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REX OR IMPERATOR? KALOJAN'S ROYAL TITLE IN THE CORRESPONDENCE WITH INNOCENT III*

Generally speaking, the sources detailing the history of the so-called 'Second Bulgarian State' are extremely scarce, when compared to those available for other contemporary situations¹. Moreover, being also in their majority the product of polities hostile to Bulgaria, such as the Byzantine empire or the Latin empire of Constantinople, they are also usually biased, a circumstance which at times makes it difficult to reconstruct the exact nature of the events related². An exception to this general rule is the correspondence of pope Innocent III (1198–1216), a large part of which has been recorded in the pontifical *Regesta* by the clerks of the papal chancellery during the course of his pontificate³. While the collection is far from complete, the letters contained in the *Regesta* are one of the most important sources for the history of Bulgaria between 1199, the date of the first letter

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¹ While the term 'Second Bulgarian Empire' is usually preferred in Western scholarship, I will follow the Bulgarian usage (*Втора Българска Държава*) and employ this more neutral definition.

² Such is the case for some of the most important and useful sources detailing the establishment and the first decades of the second Bulgarian state, such as *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, ed. J.-L. VAN DIETEN, Berlin–New York 1975 [= *CFHB.SBe*, 11] (cetera: *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*); ROBERT DE CLARI, *La conquête de Constantinople*, ed. J. DUFOURNET, Paris 2004; GEOFFROI DE VILLEHARDOUIN, *La conquête de Constantinople*, vol. I–II, ed. E. FARAL, ²Paris 1961.

³ The correspondence of Innocent III is published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences in an ongoing series of volumes under the supervision of Othmar Hageneder and others. The project started in 1964 and the latest volume, covering the years 1211–1212, has been published in 2018: *Die Register Innocenz' III*, vol. I–XIV, ed. O. HAGENEDER et al., Vienna–Graz–Köln 1964–2018 (cetera: *Register Innocenz' III*). Other useful editions of Innocent's correspondence, sometimes containing letters either sent or received by him and not recorded in the *Regesta*, are *Vetera monumenta slavorum meridionalium historiam illustrantia*, vol. I, ed. A. THEINER, Rome 1836; *Acta Innocentii PP. III (1198–1216)*, ed. T. HALUŠČYNSKYJ, Vatican City 1944 [= PCRCICO.F, 3.2]. The letters not yet edited by Hageneder et al. are collected in *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina*, vol. CCXVI, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris 1855.

sent by Innocent to Kalojan⁴, and 1213, when the Bulgarian clergy was invited, along with the prelates of every Christian nation, to participate in the Fourth Lateran Council – at least, this is the last letter addressed to Bulgaria recorded in the correspondence of Innocent III⁵. The *Regesta* are a very well known and very well researched source; in particular, the letters exchanged between the pope and Kalojan have been the subject of a good number of studies and will therefore not be discussed here in their general features⁶. This paper will instead concentrate on a minor detail which, nonetheless, is of some interest for the reconstruction of the political ideology of the second Bulgarian state.

Even a cursory glance at the correspondence between Innocent III, Kalojan and Vasilij, the archbishop of Tärnovo and primate of the Bulgarian Church, reveals a striking disparity in the way in which Kalojan's title was mentioned by the pope and by Kalojan himself. The Bulgarian ruler consistently refers to himself as *Imperator Bulgarorum et Blachorum*⁷, and in the most extended form, as *Dominus et Imperator totius Bulgarie et Vlachie*⁸. The lands of Bulgaria and Vlachia under his suzerainty are called *imperium nostrum*⁹, and the former rulers of the first Bulgarian State are called *Imperatores nostri veteres*¹⁰, or *Imperatores totius Bulgarie et Vlachie prisca illi nostri predecessores*¹¹, or even *progenitores*¹². Archbishop Vasilij, understandably, follows the same practice: Kalojan is called *Dominus noster Chalioannes Imperator*¹³, his letters are *litteras imperatoris*¹⁴, and his followers are *bonos homines et fideles imperatoris*¹⁵. The only exceptions to this usage, in which Kalojan and Vasilij make reference to both a *royal* and *imperial* dignity and crown, are contained in the two letters addressed to Innocent in November 1204, after cardinal

⁴ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. II, p. 485–486.

⁵ The letters contained in the *Regesta* which directly discuss the Bulgarian situation are addressed to Kalojan, to the archbishop of Tärnovo Vasilij, to the pontifical legates sent in Bulgaria, to other members of the Bulgarian clergy, to the king of Hungary Imre, or to the Latin emperor of Constantinople Henry, and their answers to the pope, and are a total of thirty-three; some unrecorded letters can be reconstructed, at least in their general sense, from the surviving ones, and other insights on Bulgaria can be gathered by letters addressed to different personalities.

