Orationes*, p. 7–9; interestingly, in the History it is Asen who convinces the Cumans: CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 374). The Western sources of the Third Crusade mention Peter as tsar of the Bulgarians in 1189: *Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris*, rec. A. CHROUST, [in:] *MGH.SRG*, vol. V, Berolini 1928, p. 15–70, at p. 33, 58; *Historia Peregrinorum*, rec. A. CHROUST, [in:] *MGH.SRG*, vol. V, Berolini 1928, p. 129–152, at p. 135, 149. On the alleged disagreement between the two brothers, which forced Peter to step down from power, see A. KAZHDAN,

*Ivanko*<sup>26</sup> and decided to stall, at least for the time being, probably to muster more troops and political support, in the hope that the rebellion would die out by itself.

Peter's tactic proved successful. Ivanko realised that he could not endure a long confrontation and urged Alexios to send an army and take control of Bulgaria. It is impossible to figure out whether he just wanted to save his life at the cost of handing the Bulgarian kingdom to Constantinople, or if he believed that Alexios would leave him on the throne of Tŕrnovo as an ally. Choniates seems to imply that some sort of agreement between Ivanko and Constantinople had been reached even before the death of Asen. The historian relates the rumour that Ivanko had been convinced to kill Asen by the *sebastokrator* Isaakios Komnenos, taken prisoner by the Bulgarians in Macedonia, who had promised him the hand of his daughter (and niece of Alexios III) Theodora: but the same Choniates immediately disproves the allegation, remembering the readers that Isaakios died in prison well before the murder was committed<sup>27</sup>. As a matter of fact, once Ivanko escaped to Constantinople Alexios decided to fulfil Isaakios' promise and betrothed him to Theodora, leading us to believe that the conversation related by Choniates did actually take place (although it remains difficult to understand how)<sup>28</sup>: but it seems improbable that this was the main motivation for the murder of Asen, especially because, after the death of Isaakios, Ivanko had no way of knowing if the emperor would approve the terms of the agreement, and particularly the marriage with Theodora that would associate him with the imperial family. It is also entirely possible that the whole story was fabricated by Ivanko to increase his standing in Constantinople, or a rumour spread after his engagement with Theodora to justify such an outstanding honour. If we follow Choniates' account of the events, that might be the very same that Ivanko circulated after his escape, the murder and the

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*La date de la rupture entre Pierre et Asen (vers 1193)*, В 35, 1965, p. 167–174; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 290–291. On Peter's appanage in Preslav see AKROPOLITES, p. 21; see also Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения...*, p. 59–62, with a comprehensive analysis of the sources.

<sup>26</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 471. According to C. BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West, 1180–1204*, Cambridge MA 1968, p. 126, Peter's hesitation was due to the fact that *the Vlach-Bulgarians knew little of siegecraft*. Brand probably made this assumption on the basis of the unsuccessful attempt at capturing Preslav in the early stages of the revolt, but in the following years the Bulgarian army took quite a large number of cities and citadels. Moreover, Choniates states that Tŕrnovo was very well fortified: CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 470.

<sup>27</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 471.

<sup>28</sup> According to Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА, *България при Асеневици...*, p. 42, Isaac was killed because his role in the conspiracy was discovered: but she does not explain why the Bulgarian schemers were not punished as well, including Ivanko. According to В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, p. 92, it is impossible that Isaac and Ivanko reached any agreement since Isaac was a prisoner, and it is unseemly that in that position he could organize a plot. According to И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията...*, p. 33–34, Isaac, acting more like a spy than a prisoner (my consideration), convinced Ivanko *that he was worthy to take the royal crown*, and his death did not change the agreement that (my consideration again) had been somehow notified to Constantinople, given Alexios' willingness to respect its terms.

attempted usurpation were neither premeditated nor arranged in complicity with the Byzantines: but once Ivanko found himself in a dire predicament he decided to make good use of Isaac's promise – again, assuming that such a promise had been made.

Choniates is extremely critical of Alexios' lacklustre reaction at Ivanko's proposal to send an army to Bulgaria: according to him, the emperor should have acted swiftly and take control of Tărnovo, from which he could have easily conquered the rest of the country<sup>29</sup>. Leaving aside Choniates' enthusiasm, which was in all probability excessive, Alexios preferred not to personally lead the expedition, and sent an army under the command of the *protostrator* Manuel Kamytzes. Since the soldiers refused to cross the mountains and turned back<sup>30</sup>, a second and larger expedition was planned, but it failed as well and Ivanko received no support. *Worried for the way things were going in Tarnovo, because the supporters of Peter grew stronger and received new troops*<sup>31</sup>, he decided to take refuge in Constantinople, where Alexios received him with great benevolence. Nothing is said about his associates.

