CUMANI BELLATORES IN THE SECOND BULGARIAN STATE (1186–1396)

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In his famous work *La Civilisation de l'Occident médieval*[1] Jacques le Goff quotes the classical formula of the tripartite division of medieval society—*oratores, bellatores, laboratores*—which is found in the poem of Bishop Adalberon of Lens (circa 1020), dedicated to Robert the Pious, king of France. The layer of *bellatores* represented the military aristocratic elite, often descendants of groups of warlike migrants or mercenaries.

In the region of Central Eastern, and especially Southeastern, Europe migrants frequently filled the role of this warlike and skillful military elite from the Eurasian East. In certain cases, such medieval Hungary and Bulgaria, these migrants were able to create stable state formations which lasted for centuries and enabled a successful synthesis between the tradition of the local sedentary population and newly settled Eurasian nomads.[2]

The aim of this article is to find where and how a specific nomadic group, the Cumans, were integrated and assimilated into a sedentary society on the Lower Danube, the so-called Second Bulgarian State (from the end of the twelfth to the end of the fourteenth century). In my opinion this topic still has not been well enough researched and clarified.

The Cumans (also called the Kipchaks) formed the last large wave of north Turkic nomads who followed the centuries-long road from Inner Asia to the Pontic steppe region of Eastern Europe. They appeared in the lands north of the Black Sea around the middle of the eleventh century, slowly pushing their Pecheneg and Ghuzz relatives westwards. Thus, the Cumans (Kipchaks) played a significant role in the development of a broad region from the end of the eleventh century until the Mongol conquest of Eastern Europe and the subsequent Mongol attack on Central Eastern Europe and the Balkans.[3] Even

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[1] Jacques Le Goff, *La Civilisation de l'Occident médieval* (Paris: Editions Flammarion, 1997), first published in 1965. Quoted from the Bulgarian translation: *Civilizacijata na srednovekovnija Zapad* (Sofia: Agata-A, 1998), 299.

[2] On the statehood of Eurasian nomads see Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 233–263.

[3] See for detailed accounts: András Pálóczi-Horváth, *Pechenegs, Cumans, Iasians* (Budapest: Corvina, 1989), 7–27,39–54 (hereafter Pálóczi-Horváth, *Pechenegs*); Peter Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogensis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz,

later, after the Mongol conquest of the Pontic area and the foundation of the Golden Horde, they continued to be the bulk of the population of this western Mongol state. In both Western and Oriental sources one finds names like Cumania and Desht-i-Kipchak as synonyms for this Mongol state.[4]

The military skills of the Cumans made them widely popular. Many Cumanic mercenaries were hired in the Russian principalities, where they merged with the local political and military elites. Such a case also happened in Egypt, ruled by the Kipchak dynasty of the Kalavunids, which had its origin in the Mamluk guard, recruited widely from the Pontic region through the slave trade.[5]

In this period (the end of the twelfth through the fourteenth century), Central Eastern Europe and the Balkans continued to develop as a border region between sedentary European societies in their Latin or Slavo-Byzantine modifications and the turbulent world of nomadic Eurasia. Thus, the Hungarian Kingdom and the Byzantine Empire were forced to develop a specific policy towards the migrants from the East, which could not be restricted to purely military countermeasures. They had to deal with groups attempting to penetrate the borders of the Latin or the Byzantine world, not only with predatory goals, but often to obtain new homelands and protection.[6]

Hungary used different approaches in dealing with its nomadic neighbors and the groups which tried to settle within the borders of the kingdom. In order to prevent a new *honfoglalás* ("landtaking") in the Carpathian basin, the Hungarian state skillfully defended its borders with the sword and the cross. The country slowly developed the image of a *propugnaculum fidei catholicae* against schismatics and pagans from the East, nevertheless keeping in contact with these areas. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Hungarian Kingdom

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1992), 270–77; László Rásonyi, *Les Turcs non-islamisés en Occident (Pécenégues, Ouzes et Qipchaqs) et leurs rapports avec les Hongrois* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1970); Svetlana Pletneva, *Polovtsy* (The Polovtsians) (Moscow: Nauka, 1990).

[4] For more details see German Fedorov-Davydov**,** *Kochevniki Vostochnoj Evropi pod vlastju zolotoordinskich hanov* (The nomads of Eastern Europe under the rule of the Golden Horda khans) (Moscow: Nauka, 1966); Bertold Spuler, *Die Goldene Horde. Die Mongolen in Russland.* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1965).

