

Cumans in Southern Dobrudja

Some remarks on the Second Bulgarian Empire
during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries

THOMAS BRÜGGEMANN



The end of the First Empire – Byzantines, Bulgarians, Vlachs, and Cumans

The downfall of the First Bulgarian Empire and the re-integration of its territory between the Balkan Mountains and the Danube at the beginning of the eleventh century achieved just a short respite for the Byzantine Empire in the Balkans.¹ Soon the Byzantines were confronted with permanent uprisings of the resident population, because they had confined their re-conquest mainly to the elimination of the Bulgarian elite and taking over its military infrastructure, which, if they were unable to control, they destroyed.² Constantinople had to face insurgents on two fronts. On the one hand there were dispersed parts of the remaining Bulgarian population, which due to its loss of political leadership was beset by

¹ The Byzantine Emperor Basileios II Bulgaroktonos had brought about the decline of the First Bulgarian Empire by his victory at the Kimbalongos pass in the gorge of Kleidon, where he defeated Tsar Samuel and his troops in July 1014; Th. Brüggemann, "Die Staatswerdung Bulgariens zwischen Rom und Byzanz. Migration, Christianisierung und Ethnogenese auf der Balkanhalbinsel (6.-11. Jahrhundert n. Chr.)," in S. Conrad et al., eds., *Pontos Euxeinos. Beiträge zur Archäologie und Geschichte des antiken Schwarzmeer- und Balkanraumes, Manfred Oppermann zum 65. Geburtstag*, Langenweißbach 2006, 468 with notes 66–70; R.-J. Lilie, *Byzanz. Das zweite Rom*. Berlin 2003, 250, also H. Ditten, *Ethnische Verschiebungen zwischen der Balkanhalbinsel und Kleinasien vom Ende des 6. bis zur zweiten Hälfte des 9. Jahrhunderts*. Berlin 1993, 91ff.

² For the "Byzantine Intermediate", between 1014 and 1185, see the description of Georgios Akropolites, *Chronike syngraphe*, in *Georgii Acropolitae opera*. ed. A. Heisenberg, Leipzig, 1903, 18 6–10; in general, see I. Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars. Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185–1365*. Cambridge 2005, 13–17; G. Ostrogorsky, *Geschichte des Byzantinischen Staates*. Munich 1963; and F. Grabler, ed., *Abenteurer auf dem Kaiserthron. Die Regierungszeit der Kaiser Alexois II, Andronikos und Isaak Angelos (1180–1195) aus dem Geschichtswerk des Niketas Choniates*. Byzantinische Geschichtsschreiber 8. Graz 1958, 171ff.

social crisis and economic suffering. On the other hand, there was the endemic old-Balkan Vlach populace,³ who, being transhumant animal-breeders, mainly inhabited the mountainous regions. The latter had been a source of continuous trouble for the Bulgarian tsars and especially for their sedentary rural subjects already, but now the Byzantines,⁴ who obviously lacked a consistent political concept for the region, received the Bulgarians in addition, who were thrown from their fairly stable life into chaos. Due to the fact that the hegemony of Constantinople had been restored only superficially, one uprising was followed by the next immediately.⁵ Therefore, in spite of their own weakness, the Byzantines owed their fragile 'control' and the at best formal existence of the Byzantine 'Danube-border' entirely to the poor organization and the total lack of powerful political-military leadership of the rebels.⁶

³ The old-Balkan population, which mostly consisted of transhumant pastoralists, is mentioned under this name for the first time in sources of the tenth century; see *Annae Comnenae porphyrogenitae Alexias*, 2 vols. ed. A. Reifferscheidt, Leipzig 1884. 2: 8, 11–13. The sources clearly distinguish the Vlachs from the sedentary rural population of the Balkans. They settled and wandered mainly in the area between Thessaly and the Balkan Mountains, the Thessalian region is even known as "Megale Vlachia"; see M. Blagojević, "Vlachen" in *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 8 (1997), 1789; G. Schramm, *Eroberer und Eingesessene. Geographische Lehnnamen Südosteuropas im 1. Jahrtausend n. Chr.* Stuttgart 1981, *passim*; and T. J. Winnifrith, *The Vlachs. The History of a Balkan People*. London 1995, 3–7.

⁴ The Byzantine conquerors were either unwilling or unable to integrate the former Bulgarian territory. At first they did not seem to have a concept for the Bulgarian lands at their disposal which went beyond the "pure" military re-conquest: this caused the re-futation of the new "old rules" by the resident population, because the Byzantines failed to offer their new subjects any rewarding political, social or economic incentives. For the subjected people, just the political-military leaders changed, and the Byzantines remained an "alien element", a "head" without connection to its "body". The breakdown of Byzantine supremacy up to the Danube therefore was bound to happen before long.

⁵ For the connections between Byzantines and Cumans in the southern Dobrudja during the "Byzantine Intermediate" throughout the eleventh and twelfth century, which were not only of a military nature, see H. Göckenjan, "Kumanen" in *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 5 (1991), 1568, 1068; V. Spinei, *The Great Migration in the East and Southeast of Europe from the ninth to the thirteenth Century*. Cluj-Napoca 2003, *passim*, also P. Diaconu, *Les Coumans au Bas-Danube aux IX^e et XII^e siècles*. Bucharest 1978, 14–21.

