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## PARISTRION AS CENTRE AND PERIPHERY: FROM BYZANTINE BORDER PROVINCE TO HEARTLAND OF THE SECOND BULGARIAN TSARDOM\*

**Abstract.** In 1185, after a successful revolt against the Byzantine empire, the so-called second Bulgarian kingdom was established on the territory of the former province of Paradounavon/Paristrion, that had been the first area of settlement of the Bulgars who had crossed the Danube and established their state in 681, and had become a peripheral region of the Byzantine empire after the conquests of Tzimiskes and Basil II. Even before the 1185 revolt, however, Paristrion had already begun to develop an embryonal degree of self-consciousness, although not in a 'national' way, owing to its peculiar history and ethnic composition. During the course of the 9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century it had experienced a constant influx of invaders from the north, many of whom had in the end settled, either forcibly or after reaching an agreement with the imperial authorities. Those *mixobarbaroi*, half-civilized barbarians (according to the Byzantine point of view) had gradually integrated with the local population, made of Bulgarians, Vlachs, and Byzantine soldiers, settlers and administrators coming from the various provinces of the empire. When the military presence on the Danube was strong the region prospered economically, and became integrated in a vast trade network managed by Cuman and Rus' traders and raiders; but during the 12<sup>th</sup> century the empire gradually withdrew its troops and its interest in Paristrion, and this relative prosperity began to diminish. Coupled with the remembrance, in popular traditions, of the past glory and abundance of the first Bulgarian empire, and with the increasing fiscal burden that oppressed the local traders, the Paristrions gradually became convinced that their future prosperity, much like at the time of the first Bulgarian kingdom, was in their independence from the empire. Once again, this peripheral region began the centre of an independent polity that traced its roots in the past Bulgarian kingdom, but exhibited also some radically different traits.

**Keywords:** Byzantine history, Medieval Bulgaria, Ethnicity, Peripheries, Medieval Nomads, Medieval Statehood

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The asymmetric relationship that connects the centre and the peripheries of a state is not necessarily fixed and permanent. It often remains basically unchanged during the course of time, as in the case of Constantinople and its provinces: but under certain political or economic circumstances it is also possible for a core region to become periphery and vice-versa, especially if the area under scrutiny is contested between different polities. The present paper will analyse such an occurrence: the establishment, in 1185/1186, of the so-called 'Second Bulgarian kingdom' in the region of *Paristrion*, also called *Paradounavon*, that is the area framed North by the river Danube, East by the Black Sea, and West and South by the Stara Planina and Sredna Gora massifs, called Αἴμος in the Byzantine sources and *Haemus* in the Latin ones. What had previously been a peripheral borderland, separating the core of the European imperial territories from the boundless expanse of land outside the limits of the Byzantine *oikoumene*, became, at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the heartland of an independent polity which traced its origins back to the old Bulgarian kingdom established in 681, and vanquished and reabsorbed by the Byzantine empire between the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Protected by the rugged terrain and impenetrable forests of the Stara Planina, that the Byzantines were reluctant to cross and where they suffered many defeats<sup>1</sup>, the territory of Paristrion itself (at the time still called with the ancient name of Mysia) was the central area of the first Bulgarian kingdom. Between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> century, this new polity took control of a large part of South-Eastern Europe, including a sizeable territory north of the Danube. Both its capitals, Pliska and Preslav<sup>2</sup>, were built in that region. The old Roman and Byzantine fortresses along the Danube, that had been ineffective in stopping their invasion, were refurbished. Their importance was not only of a military nature: one of the residences of khan Omurtag was built in the vicinity of the fortress of Dristra, as a further proof of the centrality of the region<sup>3</sup>. From this relatively secure heartland the Bulgarians constantly expanded south- and westward, towards Byzantine-held Thrace and

<sup>1</sup> K. MARINOW, *Across Haimos: Inconveniences and Dangers in Crossing the Mountains of Bulgaria in the Middle Ages*, VTUR 1.1, 2018, p. 11–24; К. МАРИНОВ, *Стратегическата роля на Старопланинската и Средногорската вериги в светлината на българо-византийските военни сблъсъци през VII–XI век*, ИРИМГ 2, 2014, p. 111–134.

<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps an exaggeration to consider Pliska and Preslav as proper capital cities, or as the sole residences of the khans and tsars of the first Bulgarian kingdom. See D. ZIEMANN, *Pliska and Preslav: Bulgarian Capitals between Relocation and Invention*, [in:] *Българско Средновековие: общество, власт, история. Сборник в чест на Проф. Д-Р Милиана Каймакамова*, ed. Г. НИКОЛОВ, А. НИКОЛОВ, София 2013, p. 170–185.

<sup>3</sup> Г. АТАНАСОВ, *Дръстър (Силистра) и дунавската резиденция на българските ханове през първата половина на IX в.*, Арх 53.1, 2012, p. 28–45; Г. АТАНАСОВ, К. МИХАЙЛОВ, *Нови данни за двореца на хан Омуртаг в Дръстър (Силистра) (= ὑπέρφυμον ἕκον ἐς τὸν Δαυούβην)*, [in:] *Трети международен конгрес по българистика, 23–26 май 2013 г. Секция "История и археология", подсекция "Археология и стара история"*, ed. Т. ПОПНЕДЕЛЕВ, София 2015, p. 213–245.

Macedonia, and built a well-organised state which, albeit for a short time, seemed capable of taking control of the whole peninsula<sup>4</sup>.

The regional balance of power changed in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, after a long period of peace. In 966 the emperor Nikephoros II Phocas refused to pay the annual tribute to Bulgaria and invited Svjatoslav of Kiev to raid the Bulgarian cities on the northern Danube. The plan was successful, but brought along unexpected consequences: Svjatoslav, enticed by the riches found in the region, returned with a large army of Rus', Magyar and Pecheneg warriors, and took control of the lower Danube without Byzantine permission. The Bulgarians were forced to acknowledge his dominance and Svjatoslav's army moved south, menacing Constantinople. Nikephoros was killed by his nephew John Tzimiskes, who became the new emperor and managed to repel the Rus' invasion, conquering Bulgaria and deposing its last tsar, Boris, in 971. Preslav was renamed Ioannopolis and became the seat of the *strategos* entrusted with the defence of the region, while Dobrudja and the Danube delta, renamed 'Western Mesopotamia', were garrisoned with a substantial amount of Byzantine troops under the supervision of a *katepanos*. The old fortresses of Dristra, Isaccea (Noviodunum), Dinogetia, Capidava, and Derwent were restored and enlarged, and new strongholds were built, such as the one known today as Păciuil lui Soare<sup>5</sup>.