[5] Peter M. Holt, *The Age of the Crusades. The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1517.* (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1986).

[6] Paul Stephenson**,** *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier: A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80–117 (hereafter: Stephenson. *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*).

recruited small groups of migrating nomads as auxiliary troops, described as *Hilfsvölker und Grenzwächter* in the famous book of Hansgerd Göckenjan.[7]

The development of mendicant, mostly Dominican, missions at the beginning of the thirteenth century added another aspect to this policy. Thus, a Cumanic bishopric was established in the town of Milkó, aimed at extending the Hungarian influence further east, deep into the problematic Pontic steppe region.[8] This can probably be regarded as an attempt to contribute to the creation of a buffer "Mixobarbarian" society along the eastern borders of the Latin world. On the one hand it would prevent direct contact with the dangers of the Eurasian world and on the other hand facilitate cultural and economic contacts between eastern Central Europe and the steppe region. The Mongol explosion, however, rapidly changed the situation. Hungary was forced to find a way to integrate and assimilate a large mass of Cumanic refugees. This process had ended more or less successfully by the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century through the Christianization, sedentarization, and assimilation of the Cumans. They became an integral part of the military structure of the Hungarian Kingdom and their clan elite gradually became part of the Hungarian aristocracy. Nevertheless, the Cumans were not able to become the main actors in the political development of the kingdom. They were finally forced to accept strict conditions, put into specific legislation known as *Articuli Cumanorum*, and to abandon to a great extent their previous way of life—a process recently described in detail by Nora Berend in her famous book *At the Gate of Christendom*.[9]

In the first decades of the eleventh century, the mighty Byzantine Empire of the Macedonian dynasty found itself in the situation of the famous King Pyrrhus of Epirus after his victories over the Romans. Its rival in the Balkans, Bulgaria, was totally destroyed, but several decades after the glorious victory of Basil II the Bulgar-Slayer, the empire again had to deal directly with Eurasian

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[7] Hansgerd Göckenjan**,** *Hilfsvölker und Grenzwächter im mittelalterlichen Ungarn* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1972).

[8] Nikolaus Pfeiffer, *Die ungarische Dominikanerordensprovinz von ihrer Gründung bis zur Tatarenverwüstung 1241–1242*. (Zürich: Gebr. Leemann, 1913); Ioan Ferenţ, *Cumani şi episcopia lor*. (The Cumans and their Bishoprics) (Blaj: Tipografia seminarului Teologic Greco-Catolic, 1933); Vladimir Pashuto, "Poloveckoje episkopstvo" (The Polovtsian Bishoprics), in: *Ost und West in der Geschichte des Denkens und der kulturellen Beziehungen. Festschrift für Eduard Winter zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. W. Steinitz and others, 33–40 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1966).

[9] Nora Berend, *At The Gate of Christendom. Jews, Muslims and "Pagans" in Medieval Hungary, c.1000–c. 1300*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 68–74 (hereafter: Berend, *At the Gate*).

nomads migrating into the area of the Lower Danube. These new migrants created specific new problems in this area for the weakened Byzantine administration.[10]

In her article "Byzantine Concepts of the Foreigner: The Case of the Nomads," Hélène Ahrweiler[11] presents the mechanisms of integration and assimilation of the nomadic migrants and captives in Byzantium. She describes the complicated perception of "otherness" in the Byzantine tradition, dating back to late antiquity and the Roman and Hellenic past. In a multiethnic and multicultural society such as Byzantium, there was a broad variety of terms and attitudes towards the "Other." At the same time one can see flexible mechanisms of assimilation and integration of various ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities based on a highly elaborated legislative system. On the scale of "otherness," however, nomads and infidels occupied the lower parts. To quote Ahrweiler again: "The terms *barbaros* and 'nomad' had resonance for Byzantines as key words to describe a quintessential cultural otherness."[12] Nevertheless, especially in the Balkans, the Byzantines had to deal with vast groups of nomads, pastoralists, and various semi-nomadic groups which felt quite independent during the eleventh and twelfth centuries in certain areas of the Byzantine Balkan provinces. The interaction of the new settlers from the Eurasian steppes and the local sedentary, semi-nomadic pastoral population consisting mainly of Slavo-Bulgarians and Romance-language-speaking Vlachs resulted in the creation of a typical frontier society in the Lower Danube borderlands. This society was described in the sources as *Mixobarbaroi* or even *Mixhellenes*; to quote Ahrweiler once again:

> The term 'Mixobarbaroi' refers to cultural issues, and is used for those who filtered across the Danube and whose nomadic way of life interacted with sedentary traditions. However, the terms 'Mixhellenes' and 'Mixobarbaroi' used by the Byzantine authors of the eleventh and twelfth centuries should be studied in connection with the practice of mixed marriages in that area, which was inhabited by Christianized nomadic groups.[13]

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[10] Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 47–80.