⁶ Soon after the re-integration of the former Bulgarian territory, the Byzantines, due to their neglect of governance, were confronted with uprisings of the residual Bulgarian population, whose living conditions especially in political and economic matters worsened rapidly under Byzantine rule. The first, which took place in 1040/41, was led by Peter Odeljan, who called himself a grandson of the last Bulgarian Tsar Samuel. When the Bulgarians rose again in 1072 they had to look for a leader firstly, because no direct descendants of the old Bulgarian dynasty were left. Bodin, son of the Serbian prince Zeta, was appointed as "Bulgarian" Tsar at the Prizren court, see I. Dujčev, "Bulgarien" in *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 2 (1983), 914–927 at 920. These uprisings of the Bulgarians

In this state of affairs it was just a question of time before immigrants from the north came to disregard the tenuous *status quo*. Pechenegs,⁷ Uzes, and especially Cumans crossed the Danube and settled on Byzantine territory, and occupied the land almost unhindered by the Byzantines. In particular, the Cumanian upheavals in 1087, 1094, 1109, and finally 1160, put serious pressure on the Empire and could be checked only with great difficulty.⁸ The attempts of individual Cuman tribes for separatism and the growth of the tribal chieftains' power at the expense of the existing federate khans can explain why, during the first half of the twelfth century, the Cuman federation split into western and eastern branches. The military activities of the western Cumans during this period were of great importance, their marauding expeditions into the territories of Byzantium, Hungary, Russia and Poland caused considerable disturbance. The eastern Cuman federation had a much larger territory for itself, and the archaeological evidence also suggests that it was more densely populated by Cumans. The power of the Cumanian tribal and clan aristocracies was backed by retinues of the warrior-class.⁹ Its members are also documented as mercenaries in foreign lands, including the courts of Georgia and Serbia, and later of Hungary and Bulgaria.

Both as allies and enemies, the Cumans had a great influence on the internal development of their neighbouring states. They stood in close contact to the Kievan Rus at an early stage, being relatives of Russian princes and even exercising border patrols for them, but they also attacked their own allies regularly.¹⁰ King David II of Georgia is reported to have settled around 40,000 Cumans in 1118, after they had supported him militarily against the Seljuks and the reluctant Georgian aristocracy.¹¹ Other Cuman tribes either formed the substrate during

show that the Byzantine Empire was not able to control the re-conquered territories enduringly.

⁷ For the Pechenegs, who had crossed the Danube since the eleventh century, when they also came into closer contact with the Byzantine Empire, see O. Schmitt, "Die Petschenegen auf dem Balkan von 1046 bis 1072," in: S. Conrad et al., eds., *Pontos Euxei-nos. Beiträge zur Archäologie und Geschichte des antiken Schwarzmeer- und Balkanraumes, Manfred Oppermann zum 65. Geburtstag*, Langenweißbach 2006, 473–490 with further sources and literature.

⁸ Anna Komn. *Alex. II* 8, 28–31; Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars*, 21 with note 28.

⁹ According to the *codex Cumanicus* (*Codex cumanicus bibliothecae ad templum Divi Marci Venetiarum*, ed. G. Kuun, Budapest 1880.), they were called *nögers* or *nökörs* by the Cumans, see P. B. Golden, "The *Codex Cumanicus*," in H. Paksoy, ed., *Monuments of Central Asia*. Istanbul 1992, 33–63 *passim*, as well as D. Drüll, *Der Codex Cumanicus. Entstehung und Bedeutung*. Stuttgart 1980, *passim*.

¹⁰ The Kievan Rus called the Cumans "wild Polov'cer". One of the Russian attacks, which Igor Svjatoslavic undertook in 1185, passed into the so-called "Song of Igor". See O. Pritsak, "The Polovcians and the Rus," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 2 (1982), 321–380; and P. B. Golden, "The Question of the Rus' Qaghanate," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 2 (1982), 77–97.

¹¹ He reigned from 1089 to 1125, see, in general, P. B. Golden, "Cumanica I: The Qipčaq in Georgia," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 4 (1984), 45–87; and A. Pálóczi-Horváth, *Pe-*

the ethnogenesis of Turkic populations in the Northern Caucasus or invaded Hungary, first in 1091, when King Ladislaus I was still able to defeat them.¹²

The Cumans, who practised agriculture as a subsistence economy, should be called semi-nomads, because of their regular raids against the sedentary rural population to capture luxuries and slaves.¹³ The assumption that the Cumans persisted in semi-nomadic habits is also proved by the existence of settlement-centres such as Sudaq, Asaq (Asov), and Saçın (İtl), although one should not call them "cities".¹⁴ Starting from these centres they maintained trade connections to Central Asia,¹⁵ Egypt,¹⁶ and via the Byzantine Crimea even to the European Mediterranean already before their westward migration.¹⁷ Written sources men-

chenegs, Cumans, Iasians. Steppe Peoples in Medieval Hungary. Budapest 1989, 313–333, with further sources and literature.

¹² He ruled Hungary from 1077 to 1095. For the legend concerning his battles against the Cumans, see E. Szentpétery, ed., *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum, tempore ducum et regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum*, 2 vols. Budapest 1937–1938. 1: 366–427; 2: 507–527, also Gy. Györffy, "Die Nordwestgrenze des Byzantinischen Reiches und die Ausbildung des 'ducatus Sclavoniae'," in P. Brière and X. de Ghellinck-Vaernewyck, eds., *Mélanges offerts à Szabolcs de Vajay à l'Occasion de son Cinquantième Anniversaire.* Braga 1971, 295–313.

¹³ Györffy, "Die Nordwestgrenze des Byzantinischen Reiches"; Golden, *Cumanica I*, 45–87; and A. Pálóczi-Horváth, "L'immigration et l'établissement des Comans en Hongrie," *Acta orientalia Hungarica* 29 (1975), 313–333.

¹⁴ P. B. Golden, "Cumanica II: The Öberli (Öperli). The fortunes and misfortunes of an Inner Asian Nomadic Clan," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 6 (1986), 5–29.

¹⁵ The *codex Cumanicus* proves in this respect not only intense trade relations to Central Asia and Egypt, but allows us to reconstruct the Cumanian language via the documented terms and expressions. Besides that, the codex shows via its terminology and foreign words where the Cumans came from and the hierarchy of their trading partners. The economic terminology reveals Chinese and Persian terms mostly, but no Greek; this did not change even by way of the permanent Cuman contacts with the Byzantines from the tenth century. Their origin, ethnogenesis, and priorities become clear in this context. See Golden, *The Codex Cumanicus, passim*; Th. Brüggemann, "From Money-Trade to Barter? Some remarks on nomads and the changing economy on the Byzantine Chersonesos (10th–13th century)," *Academia. The Magazine of the Polish Academy of Sciences* 17 (2008), *passim*; Th. Brüggemann, "Vom Geld- zum Tauschhandel. Die byzantinische Krim zwischen Urbanität und Nomadismus," in I. Breuer, ed., *Nomaden in unserer Welt. Nomaden und Sesshafte* 3, Wiesbaden 2007, *passim*; and A. Bodrogligeti, *The Persian Vocabulary in the Codex Cumanicus.* Budapest 1971, *passim*.