Byzantine control of Paristrion was short-lived. The region was wrestled away from the empire after the revolt of the so-called *kometopuloi*, the four sons of the

<sup>4</sup> On the history of the first Bulgarian kingdom in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century, see especially И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на Средновековна България, VII–XIV век*, София 1999, p. 169–297; M. LESZKA, K. MARINOW, *Carstwo Bułgarskie. Polityka, społeczeństwo, gospodarka, kultura 866–971*, Warszawa 2015; *The Bulgarian State in 927–969. The Epoch of Tsar Peter I*, ed. ИДЕМ, Łódź–Kraków 2018; *Българският златен век. Сборник в чест на цар Симеон Велики (893–927)*, ed. В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, И. ИЛИЕВ, К. НЕНОВ, Пловдив 2015; F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1250*, Cambridge 2006 [= CMT], p. 166–179, 213–238; J.V.A. FINE, *The Early Medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century*, Ann Arbor 1983, p. 112–157; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier. A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204*, Cambridge 2000, p. 18–48.

<sup>5</sup> P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 48–57; A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube, 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Leiden 2013 [= ECEEMA, 22], p. 28–44, 101–114; N. OIKONOMIDES, *Recherches sur l'histoire du Bas-Danube au X<sup>e</sup>–XI<sup>e</sup> siècles: la Mésopotamie d'Occident*, RESEE 3, 1965, p. 57–79. On the *strategoi* of Ioannopolis/Preslav see especially И. ЙОРДАНОВ, *Печатите от стратегията в Преслав (971–1088)*, София 1993; A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 59–62. On Păciuil lui Soare see G. ATANASOV, *On the Initial Date of the Medieval Lower Danube Fortress of Păciuil lui Soare and its Harbour*, ABU 23.3, 2018, p. 77–106; Г. АТАНАСОВ, *Още веднъж за датировката, принадлежността и идентифицирането на крепостта Пъкуюл луй Соаре и пристанището*, [in:] *Acta Mediaevalia Magnae Tarnoviae*, vol. I, Владетел, Държава и Църква на Балканите през Средновековието. Сборник в Чест на 60-годишнината на Проф. Д-Р Пламен Павлов, Велико Търново 2020, p. 626–674. According to Atanasov the fortress was built by the Bulgarians in the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but the harbour was built after Basil II's conquest.

comes Nicholas: the most successful of them, Samuil, created a large state centred around Macedonia and the Western Balkans and conquered Preslav in 986, but not Western Mesopotamia which remained under Byzantine control<sup>6</sup>. However, Paristrion was too far from the centre of Samuil's dominions and of secondary interest to him – it was, in essence, once again a periphery. After 1001 it was recovered by emperor Basil II who, between 1014 and 1018, reclaimed all the territories lost by the empire in the previous decades. Basil II organized the conquered Bulgarian lands into three themes, *Bulgaria*, *Sirmion*, and *Dristra*<sup>7</sup>, which became known as *Paradounavon* (Paristrion is the name most commonly employed by the sources, but it was not the official name of the military district) in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>, and remained under imperial control until the last quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>.

The establishment of Paristrion as a separate region, with a strong military character, dates back to the reforms of Basil II aimed at achieving a stable control of the lands that had previously formed the Bulgarian kingdom. Since the Rus' menace had waned, he did not leave a large standing army in Paristrion but relied on the network of fortresses on the Danube<sup>10</sup>. The renewed importance of those citadels and their larger population of soldiers caused a significant increase in trade. Local goods and local workers were needed by the military, and

<sup>6</sup> И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на Средновековна България...*, p. 312–331; F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe...*, p. 241–247; J.V.A. FINE, *The Early Medieval Balkans...*, p. 188–199; A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 47–48; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 58–61; С. ПИРИВАТРИЊ, *Самуилова држава. Обим и карактер*, Београд 1997; В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, Г. НИКОЛОВ, *Европейският Югоизток през втората половина на X – началото на XI век. История и култура*, София 2015.

<sup>7</sup> И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на Средновековна България...*, p. 343–359; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 63–78; A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 55–58, 62–64; N. BŪNESCU, *Les duchés byzantins de Paristrion (Paradounavon) et de Bulgarie*, Bucarest 1946; L. МАКСИМОВИЋ, *Организација византијске власти у новоосвојеним областима после 1018 године*, ЗРВИ 36, 1997, p. 31–42.

<sup>8</sup> A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 68–69; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> On Paristrion and the lower Danube region in the eleventh and twelfth century see especially P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*; IDEM, *The Byzantine Frontier at the Lower Danube in the Late Tenth and Eleventh Centuries*, [in:] *Frontiers in Question. Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700*, ed. D. POWER, N. STANDEN, London 1996, p. 80–104; В. ТЪПКОВА-ЗАИМОВА, *Долни Дунав, гранична зона на византијскиот запад: към историята на северните и североизточните български земи, края на X–XII в.*, София 1976; A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*; IDEM, *Dunărea în epoca bizantină (secolele X–XII): o frontieră permeabilă*, RI 10, 1999, p. 41–55; IDEM, *The Military Organization of Paradunavon*, Bsl 60.2, 1999, p. 421–446; I. BARNEA, Ș. ȘTEFANESCU, *Din istoria Dobrogei*, vol. III, *Bizantini, români și bulgari la Dunărea de Jos*, Bucarest 1971; F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe...*, p. 293–299, 302, 314, 319; И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на Добруджа*, Варна 2004, p. 102–124.

<sup>10</sup> J. SHEPARD, *Information, Disinformation and Delay in Byzantine Diplomacy*, BF 10, 1985, p. 254–259; A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 115.

archaeological excavations have unearthed many isolated low-value coins, large amounts of amphorae used primarily to transport wine and oil, and other ceramics produced in Constantinople. Moreover, the presence of new markets attracted Pecheneg and Rus' merchants, who could acquire Byzantine wares without having to travel to Constantinople or to the other Byzantine ports on the Thracian coast<sup>11</sup>.