⁶ See especially И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Преписката на папа Иннокентий III с българите. Увод, текст и коментар*, ГСУИФФ 38, 3, 1942, p. 71–116; F. DALL'AGLIO, *Innocenzo III e i Balcani. Fede e politica nei 'Regesta' pontifici*, Naples 2003.

⁷ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. V, p. 225. For those examples, only the first occurrence will be given.

⁸ *placuit Domino nostro Iesu Christo me dominum et imperatorem totius Bulgarie et Vlachie facere: Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 14.

⁹ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. V, p. 225. In *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 14, *imperium meum*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 15.

¹² *secundum consuetudinem [...] Symeonis, Petri et Samuelis, progenitorum meorum: Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 19.

¹³ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. V, p. 230.

¹⁴ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VI, p. 235.

Leo had crowned Kalojan. In the letter written by Kalojan¹⁶, the Bulgarian tsar identifies himself as “Caloiohannes rex totius Bulgarie et Vlachie”, but in the following text the expressions *regnum meum* and *imperium meum* are used as if they were interchangeable, with a prevalence of the second formulation. The same happens in the letter written by Vasilij¹⁷: cardinal Leo “coronavit et benedixit imperatori Caloiohanni domino omnium Bulgarorum atque Blachorum”, but he was crowned with a “regiam coronam”. He also adds that two children would be sent to Rome in order to learn Latin, and that one of them was, apparently, the son of Kalojan: he is “filius [...] regis”, but he is sent to Rome “ex precepto domini imperatoris”. It is possible that, in this case, the letters were drafted by Leo himself, with little regard for the terms Kalojan and Vasilij had in mind, or that the translators were inconsistent in their work. However, as said before those two letters are the only instances where Kalojan will be called *rex* in a letter written by himself or by Vasilij.

Innocent III, on the other hand, never employs the term *Imperator* for the Bulgarian tsar, neither before nor after his coronation. In the first letters sent to him, Kalojan is called *nobilis vir*, nobleman¹⁸. His legate in Dioclea, Bosnia and Bulgaria, John of Casamari, will employ a slightly different formulation in 1203, calling Kalojan *magnus vir Caloiohannes*¹⁹. *Nobilis vir*, however, while admittedly not a particularly prestigious term, must not be considered as dismissive of Kalojan's dignity. Innocent uses it consistently when addressing important personalities or heads of state who have not been crowned kings or emperors, or whose status is somewhat unclear: he uses it, for instance, while addressing the Venetian doge Enrico Dandolo²⁰. Aside from *nobilis vir*, since the second letter he wrote him the pope will also employ another neutral appellative when addressing Kalojan, *Dominus Bulgarorum et Blachorum*²¹, acknowledging the fact that he ruled over Bulgaria and Vlachia, but refusing to comment over the actual legitimacy of his title. This caution on Innocent's side is understandable, given the fact that Bulgaria had only very recently regained its independence²², and Kalojan, like his

¹⁶ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 409–411.

¹⁷ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 411–412.

¹⁸ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. II, p. 485–486.

¹⁹ *nuntii illius magni viri Caloioh(ann)is venerunt...: Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VI, p. 230.

²⁰ *nobili viro... duci Venetorum: Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 36. This appellative is also used for less important personalities, such as the *nobilis vir* Belota whose lands were to be crossed by the papal delegation going to Bulgaria in 1202: *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. V, p. 233.

²¹ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. V, p. 226.

²² The Second Bulgarian State was established in 1185, after a successful revolt led by Kalojan's older brothers, Asen and Peter. The bibliography detailing the establishment of the state and the first decades of its existence is very large: as a basic introduction, see especially A. MADGEARU, *The Asanids. The Political and Military History of the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1280)*, Leiden 2017, p. 29–174; И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на средновековна България, VII–XIV век*, София 1999, p. 421–500; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици (1186–1460). Генеалогия и просопография*, София 1994, p. 27–68.

brothers and predecessors, had not been formally crowned: it will be Innocent himself, answering his pleas, who will grant him this title in 1204. The crown that he will send to Târnovo, however, will be a royal crown, and Kalojan's dignity will be that of a king, not of an emperor. After the coronation he will be addressed by the pope as *Rex Bulgarorum et Blachorum illustris*²³, his dominion will be called *Regno Bulgarorum et Blachorum*²⁴, and his predecessors are here consistently called *reges*²⁵: by contrast, the usual salutation to the rulers of Constantinople is always *illustri Constantinopolitano imperatori*²⁶, sufficient proof of the fact that for Innocent the dignity of the Eastern Roman emperor was different from that of a king, and far superior to it. It is interesting to note that this difference was quite clear to Kalojan as well: while he styled himself *Imperator*, as we have already seen, he always called Imre of Hungary *Rex Hungarie*²⁷, while the Byzantine emperor is correctly called *Imperator*²⁸.

