

Prelude: Establishment and Survival of the Bulgar State, 679–803

By the third quarter of the seventh century Byzantium was reeling from blows inflicted by the Avars and Slavs in the Balkans, and by the Persians and Arabs in West Asia and Africa. The empire lost Syria, Palestine, and Egypt to militant Islamic Arab expansion, and with them went a wealth

The following works provided the basic informational framework for the text of this prelude: Theophanes, 497–646, *passim*; Nik. Pat., chaps. 35–82, *passim*; John Zonaras, *Epitome historiarum*, in *GIBI* 7, S. Lishev, et al., eds. (Sofia, 1968), chaps. 11–22, *passim*; *Voices*, 23; Bozhilov and Gyuzelev, pt. 2, chaps. 3–5; Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 176–321; Mutaſchiev, *IBN* 1, chaps. IV–V; *IB* 2, pt. II, chaps. 1–2; Tzvetkov, 76, 95–106; I. Andreev, *Bŭlgarskite hanove i tsare, VII–XIV vek: Istoriko-bronologichen spravochnik* (Sofia, 1988), 8–28; Ts. Stepanov, *The Bulgars and the Steppe Empire in the Early Middle Ages: The Problem of the Others* (Leiden, 2010); P. Petrov, *Obrazuvane na bŭlgarskata dŭrzhava*; *IB* 5 VI, 73–78; V. Primov, “Bulgaria in the Eighth Century. A General Outline,” *Bb* 5 (Sofia, 1978), 7–40; id., “The Creation of the First Bulgarian State and European History,” *BHR* 1, no. 2 (1973): 37–51; Runciman, *A History*, 22–50; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, chaps. 2, 5–10; Sophoulis, chaps. 2–4; Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, chaps. 2–3; Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 81–90; Ostrogorsky, *History*, chaps. II–III.; Treadgold, *A History*, chaps. 9–12; id., *Byzantium and Its Army*, chaps. 1, 3, 6; Whittow, 270–276; R.J.H. Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries, A.D. 610–1071* (London, 1966), chaps. 4–7; *NCMH* 2, R. McKitterick, ed. (Cambridge, 1995), 228–234; Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, chap. 2.

of human, material, and commercial resources that had bolstered the East Roman Empire for centuries past. In the Balkans, the raids of the Avars and their Slavic allies, coupled with a flood of Slavic settlement, had driven much of the native Roman population to the coasts or into the mountains in search of protection from the intruders' ravages. The majority of interior urban settlements were abandoned or shriveled to the size of villages while most of the countryside was controlled by *Sklaviniai* established by Slavic settlers. Only Thrace and some Balkan coastlines, with their fortified cities and access to the sea, remained under direct imperial authority. Compounding the empire's woes was the collapse of its army. Although the eastern forces were undergoing stopgap reorganization into themes behind the protection of Anatolia's southeastern mountains, the army in the Balkans had melted away before the Avar and Slav inundations.

There were faint signs of a silver lining in the empire's generally gloomy situation. The imperial fleet commanded the eastern Mediterranean, defeating an Arab blockade of Constantinople in 674–678, and providing naval protection for the population huddled along the Balkans' Adriatic and Aegean coasts. The majority of the inhabitants in the lands lost to the Arabs in the east were staunch Monophysite heretics who had plagued the empire's Christian administration for centuries. Their loss contributed to fashioning a more uniform imperial Orthodox religious ideology. The new theme-based military organization in Anatolia displayed signs of stabilizing the military and administrative situations in the region while the empire's Muslim Arab enemies were weakened by civil wars over the legitimate succession to the Islamic prophet-prince, Muhammad (622–632). In the Balkans, the Avar *kaganate* had slipped into decline following a failed assault on Constantinople in 626, leaving the Slavic *Sklaviniai* spread throughout the peninsula independent, disunited, and weakened. Given Byzantium's political, social, and cultural superiority, it appeared only a matter of time before the empire brought those primitive Slavic settlers under its authority and again exerted control over the imperial territories they inhabited.

Appearances regarding the Slavs in the Balkans proved deceiving, however, because the Bulgars arrived on the Danube in the late 670s.

Following the breakup of Great Bulgaria during the 660s under pressure from the Turkic Khazars, the Onogur Bulgars divided into five hordes, each led by a son of the deceased Great Bulgarian *han*,

Kubrat. One group remained in the homeland north of the Caucasus and fell under Khazar authority. Another fled north and settled near the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers in present-day Russia, becoming known as the Volga Bulgars. The other three hordes were pushed westward by the Khazars, two of which entered Pannonia, some falling in with the Avars and others pushing into northeastern Italy before finally settling down. The largest group, constituting the Onogur Bulgars' main branch, was driven along the Black Sea coast until finding refuge in a naturally defended region, bordered by rivers and marshes, called the Onglos, north of the Danube in southern Moldavia in the 670s.