The Pecheneg presence north of the Danube, however, soon turned into a menace and the river, to use the term coined by Alexandru Madgearu, became for a long time a 'permeable frontier'<sup>12</sup>. The first Pecheneg incursion in Byzantine territory dates back to 1027 and the most devastating raids were carried between 1032 and 1036. Those expeditions had a serious impact on the local population, not only because of the destruction they obviously inflicted but also because, between 1045 and 1047, and again in 1059, large groups of invaders received the permission to settle in the region: the Byzantine army was unable to repel them, and thought best to reach an agreement. The Pecheneg chieftains received stipends, gifts, military commands, and became involved in the task of defending the Danube frontier from other nomads such as the Oghuzs, who raided Paristrion in 1064/1065. Gradually assimilated within the imperial military and administrative system, they were called *mixobarbaroi*, half-barbarians, by the Byzantine writers<sup>13</sup>. This derogatory term must not be intended as an ethnonym: the Byzantines were not describing a different population but rather a group of 'almost-civilized' foreigners, whose actual ethnicity was not important to investigate since, in their eyes, they all belonged to the undifferentiated mass of the northern nomads. Even if they had partially absorbed some Byzantine customs and values, including the Christian faith, they were nonetheless perceived as essentially alien<sup>14</sup>. Thus, *mixobarbaroi* was the name given, regardless of their ethnic origin, to the local elite of military servicemen who were employed for the defence of the Danube *limes*, and who were rewarded with money and, after the institution of the *pronoia* system, with plots of land<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 84–88.

<sup>12</sup> A. MADGEARU, *Dunărea în epoca bizantină...*, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> V. TÜPKOVA-ZAIMOVA, *Les Mixobarbaroi et la situation politique et ethnique au Bas-Danube pendant la seconde moitié du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, [in:] EADEM, *Byzance et le Balkans à partir du VI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, London 1979, p. 615–619; N.-Ş. TANAŞOCA, *Les Mixobarbares et les formations politiques paristriennes du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, RRH 12.1, 1973, p. 61–82; H. AHRWEILER, *Byzantine Concepts of the Foreigner: the Case of the Nomads*, [in:] *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*, ed. IDEM, A. LAIOU, Washington D.C. 1998, p. 10–15; A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 87–88; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 109–114.

<sup>14</sup> On the problem of how nomads were perceived by sedentary populations see especially F. HARTOG, *Le miroir d'Hérodote. Essai sur le représentation de l'Autre*, Paris 1980; specifically for the Byzantines H. AHRWEILER, *Byzantine Concepts...*; for the less studied question of how sedentary populations appeared in the eyes of the nomads, see Ts. STEPANOV, *The Bulgars and the Steppe Empire in the Early Middle Ages. The Problem of the Others*, Leiden 2010 [= ECEEMA, 8].

<sup>15</sup> On the institution of *pronoia* see especially M. BARTUSIS, *Land and Privilege in Byzantium. The Institution of Pronoia*, Cambridge 2012, p. 94–97; J. BIRKENMEIER, *The Development of the Komnenian*

The politics of appeasement was initially successful. Peace and trade were restored and the Danubian cities began to experience an economic and demographic upsurge, vividly described in a well-known passage in Attaleiates' *History*<sup>16</sup>. In 1072 Nikephoritzes, the powerful minister of emperor Michael VII, decided to withdraw payments to the Pechenegs, who rebelled and resumed their devastating incursions. The local population rebelled as well, fearing that Nikephoritzes' plan to reform the taxation of the local markets, by forcing the producers to bring their goods to deposits controlled by imperial officers, would be detrimental to their income. This period of armed confrontation and general unrest, resembling very closely a secession of Paristrion, lasted until 29 April 1091 when the Pechenegs were finally vanquished in the battle of Levounion<sup>17</sup>. This victory ended the Pecheneg threat, but did not guarantee the safety of the Danubian border. Another nomadic people, the Cumans, who were already present in the area and had fought as Byzantine auxiliaries at Levounion, crossed the river in 1095 and plundered the region for the first time. Other raids followed in 1114, 1122 (along with a contingent of Pechenegs) and 1148, with some minor incursions in the following years. A number of Cumans settled in Paristrion, further complicating the ethnic and cultural mosaic of the area<sup>18</sup>. In the same period the Vlach presence

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*Army, 1081–1180*, Leiden 2002, p. 148–168; A. LAIOU, *Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire*, Princeton 1977, p. 142–158; P. LEMERLE, *The Agrarian History of Byzantium from the Origins to the Twelfth Century*, Galway 1979, p. 166–188, 230–248; А. КАЖДАН, *Аграрные отношения в Bizантии, XIII–XIV вв.*, Москва 1952, p. 202–223; A. KAZHDAN, *Pronoia: the History of a Scholarly Discussion*, MHR 10, 1995, p. 133–163, with a comprehensive bibliography. On the nomad chieftains in Byzantine service see also Ж. ЖЕКОВА, *Печати на номади на служба във Византия (XI–XII в.)*, [in:] *Acta Mediaevalia Magnae Tarnoviae*, vol. I..., p. 836–845. Niketas Choniates was extremely critical of this development, which according to him weakened the Byzantine army by giving military commands not only to half-barbarians, but also to people of low status and inadequate experience: *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. J.L. VAN DIETEN, Berlin–New York 1975 [= *CFHB*] (cetera: *CHONIATES*), p. 208–209. For other examples of Byzantine writers expressing disgust at the idea of barbarians leading Byzantine soldiers, see H. AHRWEILER, *Byzantine Concepts...*, p. 2–3.

<sup>16</sup> *Michaelis Attaliatae Historia*, ed. E.Th. TSOLAKIS, Athens 2011 [= *CFHB.A*, 50], p. 158: *numerous and large cities, populated by a multitude of people speaking all languages.*

<sup>17</sup> P.B. GOLDEN, *Nomads and their Sedentary Neighbors in Pre-Cinggisid Eurasia*, AEMA 7, 1987–1991, p. 53–61; F. CURTA, *The Image and the Archaeology of the Pechenegs*, Ban 23, 2013, p. 143–202; P. DIACONU, *Les Petchénègues au Bas-Danube*, Bucarest 1970; É. MALAMUT, *L'image byzantine des Petchénègues*, BZ 88, 1995, p. 105–147; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 29–31, 87–103; A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 64–84, 116–139; J. SHEPARD, *John Mauroπους, Leo Tornicius and an Alleged Russian Army: the Chronology of the Pecheneg Crisis of 1048–1049*, JÖB 24, 1975, p. 61–89.