The account that Choniates gives of Ivanko, upon his arrival in Constantinople, is largely positive: he was tall, clever, and very strong, and he proved useful to the Romans fighting with great energy against the Bulgarians and the Cumans in the region of Philippopolis. But he also exhibited the traits usually associated to the barbarians: he was stubborn and easy to anger, and unable to learn the moderation of Byzantine customs<sup>32</sup>. Choniates relates one incident that intends to show that the uncivilized nature of Ivanko could not be reformed. Alexios confirmed the marriage proposal originally given by Isaakios, postponing it until the bride would come of age, since she was still a child. Ivanko, however, *having fantasies of a more prestigious marriage*<sup>33</sup>, was much more interested in her mother Anna and expressed his preference with an inopportune simile involving sucklings and grown sheeps, and the respective mating qualities of both: a comparison that was not only rude and inappropriate, but that also betrayed the rusticity of his 'Vlach' upbringing.

<sup>29</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 471.

<sup>30</sup> On the difficulties encountered by the Byzantine armies in the mountains of Bulgaria, see especially K. MARINOV, *Бунтовният Хемус. Масивът като база за нападения и убежище по време на първите Асеневици*, Епо 23, 2015, p. 330–347; IDEM, *Across Haimos: Inconveniences and Dangers in Crossing the Mountains of Bulgaria in the Middle Ages*, VTUR 1, 2018, p. 11–24.

<sup>31</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 472.

<sup>32</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 473. On Alexios III's reasons for employing Ivanko, see A. SIMPSON, *Byzantium's Retreating Balkan Frontiers during the Reign of the Angeloi (1185–1203): a Reconsideration*, [in:] *The Balkans and the Byzantine World before and after the Captures of Constantinople, 1204 and 1453*, ed. V. STANKOVIĆ, Lanham 2016, p. 3–22, here at p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 473.



Ivanko received the command of the troops in the region of Philippopolis, and convinced a part of *those of his own tribe*<sup>34</sup> to join the ranks of his army, bestowing gifts and providing weapons. He also built, or refurbished, some mountain fortresses on the borderland between Bulgaria and the empire. Alexios was well-disposed to his zeal, while some of his counsellors (probably including Choniates) advised him to be more cautious, pointing out the fact that Ivanko was strengthening *the army of his fellow countrymen*<sup>35</sup>, while reducing the share of Byzantine soldiers, keeping them in reserve and away from the frontlines. They suspected that he may have more ambitious plans than being a local commander in the Byzantine army, and their fears were proved true when he defected. This happened shortly after the marriage of two of the emperor's daughters, one of which was Theodora's mother Anna, who married Theodore Laskaris<sup>36</sup>. Unfortunately Choniates only records that the weddings took place in February, without specifying the year. Various dates have been proposed, ranging between 1198 and 1200<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> τὸ περὶ αὐτὸν ὁμόφυλον: CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 509.

<sup>35</sup> τὸ ἐμφύλιον αὐτῷ στρατεύμα: CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 510; see also CHONIATES, *Orationes*, p. 60, where the same concept is repeated in different wording.

<sup>36</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 508–509, for an extensive account of the ceremony and the festivities.