This last group was led by Asparuh (or Isperih), Kubrat's third son. He headed a horde of some 100,000 followers, 10,000 of whom were warriors. Taking advantage of the favorable terrain, Asparuh built a fortified camp to serve as a fortress and base for raiding expeditions.¹ In 679 his raiders crossed the Danube and began terrorizing the Slavic communities inhabiting Dobrudzha, which, similar to the adjoining Danubian Plain, was a region the Byzantine authorities considered imperial territory despite the lack of any formal administrative presence. When news of Bulgar inroads in Dobrudzha reached Emperor Constantine IV) (668–685), who had recently broken the Arab blockade of his capital and defeated a Slavic assault on Thessaloniki (July 677), he determined to expel the Bulgars from former imperial territory and reduce them to Byzantine client frontier buffer forces.

In summer 680 Constantine launched an attack against the Bulgars in the Onglos, entertaining high hopes of making short work of Asparuh's earthworks and imposing imperial suzerainty on the Bulgars. Unfortunately, poor staff work left him ill-prepared to tackle the natural obstacles protecting the Bulgar stronghold, and an unexpected drop in his army's morale led to ignominious defeat and retreat. Following the Byzantine debacle, the Bulgars overran Dobrudzha and the eastern Danubian Plain. Asparuh realized those lands offered more advantages than the featureless and sparsely populated steppes. They enjoyed natural borders defined by the Danube, the Balkan Mountains, and the Black Sea. Their open fields offered pasturage for his warriors' horses and were populated by Slavic communities, the Severi and the *Sklavinia* of the Seven Tribes. Asparuh spent a year consolidating his control over the two regions, subjugating or reducing to tributaries their Slavic inhabitants.

With Bulgar warriors beginning to raid Byzantine territories south of the Balkan Mountains, Emperor Constantine negotiated a peace agreement with Asparuh, freeing him to rebuild the thematic forces wrecked during the recent campaign. The treaty concluded in autumn 681 was the first in which the Byzantines officially relinquished former Balkan imperial lands by recognizing the existence of a foreign state controlling the peninsula's Dobrudzhan and lower Danubian territories. Asparuh also was granted annual tribute and ruled a Bulgar state stretching from the Dniester River on the steppes to the Balkan Mountains.

Having won official recognition from Byzantium, Asparuh organized his state's defenses and solidified his authority by placing a Bulgar governmental infrastructure into operation. The subject Slavs were transplanted *en masse* from their original homes on the plains to frontier regions for service as the state's border guards. The Seven Tribes were moved to face the Avar *kaganate* and the Severi were relocated to the eastern Balkan Mountains to guard the crucial mountain passes and Black Sea coastal road against future Byzantine threats. The Slavic tribes were permitted a measure of local autonomy under native *zhupani* so long as they paid tribute in kind and supplied military forces when required. Interior defensive positions were established behind the frontiers by erecting a series of earthworks.

The Slavic population transfers rendered the heartlands of the state—Dobrudzha and the eastern Danubian Plain—exclusive Bulgar preserves, settled and worked by Bulgars who soon became mixed pastoralists-agriculturalists. In the southeast, Asparuh erected Pliska, which later evolved into the state's capital. More a fortified encampment resembling those built for wintering on the steppes than a traditional European city, Pliska was surrounded by an extensive earthwork encompassing an area within which the entire Bulgar population and its animals could find refuge in times of need. At its center stood a similar but less extensive fortification enclosing a small area housing the *han's* residence and throne hall, religious structures, and the dwellings of high court officials and commanders. Although the segregation of Bulgars and Slavs eroded over time, for most of the eighth century Byzantine sources distinguished between Bulgars and Slavs when describing their enemy's military forces or population.²

Shortly after concluding the treaty Constantine IV introduced the theme system into the Balkans by establishing the theme of Thrace. Sometime in the 690s his son and successor Justinian II

(685–695; 705–711) founded the second Balkan theme of Hellas as a mixed naval and land theme.³ Other than a chain of fortified port-cities along the Adriatic coast and their immediate hinterlands, by the end of the seventh century all Balkan territories lying outside the confines of those two themes were not imperial lands and were fair game for acquisition by the Bulgar outsiders.

To create his new Hellas theme, in 688 Justinian II moved against the *Sklaviniai* and a minor branch of Bulgars in Western Thrace and southern Macedonia. He advanced through Western Thrace to Thessaloniki, crushing all Bulgar and Slav resistance, collecting thousands of captives, and imposing imperial authority over the *Sklaviniai* in his path. After embarking his captives on ships bound for Bythinia, he marched out of Thessaloniki for Constantinople along the *Via Egnatia*, confident that the region's *Sklaviniai* were subdued, but he was ambushed and defeated in a southern Rhodope mountain pass by Bulgars and Slavs, barely escaping with his life.

Justinian II later played an active role in shaping Bulgar state history. In 695 he was deposed as emperor and exiled to Khazaria, where he was treated with honor and married a Khazar princess. After Byzantine agents persuaded the Khazar ruler to assassinate him in return for imperial favors, in late 704 Justinian fled by boat across the Black Sea to the Bulgar state, whose *han* was a recipient of annual imperial largess and thus considered a client by the Byzantines.