[11] Hélène Ahrweiler**,** "Byzantine Concepts of the Foreigner: The Case of the Nomads," in *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*, eds H. Ahrweiler and A. Laiou, 1–15 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks 1998). (hereafter: Ahrweiler**,** "Byzantine Concepts")

[12] Ahrweiler**,** "Byzantine Concepts," 11.

[13] Ahrweiler**,** "Byzantine Concepts," 13.

Of course, Byzantium tried to resist the new migrants and to protect its territories on the Lower Danube. Some of the nomads were defeated and settled in various areas of the Byzantine *Dysis*. There was even an attempt to sedentarize the newly captured and baptized *stratiotai* of North Turkic origin in mountain or semi-mountain areas of modern western Bulgaria and Macedonia in order to change even the natural conditions around the newcomers from the steppe region. Another option were the vast forests between Niš and Belgrade, known to the crusaders as *Sylva Bulgarica* or *Deserta Bulgariae*, where they had to suffer attacks by such *Grenzwächte*r, who were recruited not only by the sparse local population but also by newly settled *stratiotai* of North Turkic origin.[14]

In both Hungary and Byzantium there was only one immediate option for sedentarization and assimilation of the nomads. It was their inclusion in the layer of the *bellatores*—the only class of a medieval society which was able to accept them without great difficulties. The nomads lacked the skills to be *laboratores* because of their way of life, in which agriculture had a lowly position compared to stock-breeding and war. Being in the best case newly baptized, they were also not able to penetrate the *ordo* of *oratores*. Thus, the only rational option for the authorities was to let them to enter the military class, of course, its lower parts. This enabled them, however, to keep to a certain extent their ancient traditions and clan structure and permitted them to play an independent political role in certain periods. Thus, in Hungary around the time of and after the Mongol attack Cumans were able to provoke a series of internal conflicts within the kingdom in an attempt to build up a strong pro-Cumanic lobby in the Hungarian court, especially successful in the reign of Ladislas IV the Cuman (1272–1290). Yet finally the Cumans lost this battle against the Hungarian nobility and the Church and were forced to accept strict rules for their integration into medieval Hungarian society.[15]

The Byzantine authorities took a different approach. They tried to disperse the nomadic settlers or captives in smaller units, to mix them with the local population, nevertheless using them in the only possible effective way—as

[14] Vassilka Tâpkova-Zaimova, "Les Mixobarbaroi et la situation politique et etnique au Bas-Danube pendant le seconde moitié du 11e siècle," in *Actes du 14e Congrès International des Études Byzantines,* eds M. Berza and E. Stanescu, 617–619 (Bucharest: Editura Academiei SRR, 1971); Krassimira Gagova, *Krystonosnite pohod i srednovekovna Bylgarija* (The Crusades and Medieval Bulgaria) (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sveti Kliment Ohridski," 2004), 9–118.

[15] Pálóczi-Horváth, *Pechenegs,* 68–85; Berend, *At the Gate*, 87–93.

soldiers. They never let them, however, penetrate the higher circles of the imperial elite, keeping them in the status of *stratiotai* or as small *pronoiars*.[16]

Despite this policy, the Byzantine Empire was not able to control its borderlands effectively on the Lower Danube. Here, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries a semi-independent Mixobarbarian society developed, whose links with Constantinople were very dependent on the balance of power between the center and the periphery.[17]

Thus, the revolt of the Assenides in 1185, which was followed by the foundation of the so-called Second Bulgarian state on the Lower Danube, was a product of a slow development of the local Mixobarbarian elite, in which already settled Cuman clans played an important part. The provincial society of Paristrion, being rather heterogenous by origin and culture, including Slavo-Bulgarians, Vlachs, and North Turkic (Pecheneg and Cuman) elements, was ripe for independence from the weakened center. Its attempt to revive the glorious tradition of the First Bulgarian State was regarded as a dangerous challenge to the Byzantine authorities. In their understanding, Bulgaria was an imperial province between Belgrade and Ohrid, constituted by Basil II himself, and its population only could be designated as Bulgarians. The Assenides and their followers were pejoratively called Vlachs in the sense of semi-nomadic shepherds, or in the best case *Mysoi*, thus restricting their influence to only north of the Balkan range.[18]