<sup>37</sup> For the date of 1198, which I tend to favour, see В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, p. 115, in note; R. RADÍĆ, *Обласни господари...*, p. 187–188; Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения...*, p. 129 (the author subsequently came to a different conclusion, since in ИДЕМ, *Образът на трима сепаратисти...*, p. 253, the date is set to the early spring of 1200); Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА, *България при Асеневици...*, p. 43. To the considerations expressed by the aforementioned scholars, it can be added that after the account of Ivanko's first military actions against the Byzantines, Choniates makes a long digression (CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 514–517) to discuss a theological dispute that took place in Constantinople during the same period, regarding the corruptible or incorruptible nature of the bread and wine used during the Eucharist. He was personally involved in the polemics and had to defend himself from the accusations moved against him by John Kama-teros (CHONIATES, *Orationes*, p. 6–12; J.L. VAN DIETEN, *Niketas Choniates. Erläuterungen zu den Reden und Briefen nebst einer Biographie*, Berlin–New York 1971 [= SupByz], p. 30–31, 106–115). The matter was resolved after a synod presided by Alexios (see V. GRUMEL, J. DARROUZÈS, *Les Regestes des Actes du Patriarcat de Constantinople*, vol. I, Paris 1989 [= PByz], p. 606–607) that ended in March 1200; Choniates states that, after the emperor *followed the best opinion* regarding the discussion, he moved the army against Ivanko (CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 518). So, in the text of Choniates the theological dispute is framed between the start of Ivanko's rebellion and the campaign that ended it: that is, from the second half of 1198 to the spring of 1200. H.J. MAGOULIAS, *O City of Byzantium...*, p. 280; J.V.A. FINE, JR., *The Late Medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest*, Ann Arbor 1994, p. 30; J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations...*, p. 133; and J. HOFFMANN, *Rudimente...*, p. 53, all incline towards 1199; see also C. BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West...*, p. 130; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 307. According to J.L. van Dieten (CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 508; J.L. VAN DIETEN, *Niketas Choniates...*, p. 97–101), M. ANGOLD, *Byzantine Politics vis-à-vis the Fourth Crusade*, [in:] *Urbs Capta: the Fourth Crusade and its Consequences*, ed. A. LAIOU, Paris 2005, p. 55–68, here at p. 60, and D. ANGELOV, *The Byzantine Hellene. The Life of Emperor Theodore Laskaris and Byzantium in the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge 2019, p. 19–20 the marriage took place in 1200.

The news of Ivanko's defection took Alexios as a surprise. Bewildered and indecisive as usual (at least according to Choniates' characterization), he sent a eunuch to remind Ivanko of the favour he had always enjoyed at court, hoping that he would reconsider his decision, while his sons-in-law Alexios Palaiologos and Theodore Laskaris started preparation for an expedition. The eunuch, far from convincing Ivanko, actually warned him of the emperor's plans and suggested, out of clumsiness or on purpose, that he should avoid the plains and take refuge on the mountains<sup>38</sup>. There were many disagreements about the strategy to pursue against Ivanko. In the end, it was decided to avoid any direct engagements with his army, and instead retake, one by one, the fortresses he had occupied. This strategy proved successful and some citadels were recovered, either by force or bribery; the siege of Kritzimos, modern Kričim, was a particularly bloody affair, but in the end the fortress was taken<sup>39</sup>.

This show of force, however, did not deter Ivanko. Since he knew that he could not resist indefinitely on his own resources, he came to an agreement with Kalojan, who had become tsar of the Bulgarians in 1197<sup>40</sup>. Evidently Ivanko had been pardoned for Asen's murder, since his usefulness in the fight against the empire far outweighed his past transgression against the Bulgarian crown. We are not informed about the terms of the agreement, but in exchange for Kalojan's assistance, Ivanko was supposed to send him a convoy of cattle and prisoners. He made use of this to set up an ambush for the Byzantines who, led by the *protostrator* Manuel Kamytzes, controlled the local roads. The convoy travelled with a small escort: this detail, along with the perspective of a rich plunder, convinced Kamytzes to swiftly intercept and seize it. The bulk of Ivanko's army was waiting in the nearby woods and the Byzantine forces were surrounded and defeated. Kamytzes was taken prisoner and sent to Kalojan, who hoped to have him ransomed<sup>41</sup>. This defeat destroyed the morale of the Byzantine army, that limited its actions to the defence of Philippopolis. Ivanko, unopposed, pushed his advance as far as Xanthe

<sup>38</sup> Eunuchs are usually represented by Choniates in negative terms, despite (or maybe because) their importance in the Byzantine administration: see especially S. TOUGHER, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society*, London–New York 2008; G. SIDÉRIS, 'Eunuchs of Light': Power, Imperial Ceremonial and Positive Representations of Eunuchs in Byzantium (4<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD), [in:] *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. S. TOUGHER, London 2002, p. 161–175; K.M. RINGROSE, *Eunuchs as Cultural Mediators*, BF 23, 1996, p. 75–93.

<sup>39</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 511–512.

<sup>40</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 512.