When Justinian arrived on Bulgar territory, Asparuh was dead and a new Dulo *han* ruled the Bulgar state—Tervel (700/701–721). Justinian offered him increased future tribute and gifts in return for military assistance in his regaining the imperial throne. In 705 Tervel gathered his army and advanced southward through Thrace to Constantinople, encountering little opposition because the region's thematic force was caught by surprise. Tervel and Justinian spent three days unsuccessfully attempting to gain entry to the city, but on the evening of the third night Justinian discovered an unguarded channel in the Aqueduct of Valens leading into the city. While Tervel's forces occupied the attention of the capital's defense forces, he crawled through the tunnel with a few followers, rallied additional supporters within the capital, seized control of the Blakhernai area with little difficulty, and caused confusion within the city. Emperor Tiberios Apsimar (698–705) fled and all resistance ended. After a decade of exile, Justinian again sat on Byzantium's imperial throne, thanks to the assistance provided by Han Tervel.

Justinian lavished Tervel with honors and gifts, proclaiming him caesar (Gr: *kaisar*), a title second only to that of emperor in prestige. An immense amount of money, weapons, and expensive silks was sent to the Bulgar camp.⁴ The honors bestowed on Tervel by Justinian proved beneficial for consolidating the young Bulgar state. He was the first foreign ruler to receive the Byzantine title of caesar. The wealth granted him signified an increase in annual tribute paid him by Byzantium. His actions in 705 strengthened his state internally by further cementing his subjects' sense of loyalty to Bulgar central authority, increased foreign recognition of the state, and displayed to the Balkan *Sklaviniai* that the Bulgars offered a viable alternative to Byzantium regarding future affiliations.

The Bulgars' peaceful relations with Byzantium did not last long. In 708 Justinian, realizing that his Bulgar ally had emerged stronger and more dangerous as a result of 705, launched an attack on them but was routed outside Ankhialos. The victory assured Tervel's continued reception of large tribute payments and solidified the Bulgar state's standing as a regional Balkan power. The defeat contributed to Justinian's overthrow and death three years later (711).

Following his victory at Ankhialos, Tervel assumed a consistently threatening stance toward Byzantium. By 716 Theodosios III (715–717) sat unsteadily on the Byzantine throne. Faced with internal disorders and intensified warfare with the Arabs in Anatolia, Theodosios settled matters with the Bulgars in a treaty encompassing four main issues. First, a fixed border was drawn separating the two states. Second, the annual tribute paid the Bulgar *han* was increased in value. Third, a mutual exchange of captives, emigrants, and refugees was implemented. Last, trade between the two states was normalized and officially regulated.⁵ After 35 years of official existence, the treaty demonstrated that the Bulgar state was evolving into a European power of note. Soon after its conclusion, events placed the Bulgars in the European international spotlight, cementing especially their military reputation.

While Tervel entrenched his state's position in the Balkans, developments within the Arab *khalifate* took a turn boding ill for Christian Europeans. In 711 North African Arab forces crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and began the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, threatening the Frank state in the west. Meanwhile, Arab Syrian forces, commanded by Maslama, increased pressure against Byzantine Anatolia, contributing to instability within Byzantium's leadership. On both fronts, the Muslim

warriors were eager to continue advances against the Christians and Khalife Sulayman (715–717) was sympathetic and obliging. As a result, Christian Europe was caught between eastern and western pincers of militant Islam.

Sulayman ordered Maslama to advance against Constantinople. News of the assault spread rapidly, leading to the overthrow of Emperor Theodosios in spring 717 and his replacement by the *strategos* of the Anatolikon theme, Leo III the Syrian (717–741). Leo needed assistance to fend off the powerful Arab forces advancing on his capital by land and sea and turned to the only practical ally available, the neighboring Bulgar state. Tervel understood the danger posed for his realm should Byzantium be defeated and agreed to join forces with Leo.

The Arab siege of Constantinople began in summer 717 with an investment of the city by land and a naval blockade. From the beginning, the besiegers on land were forced to fight on two fronts, one against the Byzantines behind their impregnable land walls and the other against the Bulgars, who assailed them from Thrace. The Byzantine navy and the walls' defenders repulsed every attempt to breach the city's defenses by water and land while Tervel's men played havoc with Arab efforts to sortie or forage in the Thracian countryside. The siege dragged on through the severe winter of 717–718, with Maslama's efforts making little headway and his men suffering from the inordinate cold and widespread hunger caused by the Bulgars effective squelching of their foraging attempts. The end for Arab operations came in August 718 when Maslama made a last desperate attempt to break through the ring of Tervel's surrounding troops. The Arab assault was smashed and Tervel's men inflicted a terrible toll in casualties. With all hope of success gone, Maslama evacuated his remaining troops and the great siege of Constantinople ended. The surviving Arabs limped back across Anatolia to Syria while their fleet was destroyed by a storm on the Sea of Marmara.⁶

Fourteen years later, in 732 at Poitiers, the Franks under Charles Martel defeated a large armed raid into French territories by the Iberian Arabs, thus containing them south of the Pyrenees Mountains. Taken together, the two victories at Constantinople and Poitiers were viewed by contemporaries and later commentators as the most decisive events in early medieval European history. Because the attack on Constantinople was conducted by the forces of the *khalifate* itself, many in Europe held that, of the two, the victory at Constantinople was the more significant, in which the Bulgars had played a significant role. Tervel's effective

intervention as a Byzantine ally bestowed a level of international status on the Bulgar state that elevated it to a recognized European power.

Following the battles before Constantinople, little is known of the Bulgar state's internal developments from the 720s to the 750s because primary sources are scarce. This lack of sources renders any description of Bulgar affairs during the first half of the eighth century tentative.