The terminology used by Innocent in regard to the status of Kalojan is not unique. The Western chroniclers of the fourth crusade, Villehardouin and de Clari, call Kalojan *rois*, while Baldwin is obviously referred to as *empereur*. On the Byzantine side, Nikethas Choniates voices his aversion for the newly established Bulgarian state belittling the authority of its rulers, and using for Kalojan the very dismissive title of ἄρχων and never that of βασιλεύς²⁹.

Now that the sources have been examined, albeit in a very cursory way, and a coherent pattern has been established between those two different usages, it remains to understand why, in the correspondence of Innocent III, this different terminology was used, and if it reflected political ideology on either side. The most obvious answer to this question is that the dichotomy *rex/imperator* was just a matter of a different translation of the same term and that no particular value was attached to it, in the sense that neither Kalojan nor Innocent implied that there was more at stake than the *royal* dignity of the Bulgarian tsar. The letters sent from Rome were, obviously, written in Latin, and followed the tenets of Western European political thought with its precise hierarchy: one emperor for the West and, begrudgingly, one for the East, both claiming direct descent from the imperial authority of Rome, while the rest of the independent polities were arranged in kingdoms whose rulers were, as a consequence, inferior in status to the emperor although sovereign in their lands. Kalojan had no right whatsoever to be considered an emperor, therefore the pope addressed him as king, regardless of what was

²³ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 3.

²⁴ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 7.

²⁵ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. V, p. 228.

²⁶ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. I, p. 526.

²⁷ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 20.

²⁸ *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VI, p. 234.

²⁹ To give just an example, he is called "the archon of Zagora" (τῷ ἀρχοντι τῆς Ζαγορᾶς Ἰωάννη): *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, p. 512.

written in the letters sent from Tărnovo. Those letters, on the other hand, were written *de Bulgarico in Grecum et de Greco postea in Latinum*³⁰. This clarification is attached to the titling of the first letter received by the pontifical curia from Tărnovo, and since two boys were sent to Rome after the coronation of Kalojan, in 1204, *ut addiscant in scolis litteras Latinas, quoniam hic gramaticos non habemus, qui possint litteras, quas mittitis, nobis transferre*³¹, we may safely assume that this habit continued for the whole duration of the correspondence. But while the situation is clear on Innocent's side, there are some other considerations to make. The letters from Bulgaria were not just a product of a double translation, with all the ambiguities that could possibly arise from such circumstances. Even more importantly, they were composed having in mind the political tradition of South-Eastern Europe, and especially the complex relations between Bulgaria and Constantinople and the status of the Bulgarian sovereign, a situation that was the direct consequence of a series of events dating back to the ninth century.

Since the beginning of the insurrection which brought about the birth of the second Bulgarian State in 1185, the ruling family of the Asenids made every effort to present this polity as the lawful continuation of the First Bulgarian State, and themselves as the lawful successors, although not the descendants, of the former Bulgarian rulers³². As an obvious consequence, they claimed that their dignity must be equal to that of their predecessors³³. In this regard, the relation between Constantinople and Bulgaria cannot be easily accommodated in the binary and asymmetrical opposition between empire and kingdom that the Western sources favoured. The situation was far more complex: in 913, when Bulgaria was at the height of its power, the Byzantine emperor Alexander refused to pay the customary tribute to the Bulgarians agreed upon by Leo VI in 907³⁴. The Bulgarian king

³⁰ *From Bulgarian to Greek, and afterwards from Greek to Latin: Register Innocenz' III*, vol. V, p. 224.

³¹ *to learn Latin in school, because here we do not have scholars who can translate to us the letters you send: Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 411. This letter is from Kalojan, and the same information is also given by Vasilij in *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 412 (see above, note 17): *duos pueros [...] vobis mitto [...] ut ex precepto vestre sanctitatis litteras Latinas addiscant (I send two children [...] to you [...] so that according to the instructions of your Holiness they will learn Latin).*

³² 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. BILJARSKY, Sofia 2018, p. 282–299; M. 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*, EH 9, 1979, p. 77–97.