<sup>41</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 512–513. Kamitzes was not ransomed by Alexios, who profited from his capture to seize his possessions (CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 513–514). After some vicissitudes he was set free by Kalojan and joined forces with another rebel of Bulgarian origins, Dobromir Chrisos, who had also carved up an independent dominion on the Bulgaro-Byzantine border in Macedonia: CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 533–535. On Chrisos see Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения...*, p. 70–94; R. RADIĆ, *Обласни господари...*, p. 193–205; J. HOFFMANN, *Rudimente...*, p. 47–50, 90–91.

and Abdera, on the Aegean Sea, killing gruesomely or chasing away the Byzantines but leaving his countrymen in peace<sup>42</sup>.

It has been postulated that one of the reasons of Ivanko's success was the ethnic character of the dominion he established, which convinced the locals to side with him against the Byzantines<sup>43</sup>. Choniates and his many references to the *fellow countrymen* who fought alongside him are certainly proof that this characteristic had been noted and considered important: but we have no evidence whatsoever about the number of soldiers in his army, or about the actual participation of the local population. It would be quite interesting to know whether the propaganda of the second Bulgarian kingdom, with its constant references to the glorious past of the first Bulgarian kingdom<sup>44</sup>, would also reach outside the boundaries of the state and affect the population of Bulgarian origins still living under Byzantine domination: and it would also be interesting to know if Ivanko purposefully employed a similar propaganda, if he organized his army along ethnic lines. Regarding the territorial extent of his dominion, it seems unlikely that he actually controlled all the towns and regions listed by Choniates. Although the historian admits that he was *much more dangerous than the previous rebels*<sup>45</sup> and that he was spreading *like a contagious disease*<sup>46</sup>, it is more likely, given also the very short temporal span in which he was able to remain independent, that he only sacked those cities or forced them into tribute, and that the core of his 'state' was centred in the network of mountain fortresses and citadels that he had built or refurbished when in Byzantine service<sup>47</sup>.

After his swift expansion, Ivanko's end came unexpectedly and just as quickly. In the late spring of 1200, after the conclusion of the synod in Constantinople<sup>48</sup>, Alexios organized a new expedition against Ivanko. He moved his troops to Adrianople, where he remained undecided for some weeks, especially because his army appeared, as usual, unwilling to engage the rebel. He decided to try a diplomatic approach diplomacy, sending emissaries to Ivanko, but to no avail. Finally,

<sup>42</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 513.

<sup>43</sup> Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения...*, p. 131.

<sup>44</sup> М. КАЙМАКАМОВА, *Власт и история в средновековна България, VII–XIV век*, София 2011, p. 217–226; С. KOLAROV, Y. ANDREEV, *Certaines questions ayant trait aux manifestations de continuité d'idées en Bulgarie médiévale au des XII–XIV siècles*, EHi 9, 1979, p. 77–97, at p. 77–82; F. DALL'AGLIO, "As it Had Been in the Past": the Idea of National Continuity in the Establishment of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, [in:] *Laudator Temporis Acti: Studia in Memoriam Ioannis A. Božilov*, vol. I, ed. I. ВІЛІАРСЬКУ, София 2018, p. 282–299; ИДЕМ, *The Second Bulgarian Kingdom as an «Imagined Community» and as a Community of Memory*, [in:] *България и българите: бит, душевност, национална идентичност*, Шумен 2020, p. 117–124; Д.И. ПОЛЫВЯННЫЙ, *Историческая память о первом болгарском царстве в правление первых Асенией*, ТКШ 11, 2019, p. 532–543.

<sup>45</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 513.

<sup>46</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 513.

<sup>47</sup> For a list of his fortresses, see Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения...*, p. 202–204.

<sup>48</sup> See above, note 37.

he moved to Philippopolis and besieged the fortress of Stanimakon, which he managed to capture along with many prisoners. This was a hard blow for Ivanko. Now it was his turn to negotiate, and he did so quite haughtily, demanding that Alexios return him the citadels he had conquered and send him Theodora, that had been promised to him, *along with the insignia of his office*, evidently hoping that he could revert to his past dignity of military commander and that, as happened with Kalojan, his treason might be pardoned. Alexios pretended to agree: but when Ivanko showed himself at his camp, he had him arrested. With the rebel imprisoned it was easy to take control of his dominion; his brother Mito, an otherwise unknown character, escaped to Bulgaria<sup>49</sup>.