The early Bulgar state seems to have been typically steppe nomadic in nature, ruled by an autocratic *han*, a title directly inherited from Western Turk rulers. Associations with the Western Turks also were apparent in the name of the ruling clan—Dulo—which had been that of a Western Turk leading family. Also typical was the Bulgars' political structure, which divided authority between inner and outer clans within the ruling elite and elevated all Bulgars above their Slavic tributaries, who participated in the state only as subjects. Further evidence linking the Balkan Bulgar state to Turkic cultural traditions was the nature of the Bulgars' primary settlement at Pliska, with its resemblance to a steppe encampment, and a Bulgar tradition of stone relief carvings and inscriptions found scattered throughout the eastern Danubian Plain.

There also is evidence for Byzantine cultural influences on the early Bulgar state. The Bulgar stone inscriptions were mostly written in Greek, using Greek characters rather than Turkic runes. Their content included names of Bulgars bearing Byzantine titles, Byzantine terminology, and the general use of Byzantine dating systems. This would indicate that the Bulgars made use of imperial models in political and administrative matters, that they maintained direct relations with the imperial court, and that they probably used members of their Romanized subjects as government functionaries from an early date.

Both the Turkic and Byzantine traditions worked together to shape a viable Bulgar state. The former provided an elite ruling warrior class dedicated to a strongly centralized, independent state ruled by an autocratic *han*. They upheld the ruler's authority, defended and expanded the state's borders, and ensured that the subject population remained loyal and provided what was required. In return, the ruler guaranteed them a dominant position within the state, their monopoly on all important military-administrative offices, and their well-being *vis-à-vis* their peers and inferior non-Bulgar subjects. The latter tradition imparted an ideal geared toward fashioning a sedentary, sophisticated state that could take advantage of skills—record keeping, court ceremonial, and bureaucratic talent—possessed by non-Bulgars as well as

Bulgars. The two traditions combined to forge a viable state in the true sense of the word.

The state's population was unevenly divided between Bulgars and non-Bulgars. The Bulgars constituted a minority and were concentrated on the right bank of the Danube throughout Dobrudzha and the eastern Danubian Plain. They conducted a mixed pastoral and agricultural economy and probably undertook barter trade with imperial territories to the south. The Slavs were the state's majority population and consisted of sedentary agriculturalists living in villages concentrated on the the state's borders, providing military recruits and paying tribute in kind to their Bulgar overlords. They existed in tribal groups led by native chiefs. The *Sklavinia* of the Seven Tribes enjoyed a confederative structure while other Slavic tribes, other than the Severi, were more nominal tributaries than outright subjects. Almost nothing is known regarding the existence of indigenous Thracians and Dacians, who inhabited the state's territories prior to the advent of the Slavs and Bulgars. Initially the Bulgars attempted to maintain their segregation from their Slavic subjects, but ethnic intermixing of the two peoples started at an early date.⁷

With the death of the last Dulo *han*, Sevar (738–753/754), in 753, the stability that had characterized the Bulgar state since its founding ended. Sevar's successor, Vineh (753/754–760), was a scion of the Vokil (or Ukil) clan and his successor was from another, after whom the succession again reverted to the Vokils. Such developments indicate that Bulgar central authority became hostage to clan rivalries with the extinction of the Dulos and remained so during the second half of the eighth century.

Divisiveness within the Bulgar leadership could not have occurred at a worse time. During the period of their state's consolidation, the Bulgars were free of significant Byzantine threats since Byzantium suffered its own stint of instability surrounding the imperial throne and was faced with Arab pressures from the east. That situation in Byzantium ended with the accession of Emperor Leo III and the Arab defeat at Constantinople, which led to the consolidation of imperial control over most of Anatolia and the dampening of the *khalifate's* threat from being potentially fatal to one primarily local. Leo enacted effective stabilizing legal reforms, but his parallel Orthodox church reform, known as Iconoclasm, was ideologically simplifying while emotionally divisive for the empire's subjects. The fact that the army, the most important institution upholding imperial stability and security, generally supported

Iconoclasm prevented the popular divisiveness from undermining central authority.⁸

Leo's son and successor Constantine V surpassed his father both as a military commander and an Iconoclast. After 14 years of successful military operations against the Arabs, those attributes of their leader became indelibly linked in the minds of most Byzantine troopers. The army's loyalty enabled Constantine to overcome coup attempts, restructure the theme organization to stifle *strategoi* rebellions, and create the corps of professional tagmatic units to serve as an elite strike force and counterweight to the militia-like provincial thematic forces. By the 750s, with affairs in Anatolia stabilizing, Constantine turned his attention to the Balkans and the Bulgars.

Constantine sought to rebuild the empire's demographic base in its Balkan holdings, thereby creating a strong defensive bastion against Bulgar threats and establishing a firm springboard for future expansion on the peninsula. In 755 he gathered colonists from Armenia and northern Syria for resettlement in Thrace, transferred them to the Balkans, and erected a series of fortresses along his border with the Bulgar state. Han Vineh interpreted those activities as a breach of the 716 treaty and demanded additional tribute in compensation. After Constantine insultingly dismissed the Bulgar request, Vineh turned to militarily addressing the situation. In late summer 755 he raided through Thrace, causing much destruction and capturing numerous prisoners. All went well until the raiders reached the Long Wall of Anastasios, where they were struck by Constantine leading his new tagmatic units in an effective counterattack. Vineh's lines broke and the Bulgars fled northward for the safety of the Balkan Mountains, suffering appalling casualties. So began the early Bulgar state's two-decade-long struggle for survival.

