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НИКОЛАЙ ХРИСИМОВ, *България и европейският запад през първите десетилетия на IX век* [NIKOLAY HRISIMOV, *Bulgaria and the European West in the First Decades of the 9th Century*], Изток-Запад, София 2023, pp. 294

In December 2023 Nikolay Hrisimov¹, published a book, entitled *Bǎlgariya i Evropejskiya zapad prez pǎrvite desetiletiya na IX v.* [*Bulgaria and the European West in the First Decades of the 9th Century*]. The book represents the culmination of Nikolai Hrisimov's prolonged research interest in the various aspects of the early medieval history of the European Southeast, with a particular focus on the relations between pagan Bulgaria and the Carolingians.

The first chapter (*Za panonskiya proizhod na khan Krum i "Krumovata dinastiya"*, p. 17–24) offers an overview of the scholarly literature regarding the origins of the early medieval Bulgarian ruler Khan Krum (ca. 800–814), situating this discussion within the broader academic discourse. In this brief section, Nikolay Hrisimov successfully presents a detailed account of the historical contexts that contributed to the creation of the historiographical myth linking Khan Krum with the Pannonian Bulgars. The hypothesis was proposed by Johann Christian von Engel (1770–1814), a renowned historian, who resided and worked in the Habsburg Empire. Spiridon Palauzov (1818–1872) was the only nineteenth-century Bulgarian scholar

to challenge Engel's claim, dismissing it as implausible. Despite Palauzov's criticism, Engel's idea was later embraced by prominent Bulgarian scholars such as Vasil Zlatarski (1866–1935) and Petăr Mutafchiev (1883–1943), and it became a leading view in modern historiography.

The second chapter, titled *Bǎlgari i avari v otnosheniyata si v perioda na sǎshstestvuvane na rannosrednovekovnata bǎlgarska dǎrzhavnost* (p. 25–87), opens with the first section, *Preistoriyata* (p. 25–31), which addresses the arrival of the Avars in the Northern Black Sea region and the subjugation of the Kutrigurs under their rule. The focus shifts back to the Bulgars in the region after the 630s, when Khan Kubrat (ca. 630s – ca. 660s) established so-called Old Great Bulgaria. An older hypothesis is revisited, suggesting that although the Avar power center had shifted westward, they maintained control over the northern Black Sea steppes for a longer period. According to this theory the Avar Khaganate was divided into two wings or centers of power, one in the Carpathian Basin and the other in the steppes north of the Black Sea, resembling the previous steppe "empire" of the Huns. The author reaches these conclusions by comparing the elite material culture of the two regions during the so-called "Early Avar period". The treasure from Malaya Pereshchepina is presented as the best example of the elite material culture of the eastern wing

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of the Khaganate. Furthermore, evidence from various sources suggests that the widely accepted theory regarding the “Bulgarians’ liberation from Turkic rule” is inaccurate, or at least debatable and needs precision.

The second paragraph (p. 32–45) addresses the establishment of the Bulgarian state along the Lower Danube and its relations with the Avars. Hrissimov gives due attention to the Avar embassy in Byzantium in the context of events after the overthrown Arab blockade of Constantinople (674–678). He tries to link more unambiguously the written accounts in the Byzantine sources and the archaeological evidences. This is particularly evident when it comes to one of the most significant late Avar treasures in Central Europe – the Zemiansky Vrovok hoard in present-day Slovakia. Along with this, the grave from Târgșor is regarded as possible evidence of Avar influence in the Wallachian Lowlands at that time. Hrissimov provides a thorough overview of the historiography and addresses the idea that early medieval Bulgaria largely hampered direct Avar-Byzantine contacts, halting the flow of Byzantine coins into Khaganate. Yet, he admits that contacts likely continued, however in a significantly changed geopolitical situation: with the Bulgarian dominance in Northern Balkans, the tributes previously paid to the Avars (in reduced form and amount) may have been redirected towards Pliska’s khans.

Nikolay Hrissimov clearly indicates that it is difficult to talk about the existence of a direct border between the Bulgars and Avars during the early period of the so-called First Bulgarian state. Instead, he leans toward the notion of a buffer zone between the two states. The author acknowledges that there is no conclusive evidence to strongly refute the use of the Diagonal Road for communication between the Byzantine Empire and the Avars from the late seventh century onwards.

Due attention is given to the discussion concerning the reliability of the data from the *Suda Lexicon*. In this case the author draws on the achievements of Thérèse Olajos. Clarification are provided regarding the timeline of the Bulgarian northwestern campaign, alongside

with as comprehensive as possible chronology of the Frankish-Avar conflict from the late eighth – early ninth centuries. Within the frameworks of the paragraph entitled *Bългарo-avarskiyat konflikt ot kraya na VIII – nachaloto na IX vek (hronologiya na sâbitiyata)*, on pages 54–63, the author states that the Bulgarian offensive against the Khaganate occurred between 803 and 804. The voluminous second chapter concludes with a section in which the Avar legacy in early medieval Bulgaria is critically analyzed and evaluated.