³³ On the titles and prerogatives of the rulers of the Second Bulgarian state see especially Г. БАКАЛОВ, *Средновековният български владетел*, София 1995, p. 197–208; Г. АТАНАСОВ, *Институциите на средновековните български владетели*, Плевен 1999, p. 122–133; К. ГАГОВА, *Калоян – Цар на България и Влахия*, ИП 55, 3/4, 1999, p. 3–17.

³⁴ On those events, and on the history of Bulgarian-Byzantine relations from the reign of Simeon to the demise of the Bulgarian state, see especially И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Цар Симеон Велики (893–927). Златният век на средновековна България*, София 1983; И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История...*,

Simeon invaded Thrace and set camp under the walls of Constantinople; and since Alexander succumbed to an illness and the heir to the throne, Constantine VII, was still underage, being born in 905, the regency council guided by the patriarch Nicholas Mystikos found itself in a dire predicament. It was imperative to end the hostilities, and to this purpose Simeon received a crown and the promise that his daughter would marry the future emperor. The crown was not the imperial crown of the Roman Empire, of course, and it applied only to the lands and people ruled by Simeon: but receiving it meant that the Byzantine court had been forced to abandon its usual position regarding both the Bulgarian ruler, who was now considered a legitimate sovereign equal in status to the Byzantine emperor, and the Bulgarian state, no longer considered a land belonging to the empire. Consequently, Simeon began to use for himself the title of βασιλεύς, and his successors did the same.

The demise of the Bulgarian state brought an end to the independence of the country, but it did not revoke the title bestowed upon its rulers: and when the state was re-established, the new monarchs believed that it was their right to use it for themselves, as rightful sovereigns of Bulgaria, asserting both their authority and the legitimate independence of their country, notwithstanding the opposition of the Byzantines who considered them usurpers, and their kingdom a rebellious province. For a Bulgarian ruler being called βασιλεύς meant that he was an αὐτοκράτορ, an independent ruler whose power was not limited by any external authority within the frontiers of his state. It did not mean that he had any right whatsoever upon the Byzantine lands, or that he was considered a candidate to the throne of Constantinople, or that his authority derived from a supposed Roman descent. His autocratic power was limited to the lands that rightfully belonged to him: he was βασιλεύς τῶν Βουλγάρων, 'emperor of the Bulgarians', just as the Byzantine emperor was βασιλεύς τῶν Ῥωμαίων 'emperor of the Romans'.

Therefore, the presence of the word *imperator* in the pontifical registers may be just an attempt, made by a puzzled translator unaware of its meaning in the Bulgarian political tradition, at faithfully translating the word βασιλεύς, in itself a translation of the Bulgarian *Tsar*, and also unaware of the fact that Kalojan was using this term not in the sense that he was claiming the title of Emperor of the Romans or that he wanted to establish a third empire in Europe, but merely that he was asking to be considered, by the pope and especially by his own neighbours, Byzantines, Latins or Hungarians, as the legitimate autocrat of his lands, whose possession he was entitled to maintain. This is also evident from the fact that neither Kalojan

p. 229–338; *Българският златен век. Сборник в чест на цар Симеон Велики (893–927)*, ed. В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, И. ИЛИЕВ, К. НЕНОВ, ПЛОВДИВ 2015; I. МЛАДЈОВ, *The Crown and the Veil: Titles, Spiritual Kinship, and Diplomacy in Tenth-Century Bulgaro-Byzantine Relations*, HCom 13, 2015, p. 171–183; M.J. 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. M.J. LESZKA, K. MARINOW, Łódź–Kraków 2018 [= BL, 34].

asked for a superior dignity after his royal coronation, nor Innocent felt the need to explain him that he could not bestow upon him the imperial dignity, as he did with Vasilij regarding his request to be anointed *patriarch* of the Bulgarian Church while he only received the title of *primate*³⁵. Actually, this whole terminological issue could have been avoided: in this specific context *rex* was a perfectly good translation of βασιλεύς, since the prerogatives of a Western king were those of an autocratic ruler, at least regarding his legitimate right to rule his lands, free from external interferences. Already in December 1202, Innocent had clarified this point in the famous *Per venerabilem* decretal, addressed to the count of Montpellier William VIII: “cum rex ipse superiorem in temporalibus minime recognoscat”³⁶, a principle that would be formalized, some decades afterwards, in the formulation “rex superiorem non recognoscens in regno suo est imperator”³⁷. Unbeknownst to either one, both Innocent and Kalojan were discussing the same thing: or at least, both were willing to avoid any friction.