Beginning in the following year, Constantine initiated a concerted military effort to solidify Byzantium's presence in the Balkans by bringing the Bulgars to heel. He opened with a two-pronged assault on the Bulgar state in 756, dispatching a contingent of troops on ships to the mouth of the Danube for an amphibious operation against the Bulgars' Dobrudzhan heartland while he led another detachment overland against Vineh's main forces guarding the passes through the eastern Balkan Mountains. The campaign ended when Vineh was defeated outside the fortress of Markellai and forced to sue for peace.⁹ Constantine followed that victory with a successful campaign of conquest against the southern Macedonian Slavs in 758, guaranteeing Byzantine control over the

northern Aegean coastline between Thrace and Thessaloniki. He then turned on Vineh and the Bulgars in 759 but his invasion force was caught, ambushed, and defeated in Rish (Gr: Veregava) Pass while traversing the Balkan Mountains.¹⁰ Vineh failed to follow the Rish victory with offensive actions of his own and was overthrown as *han* by a *boil* uprising in 760. Telets (760–763) was installed as the new *han*.

To satisfy the militant ambitions of the warriors who raised him to the throne and to replenish his state's manpower with fresh captive subjects, Telets raided Byzantine northern Thrace, capturing inhabitants and laying waste a number of fortresses and villages. Constantine reacted in 763 by launching another combined land and amphibious operation, which brought Telets to battle near Ankhialos in June. After heavy fighting the Bulgars were routed. The numerous Bulgar captives from the battle later were executed in front of Constantinople's Golden Gate.¹¹ Telets was killed by his own *boili* soon after and replaced with Sabin (or Sivin; 763–766), who proved a weak and ineffective ruler.¹²

Constantine, aware of the divisions plaguing the Bulgar leadership, took the opportunity to definitively put the Bulgars in their place. He again resorted to his favorite grand tactical approach and organized a new combined land and sea operation aimed at striking the weakened state before it could stabilize. In 766 he led his tagmatic units and some Thracian *themata* overland to the foot of the Balkan Mountains and the Rish Pass while a large thematic force from Anatolia was dispatched by sea to north of Mesembria for an invasion of Bulgar territory. Before the disembarkation of the amphibious troops got much underway, a violent wind storm blew up, wrecking most of the ships. Thousands of men caught on the floundering vessels drowned. With the largest component of his combined operation destroyed, the emperor called off the offensive and returned to Constantinople.¹³

Sabin thought that the Byzantine debacle presented a good opportunity for renegotiating peace with the empire on favorable terms. Such overtures alienated many *boili*, who called a general assembly of Bulgar warriors, at which the opposition accused Sabin of pandering to the Byzantines to the detriment of the state. Matters quickly degenerated and the assembly was followed by rebellion. Sabin and most of his clan followers fled the state for Constantinople, seeking and winning Constantine's protection. His successor Umar (766) lasted on the throne a mere 40 days before being overthrown by the fractious clan leaders. A new *han*, Toktu (766–767), was proclaimed but he could not mend the

rifts splitting the Bulgar leadership. In 767 he was killed while combating invading Byzantine raiders in southern Dobrudzha.

Constantine maintained active pressure on the shaky Bulgar state after recovering from the failed campaign in 766. Pagan (767–768), the new Bulgar *han*, had his hands tied by continued infighting among the *boili*. Realizing that he needed to blunt imperial pressures on his state to end the leadership crisis and rebuild military morale, Pagan headed a delegation to Constantinople for negotiating a new treaty. When they met with Constantine in the capital, the former *han*, Sabin, appeared seated in the emperor's company. Before treaty discussions commenced, Pagan and the *boili* endured an insulting reprimand from Constantine for their ongoing disorderly actions and for the hatred they had displayed toward Sabin. Having dressed down the supplicant Bulgars, Constantine concluded with them a spurious new peace treaty (767/768).

The treaty was spurious because Constantine displayed no intention of abiding by its terms. While the talks were in progress, he had Slavun, *zhupan* of the Severi Slavs and loyal Bulgar commander, kidnapped and executed.¹⁴ The Bulgar delegation had little recourse but to accept Slavun's loss and embrace the treaty dictated by Constantine, despite knowing their state was further weakened. Constantine did not waste time before striking. In 768 he led troops through the mostly unguarded passes in the eastern Balkan Mountains onto the southern Danubian Plain, where they burned a number of *auls* and villages, but were turned back by unexpectedly effective Bulgar resistance. Despite weathering the Byzantine invasion, Pagan did not long survive its conclusion. The *boili* held him responsible for the poorly guarded borders and rejected his reluctance to follow up the incursion's successful repulse. In attempting to flee the state for Byzantium, Pagan was murdered in Varna by his servants.¹⁵

With the acquisition of the Bulgar throne by Telerig (768–777), the internecine clan strife among the state's leadership dampened in degree. Within six years the new *han* reined in the *boil* conflicts and attained a measure of internal stability, granting the Bulgar state a short period to lick its wounds. Between 768 and 774 Emperor Constantine was preoccupied with domestic matters surrounding Iconoclasm and renewed Arab problems in Anatolia. The period of internal consolidation and calm under Telerig stood the Bulgar state in good stead when the emperor again turned his attention to the Balkans in 774.