¹⁶ For a general overview of the Cuman-Mamluk connections in the thirteenth century, see P. B. Golden, "Cumanica IV: The Cumano-Qipçaqs Clans and Tribes," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 9 (1995/97), 99–122; and U. Haarmann, "Der arabische Orient im späten Mittelalter," in U. Haarmann, ed., *Geschichte der arabischen Welt.* Munich 2004, 215–263.

¹⁷ Their presence in the Crimea and Cherson is proved from the second half of the eleventh century. For their trade relations with the Kievan Rus and the Byzantine Empire, see Brüggemann, "From Money-Trade to Barter?" *passim*; Brüggemann, "Vom Geld- zum Tauschhandel," *passim*; A. I. Romančuk, *Studien zur Geschichte und Archäologie des*

tion the names of a number of Cumanian chieftains, amongst whom Boniak (Bönek) Khan was the most significant personality. It was he who led the army which gave the Byzantines assistance against the Pechenegs in 1091, and of which a part, after the victory at Mount Levunion, turned towards Hungary.¹⁸

Between the Empires – Cumans, the Balkans, and the Byzantine Intermediate

As holders of imperial tenures, some Cuman tribes were put in charge of defensive duties for the Empire and in this capacity were even transferred to Thrace, Macedonia, and Asia Minor.¹⁹ However, by taking its inconvenient Cuman contemporaries into imperial service Byzantium just bought a short period of peace. Soon Cuman horsemen, whose loose confederation stretched from the northern steppe regions to the territories south of the Danube anyhow, unified with the Bulgarian and Vlach populaces of the southern Dobrudja with ease.²⁰ The final collapse of Byzantine rule in the southern Dobrudja, rudimentary at least since the middle of the twelfth century, just needed organized military leadership to bundle the merged but disparate Bulgaro-Vlach population and the marauding Cumans into a unit with mutual interests and aims.²¹ When in 1185 the Byzantines were bound up with the invasion of the Normans,²² who took Thessaloniki

byzantinischen Cherson. Leiden 2005, 11–19; M. Strässle, *Der internationale Schwarzmeerhandel und Konstantinopel im Spiegel 1261–1484 im Spiegel der sowjetischen Forschung*. Frankfurt 1990, 23–38; and finally G. Brătianu, *La Mer Noire: Des origines à la conquête ottomane*. Munich 1969, 46ff.

¹⁸ A historical overview can be found in Lilie, *Byzanz*, 328ff.

¹⁹ Schmitt, *Die Petschenegen auf dem Balkan*, 473–490. The Byzantine “approach” to integrating the uninvited immigrants followed the conventional course. On the one hand, Byzantium was forced to “embrace” the Cumans by the assignation of land and the transfer of duties and titles, quite similar to the Byzantine treatment of the Pechenegs before. On the other hand, some Cuman tribes were moved to regions which the Byzantines though would hinder and restrict the Cumanian nomadic way of life. This would force the Cumans to concentrate on their own economic survival and therefore they would be kept from raids against the Byzantine central power and its rural inhabitants. That such resettlements were mostly unsuccessful is shown by H. Ahrweiler, “Byzantine Concepts of the Foreigner: The Case of Nomads.” in H. Ahrweiler and A. E. Laiou, eds., *Studies on the internal diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*. Dumbarton Oaks 1998, 1–16; and P. Charanis, “The Transfer of Population as Policy in the Byzantine Empire,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3 (1961), 140–154.

²⁰ Golden, “Cumanica I,” 45–87; Golden, *The Question*, 5–29; and Diaconu, *Les Coumans au Bas-Danube*, 14–21.

²¹ The process is comparable with the ethnogenesis of the First Bulgarian Empire between the sixth and seventh centuries, when one could observe the merging together of a military and politically well organized Turkic elite with a Slavic majority that was in this respect undeveloped. See Brüggemann, *Die Staatswerdung Bulgariens*, 462ff.

²² Nicetae Choniatae *Historia*, 1: 368, 38ff; Georg. Akr. *Chron.* 1: 18, 6–10 for the Norman invasions and the reign of Isaak II Angelos; also R.-J. Lilie, *Handel und Politik zwischen dem byzantinischen Reich und den italienischen Kommunen Venedig, Pisa und Genua in der*

and rushed for Constantinople, and the pressure of the Seljuks in Asia Minor outside the Balkans, finally, two charismatic leaders, the brothers Petär and Asen, took the chance to start the ultimate uprising against the Byzantine Empire, in the Tărnovo area. As the Byzantine Emperor Isaak II Angelos was not able to check the rebellion, he had to agree to a peace-treaty with the insurgents. This rebellion not only unified Bulgarians, Vlaxhs and Cumans, but also led to the establishment of the Second Bulgarian Empire.²³

Although it is not the task here to trace the process of migration and settlement of the Cumans north of the Danube,²⁴ the so-called Cumania, some remarks should nevertheless be made. At the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century, political leadership was in the hands of the tribes living to the west of the Dnjeper,²⁵ but the land of Cumania beyond the Dnjester was less well known to the Byzantines and Westerners. Therefore literary information about the names and dispositions of the several Cuman tribes that settled on the grassy steppe to the north of the Black Sea is rather sparse. However, at least some of the tribal centres can be ascertained by information provided by the Russian chronicles. By comparing these with the distribution of archaeological finds, a rough picture emerges of the areas of settlement.²⁶ The southern frontier was the Da-

Epoche der Komnenen und der Angeloi (1081-1204). Amsterdam 1984, I 9-120, esp. 99ff; and Grabler, *Abenteurer auf dem Kaiserthron*, 171f.