The registers of Innocent III are not the only Western European source in which this confusion between *imperator* and *rex*, that is, between the actual demands of a Bulgarian sovereign regarding his status as an independent ruler and the foreign recognition of his title, can be noticed. It is also evident in the accounts of the encounter between the Bulgarian envoys and Barbarossa, while the emperor was crossing the Balkans in 1189, during the Third Crusade³⁸. In order to exploit to their advantage the growing hostility between Frederick I Barbarossa and the Byzantine emperor Isaac II Angelus, the Bulgarians proposed a military alliance to the German emperor. In exchange for a large army, Peter asked for the recognition of his authority over the Bulgarian lands. Once again, the translators of the proposal faithfully rendered βασιλεύς as *imperator*: therefore, according to the *Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris*, Peter wanted to receive from Barbarossa “coronam imperialem regni Grecie”³⁹. Leaving aside the name of the region claimed by

³⁵ *Apud nos hec duo nomina, primas et patriarcha, pene penitus idem sonant, cum primates et patriarche teneant unam formam, licet eorum nomina sint diversa (among us those two names, primate and patriarch, mean almost the same thing, since primate and patriarch have the same function, although their names are different): Register Innocenz' III, vol. VII, p. 7.* The explanation is vague, but the difference between patriarch and primate is underscored quite firmly.

³⁶ *Register Innocenz' III, vol. V, p. 253.*

³⁷ See F. CALASSO, *I glossatori e la teoria della sovranità. Studio di diritto comune pubblico*, ³Milan 1957, p. 22–77, and especially p. 41–53 for Innocent's opinion on the matter.

³⁸ On the perception of Bulgaria by the crusaders, see especially K. НЕНОВ, *Българското царство в латинските извори за кръстоносния поход на Фридрих Барбароса (1189–1190)*, *BMd* 8, 2017, p. 135–169; F. DALL'AGLIO, *'In ipsa silva longissima Bulgariae': Western Chroniclers of the Crusades and the Bulgarian Forest*, *BMd* 1, 2010, p. 403–416.

³⁹ *Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris*, [in:] *Quellen zur Geschichte des Kreuzzuges Kaiser Friedrichs I*, ed. A. CHROUST, Berlin 1928 [= *MGH.SRG, N.S.*, 5], p. 58. A similar statement is also found in the *Historia Peregrinorum*, [in:] *Quellen zur Geschichte...*, p. 149: *diadema regni Grecie de manu imperatoris capiti suo [Peter] rogans imponi.*

Peter, which was obviously not Greece, it is clear that the situation is exactly the same as that of Kalojan in his negotiations with the pope, twelve years later: the recognition of a legitimate, autonomous rule over the lands he held. Moreover, according to Kalojan, Peter and Asen had tried many times to send envoys to Rome, although without success, quite possibly to ask the same thing from the predecessors of Innocent⁴⁰; and while the official recognition of their royal status did not come from them or from Barbarossa, who in the end reconciled with the Byzantine emperor and declined Peter's offer, Innocent agreed to fulfil Kalojan's wish and acknowledge his right and that of his descendants to rule over Bulgaria and Vlachia in perpetuity⁴¹. Whatever he intended with *rex* or *imperator*, the result was the same and it what was Kalojan wanted: the recognition as the sovereign monarch of his country.

On the other hand, possible that Peter and Kalojan did actually demand recognition as βασιλεύς, signalling the desire to take over the Byzantine empire with the assistance of Western powers, in a moment in which the imperial authority in Constantinople was weakened and under attack? After all, according to the well-known words of Niketas Choniates, in the initial stages of the revolt Asen and Peter had rallied the Bulgarians and Vlachs proclaiming that *the martyr of Christ, Demetrius, had left the town of the Thessalonians and his temple and his residence among the Romans, and came to them to help and assist in the endeavour*⁴². If the Byzantine empire had been deserted by its saints, who had fled his lands to take refuge in the newly restored Bulgarian state, would it be possible that imperial authority had also deserted Constantinople, and had been transferred to Târnovo?

This hypothesis is certainly suggestive, and it is not new: actually, it is very well entrenched in the historiography. It was first proposed in 1879 by Fëdor Uspenskij⁴³, and supported by such notable scholars as Ivan Božilov, who aptly called it 'the great idea'⁴⁴, in a parallel with the *megalē idea* of 19th–20th century Greek nationalism, and considered it a cornerstone in the politics of Kalojan and of his predecessors: *His [Kalojan's] whole policy shows that he struggled for this title – an aim already sought by Ivan Asen I and Peter. The great idea, the idea of a Bulgarian hegemony in the Balkans, of Bulgarian sovereignty over the Queen of Cities*⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ Register Innocenz' III, vol. V, p. 225.

⁴¹ According to the titling of the letter which confirmed his coronation: Register Innocenz' III, vol. VII, p. 3.