<sup>18</sup> A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 54–68, 142–147, 150–153; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 103–106; I. VÁSÁRY, *Cumans and Tatars. Oriental Military in the pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185–1365*, Cambridge 2005, p. 13–47; P.B. GOLDEN, *Nomads and their Sedentary Neighbors...*, p. 61–81; IDEM, *The Cumans*, [in:] *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. D. SINOR, Cambridge 1990, p. 277–284; IDEM, *The Quipchaks of Medieval Eurasia: an Example of Stateless Adaptation in the Steppes*, [in:] *Rulers from the Steppe. State Formation on the Eurasian*

also increased significantly, or at least the sources record their name more frequently. The primary economic activity of the Vlachs was sheep breeding, but they also contributed troops and scouts to the Byzantine empire, although their loyalty was, at times, questionable<sup>19</sup>.

After 1095 there is no more evidence of the presence of a *katepanos* stationed in Paristrion. The fortress of Preslav/Ioannopolis had, apparently, lost its importance, along with the whole defensive system of the region. This was a consequence of the fact that Alexios I Komnenos changed the traditional Byzantine strategy regarding the Danube *limes*: realizing that the province was difficult to defend, he reduced the military presence in the region, leaving garrisons only in the most important citadels (Isaccea and Dristra above all) and abandoning the rest of the settlements. The main line of defence was moved south, on the slopes of the Stara Planina mountain range, in order to minimize the risk of incursions in Thrace stopping the invaders on the mountain passes, in an interesting reversal of the classic (an soon to be renewed) Bulgarian strategy to block the attacks coming from the south. Moreover, Byzantine foreign politics concerns and military engagements gradually shifted westward as the confrontation with the kingdom of Hungary became more intense during the reign of emperors John II and, especially, Manuel, who established a new theme in Niš which drained even more manpower and resources from Paristrion. This does not mean that the province was abandoned or neglected – Manuel himself led the counterattack against the Cuman invasion of 1148, although he achieved little<sup>20</sup> – but the interest of the central government for Paristrion was sensibly reduced, and the local population was mostly left to itself. Owing to the fact that the Cumans acted as commercial intermediaries between Constantinople, the Byzantine fortified *emporion* on the Danube, the lands of Rus' and Galicia and the farthest Eastern regions, local trade continued to flourish especially in the centres of Dristra, Dinogetia and the new town of Kilia.

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*Periphery*, ed. G. SEAMAN, D. MARKS, Los Angeles 1991, p. 132–157; P. DIACONU, *Les Coumans au Bas-Danube aux XI<sup>e</sup> et XII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Bucarest 1978; F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe...*, p. 293–317; Я. ПИЛИПЧУК, *Соціальна історія кипчаків у IX–XIII ст.*, Київ 2018; Я. ПИЛИПЧУК, *Кїпчаци и Византия (конец XI – начало XIII в.)*, SHEO 5, 2012, p. 41–52.

<sup>19</sup> M. GYÓNI, *Le nom de Βλάχοι dans l'Alexiade d'Anne Comnène*, BZ 44, 1951, p. 241–252; IDEM, *La transhumance des Vlaques Balcaniques au Moyen Age*, Bsl 12, 1951, p. 29–42; E. STĂNESCU, *La population vlaque de l'Empire Byzantin au XI<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, BF 7, 1979, p. 23–53; P.Ș. NĂSTUREL, *Les Valaques balkaniques aux X<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles. Mouvements de population et colonisation dans la Romanie grecque et latine*, BF 7, 1979, p. 89–112; F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe...*, p. 280–282, 316–317, 354–365; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 104–105; A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 140, 143.

<sup>20</sup> A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 85–86, 99–100, 147–158; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 103–105, 203–210, 229–269; F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe...*, p. 328–334; J.V.A. FINE, *The Early Medieval Balkans...*, p. 234–247; F. МАКК, *The Árpáds and the Comneni. Political Relations between Hungary and Byzantium in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century*, Budapest 1989, p. 96–124.

The relative scarcity of Cuman raids in the hinterland of Paristrion is a further proof of the fact that the locals and the last wave of invaders had gradually reached a *modus vivendi*, and that peaceful relations within the various ethnies living in the region were more productive than a state of constant threat and warfare<sup>21</sup>.

The local population, as it has been already mentioned, was extremely diversified: Bulgarians, Vlachs, Cumans, and soldiers and administrators coming from various parts of the Byzantine empire had developed their own peculiar culture during the course of more than a century in which Roman, Slavic and 'alien' customs forcibly coexisted<sup>22</sup>. As the military confrontation between the ethnies inhabiting the region of Paristrion waned during the course of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, renewed trade opportunities created the conditions for the development of an integrated economic system, in which nomadic, semi-nomadic and sedentary communities, each with their own peculiarities, language and lifestyle, coexisted and prospered. Once again, the presence of a sizeable military force, although smaller than the one stationed on the Danube in the previous century, protected the inhabitants and their trade: what's more important, it generated the need for supplies and services provided by the locals, who also worked as intermediaries in the flow of goods exchanged between Constantinople, Paristrion itself and the territories to its north.

Progressively, a group of small- and medium-scale local magnates began to emerge. Their ethnic origins and their economic activities were varied. Some had received land in *pronoia*, and commanded fortresses and military units on the river or on the mountain slopes: most likely, but not necessarily, they were sedentarized *mixobarbaroi* of Petcheneg or Cuman origins (or Rus': Manuel I entrusted four Danube fortresses to Rus' chieftains, who presumably garrisoned them with their retinue and troops, after 1160)<sup>23</sup> with ties with the Cumans living north of the Danube. Other Cumans had not renounced their nomadic lifestyle, and bred horses for the needs of the Byzantine military. There were landholders, descendants of the old Bulgarian aristocracy who, although culturally and politically part of the Byzantine *oikoumene*, had not entirely forgotten their heritage. And there were Vlach merchants and sheep breeders, living on the hills and moving with their herds, descending on the plains to trade their products. Long coexistence and economic

<sup>21</sup> A. MADGEARU, *Byzantine Military Organization...*, p. 153; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 106; J. SHEPARD, *Tzetzes' Letters to Leo at Dristra*, BF 6, 1979, p. 191–239.