²³ The sources show clearly that the motives for this insurgece, both from the brothers (appreciation by the Byzantine Emperor and assignation of land) and from the population (taking back the increase of taxes and fees by the Emperor), had a short-sighted, individual nature only. See Georgii Acropolitae *Opera*, ed. A. Heisenberg, Leipzig 1903, Vol. I: 18, 12-13. See also Nicetae Choniatae *Historia*, 2 vols. ed. H. van Dieten, Berlin - New York 1975, I: 368, who says that "because of his pettiness he (Isaak II) did not notice that he caused trouble [...], and incited to war the barbarians living in the Balkan Mountains against himself and the Rhómaioi. [These barbarians] were formerly called Mysians, and now they are named Vlaxhs". See below note 66 also. On this background it remains unintelligible why Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars, passim*, calls this rebellion a "liberation movement", especially since he indicates that the upheaval had no "nationalistic" notions, as for example at page 21 with note 28. Because of the several "trivial" reasons for the uprising, one cannot truly speak of a planned military, political or social "national movement" against the rule of the Byzantines. The result of this revolt was the "liberation" of the southern Dobrudja and the "foundation" of the Second Bulgarian Empire, but it has to be emphasized that this happened rather accidentally; therefore the "liberation movement" of Vásáry has to be rejected.

²⁴ For a general overview, see Golden, "Cumanica II," 5-29; Diaconu, *Les Coumans au Bas-Danube, passim*.

²⁵ See Golden, "Cumanica II," 5-29; Golden, "Cumanica I," 45-87.

²⁶ See, therefore, P. B. Golden, "Aspects of the nomadic factor in the economic development of Kievan Rus," in I. S. Koropecyky, ed., *Ukrainian Economic History: Interpretive Essays*, Cambridge 1991, 36-73; Golden, "The Question of the Rus'," 77-97; and Pritsak, "The Polovcians and the Rus'," 321-380, with further sources.

nube, and it comprised what was later to become Wallachia and Moldavia.²⁷ To the north the Russian principalities formed the frontier, and to the east it stretched as far as the Volga. Groups of settlements have been identified by the lower reaches of the Dnjeper, on the northern shore of the Sea of Azov, in the Donets Basin, by the lower Don, and in the region of the river Kuban. In the south, the steppes of the Crimean peninsula and the Italian trading ports of the Black Sea which had formerly been under Byzantine suzerainty fell to Cuman domination.²⁸ From the end of the eleventh century the Cumans sought to increase their wealth not just by plundering raids but also by systematic collection of tributes from the cities and sedentary peoples that had come under their sway. They also supervised the trade that passed along the steppe routes, with guarantees of freedom of movement for merchants even in times of war, and a large number of craftsmen employed at their headquarters.²⁹

The climatic and ecological conditions in the southern Dobrudja were less suitable to the Cuman nomadic way of life than those north of the Danube, as becomes evident not only from the limitation of the winter-pastures in Bulgaria, but also from the distribution and density of Cuman burials in the region. Namely, although the Cumans obviously used the lands which had been abandoned by the "former" Bulgarians after the downfall of the First Bulgarian Empire, and which were under the, at best, nominal rule of the Byzantine Empire, for seasonal pastures during the eleventh century, there are few archaeological traces to show their presence in that area. While the precise ethnic classification of burials of non-sedentary groups becomes more problematic for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in contrast to the tenth and eleventh, there are still some invariable characteristics, especially in the case of the Cumans.³⁰ For example, burials of horses next to human remains are common in Cuman cavalry graves, and embel-

²⁷ The approximate extent of the lands of Cuman "settlement" between the Kievan Rus and the Black Sea is revealed not only by archaeological traces, but by information derived from Western chronicles from the fourteenth century, like the English annalist Iohannes (A. F. Gombos, *Catalogus fontium historiae Hungaricae aevo ducum et regum ex stirpe Arpad descendendum ab anno Christi DCCC usque ad annum MCCC*, 4 vols. Budapest 1937-1943, 1: 1330), who describes *utraque Cumania*, or Cornelius Zantfliet (Gombos, *Catalogus fontium*, 1: 796), who also mentions the expansion of *utramque Cumaniam*.

²⁸ For the military, political, and economic processes and disturbances in the Byzantine Crimea throughout the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, see Brüggemann, "From Money-Trade to Barter?" *passim*; and Romančuk, *Studien zur Geschichte*, *passim*.

²⁹ *Ibid. passim*; Golden, "Aspects of the nomadic factor," 23-31; Golden, "The Question of the Rus'," 77-97; Strässle, *Der internationale Schwarzmeerhandel*, 23-38; and Brătianu, *La Mer Noire*, 46ff.

³⁰ For recent work on the material Cuman traces in the southern Dobrudja, i.e., modern Bulgaria, see especially R. Rašev, "Kumanite na jug ot dunav no archeologizeski Dani," in *Sb. 800 g. ot pobedata na zar Kalojan pri Odrin 1205 g.* Šumen 2006, 21-28.

lishments of grave-statues for deceased warriors were habitual also.³¹ A putting together of all the occasional finds from the southern Dobrudja which could be attributed to the Cumans with certainty or at least high probability makes it possible to modify the “classical” view of an isolated and occasional Cuman presence in the Balkans. Although this approach cannot confirm whether the Cumans regularly settled south of the Danube, switching from a nomadic to a sedentary form of life, their presence since the eleventh century can no longer be called “indiscriminate” or “accidental”. The nomadic Cumans, known for their large herds, seem to have found favourable conditions for their way of life in the southern Dobrudja only during the winter months. If information concerning their presence in the Balkans gives particular dates, however, it could be shown that these are limited to this period of the year.³² That becomes evident both in the distribution of their material assets and in the text of a recently discovered Bulgarian inscription from Preslav.³³ The Cuman cavalry, which was crucial for all rulers of the Second Bulgarian Empire as it was previously for the Byzantines against the Pechenegs, could apparently be employed only at times when larger Cuman tribal groups stayed in the region for their winter pasture.³⁴

The Second Empire – Cumans, Bulgarians and Vlaxhs

The debate concerning the ethnic origins of the brothers Petăr and Asen, and their immediate successor, Kaloyan, who were the founders and first representatives of the new ruling dynasty in the Second Bulgarian Empire, is still a controversial one.³⁵ The interpretation of the name Asen as Cuman seems to be commonly accepted, but the historical conclusions that could be drawn from this have been very different. Some have made the Asenids Bulgars, or at best Cumano-Bulgars,³⁶ others have made them Russians or Russo-Cumans, who were

³¹ These are similar to the Russian “Kamennaja baba”. See, in this respect, R. Rašev, “Prab’lgarski li sa ‘Kamennite Babi’ ot endusche,” *Musei i Pametnizi na Kulturata* 1 (1972), 17–20.