⁴² Nicetae Choniatae Historia, p. 371. See A. DOBIČINA, A "Divine Sanction" on the Revolt: the Cult of St. Demetrius of Thessalonica and the Uprising of Peter and Asen, SCer 2, 2012, p. 111–124.

⁴³ Ф. УСПЕНСКИЙ, Образование второго Болгарского царства, Одесса 1879, p. 255.

⁴⁴ И. БОЖИЛОВ, Фамилията на Асеневици..., p. 44.

⁴⁵ Цялата му политика показва, че той се е стремил към тази титла – цел, поставена още от Иван I Асен и Петър. Голямата идея, идеята за българска хегемония ха Балканите, за българско господство над Царицата на градовете: И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, История на средновековна България..., p. 460, in note 25. The idea seems well established in Western scholarship as well: see for instance D. NICOL, *The Despotate of Epiros*, Oxford 1959, p. 20, and more recently

It is indeed true that Kalojan held a very aggressive stance towards the Byzantine empire, as Asen and Peter did before him. This can be hardly surprising, given the fact that Bulgaria came back into existence as an independent country after a rebellion against Constantinople and a long series of military campaigns aimed at securing the survival of the state and enlarging its boundaries. Yet, it would be difficult to consider that the final goal of those campaigns was the conquest of Constantinople. From a military point of view, the Bulgarian army, even with the invaluable assistance of the Cumans, and even if it did actually besiege with success some fortresses or towns, was primarily concerned in establishing a secure frontier on the natural boundaries of Haemus and Macedonia, and in launching plundering raids into Thrace. But the question cannot be reduced to the military abilities of Kalojan's army. The degree of ideological hostility towards the Byzantine empire, reciprocated in full by the Byzantines who disdained both the Bulgarians and their leaders, was far too great to allow for the establishment of a Bulgaro-Byzantine empire, with a Bulgarian at its head. The same elevation of Tŕrnovo as capital of the state, and its constant embellishment and sanctification with a large array of relics taken from the newly conquered lands⁴⁶, is proof enough of the fact that the Asenids wanted to present themselves as counterparts of the Byzantine empire, establishing a state that mirrored its political and spiritual characteristics.

Moreover, when after the very first letters Kalojan's correspondence with Innocent entered the phase of actual negotiations, the most worrisome enemy of Bulgaria was not the βασιλεύς of Constantinople but the king of Hungary, who contested the Bulgarian expansion in the area of Belgrade and Braničevo. While Kalojan mentioned to the pope the "many enemies" who were opposed to him⁴⁷, he did not make any explicit reference to Constantinople, because in 1202 he had signed a peace treaty with Alexios III⁴⁸. We do not know how did the Byzantine

F. VAN TRICHT, *The Latin Renovatio of Byzantium. The Empire of Constantinople (1204–1228)*, Leiden 2011, p. 387. The most extreme position is the one expressed by И. ИОРДАНОВ, *Корпус на печатите на средновековна България*, София 2001, p. 90, 93–94, who postulates that Peter actually claimed the title of emperor of Constantinople.

⁴⁶ See I. BILIARSKY, *La translation des reliques à la capitale du second empire bulgare et les idées du pouvoir*, [in:] *Liturgia e agiografia tra Roma e Costantinopoli. Atti del I e II seminario di studio, Roma–Grottaferrata 2000–2001*, ed. K. STANTCHEV, S. PARENTI, Grottaferrata 2007, p. 329–338; D. POLYVIANNY, *The Cults of Saints in the Political Ideology of the Bulgarian Empire*, [in:] *Fonctions sociales et politiques du culte des saints dans les sociétés de rite grec et latin au Moyen Age et à l'époque moderne*, ed. M. DERWICH, M. ДМИТРИЕВ, Wrocław 1999, p. 401–417; К. МАРИНОВ, *Търново като свещен град през късното средновековие*, [in:] *Търновската държава на Духа. Десети юбилеен международен симпозиум, Велико Търново, 17–19 октомври 2013 г.*, В. Търново 2015, p. 698–722.

⁴⁷ *multos nostros contrarios: Register Innocenz' III*, vol. V, p. 225.