<sup>22</sup> See J. BONAREK, *Le Bas Danube dans la seconde moitié du XI-ème siècle: nouveaux états ou nouveaux peuples?*, BSC 5, 2007, p. 193–200; V. TŪRKOVA-ZAIMOVA, *La population du Bas-Danube et le pouvoir byzantine (XI<sup>e</sup>–XII<sup>e</sup> s.)*, [in:] EADEM, *Byzance, la Bulgarie, les Balkans*, Plovdiv 2010, p. 68–76; EADEM, *Les mouvements des populations en Mésie et en Thrace entre le début du XI<sup>e</sup> et le début du XIII<sup>e</sup> s.*, [in:] EADEM, *Byzance, la Bulgarie...*, p. 77–85; 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.

<sup>23</sup> П. ПАВЛОВ, *За руското присъствие на Долни Дунав и българо-руските връзки през XI–XII в.*, Дюб 3, 1986, p. 11–20; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 107.



interdependence had gradually blurred the ethnic and cultural divisions which separated them, and trying to make a distinction between Bulgarians, Vlachs and Cumans is a difficult and most certainly irrelevant task.

This situation of relative prosperity came to an end in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the concerns arising from the old conflict with Hungary, now coupled with tensions with the Normans and the Western powers in general, the Byzantine military presence on the Danube was reduced to a minimum. The definitive inclusion of the Cumans in the Byzantine commercial and diplomatic space made its presence redundant, and the network of fortresses and trading posts that dotted the Danube was gradually decommissioned<sup>24</sup>. While peace is certainly a desirable condition, the reduction of the military presence brought a parallel reduction in trade and, consequentially, a decrease in economic prosperity and social stability<sup>25</sup>. The good relations between the Cumans and the inhabitants of Paristrion favoured trans-border commercial exchanges, but this was not to the benefit of the locals. Trans-Danubian Cumans were generally not interested in trading agricultural goods: likewise, the goods they exported south of the river were of no commercial interest to the locals, being mostly luxury items like silk, or horses for the needs of the Byzantine military. The locals found themselves progressively cut out from the main commercial routes of the empire. Without a significant military presence that could absorb the local production, the main market for horses, cattle and agricultural produce was Constantinople: but the Paristrion entrepreneurs had to compete with the provinces of Thrace and Macedonia, which produced more, were nearer to the capital and better connected by a good network of roads and especially harbours for sea trade, something which Paristrion lacked.

The region became progressively irrelevant, both from a strategic and commercial point of view. The reduction in the volume of trade, coupled with an increasingly oppressive fiscal politics, generated a great deal of resentment amongst the local population. This was encouraged by the remembrance of the past glory of the Bulgarian kingdom, celebrated in many anonymous texts written during the Byzantine domination of Bulgaria, either as originals or as translations and adaptations from Greek models. Known as 'historical-apocalyptic writings', those are not trustworthy recollections of the past: on the contrary, characters and events of Bulgarian history are mixed together with religious texts and transfigured into allegoric tales with strong prophetic and eschatological overtones<sup>26</sup>. While the

<sup>24</sup> И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на Добруджа...*, p. 113–114, and especially note 186.

<sup>25</sup> For an analysis of the decrease of monetary circulation in the region see И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на Добруджа...*, p. 183–186.

<sup>26</sup> On the Bulgarian historical-apocalyptic literature see especially В. ТЪПКОВА-ЗАИМОВА, А. МИЛТЕНОВА, *Историко-апокалиптичната книжнина във Византия и в средновековна България*, София 1996, p. 12–117 (English edition, V. TÄPKOVA-ZAIMOVA, A. MILTENOVA, *Historical-Apocalyptic Literature in Byzantium and Medieval Bulgaria*, Sofia 2001); М. КАЙМАКАМОВА, *Власт и история в средновековна България, VII–XIV век*, София 2011, p. 157–216; F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe...*, p. 288–289.

texts are of a different nature, there is a certain insistence in all of them on representing the past of the virtuous Bulgarian people as an age of splendour and moral excellence. The champion *par excellence* of those virtues is tsar Peter (927–970), celebrated for his love of peace and for his religious zeal. The most eloquent example of this laudatory attitude, in which the symbolic and eschatological elements prevail over the historical truth, is the *Tale of the Prophet Isaiah*:

He [Peter] ruled over the Bulgarian land for twenty years without sin and without a wife, and his reign was blessed. In that time, in the days and years of saint Peter, tsar of the Bulgarians, there was abundance of everything, namely grain and butter, honey and milk and wine [...] and there was want of nothing, but there was abundance of everything according to God's will<sup>27</sup>.

Isolated from the centre of the empire, impoverished and disenfranchised, increasingly confronted with the memory of a past they found much more enticing than the grim reality of the present, the local inhabitants gradually lost their emotive and identitarian connection with Constantinople<sup>28</sup>. Other factors, not directly connected to Paristrion but to the general state of the empire, weighed in. The death of Manuel I, in 1180, marked the beginning of a political crisis in Constantinople, which had serious repercussions on its peripheral territories<sup>29</sup>. Béla III of Hungary resumed military operations and occupied the regions of Srem, Fruška Gora, Croatia and Dalmatia while his ally, the grand *Župan* of Serbia Stefan Nemanja, began a parallel expansion on the Adriatic coast, Kosovo and Macedonia<sup>30</sup>. To make

<sup>27</sup> *Ска(з)ание Нсаіе пр(о)рка*, in В. ТЪПКОВА-ЗАИМОВА, А. МИЛТЕНОВА, *Историко-апокалиптическата книжнина...*, p. 200 (English translation by the author). On the significance and textual history of the *Tale*, see I. BILIAISKY, *The Tale of the Prophet Isaiah. The Destiny and Meanings of an Apocryphal Text*, Leiden 2013 [= ECEEMA, 23].

<sup>28</sup> This phenomenon was not limited to Paristrion. See for instance the letter addressed by Michael Choniates to Demetrios Drimys, in which he laments that Constantinople was neglecting its obligations towards the provinces: *Michaelis Choniatae Epistulae*, ed. H.-G. BECK, A. KAMBYLIS, R. KEYDELL, Berlin–New York 2001, p. 69, 52–70, 68. See also V. TREMBLAY, *L'identité romaine est-elle exclusive à Constantinople? Dichotomie entre Byzance et les Balkans à l'époque médiobyzantine (VI<sup>e</sup>–XII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, [in:] *From Constantinople to the Frontier. The City and the Cities*, ed. N. MATHEOU, T. KAMPANAKI, L. BONDIOLI, Leiden 2016 [= MME, 106], p. 36–40. Of course the relation between capital and provinces, the attraction exercised by the capital on provincials, and the question of provincial versus 'Roman' identity are much more nuanced than a simple opposition: see A. KALDELIS, *Provincial Identities in Byzantium*, [in:] *The Routledge Handbook on Identity in Byzantium*, ed. M.E. STEWART, D.A. PARNELL, C. WHATLEY, New York 2022, p. 248–262.