Finally Byzantium was forced to accept a new political reality and the emergence of a new "Bulgarian" state on the Lower Danube. This state was based on the local Mixobarbarian society, which chose Bulgarian identity not only because of the tradition, but also because of its anti-Byzantine content. Being of Cumanic or Vlacho-Cumanic origin, the Assenides, despite their clearly Bulgarian royal ideology, continued the active partnership with the large Cumanic diaspora north of the Danube, even after the success of their revolt. The Cumans, being mercenaries and allies, played a significant role in almost all the successful military campaigns of the Second Bulgarian state. They were also

[16] Angeliki E. Laiou, "Institutional Mechanisms of Integration," in *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of Byzantine Empire*, 161–181.

[17] Petre Diaconu, *Les Coumans au Bas-Danube aux XIe et XIIe siècles.* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei SRR, 1978).

[18] Genoveva Cankova-Petkova, "La liberation de la Bulgarie de la domination byzantine," *Byzantinobulgarica* 5 (1978); Petyr Petrov, *Vyzstanovjavane na bylgarskata dyrzhava,1185–1197* (Restoration of the Bulgarian State, 1185–1197) (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1985); Robert Lee Wolff, "The 'Second Bulgarian Empire.' Its Origin and History to 1204." *Speculum* 24 (1949): 167–207; Nicolae Tânâşoca, "De la Valachie des Assenides au Second Empire bulgare," *Revue de des Etudes Sud-Est Européennes* 3 (1981): 581–594.

able to capture the emperor of the Latin Empire of Constantinople, Baldwin of Flanders, in the famous battle by Adrianople (1205). People of Cumanic origin were in the highest circles of the Second Bulgarian State: the royal wife of the Tsars Kaloyan (1197–1207) and Boril (1207–1218) was of Cumanic origin; the Assenides themselves had clearly Cumanic names such as Asen, Boril, Belgun.[19]

After the Mongol attack in 1241 the position of the Cumans in Bulgaria was even strengthened. New waves of Cumanic refugees found shelter on Bulgarian soil, slowly forming a significant part of the local aristocracy. In the second half of the thirteenth and the fourteenth century one could find influential Cumanic families to rule large principalities, vaguely dependent on the capital Trnovo, with centers in Branichevo, Vidin, Krn-Kopsis, Karvuna. Two influential Cumanic families: the Terters and later the Shishmanides ruled the country as tsars almost without a break from 1280 to 1396. They were able to maintain a complicated alliance with the strong Golden Horde, sometime interpreted as "Tatar hegemony"—a term which does not present clearly the whole complexity of relations between Bulgaria and the Golden Horde, two countries with a strong Cumanic presence.[20]

Thus, in my opinion, the Second Bulgarian state represents a mixed model of how nomadic settlers could be integrated and assimilated into a sedentary society. As in Hungary, the Cumans settled *en masse* in the territories where the Second Bulgarian state was created. They formed not only a significant but a leading part of the aristocratic military elite, compensating in this way for the lack of a fully developed local military class. Unlike Hungary, there was no pressure or special legislation which forced the newcomers to take on Bulgarian identity. After their Christianization they merged with the local elite without difficulty. This is reminiscent of the integration of foreigners and nomads in the Byzantine Empire, where the acceptance of Orthodoxy was a strong step towards a Byzantine identity. The Second Bulgarian state—a product of the social development of a frontier Mixobarbarian society between the steppe region, the Byzantine and the Latin worlds—succeeded in filling a gap of power in this problematic end of the Pontic corridor for more than two centuries, until the Ottoman conquest, which changed the political realities in a vast region for a long time.

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[19] Ivan Bozhilov, *Familijata na Asenevtsi (1186–1460)* (The Family of the Assenides) (Sofia, Nauka i izkustvo, 1981); Plamen Pavlov, *Srednovekovna Bylgarijai i kumanite*, *1186–1241* (Medieval Bulgaria and the Cumans) (Veliko Trnovo: Universitetsko izdatelstvo, 1989).

[20] Vassil Zlatarski, *Istorija na srednovekovnata bylgarska dyrzhava* (The history of the medieval Bulgarian state), vol. 3 (Sofia: Marin Drinov, 1994); Petyr Nikov, *Bylgari I tatari prez srednite vekove* (Bulgarians and Tatars during the Middle Ages) (Sofia: Prosveshtenie, 1929).