⁴⁸ *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, p. 535; *Nicetae Choniatae Orationes et Epistulae*, ed. J.-L. VAN DIETEN, Berlin–New York 1972 [= *CFHB.SBe*, 3], p. 110–111; *Nicephori Chrysobergae ad Angelos orationes tres*, ed. M. TREU, Breslau 1892, p. 18–21.

emperor address Kalojan in this treaty, and if the Bulgarian ruler saw his status as *autokratōr* finally recognized by Alexios⁴⁹: apparently he did not, since Kalojan informed Innocent, in June 1203, that Alexios was willing to make this concession only after he received news of his negotiations with the pope and, we may add, although neither Kalojan nor Innocent knew that at the time, after he had received news that the crusader fleet was approaching Constantinople⁵⁰. However, even if the independence of Bulgaria had been officially acknowledged by Constantinople, this did not deter Imre of Hungary from considering Kalojan a mere usurper, and a large part of his lands as pertaining to the Hungarian crown⁵¹.

The situation, as it is well known, quickly evolved between 1203 and 1204, and while the hostility between Bulgaria and Hungary remained, the fall of Constantinople to the Fourth Crusade changed everything in the region. Kalojan profited from the situation to seize some land in Macedonia and tried to establish good relations with the Latins, but they rejected his openings and actually threatened to take away his lands. This, of course, strained the relations between the two states, although the military confrontation was not immediate. As a matter of fact, in the winter of 1204 the Byzantine aristocracy of Thrace approached Kalojan and asked his help to recover their lands. According to Villehardouin, they even promised that they would recognize him as their emperor⁵², while Choniates only writes

⁴⁹ According to C. BRAND, *Byzantium confronts the West, 1180–1204*, Cambridge Mass. 1968, p. 134–135, Kalojan received a royal crown and a primate for the Bulgarian Church, an assumption clearly contradicted by the future developments and by Kalojan's correspondence with Innocent III; P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier. A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204*, Cambridge 2000, p. 130, shares those assumptions.

⁵⁰ *Ex quo sciverunt istud Greci, miserunt mihi patriarcha et imperator: veni ad nos, coronabimus te in imperatorem et faciemus tibi patriarcham, quia imperium sine patriarcha non staret* (When the Greeks knew this, the patriarch and the emperor sent me [a message]: come to us, we will crown you emperor and make a patriarch for you, because an empire without a patriarch cannot exist): *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VI, p. 234.

⁵¹ As recorded in *Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 20, in 1203 Kalojan required an arbitrate regarding *de confinio Hungarie, Bulgarie et Blachie*, since Imre had invaded his lands and conquered five episcopates. Innocent took care of the matter: he wrote on 15 September 1204 to his legate, cardinal Leo, who in that time was detained by Imre, who would not allow him to cross the border and reach Tärnovo. Among the many points discussed with the Hungarian king, Innocent informed his legate, was the problem of Kalojan's coronation and the issue of the Hungaro-Bulgarian border, which he wished to resolve to the advantage of Kalojan: [Kalojan and his brothers] *terram patrum suorum non tam occupare quam recuperare ceperunt [...]* *Unde nos eum non super alienam terram sed super propriam [...]* *regem intendimus coronare, volentes, ut et ipse terram restituat inuste detentam et terra inuste detenta restituatur eidem, cum ipse postulaverit hoc a nobis* [Kalojan and his brothers] *did not invade, but recovered the lands of their fathers [...]* *Therefore we wish to crown him [...]* *king over his own land, not over a foreign one, and we wish that he would give back the land unjustly held, and that the land unjustly held would be given back to him, as he asked us* (*Register Innocenz' III*, vol. VII, p. 205).

⁵² GEOFFROI DE VILLEHARDOUIN, *La conquête de Constantinople*, § 333.

about a military alliance aimed at expelling the Latins⁵³. Was it at that point that, if ever, he did begin to entertain the idea of becoming the emperor of Constantinople, and not only of Tărnovo?

A letter sent by Kalojan to Innocent and summarized in the *Gesta Innocentii*, a sort of biography of Innocent written by an anonymous author using the letters recorded in the *Regesta*, helps to clarify his position: he wrote to the pope that

When he heard about the capture of the royal city, he sent messengers and letters to the Latins, in order to have peace with them; but they answered very haughtily, saying that they would not have peace with him until he returned the land belonging to the Constantinopolitan empire that he invaded by force. And he answered them that that land was more rightly owned by him than Constantinople owned by them, because he took back the land that his ancestors had lost, but they occupied Constantinople that didn't belong them at all; moreover, he had legitimately received the royal crown from the holy pontiff, but he [Baldwin], who called himself *basileus* of Constantinople, had thoughtlessly usurped the crown of the empire: therefore, the empire belonged more to him than to that one.⁵⁴

On the other hand, Kalojan was well aware that this alliance was nothing but a tactical one, and that the Byzantine aristocrats had no intention of choosing him as their emperor, but only of using his manpower and resources to force the Latins to retreat. The battle of Adrianople of April 14, 1204, made him master of practically all Thrace⁵⁵. Baldwin was captured and died shortly thereafter, and the Latin empire remained without a ruler, or at least without an emperor, since Baldwin's brother, Henry, was elected bailiff by the Latin barons but did not receive the imperial crown yet. After this triumph, Kalojan may have briefly thought of taking control of Constantinople⁵⁶. Indeed, the circumstances were very favourable, given

⁵³ *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, p. 612–613.