³² The investigations of D. Raskovskij, “Rol’ polovcev v vojnah Asenej s Vizantijskoj i Latinskoj imperijami v 1186–1207 godah,” *Spisanie na B’lgarskata Akademija na Naukite* 58/29 (1939), 203–211 have proved their presence for winter pastures during the months November to April.

³³ Although this inscription is not datable precisely, it derives most probable from the twelfth or thirteenth century. It proves not only that the Cumans retained their nomadic skills at least in the southern Dobrudja, but also that they did so even in the time of the Second Bulgarian Empire, see Rašev, “Kumanite na jug,” 21.

³⁴ For the inscription and its text, see Totev (2006), cited in Rašev, “Kumanite na jug,” 21.

³⁵ A comprehensive overview of the scientific debate is given in Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars*, 33–42, esp. 34–38 with notes 80 to 99.

³⁶ Bulgarian scholars especially have tried to prevent the ruling dynasty of the Second Bulgarian Empire from being of Cuman origin. See, for example, V. N. Zlatarski, *Istoriija na b’lgarskata d’ržava prez srednite vekove*, 3 vols. Sofia 1918–1940, 2: 424; and idem, “Potekloto na Petra i Asenja, vodačite na v’zstanieto v 1185 god’,” *Spisanie na B’lgarskata Akademija na Naukite* 45 (1933), 7–48, whose “kumano-b’lgarski znaten rod” is hard to

practically Bulgars.³⁷ Finally the fact that Asen was a Turkic name was sufficient to make him and his descendants Cumans.³⁸

The name Esen was widespread among the Turkic peoples.³⁹ All the Greek forms of the name (Asan, Asanäs) and the Russian ones (Osen, Asin) can be satisfactorily explained by reference to Turkic "Esen".⁴⁰ Thus, while the Turkic origin of the name Asen can be taken for granted, this fact cannot prove that its bearer was undoubtedly Cuman. Asen's Turkic name must be reconciled with the fact that the sources unanimously testify to his being a Vlakh. Since the Vlachs lived in the Balkans before 1185 and settled on the left bank of the Danube only from time to time, only Turkic groupings of the Balkans can be considered as having lent Turkic personal names to the Vlachs.⁴¹ Given that the Cumans were the most frequent visitors to the Balkans, and that Cuman nobles of the eleventh and twelfth century had the same name as Asen, the most probable explanation for Asen's Turkic name is that it came from the Cumans. Some Cuman tribes must have remained in the Balkans even during the summer months and merged with the Vlachs. The fact that the nomadic way of life of both groups displayed numerous common features may have facilitated their fusion.⁴²

believe. Similarly, P. Mutafčiev, "Proizod't na Asenevci," *Makedonski Pregled* 4/4 (1928), 1-42 (French summary 149-152). This nationalistic interpretation of the sources has nowadays become less dominant even among Bulgarian scholars, see, for example, V. Stojanov, *Kumanen und Kumanologie. Über die kumanische ethnische Komponente auf dem Balkan*. in http://www.ihist.bas.bg/sekcii/CV/_private/Valery_Stojanov_passim.

- ³⁷ P. Mutafčiev, *Istorija na b'lgarskija narod*, 2 vols. Sofia 1943-1944, 33, attempted this, wrongly creating closer ethnic ties between the Asenids and the Kievan Rus, in this respect unconvincingly as Zlatarski.
- ³⁸ This assumption, which can be regarded as generally accepted nowadays, has become more and more influential since F. I. Uspenskij, *Obrazovanie vtorogo bolgarskogo carstva*. Odessa 1879, 108; and C. Jireček, *Geschichte der Serben*. 2 vols. Gotha 1911-1918, 1: 269. See, for more detail, Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars*, 38ff.
- ³⁹ See L. Rásonyi, "Les anthroponymes Comans de Hongrie," *Acta orientalia Hungarica* 20 (1967), 135-149; and L. Rásonyi, "Kuman özel adları," *Türk Kültürü Araştırmaları* 3-6 (1966/69), 71-144.
- ⁴⁰ Rásonyi, "Kuman özel adları"; G. Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish*. Oxford 1972, 248.
- ⁴¹ The relevant sources cannot be dealt with here for reasons of space; due to the fact that they are not supposed to be in the foreground, see L. Rásonyi-Nagy, "Valacho-Turcica." In: *Aus den Forschungsarbeiten der Mitglieder des Ungarischen Instituts und des Collegium Hungaricum in Berlin, dem Andenken Robert Graggers gewidmet*. Berlin and Leipzig 1927, 68-96; Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars*, 40 with note 116; and Mutafčiev, "Proizod't na Asenevci," 1-42.
- ⁴² "The *prostagma* of Emperor Andronikos Komnenos from 1184," in *Actes de Lavra* 341-345, No. 66, ed. P. Lemerle, Paris 1970, in which mention is made of the Cumans, Vlachs and Bulgars in the province of Moglena in western Macedonia, makes this assumption plausible.