Constantine sought to achieve an easy victory over the weakened Bulgar state to bolster his domestic position and military reputation after some tarnishing defeats in the east. Resorting to the combined land and sea operations often used in past campaigns, in May 774 he dispatched his thematic cavalry forces by land against the eastern Balkan Mountain passes while he sailed for the mouth of the Danube with the rest of his troops. When Constantine reached Varna, he was met by a delegation from Telerig requesting a peaceful settlement before actual fighting erupted. For reasons unknown, the emperor complied and a treaty was struck in which both sides renounced further offensive undertakings.¹⁶

With the Byzantine menace momentarily dampened, Telerig turned to replenishing his subject population after the years of warfare with Byzantium. In October 774 he dispatched a force of 12,000 warriors to the region of Berzitia, somewhere in northeastern Macedonia, with orders to subjugate the territory and transfer its Slavic population to locations inside the state. Constantine learned of the plan from “secret friends” among the Bulgar *boili*. He gathered a large force and marched rapidly to Berzitia, intent on preventing the Bulgars from replenishing their numbers and extending their influence into Macedonia. The forces met at Lithosoria and the Byzantines achieved complete tactical surprise, routing the Bulgars while suffering few casualties. Constantine returned to Constantinople and celebrated a triumph commemorating his victory in what became known in Byzantium as the “Noble War.”¹⁷

Constantine considered Telerig’s activities in Berzitia a breach of the Varna accord and in the following year (775) organized a new combined land and sea operation against him. Misfortune struck the expedition as the fleet was wrecked by a storm on approaching Mesembria, leading Constantine to cancel the operation. Telerig then demonstrated that he had learned the wiles of Byzantine diplomacy. Convinced Constantine was being furnished intelligence by informants among his *boili*, and aware that the emperor relished hosting royal refugees for diplomatic use, Telerig contacted Constantine feigning a wish to flee to the empire and asking for imperial protection. He included a request for the names of the emperor’s “friends” in Pliska who could help in the matter. Constantine duly forwarded Telerig a list of his confidants at the Bulgar court. That list constituted a death warrant for Byzantine informants in Pliska.¹⁸

Enraged at the Bulgar *han*’s duplicity, Constantine organized a campaign to avenge Telerig’s affront to imperial dignity. In August 775 he

led his troops northward but, before they advanced far into Thrace, the emperor was struck down by a high fever and died. His death was greeted with joy among the Bulgars but, for Telerig, the euphoria swiftly changed to dread. Although nothing factual is known, reemerging strife within the highest circles of the Bulgar governing elite led Telerig to do what previously he had only feigned. In 777 he fled the state for the empire fearing for his life. The new emperor, Leo IV (775–780), received and took a liking to him. Telerig soon embraced Christianity, married a cousin of Leo's empress, and joined the Byzantine patrician elite.

Emperor Constantine V's death and the acquisition of the Bulgar throne by Telerig's successor Kardam (777–803) heralded the end of the Bulgar state's eighth-century struggle for survival. Each of those events terminated an important facet of that strife. The emperor's death closed the potentially fatal foreign military threat from Byzantium while Kardam's reign resulted in dampening the equally threatening problem of endemic clan divisiveness within the Bulgar leadership by tentatively cementing the *han's* supreme authority. Certain scholarly hypotheses have arisen regarding the nature of both threats.

Constantine V's struggles with the Bulgar state have frequently been characterized as conscious efforts to annihilate the Bulgar state by an emperor fixated on its destruction. Whether his military intention was Bulgar obliteration, however, can be questioned. In every successful campaign, he never attempted to deliver an utterly decisive blow by destroying the defeated, often shattered, Bulgar forces. Nor did he attempt to capture Pliska, the Bulgars' capital, which would have forced the total surrender of the Bulgar government. He kept his military operations confined within localized bounds. The objectives of those campaigns that failed cannot be assumed to have been total Bulgar destruction, given the outcomes of those that succeeded. In all peace negotiations, he explicitly recognized the continued existence of the Bulgar state. It appears he was more concerned with protecting and increasing the population of imperial territories—with his fortress building, population transfers, southern Macedonian conquests, and prevention of Bulgar expansion—than with annihilating the Bulgar state. That the Bulgars came close to collapsing under the military pressures of his campaigns speaks more about Bulgar inability to withstand the full military might of an enemy undistracted by concerns in the east than about intractable anti-Bulgar motivations on Constantine's part.¹⁹

Regarding the internal threat to Bulgar state existence, the lack of sources treating Bulgar domestic affairs renders the actual causes and social-political dimensions of the divisiveness indiscernible. This factual vacuum has been filled by interpretive hypotheses, two of which enjoy popularity among scholars.