⁵⁴ *Ipse audita captione regiae civitatis, miserat nuntios et litteras ad Latinos, ut cum eis pacem haberet; sed ipsi ei superbissime responderunt, dicentes, quod pacem non haberent cum illo, nisi redderet terram ad Constantinopolitanum imperium pertinentem quam ipse invaserat violenter. Quibus ipse respondit: quod terra illa justius possidebatur ab ipso, quam Constantinopolis possideretur ab illis, nam ipse recuperaverat terram quam progenitores ejus amiserant, sed ipsi Constantinopolim occupaverant, quae ad eos minime pertinebat: ipse praeterea coronam regni legitime receperat a summo pontefice; sed ipse, qui se appellabat Constantinopolitanum basileum, coronam imperii temere usurpaverat a se ipso: quare, potius ad ipsum quam ad illum imperium pertinebat.* *Gesta Innocentii PP. III*, [in:] *PL*, vol. CCIV, col. 147–148. English edition and translation, *The Deeds of Innocent III by an Anonymous Author*, trans. J.M. POWELL, Washington 2004, p. 201–202. The letter was written after the battle of Adrianople of 14 April 1205, for which see below.

⁵⁵ Among the extensive bibliography on the battle of Adrianopolis, see the recent *Одринската битка от 1205 г.*, ed. В. Гюзелев, София 2005.

⁵⁶ This is the opinion of В. Гюзелев, *Четвъртият кръстоносен поход, превземането на Цариград и българо-латинските отношения 1204–1207 г.*, Pbg 28, 2004, p. 80–88, at p. 85 and 88. А. Данчева-Василева, *България и Латинската империя (1204–1261)*, София 1985, p. 61, believes instead that Kalojan had no intention, and no possibility, of conquering Constantinople. See also И. Божилов, *България при Асеневици*, ИП 36, 2, 1980, p. 80–95, at p. 92.

the panic that had struck the Latins, and the heavy losses they suffered. Yet, his subsequent actions demonstrate that the idea of taking control of the City was not a priority to him. After raiding Thrace, he retreated and concentrated his efforts in Macedonia, where he obtained significant territorial gains in the following years. Far from being a strategic error, this course of action was indeed well-thought-out and well-executed, and was the culmination of the process of south-western expansion initiated by his brothers, with Adrianople and Thessalonika as its southernmost points: and he died in 1207 while besieging Thessalonika, without ever attempting any military operation against the city of Constantinople.

As usual, when dealing with the history of medieval Bulgaria, the voices of its actors are almost always lost to us. It would be interesting to know what did Kalojan think of himself, and how did he perceive his rank and his status among his mostly hostile neighbours. As long as it confirmed his legal right to rule legally his lands and be considered an independent sovereign, was he really interested in what kind of crown he received from Rome? He definitely considered himself, as he had every right to do, the βασιλεύς of Bulgaria: but most certainly, not the βασιλεύς of Constantinople.

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Abstract. In the correspondence between Innocent III and Kalojan of Bulgaria (1197–1207), the title of the Bulgarian ruler is recorded both as *rex* and *imperator*. While the pope consistently employs the title *rex*, Kalojan refers to himself, in every occasion, with the title *imperator*. Some scholars have speculated that the use of this title was a deliberate political move: styling himself *imperator*, Kalojan was claiming a much greater political dignity than that of king of Bulgaria, putting himself on the same level as the emperor of Constantinople. On the other hand, while Innocent's letters were obviously written in Latin, Kalojan's letters were originally in Bulgarian, translated in Greek, and finally translated from Greek to Latin. Therefore, the use of the word *imperator* may be just an attempt at translating the term βασιλεύς, not in the sense of Emperor of the Romans but merely in that of autocrat, a ruler whose power was fully independent from any other external political authority. This recognition was of a fundamental importance for Kalojan, since the rulers of Bulgaria's neighbouring states, the kingdom of Hungary, the Byzantine empire, and especially the Latin empire of Constantinople, were not willing to recognize his legitimacy as an independent sovereign.

Keywords: power conceptualization and legitimization, crusade studies, Second Bulgarian State, Latin Empire of Constantinople, relations between Bulgaria and Byzantium, Innocent III, Church history of the Romans.

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