reason for the political and social instability of the Second Empire: many of its "new" nobles, the Bojars, were of nomadic Cuman origin and hence subordinated under a "central" ruler with reluctance. The Cumans, with their nomadic background, were obviously not willing or able to accommodate to the conventions of feudal Bulgaria from one day to the next. Inevitably conflicts between sedentary inhabitants and rural dwellers of the Second Bulgarian Empire and Cumans were commonplace.⁴³ After the assassination of Tsar Petăr in Tărnovo in 1195, and of his brother Asen in the following year, their younger brother Kaloyan succeeded as tsar.⁴⁴ His marriage to a Cuman noblewoman shows strikingly that the Bulgarian house of tsars obviously needed a dynastic connection with the Cumans. There are two further possibilities still under discussion besides the 'Cuman theory' when looking for the ethnic origins of the ruling Asenid dynasty of the Second Bulgarian Empire. These soon turn out to be at best hypothetical, however, because trying to establish a Bulgarian or Vlach descent of Asen, Petăr, and Kaloyan does not succeed convincingly. That is because one usually cannot avoid basing both assumptions mainly on the testimonies of Pope Innocent III, which are conflicting in this respect. There are two groups of statements in the pope's correspondence, each seemingly contradicting and excluding the other. One group seems to support the Bulgarian descent of Asen's family, the other the Vlach descent.⁴⁵ Innocent III wrote to the Hungarian King Imre, in 1204, saying that "Peter and Joannica, who descended from the family of the former kings, began rather to regain than to occupy the land of their fathers".⁴⁶ By contrast, the pope wrote to Kaloyan in 1199, saying that he had heard of Kaloyan's Roman descent. In his reply, Kaloyan expressed his satisfaction that God "made us remember our blood and fatherland from which we descended".⁴⁷ In another place, Innocent remarks on "the people of your land who assert that they descended from Roman blood".⁴⁸ As far as the first statement is concerned, it is a medieval convention: the ruling house is always seen as the legitimate successor of the previous one. If the pope said that Asen, Petăr and Kaloyan were descendants of the earlier Bulgarian kings, he simply wanted to express that they were the legitimate rulers of Bulgaria. That is why they do not occupy the land, but reoccupy it as

⁴³ In this respect, cf. Rogerius' description in the *Carmen Miserabile*, §§ 2-12; Szenpétery, *Scriptores*, 2: 553-559, for Hungary in 1244: "But when the king of the Cumans, with his nobles and commoners, began to roam about Hungary, since they had innumerable herds of cattle, caused serious damage to the pastures, sown lands, gardens, orchards, vineyards, and other property of the Hungarians".

⁴⁴ He was also called Joanitza and reigned from 1197 to 1207, see, for example, Dujčev, "Bulgarien," 921.

⁴⁵ See Uspenskij, *Obrazovanie vtorogo bolgarskogo carstva*, 153; Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars*, 34; and N. Bănescu, *Un problème d'histoire medievale: Création et caractère du second empire bulgare* (1185). Bucharest 1943, 13-21.

⁴⁶ A. Theiner, ed., *Vetera monumenta Slavorum meridionalium historiam illustrantia*, 2 vols. Rome and Zagreb 1863, 1875 (henceforth *Mon. Slav. merid.*) 1: 36.

⁴⁷ *Mon. Slav. merid.* 1: 15.

⁴⁸ *Mon. Slav. merid.* 1: 16.

their heritage, which in the meantime had been usurped by the Byzantines. As for the pope's second statement, according to which the Asenid dynasty was of Roman descent,⁴⁹ similar caution is necessary. The pope must have known about the Latin origin of the Vlakh language, and consequently identified its speakers as descendants of Rome. Although Kalojan and his Vlakh subjects must have spoken a neo-Latin language, the precursor of modern Romanian, it can almost be taken for granted that the Vlaks of the Balkans had no historical awareness of their Roman descent. Therefore the pope's assertion that the Asenids were of Roman descent was a mere expression of the fact that the Asenids were Vlaks, and has nothing to do with the Vlaks' alleged Roman consciousness. If they were Romans, this was true only in the sense that they were subjects of Byzantium and thus called "Romaioi", because Byzantium regarded itself as the true heir of Rome.⁵⁰

The archaeological perspective – Cumans in the Southern Dobrudja

Since at least some of the Cumans did not give up their nomadic habits when they settled in the Balkan Peninsula in winter, the material remains of their presence are normally found outside built up settlements and *necropoleis*. Although a more intense approach to the habits of the sedentary population, at least on the part of the Cuman aristocracy in the vicinity of the Bulgarian court at Tărnovo, seems predictable, archaeological traces in this respect are as yet missing.⁵¹

The presence of the Cumans south of the Danube and their role within the Second Bulgarian Empire has been designated mainly via literary references. Though the Cumans settled sporadically on the right bank of the Danube before the twelfth century, the fact remains that there are only a few archaeological traces to show their presence in the southern Dobrudja which can be securely dated later than the eleventh century, i.e., in the period of the Second Bulgarian Empire. The fact that until recent times no archaeological traces of the Cumans in the southern Dobrudja could be dated after the "foundation" of the Second Empire neither denies their continuous presence in the region nor their connection to the "princes" of the rising state. The absence of Cuman finds outside the two centres which could be identified for the eleventh century moreover underlines that, after the end of Byzantine supremacy and its substitution by the Second Bulgarian Empire, whenever they occurred here in larger formations, they continued crossing the Danube to the south for seasonal purposes only. The Cumans went on with their nomadic way of life even in the probably Cuman-led 'Bulgarian' Em-

⁴⁹ In this respect, the term 'Roman descent' was not just used by the pope synonymously with 'Vlakh descent', as Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars*, 36, points out convincingly.

⁵⁰ For example, see Lilie, *Byzanz*, *passim*.

⁵¹ Therefore no remarks can be made about the number of Cuman courtiers, their possible residence in particular quarters and their relationship to the city's inhabitants or even to Christendom; see Rašev, "Kumanite na jug," 22.

pire.⁵² Accordingly, most probably just their elites seem to have been assimilated and integrated in the court society of the Second Empire, which then became absorbed in the sedentary urban population and therefore left no specifically Cuman archaeological trace, as for example in the capital Târnovo.