One hypothesis emphasizes domestic issues and assumes ethnic antagonisms between Bulgars and Slavs over dominance within the state lay at the heart of the crisis. In this case, a pro-Bulgar leadership party sought to preserve political dominance and held an unbridled antagonism toward the Byzantines. A pro-Slav opposition party fought to expand Slavic representation in governing circles and looked to Byzantium for assistance. The other premise focuses on foreign policy matters and supposedly stemmed from conflicting pro- and anti-Byzantine policies within the ruling elite. The former party favored peaceful relations with Byzantium to stifle threats by the empire and were sympathetic to Byzantine cultural influences. The latter party considered their domestic opponents traitors and held that only complete political and cultural independence, upheld by constant vigilance and military efforts, was acceptable. The anti-Byzantine party emphasized self-defense and active resistance to Byzantium. Because the Slavs served as the state's first line of frontier defenders and were in daily contact with Byzantine border forces, they formed an important component of this latter party.²⁰

Both of the above postulates are contradictory and seemingly confuted by the few facts found in the sources. The Slavic party could not have been both pro-Byzantine, according to the ethnic perspective, but anti-Byzantine within the foreign policy approach. Since both Sabin and his replacement Pagan sought peace with Byzantium, they should have belonged to the same pro-Byzantine party, but the meeting with Constantine V in Constantinople (767/768) made it clear they were not. Both of these traditional hypotheses should be viewed with a large dose of critical doubt. They may provide insight into what actually occurred but, just as likely, other factors were as, or more, important.

Perhaps having to face the full military might of Byzantium for the first time since entering the Balkans resulted in military disasters that shook the confidence of the Bulgar leadership. With no traditional dynastic clan enjoying unquestioned loyalty once the Dulos died out, any clan could stake its claim to the royal legacy, resulting in bloody coups, shifting clan alliances, and the refusal of some clans to accept the authority of others. Maybe unknown affairs with the Avars or Khazars

contributed to dividing priorities within Bulgar ruling circles. Add to this possible mix the presence of Byzantine agents and sympathizers and the varying military and political capabilities of those who became *han*, and it grows obvious that the eighth-century domestic political crisis probably was multi-faceted, extending beyond the two standard theories noted above. Fortunately for the state, the divisiveness was generally confined to the top leadership while the majority of warriors remained largely unaffected by the rifts, retaining their loyalty to political traditions and their determination to remain independent from the empire. The warriors' steadfastness provided the foundation for stabilizing the internal political situation by century's end.²¹

Although the details are unknown, the new *han*, Kardam, ended the divisiveness within the clan leadership in some fashion and consolidated the supreme power of the *han's* office, becoming the first Bulgar ruler since Sevar to remain in power until suffering a natural death. Emperor Leo IV was succeeded by the youth Constantine VI (780–797) and his mother-regent Eirene (797–802). Problems with the Arabs in the east monopolized those rulers' attention for another five years, granting Kardam a period of peace and the freedom to concentrate solely on domestic matters, which helps account for his success in addressing his state's domestic problems.

Kardam's cures for the internal political crisis were first tested in 784 when Empress-regent Eirene conducted a triumphal-like tour through the empire's Thracian borderlands fronting the Bulgar state, regions that the empress had recently repopulated with colonists from the east. At the head of a large military force, Eirene wended her way to Beroia (m: Stara Zagora) and had the town fortified. The walls of Ankhialos were repaired and an imperial visit to Philippopolis was made before she returned to the capital. Kardam patiently bided his time, unwilling to precipitate a major conflict with Byzantium at the time. He instead sent troops into northeastern Macedonia, to the upper Struma River region, in hopes of winning authority over the local Slavic inhabitants and strengthening the Bulgars' position against possible renewed imperial threats.²²

In 789 a Byzantine thematic raiding force led by the *strategos* of Thrace, Philetos, advanced up the Struma valley into northern Macedonian regions infiltrated by the Bulgars. His camp was overrun by Bulgar-Slav forces and he was killed. Soon after that defeat, Empress Eirene created the theme of Macedonia, which encompassed Western

Thrace and parts of Thrace proper and lay to the east of geographic Macedonia, to consolidate control over the northern Aegean coastal regions and prevent Bulgar raiders from reaching farther south.²³

In the following year, at the age of 19, Constantine VI removed his mother from power temporarily and claimed undivided possession of the imperial throne. By spring 791 he felt able to avenge the Struma defeat by undertaking his first independent military campaign against the Bulgars. He led his troops into Thrace as far as the fortress of Probaton (m: Sinnaköy), northeast of Adrianople. Nearby, Kardam and his warriors met the emperor in the late afternoon and a serious skirmish ensued until nightfall ended the combat. The inexperienced Constantine withdrew his troops without expanding the fighting into a full-blown battle and Kardam, content with the Byzantine retreat, pulled back behind his border.²⁴

Two years later Constantine again moved against the Bulgars, who had recently begun raiding northern Thrace while he had been occupied in the east. In summer 792 Constantine marched a large army, many of whose troopers had no experience fighting the Bulgars, north to Markellai, where he made camp and began repairing the walls of the fortress, which had been damaged in the recent Bulgar raiding. Kardam collected his own large force, now well trained and eager for a fight after a decade of peace, and took up a fortified position on the mountain slopes north of Markellai. On 20 July Constantine recklessly attacked the waiting Bulgars and suffered a disastrous defeat. Kardam's men overran the Byzantine camp, capturing a large amount of prisoners and booty, including the emperor's tent and all its contents.²⁵