The third chapter (*Kakvo celi khan Krum s podnovyavane na dogovora ot 716 g.? Zapadnata vrázka*, p. 99–104) aims to shed light on the reasons behind the Bulgarian decision to postpone the counter-offensive against Byzantium until the summer of 812. This was a strategic move that differed from impulse the catch the momentum of the crushing victory in the summer of 811 and chasing the immediate positives of the demoralizing effect on Byzantine elite caused by Emperor Nikephoros I Genicus’s death. This part of the study seeks to answer the question of what the true motives of the Bulgarian ruler were at the siege of Mesembria, in demanding the renewal of the Bulgarian-Byzantine treaty of 716. According to Hrissimov, given the rise of a new emperor in the West, and against the background of his military success, the Bulgarian ruler Krum saw this as opportune moment to raise similar claims for himself.

The fourth chapter (*Bългарo-frankskiyat sblāsák v Centralna Evropa prez 20 – 30-te godini na IX vek*, p. 105–174) deals with the Bulgarian-Frankish conflict in Central Europe that occurred in the 820s. The initial paragraph of the chapter presents an overview of the circumstances following the downfall of the Avar Khaganate. It traces the rise of the Croatian principality as well as those of the Serbs and the Mid-Danube Slavs. The second paragraph analyses the relationship between Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Khan Omurtag (814–831). This is done in order to shed light on the historical context within which Bulgarian-Frankish relations developed during that period. The third and fourth paragraphs


address the Mid-Danube Slavs and their attempts to overthrow Bulgarian supremacy in the 820s. Several questions are put on focus. Namely: 1) How many tribes fought against/opposed the Bulgarian Khanate at the time? 2) When were the Timochani subdued and annexed? 3) What was the scope of the Bulgarian territorial claims? 4) And last, however, with paramount importance, what happened with the Abodrites/Obodrites (Prædenecentes)? Nikolay Hrissimov notes that Bulgaria's early ninth century westward expansion unfolded in distinct stages (sometimes not in immediate chronological sequence). Firstly was targeted the Avar territory in the Carpathians and in the next phase the Timochani were involved. After that the Abodrites became an "easy" and to a certain extent reasonable (from Pliska's viewpoint) target for conquest. The author draws attention to the fact that imbalance of power accelerated the Bulgarians' expansionist ambitions in the former Avar space in the Mid-Danube area. It is likely that at this time Singidunum (modern-day Belgrade) became part of the Bulgarian state. Noteworthy, archaeological evidences from the Early Middle Ages support such an assumption. In addition to the Bulgarian expansion along the Mid-Danube, the negotiations with Emperor Louis the Pious also occupy a certain niche in the Hrissimov's research interest. The Bulgarian actions and the unsuccessful attempts of the Franks to counter them are presented in details. The term *navalis* in the *Royal Frankish Annals* is of particular concern, as it is understood to refer to a river fleet of ships rather than boats. Hrissimov unequivocally emphasizes on the significance of this peculiarity. Also referring that a vessel of this type is depicted on a well-known engraved horn from Augustae (Hurlec).

The fifth chapter (*Za proizhoda na komitite v rannosrednovkovnata bălgarska dărzhava i nyakoi problem svarzani s tyah*, p. 175–197) is focused on the origins of the *comitates* and the related issues, while the sixth (*Zemite na Părvoto bălgasko tsarstvo prez IX vek na sever i zapad o Karpatite – sporno i bezsporno*, p. 199–246) concerns the scope and the character of

the Bulgarian authority over the lands along the northern and western slopes of the Carpathian Mountain. The author presents and summarizes various scholarly opinions, analyzing both the modern statements and primary sources' accounts. Nikolay Hrissimov rejects the widely accepted view that there was a connection between the administrative and military organization of contemporary Byzantium and the early medieval Bulgarian *comitates*. Instead, he argues that these provincial units originated elsewhere. He points to their strong resemblance to the *marks* in the Carolingian Empire. The best evidence for this influence comes from the terminology used in contemporary sources, such as the *Royal Frankish Annals*, where the *marks* are referred to as *comitates* and *praefecti* are called *comites*.

It seems inevitable that many of the questions raised in Nikolai Hrissimov's book will be the subject of further discussion. However, one of his indisputable achievements will undoubtedly retain its importance in the future. This is the example of how long-standing cooperation and close contact between scholars in Eastern and Southeastern Europe has broadened our understanding of the early medieval period, moving beyond the limitations of contemporary Bulgarian historiography.

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