The presence of such nomadic parts of the Cuman tribes, especially the horsemen-warriors with their families and clans, whose services hence were available for the princes of the Bulgarian Empire on a temporary basis only, can be restricted to two zones in the southern Dobrudja. The archaeological material at and close to the centre of the First Bulgarian Empire implies a Cuman incidence even in the twelfth century, whereas the burials situated more to the south, in the Thracian basin between the rivers Tundscha and Mariza,⁵³ seem to prove a Cuman presence as allies of Constantinople against the Pechenegs and similar groups, which endangered its rule during the "Byzantine Intermediate" throughout the eleventh and twelfth century.⁵⁴ Therefore the region of Pliska has to be dealt with first of all.⁵⁵ In 1927, on the plain of Pliska⁵⁶ in the vicinity of Zarev Brod, two larger-than-life stone statues were found, put in the ground on top of a Bronze Age tumulus.⁵⁷ These sculptures are regarded as being an aristocratic couple who were worshipped here as ancestors of an important Cuman noble clan.⁵⁸ Considering many analogies in the northern Black Sea area, i.e., Cumania, one could postulate in this case a Cuman sanctuary, in which seasonal rituals of a cult for the ancestors were performed.⁵⁹ The existence of this material in the Pliska basin allows us to assume the presence of a large and important Cuman group. Moreover, the sanctuary may be evidence that the area was visited abun-

⁵² At best, the seasonal presence of larger Cuman groups in the southern Dobrudja proves this assumption; see Raskovskij, "Rol' polovcev v vojnah," 203–211, and above note 34.

⁵³ In this respect, see, convincingly Rašev, "Kumanite na jug," 24, nos. 6 and 7.!

⁵⁴ For the Cumans as allies of the Byzantines, especially against the Pechenegs, see Lilie, *Byzanz*, 328ff; and Schmitt, *Die Petschenegen auf dem Balkan*, 473–490.

⁵⁵ For the geopolitical significance and for the development of Pliska from a nomadic *campus* to the residence and capital of the First Bulgarian Empire, see Th. Brüggemann, "Campus – Sedes Principalis – Civitas Regni. Pliska und das frühe Bulgarien im Spiegel literarischer und archäologischer Zeugnisse (7.–9. Jahrhundert nach Christus)." in K. Boshnakov, ed. *Jubilaeus VI. Das antike Erbe des westlichen Pontosraumes*, Sofia 2008, *passim*.

⁵⁶ See Rašev, "Kumanite na jug," 22, nos. 1–3.

⁵⁷ The site is located close to modern Šumen, see Rašev, "Kumanite na jug," 22, no. 1 with figure 1 no. 1.

⁵⁸ Rašev, "Kumanite na jug," 23 with figure 2; and "Prab'lgarski," 17–20.

⁵⁹ In kind and size these two statues were for a long time singular on the Balkan Peninsula. However, recent excavations at the citadel of Pliska have brought to light a head of 50 cm, which undoubtedly must have belonged to a larger-than-life statue; besides that, the new piece shows generally significant similarities to Cuman "round-plastic" (Valeri Grigorov/Stanišlav Stanilov). Despite the significance of this example for the Cuman presence in the Pliska region, it has to be emphasized that its attribution cannot be called certain pending detailed publication by the excavators.

dantly and that eventually even a permanent Cuman base may have existed here. This then would have been situated between the Bulgarian court in Tărnovo and the areas where the Cuman khans resided, north of the Danube. From these archaeological data, the plain of Pliska furthermore is of outstanding importance concerning Cuman presence in the southern Dobrudja. In this respect a yet unpublished secondary burial from tumulus 25 in Pliska seems of significance also, as it is situated approximately 250 m outside the western earthen wall of the outer city.⁶⁰ Because of the total lack of embellishments, a group of four nomad-burials from Dewtaschlari near Pliska, which obviously belong together, remain uncertain in this respect. But on the ground of bearing and funeral habits they are readily interpreted as being Cuman also.⁶¹ The same can be said for the late nomadic burials from the eleventh–twelfth century from Madara.⁶² If the Pliska basin was predestined to become the gathering place of the Cumans in the Second Bulgarian Empire, both because of its proximity to the court in Tărnovo and also its symbolic importance as the “cradle” of the first Bulgarians, the findings from southern Bulgaria show undoubtedly that Cuman horsemen covered the whole of the imperial territories at least during Byzantine rule.⁶³

In addition to the tombs, many small and scattered finds from the southern Dobrudja dating from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, which have been summed up in older research as belonging to “late nomads”, have more recently been assigned to the Cumans, as for example stirrups, arrowheads and other

⁶⁰ Although the author has to thank A. Evglevszkij (Donetzk) for the hint that this Cuman burial may be dated earlier than late twelfth century due to its embellishments, and therefore does not belong to the Second Bulgarian Empire but to the period of Byzantine supremacy, the date assigned by Rašev, “Kumanite na jug,” 22 no. 1 with fig. 1 (no. 2) and fig. 5 (excavated 1998 by Rašev/Stanišov, but still unpublished) has to remain for the moment, because further archaeological data, which would allow more precise statements in this respect are not yet accessible. This tomb, which is surely Cuman, consists of a hollowed trunk as sarcophagus, which was covered with thin, smooth boards. To the left of the coffin, the skull, flayed skin, bones of the back-legs, and bridles of a horse were found in situ, which were put there correlating to the anatomy and posture of the deceased man. In the narrow interstice between the grave-trough and sarcophagus to the right of the dead man, his sabre and lance, which are clearly typologically of Cuman origin, were found.

⁶¹ Rašev, “Kumanite na jug,” 23 no. 5 with fig. 1 (also no. 2) and no. 6.