In his account, where the demise of Ivanko comes as completely anticlimactic, Choniates is slightly embarrassed at the emperor so blatantly violating a sworn oath<sup>50</sup>. The tone, however, is completely different in the encomiastic speech he wrote to celebrate Alexios' victory, in which the emperor is praised for his cunning and insight, and the description of Ivanko is much less flattering<sup>51</sup>. In the History Ivanko was criticized for his barbaric traits, similar to those of the man he had killed and to those of all the Bulgarians, but he was also represented as a serious threat for the empire. In his oration, Choniates belittles and ridicules Ivanko's pretension of power, with a series of disqualifying paragons all centred on the dualism between civilization and rusticity, restraint and recklessness, and between the real power of the emperor and the usurped power of the rebel. He describes him as a runaway slave, a savage and boorish shepherd dressed in sheepskin and furs who, despite the fact that his feet were wrapped in rags, had pretensions to wear the red boots<sup>52</sup>.

Ivanko, after having been paraded in the streets of Constantinople on a donkey<sup>53</sup>, probably died in prison, and his small dominion died with him, to be contended in the following years and decades between Bulgaria, the Byzantine empire and the Latins of Constantinople. As usual, when dealing with Bulgarian medieval history, we are left with more questions than answers. Was he a rebel, an adventurer, a statesman? Was his plan too ambitious for his forces, or did he have no

<sup>49</sup> CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 518–519; CHONIATES, *Orationes*, p. 59–65.

<sup>50</sup> *The emperor took a decision, I do not know how fitting to generals and emperors, who should be true to their oaths more than anything else*: CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 519.

<sup>51</sup> CHONIATES, *Orationes*, p. 59–65.

<sup>52</sup> CHONIATES, *Orationes*, p. 60–61. For the plants, animals and characters taken from ancient Greek literature and mythology to whom Ivanko is compared, see Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Образът на трима сепаратисти...*, p. 259–261.

<sup>53</sup> On the parade of a vanquished enemy on a ridiculous mount, well attested at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (CHONIATES, *Historia*, p. 249, 349), see Н. МАРКОВ, “С онашката в ръцете”: бележки по повод на един малко известен византийски обичай, ИНИМ 27, 2015, p. 185–231, with English parallel text; R. MELLINKOFF, *Riding Backwards: Theme of Humiliation and Symbol of Evil*, “Viator” 4, 1973, p. 153–186.

plan and just improvised, biding his time until the inevitable end? Was he just an unlucky Asenid, who was not able to build his own state, as Asen and Peter had done? It would be even more interesting to reconstruct his networks of relations, both in Bulgaria and Constantinople. This would tell us so much about the circles of power in the Bulgarian capital, of which we know next to nothing, or about the way the Byzantine empire made use of political dissidents against its enemies. What is certain is that Ivanko was not an isolated case. He was one of the many provincial commanders who tried to make their own fortune, on both sides of the porous borderland between Bulgaria and Constantinople between the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, profiting from the almost constant state of warfare between the two polities, and from their incapacity to keep control of the more remote areas of their territory. Along with Peter and Asen, with Dobromir Chris, Manuel Kamytzes, John Spiridonakis<sup>54</sup>, and some years later Slav and Strez<sup>55</sup>, Ivanko is proof that the provinces far away from the central power, both in Bulgaria and Constantinople, were quite often hotbeds of dissension and the ideal place for dissatisfied local administrators, or wannabe independent rulers, to carve some land for their own; and that, regardless of their ethnic origins, some of them decided, or were forced, to escape the binary distinction between 'Bulgarian' and 'Byzantine', and create an identity that, as the territory upon which it expressed itself, was a combination of both. All those local principalities did not last long, and those embryonic 'border identities' did not have time to develop; and it is of course unclear whether this could have happened at all. The relations between Bulgaria and Constantinople were in no way only relations between states. They were first and foremost a relation of people: and some of those people, like Ivanko, decided to maintain their balance between Tărnovo and Constantinople, and chose neither.

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<sup>54</sup> Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения...*, p. 138–43; R. RADÍĆ, *Обласни господари...*, p. 216–222; J.-C. СНЕУНЕТ, *Pouvoir et contestations...*, p. 138; J. HOFFMANN, *Rudimente...*, p. 92.

<sup>55</sup> Both Slav and Strez created independent dominions on the Bulgarian borders after the death of Kalojan in 1207. On Slav, see Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения...*, p. 143–181; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията...*, p. 95–98. On Strez, see Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Самостоятелни и полусамостоятелни владения...*, p. 95–123; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията...*, p. 98–100.

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