<sup>29</sup> M. ANGOLD, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni, 1081–1261*, Cambridge 2000, p. 126–136; for a partial reassessment of this position see the essays in *Byzantium, 1180–1204: 'the Sad Quarter of a Century'?*, ed. A. SIMPSON, Athens 2015.

<sup>30</sup> F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe...*, p. 334–335, 339, 346–347; J.V.A. FINE, *The Late Medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest*, Ann Arbor 1994, p. 6–9; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan frontier...*, p. 279–284; A. MADGEARU, *The Asanids*.

matters worse, in August 1185 a Norman army sacked Thessalonica and remained in the region until the month of November. In the eastern part of the empire there were no invasions, but some local *archontes* profited from the turmoil and tried to secede from the empire, after having increased the size of their militias: the most successful one was Isaac Comnenos, who took control of Cyprus and styled himself as a legitimate emperor<sup>31</sup>.

The idea of seceding from the empire, or at least to achieve some greater degree of autonomy, was evidently entertained also by some members of the local aristocracy of Paristrion. The catalyst that accelerated this process was an unexpected and severe onset of cattle confiscations in the early autumn of 1185. The new emperor Isaac II was about to marry Margaret, the daughter of king Béla III of Hungary. The marriage would have finally put an end to the hostilities between the two countries: Isaac did not want to use the public treasury to pay for the expenses, so he decided to take what was needed from his estates in Thrace. The greed of the tax collectors, anyways, went past his orders, and they confiscated cattle and flocks in Paristrion, especially in the region of Anchialos and the cities around it, to the point that *the barbarians living on the mount Haemus* rebelled<sup>32</sup>. Anchialos is not far from the easternmost slopes of the Stara Planina, with its population of itinerant Vlachs and Bulgarian farmers, and it was the main commercial hub of the region, where the local merchants carried their stocks to be transported oversea, and where the Byzantine tax collectors could seize their cattle and produce.

The population of Paristrion, exacerbated by this last extraordinary taxation which they rightly perceived as an abuse, convinced that the empire was no longer able to guarantee the security and the interests of its citizens, and that it could not oppose a resolute action, as the recent setbacks against Hungary, Serbia and the Normans had proved, finally decided to take the matter in their own hands. In the autumn of 1185 two brothers, Asen and Theodore (who will later chose the name Peter) approached emperor Isaac II while he was encamped at Kipsella, before his successful campaign against the Normans. We know nothing certain about them. From the fact that they were able to access the emperor, we may suppose that they were already in the service of the empire, either as holders of a *pro-noia* or as suppliers of horses or goods to the army: in short, they were part of the

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*The Political and Military History of the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1280)*, Leiden 2017 [= ECEEMA, 41], p. 32–33.

<sup>31</sup> P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium Transformed, c. 950–1200*, MEnc 10, 2004, p. 206–208; W.H. RUDT DE COLLENBERG, *L'empereur Isaac de Chypre et sa fille (1155–1207)*, B 38, 1968, p. 123–179; 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. 32–38, 86–89; J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)*, Paris 1990, p. 117.

<sup>32</sup> CHONIATES, 368; 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 [= B.EEL], p. 6–7.

local elite of *mixobarbaroi* so despised by Choniates. We can assume that they were affluent, well connected to the Cumans (and possibly of Cuman, or partly Cuman descent), as the future events will show, and that they enjoyed the esteem of their countrymen.

Much has been said about the ethnic origins of the brothers (and of the rebels in general), especially because the sources, with no exception, describe them as Vlachs. The same sources, however, while carefully distinguishing between Vlachs and Cumans make almost no mention of the Bulgarians. This is confusing, since there is no evidence that the Bulgarian ethnic element had been supplanted by the Vlachs or that it did not participate in the uprising, given especially the fact that the new polity would immediately represent itself as the resurgence of the old Bulgarian kingdom rather than a new political entity. In the past decades, the controversy between Bulgarian and Romanian scholars over this matter has been fierce, and ultimately pointless<sup>33</sup>. The most logical explanation for this is that the Byzantine authors called the rebels Vlachs because the name of Bulgaria had been used, since the time of Basil II, to indicate the western regions of the old Bulgarian kingdom and not the region of Paristrion<sup>34</sup>. The same Choniates, while employing almost only the ethnonym 'Vlach', also states that people 'of both descent' (i.e., Bulgarians and Vlachs) participated to the revolt, which was aimed at the freedom 'of the people of the Bulgarians and the Vlachs'<sup>35</sup>. The matter, however, is of very little importance: as said before, the populations living in Paristrion had already begun to forge a distinct identity which included and surpassed their actual, different ethnic allegiances. Questioning the ethnicity of the leaders of the revolt and of their followers, and attempting to ascribe it to any of the populations living in the region (especially to serve contemporary political and nationalist purposes), is a sterile occupation in the light of their future actions and ideology<sup>36</sup>.

Once in Kipsella and at the presence of the emperor, Peter and Asen demanded some concessions (according to Choniates, a small plot of land), which Isaac did not grant. Tempers rose high and Asen, the more uncompromising of the two, was slapped in the face by order of the emperor's uncle, John the *sebastokrator*. Enraged and humiliated, they returned home and staged the uprising that would bring to

<sup>33</sup> For a relatively unbiased exposition of the controversy see Ph. MALINGOUDIS, *Die Nachrichten des Niketas Choniates über die Entstehung des zweiten bulgarisches Staates*, Вуџ 10, 1980, p. 89–100, 123–129; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици (1186–1460). Генеалогия и просопография*, София 1994, p. 11–19; R. DASKALOV, *Feud over the Middle Ages: Bulgarian-Romanian Historiographical Debates*, [in:] *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, vol. III, *Shared Pasts, Disputed Legacies*, ed. IDEM, A. VEZENKOV, Leiden 2015, p. 274–354; A. MADGEARU, *The Asanids...*, p. 60–63.

<sup>34</sup> F. DALL'AGLIO, *The Interaction between Nomadic and Sedentary...*, p. 302–304, for some examples.