Following the battle Kardam spent four more years consolidating his authority at home, bolstered by his victory at Markellai. At the same time, Constantine was preoccupied with his own domestic troubles surrounding his powerful mother and discontented military commanders and government officials. To secure peace with the Bulgars while he dealt with his problems, he agreed to pay Kardam annual tribute. In 796 Kardam sent a haughty message to the emperor demanding increased tribute under the threat of devastating Thrace and marching to Constantinople's Golden Gate. Although he was a weak and incompetent ruler, Constantine did not lack panache. He sent the Bulgar *han* a package of horse dung as tribute and a challenge to meet him in battle. The two hosts met in Thrace near the fortress of Versinikia, northeast of Adrianople. Displaying new found discretion, Constantine refused to

initiate battle. Kardam, for his part, was in no rush to commence hostilities. The two armies sat in place watching one another for 17 days until Kardam, unwilling to risk the possibility of outright defeat, withdrew northward and retrenched behind his border. Constantine, following Kardam's lead, also retired, dispatching his troops to their respective themes. Active military operations petered out, with the Byzantines winning a victory of sorts since Thrace was not devastated and Constantine stopped tribute payments to the Bulgar ruler.²⁶

With the fizzling out of that campaign, the Bulgar state was granted another decade of peace by Byzantium, during which Kardam's efforts to consolidate central political authority apparently took root. He demonstrated that a strong ruler resulted in a strong military, and that a strong military prevented the danger of a fatal Byzantine threat. Although he did not decisively defeat the empire, he bested it, and by doing so made it clear that the days of Constantine V were over. Byzantium could no longer deal the Bulgar state continuous, life-threatening blows at will. The Bulgars had weathered the internal and military crises of the second half of the eighth century and, having survived, stood poised for the rise to empire that followed.

NOTES

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3. C. Head, *Justinian II of Byzantium* (Madison, WI, 1972), 83.
4. Suidas, *Lexicon*, entry "Bulgars," given in *Voices*, 23.
5. Theophanes, 681.
6. Ibid., 545–546; Zonaras, 158; the *Synaxarion of the Constantinople Church* in *BVIpid* 1, D. Angelov, comp. and ed. (Sofia, 1977), 95–96; Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)* 2, J.-B. Chabot, trans. and ed. (Paris, 1901), 485; V. Gyuzelev, "La participation des bulgares à l'échec du siège arabe de Constantinople en 717–718," *EH* 10 (Sofia, 1980): 91–113; B. Primov, "Za ikonomicheskata i politicheska rolya na pŭrvata bŭlgarska dŭrzhava v mezhdunarodnite odnosheniya na srednovekovna Evropa," *IPr*, no. 2 (1961): 55–57; E.W. Brooks, "The Campaigns of 716–718 from Arabic Sources," *JHS* 19 (1899): 19–33; P. Yannopoulos, "Le rôle

- des bulgares dans la guerre Arabo-Byzantine de 717/718,” *Byzantion* 67 (1997): 483–516.
7. Angelov, *Obrazuvane*, pt. 3, chap. 2; Sophoulis, chaps. 2.2.1–2.2.2; Whittow, 271f; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 47–48, 123–130.
 8. L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850: A History* (Cambridge, 2011); W.E. Kaegi, “The Byzantine Armies and Iconoclasm,” *Bs* 27 (1966): 48–70.
 9. Iv. Duichev, *Prouchvaniya vŭrhu bŭlgarskoto srednovekovie* (Sofia, 1943), 19.
 10. For Bulgarian defenses in the Rish Pass, see I. Georgiev, “Voenni pŭtishata i predgradni sŭorŭzheniya v Rishkiya prohod,” *VISb*, no. 2 (1993): 5–23.
 11. M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge, 1986), 135–136.
 12. Stepanov, *Vlast i avtoritet*, 141–143.
 13. Our study follows the chronology for these events given in *IB* 2.
 14. Theophanes, 603.
 15. *Ibid.*; Nik. Pat., 152–153.
 16. Theophanes, 616–617; Zonaras, 160.
 17. Theophanes, 617.
 18. *Ibid.*, 618; Zonaras, 160–161.
 19. *NCMH* 2, 232–233.
 20. For the ethnic approach regarding the internal crisis, see Zlatarski, *IBDSV* 1/1, 274–281. For the pro/anti-Byzantine approach, see Mutafchiev, *IBN* 1, 122–123.
 21. Sophoulis, 94; *NCMH* 2, 233.
 22. Zonaras, 161.
 23. Sophoulis, 165–166, dated events to 788.
 24. W. Treadgold, *The Byzantine Revival, 780–842* (Stanford, CA, 1988), 91–92, 98.
 25. Theophanes, 643; D. Momchilov, “Srednovekovniyat grad Markeli (Obzor po arheologicheski dannii),” in *Pŭtuvaniyata v srednovekovna Bŭlgariya* (Veliko Tŭrnovo, 2009), 201 (for the damaged fortress walls).
 26. Theophanes, 646; Sophoulis, 169–171.

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