<sup>35</sup> CHONIATES, 371.

<sup>36</sup> For a summary of the many theories proposed about the ethnic origins of the Asenids see И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици...*, p. 18–19.

the establishment of the second Bulgarian kingdom<sup>37</sup>. This series of events, apparently quite straightforward, present some substantial differences with the other uprisings taking place within the imperial boundaries in the same period. The first one is the fact that, since the beginning, it seems that a large part of the population was involved: while it may have been started by some local *archon*, apparently the population was quick to join them, for the reasons that have been examined above. The same Choniates states that the uprising had been planned well before the encounter with Isaac II<sup>38</sup>, so that Asen's rude behaviour may have been, in fact, a provocation aimed at exacerbating the situation.

Another difference, and a very important one, is the constant reference made by the rebels to their connection with the first Bulgarian kingdom. Choniates observed, with a certain trepidation, that the ultimate aim of the rebels was *to reunite the kingdom of the Mysians and of the Bulgarians, as it had been in the past*<sup>39</sup>. While we may suppose that, probably, in the beginning of the uprising the aim of the rebels was not that ambitious, and their political program not so well defined, it is uncontroversial that, once the survival of the breakaway province had been assured, their actions moved into that direction. Theodore was crowned tsar in the attire of the old Bulgarian rulers (a golden circlet and red boots, according to the dismissive description made by Choniates) and chose the name Peter, charged with so much significance; one of the first campaigns was directed at the old capital Preslav where he evidently wanted to perform his coronation<sup>40</sup>. The new capital was set in Tărnovo, previously a town of small importance. The two Bulgarian kingdoms were separated by almost two centuries and by many differences, not least the ethnic and cultural composition of its population. It is therefore impossible to assume that the state created by the Asanids at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century was just the natural continuation of the old Bulgarian kingdom, whose development had been interrupted, but not destroyed, by the Byzantine conquest and domination, as if it had remained dormant waiting for a chance to resurface. Nonetheless, this was precisely the concept that its rulers strived to expound: and in a certain way, there

<sup>37</sup> CHONIATES, 368–369. The establishment of the second Bulgarian kingdom is the subject of a considerable amount of historiography. For a general bibliography on the revolt and on the first years of the kingdom see И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на Средновековна България...*, p. 421–440; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици...*, p. 11–42; Ph. MALINGOUDIS, *Die Nachrichten des Niketas Choniates...* (see also its review, with many corrections and additions: Г. ЛИТАВРИН, *Новое исследование о восстании в Паристрионе и образовании второго Болгарского царства*, ВВ 41, 1980, p. 92–112); P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier...*, p. 288–315; C. BRAND, *Byzantium Confronts the West, 1180–1204*, Cambridge Mass. 1968, p. 88–96; F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe...*, p. 357–365; A. MADGEARU, *The Asanids...*, p. 35–83; A. SIMPSON, *Byzantium's Retreating Balkan Frontiers...*

<sup>38</sup> CHONIATES, 368.

<sup>39</sup> CHONIATES, 374.

<sup>40</sup> CHONIATES, 372.

was truth in their claims that the aim of the uprising was the restoration of an old polity, and not the creation of a new one, as the same Choniates admitted. While it is certainly possible to frame this rebellion in the general contemporary trend of centrifugal peripheries at the edges of the Byzantine empire<sup>41</sup>, the breakaway of Paristrion was ideologically supported by much more than simple fiscal protest and social unrest. Peter and Asen were indeed local *archontes* struggling to break free from the empire and carve out an independent principality. Yet, their idea was welcomed by the local population who participated enthusiastically, notwithstanding the great dangers and difficulties it entailed: this proves that the memory of the first Bulgarian kingdom was not just a political ploy, but an idea that resonated strongly at least with the ruling elite of the region and could be used to successfully rally the population in such a difficult endeavour<sup>42</sup>.

The reasons for this success are manifold. Obviously the general discontent with the Byzantine government, and especially the recent surge in extraordinary taxes, was an important factor but not one that, taken alone, would be sufficient to explain the events: once paired with the remembrance of the old Bulgarian state, it became irresistible. Since all the ethnies living in Paristrion took part in the revolt and in the defence of the new polity, it is evident that this discourse was attractive not only for the ethnic Bulgarians but for all the inhabitants of the region. What they saw in the memory, or in the myth of old Bulgaria was not national pride (something that could maybe work for the Bulgarians, if such a concept can be applied to the Middle Ages) but a palingenesis in which moral renewal and spiritual virtues, the core concepts of the historical-apocalyptic literature, were as much important as material prosperity. Furthermore, from a political point of view, seeking an affiliation with a once-powerful state was of great importance for the Asenides: presenting themselves as the successors of the old Bulgarian kings, even if they were not related by blood to them, would guarantee that their claims to autonomous rule would be taken seriously by their opponents. As a matter of fact, the Byzantine emperors, the Hungarian king Imre and the Latin crusaders that took control of Constantinople after the deviation of the Fourth Crusade tried to undermine their pretensions, considering them usurpers who had unjustly and forcefully taken control of territories that did not belong to them. Asen and Peter tried to be recognized as legitimate sovereigns by Frederik Barbarossa during his passage in the Balkan peninsula in the Third Crusade, but to no avail<sup>43</sup>. The matter was finally resolved by pope Innocent III who sent a royal crown and sceptre to tsar Kalojan (1197–1207), the third ruler of Bulgaria after Asen and Peter, stating

<sup>41</sup> For which see again J. HOFFMANN, *Rudimente...*; J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations...*

<sup>42</sup> 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. BILIARSKY, Sofia 2018, p. 282–299.

<sup>43</sup> *Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris*, rec. A. CHROUST, Berolini 1928, p. 58; *Historia Peregrinorum*, rec. A. CHROUST, Berolini 1928, p. 149.

that he and his brothers were legitimate sovereigns and not usurpers: *descendants of the lineage of the old kings, they succeeded not in occupying, but in recovering the land of their fathers*<sup>44</sup>, providing Kalojan with a prestigious endorsement for his claims.

The last factor that guaranteed the success of the revolt, perhaps the most important one from the military point of view, was the involvement of the Cumans: not only of those settled south of the Danube, who had by then become part of the ethnic mosaic of Paristrion, but of those stationed north, much more numerous and warlike. For them, the establishment of a state that would necessarily engage in military operations against Byzantium, and provide a buffer between their lands and those of the empire, was a great opportunity to resume their plundering raids in relative security<sup>45</sup>: as a matter of fact, the Cumans participated in the military operations on the rebels' side since the beginning of the uprising, and their help was of invaluable importance until the end of the first decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when more pressing matters in the core of their commonwealth reduced, but never completely extinguished, their presence south of the Danube<sup>46</sup>. Rather than being the gateway from which hostile populations descended to pillage and devastate the region, as in the past centuries, the Danube became a sanctuary and a supply line, from which the Cuman light cavalry could join forces with the Bulgarians and, if necessary, retreat to safety. Secure in its northern boundaries, Paristrion was easily defensible if the attackers came from the south, as long as the defenders had control of the mountain passes and fortresses: this was the initial strategic goal of the rebels, and their success in doing so proved crucial in assuring the survival of the new-born state in the first years of its existence.

The insurrection of 1185 was a turning point in the history of Paristrion, and the final step in the process of identity-building that had been taking place in the region since the 11<sup>th</sup> century: and yet, paradoxically, it also meant the end, or at least a radical redefinition, of its specific features. The idea of a secession brought together all the different components of the Paristrion population, each with its own characteristics – Bulgarians, be they descendants of the old aristocracy or

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<sup>44</sup> [...] *de priorum regum prosapia descendentes, terram patrum suorum non tam occupare quam recuperare ceperunt*: Die Register Innocenz' III, vol. VII, Pontifikatsjahr, 1204/1205. Texte und Indices, ed. O. HAGENEDER et al., Wien 1997, p. 205. The letter is dated 15 September 1204 and is addressed to Imre of Hungary, who was opposing Kalojan's coronation in the light of the ongoing conflict between Bulgaria and Hungary for the possession of the Belgrade-Braničevo area.

<sup>45</sup> According to *Nicetae Choniatae Orationes et Epistulae*, ed. J.L. VAN DIETEN, Berlin–New York 1972 [= *CFHB*, 3], p. 7–8, Peter won the assistance of the trans-Danube Cumans promising easy campaigns and rich plunder. Of course, Choniates' orations were rhetoric exercises delivered in the presence of the emperor and the court, so their historical value must be carefully weighed.

<sup>46</sup> В. Стоянов, *Куманите в Българската история (XI–XIV в.)*, ИП 61.5/6, 2005, p. 3–25; F. DALL'AGLIO, *The Military Alliance between the Cumans and Bulgaria from the Establishment of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom to the Mongol Invasion*, AEMA 16, 2008/2009, p. 29–54; K. GOLEV, *The Bulgarophilia of the Cumans in the Times of the First Asenids of Bulgaria*, 30 6.3, 2018, p. 452–471.

simple farmers, who could revive the glorious days of their forefathers, Vlach traders who wanted a fairer tax regime, Cuman merchants and raiders who were looking for more profitable enterprises, and the many more whose ancestry was unclear, mixed, untraceable – and made a single people out of them. This final act of unity, which was the high point of the formation of an embryonal Paristrion identity and at the same time the beginning of its dissolution, was the way they chose to satisfy their material and spiritual instances, since their previous existence as citizens of the Byzantine empire was evidently no longer desirable. The state that was born out of this rebellion carried, for political and cultural reasons, the name of only one of its constituents, but it was the joint creation of all its inhabitants<sup>47</sup>.

Once again Paristrion became the heartland of a Bulgarian kingdom, after having been one of the many peripheries of the Byzantine empire. This had already happened in 681 when the Bulgars established their khanate over the local Slavs and Byzantines, and it happened again in 1185: but this time the kingdom was established by local elements, although with the assistance of the Cumans who, coincidentally, were based in the lands occupied by the Bulgars before their final descent in the Balkan peninsula. And of course, before becoming again the centre of a Bulgarian polity it was the centre of the Paristrion community, incorporating Bulgarian, Vlach, Byzantine, Cuman, sedentary, transhumant, and nomadic elements into a new collective body who was conscious of its demands, willing to fight to satisfy its necessities, and looking back to the past to legitimize its actions and its future. But when it comes to the theme of peripheries, we should not limit our remarks to the obvious fact that the Byzantines considered it a peripheral province inhabited by a peculiar population of half-barbarians. Paristrion was a periphery to the Cumans as well, being the south-westernmost point of their own *oikoumene*, stretching from West-Central Asia to the heart of the Balkans: and it was for them an area of great importance, where they got direct contact with the Byzantine empire and the trade (and plunder) opportunities it provided<sup>48</sup>.

Paristrion does not fit well in the usual narrative of a binary and static opposition between centre and periphery. Its peculiar history and the development of its identity cannot be understood only in reference to Constantinople, and the same is true for the whole of Central and South-Eastern Europe. The history of Bulgaria, Hungary, Galicia, Rus' is related not only to Constantinople or western Europe, but

<sup>47</sup> While known as 'kingdom of the Vlachs and the Bulgars' in its first years, it became known as 'kingdom of Bulgaria' during the reign of Boril (1207–1218). 'Second Bulgarian kingdom' or 'Empire' (in Bulgarian, usually, второ Българско царство) is, of course, a modern appellative. See also A. MADGEARU, *The Asanids...*, p. 58: *the Bulgarians had a solid state tradition, while the Vlachs had none. The Bulgarian aristocracy [...] was linked to the past in a manner in which the Vlach nobility was not.*

<sup>48</sup> K. GOLEV, *On the Edge of "Another World": the Balkans and Crimea as Contact Zones between the Cuman-Qipchaqs and the Outside World*, EB 54, 2018, p. 109–110; Ts. STEPANOV, *Periphery as Universe*, Bsl 59, 1998, p. 247–254.



also, and with the same degree of importance, to the constant afflux of populations, ideas and goods coming from the East. In this perspective, Pechenegs, Oghuzs, Cumans, Mongols were not just exotic barbarians bent on pillaging and destroying, but important actors in a dynamic network of constant interactions, which had enormous repercussions on Constantinople and the West as well. The whole idea of a sedentary, and obviously fully-civilized, world existing in a self-sufficient void from which it projected itself outside, interacting with the nomadic polities only if and when this was suitable to its aims, must be rediscussed. Paristrion, being simultaneously a centre and a double periphery, to Constantinople and to the Cumans, and being the hinge connecting the world of the steppes with that of the sedentary civilizations, may provide an excellent case study in this regard, and on the way in which identities were formed, debated, and negotiated in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century.

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