⁶² Rašev, “Kumanite na jug,” 23 no. 2 (with fig. 1 no. 3; 3) and no. 4 with (fig. 1 nos. 3; 4). The burials were discovered in 1934 in the Bronze Age tumuli 1 and 3 from Madara. Although no embellishments were found here either, Cuman identification at least of tumulus 1 seems to be correct, because of a horse’s upper jaw-bone, which was found 6 m west of the tomb. It apparently belongs to this funeral since the custom of burying horses next to men is known in that region and period only from the Cumans.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 24 no. 6 (with fig. 1 no. 4). The secondary burial in a Roman-era tumulus from Mednikarovo with its Cuman sabre and stirrup gives satisfactory information about the deceased being a horse-soldier; next to the handle of the sabre a horse-skull was found as well; 24 no. 7 (with fig. 1 no. 5). The secondary burial from Kovazevo offered an iron sabre, which probably has to be defined as being Cuman also.

military equipment, which are unfortunately mostly without context.⁶⁴ The altogether promising archaeological data concerning the Cumans in the southern Danube region reveal a much more regular and more dense presence of this confederation of nomadic horsemen-soldiers within the Second Bulgarian Empire than was hitherto assumed. That Cuman warriors were recruited under Kalojan and Boril during the struggles against the Latin Empire of Constantinople also seems probable, but this remains to be confirmed by archaeological data.⁶⁵

Closing Remarks

Taking into consideration everything that has been said so far, the most plausible supposition seems to be that Asen and his dynasty were of Cuman origin. They stood at the head of the ultimate uprising in 1185, which caused the foundation of the Second Bulgarian Empire, and their main support derives from their Vlach environment.⁶⁶ They must have spoken the language of their "fellow-insurgents", but preserved the knowledge of their Cuman predecessors' nomadic skills. Moreover, they must have been in close contact with their near "relatives" in Cumania. That is why they turned to their kinsfolk to help them in their fight against the Byzantine Empire.⁶⁷ During the first years of the Second Bulgarian Empire, an

⁶⁴ See in general Pálóczi-Horváth, *Pechenegs, Cumans, Iasians, passim*.

⁶⁵ Especially in the battles at Adrianople in 1205 and Thessaloniki in 1207; see Dujčev, "Bulgarien," 921; I. Dujčev, "Tzar Kalojan, bitkata pri Odrin pzez april 1205 g. i nejnite setnini," *Voенно-istoritzeski sbornik* 48/4 (1979), 107-123; and R. L. Wolff, "The Second Bulgarian Empire: Origin and History to 1204," *Speculum* 24 (1949), 167-206.

⁶⁶ See above note 23. Nicetae Choniatae *Historia*, 1: 369, 60-64 suggests that the motives which led the brothers Asen and Petăr to initiate the Bulgaro-Vlach uprising against the Byzantines were in their individual nature comparable to those of the participating population. This again prohibits us to make to the incident a "liberation movement" as does Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars, passim*: "Once, they [Asen and Petăr] went to the emperor [Isaak II Angelos], who had set up his tent in Kypsella. They asked him to register them in the Roman army and to that effect to grant them, by his imperial edict, a small piece of land in the Haimos which would yield them a modest income. But their request was rejected." (transl. Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars*, 16). Only as a result of the refusal by the Byzantine Emperor did Asen and Petăr begin to agitate the Bulgaro-Vlach population: this was vengeance, nothing more. To justify calling this a "liberation movement", supplementary political thoughts and a concept would have to be reasonable for the incident: these are missing here.

⁶⁷ Nicetae Choniatae *Historia*, 1: 371, 15-372, 49, emphasizes that especially the allegedly unwilling Vlachs had to be tricked into participating in the rebellion and to subordinate themselves under its both leaders: "The brothers had a church built in honour of St Demetrios, and a crowd of men and women 'possessed by the devil' were assembled inside. They were instructed to speak in a state of ecstasy about God's intention to remove the yoke from the shoulders of the Bulgarians and the Vlachs [...] Convinced by the impressive scene, the whole people took up arms against Byzantium, and one of the brothers, Petăr, was crowned with a golden crown. The rebellion began [...]", Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars*, 16. In the same way as the fact that the rising is wrongly called a movement of (self-chosen) national liberation, this "Demetrios-legend" has of-

ethnogenesis obviously similar to that seen already in the First Empire can be observed, when the Turks after their immigration merged with the Slavic majority during the seventh to ninth centuries.⁶⁸ In the southern Dobrudja, the Cumans remained even in the Second Bulgarian Empire in large part clearly nomads, who crossed the Danube to the south only for seasonal pastures. Unlike their companions in Hungary, whose economic and social habits adjusted to those of their sedentary environment, for the southern Dobrudja archaeological traces neither for permanent Cuman settlements nor for a sedentarization of larger tribes have yet been found. That is why the Cumans, with their nomadic way of life, were not able to accommodate to the conventions of feudal Bulgaria from one day to the next: inevitably, conflicts between sedentary rural dwellers of the Second Bulgarian Empire and Cumans were probably common. Thus the Second Bulgarian Empire politically and socially remained unbalanced, the more so as many affiliates of the new Bulgarian nobles, the boyars, were of Cuman descent and therefore habitually were not willing to be subordinate to a centralized rule.

At the end of 1217, the son of Asen I, Ivan Asen II,⁶⁹ who had fled after his uncle Kalojan's death to southern Russia, returned to Bulgaria and became tsar in 1218. He made Bulgaria the most important political and military power in southeast Europe: it stretched south to the Aegean and southwest to the Adriatic Sea. This status was not enduring, however. The death of Ivan Asen II in 1241 and the loss of the Bulgarian territory in Thrace and Macedonia caused the decline of Bulgaria as the dominant power in southeast Europe – the principality was lacking ethnic and social coherence. Finally, in the middle of the thirteenth century, the Mongols overwhelmed Cumania between the Volga and the Carpathians and became not only the immediate northern neighbours of Bulgaria, but also its hegemonial power.⁷⁰

ten been over-interpreted in its importance for the achievement of the insurgence. It should be seen more as a piece of temporary Christian propaganda than as sufficient for the mobilization of larger parts of the Bulgarian or Vlach population; the erection of the church for St Demetrios may be historical reality, its influence on the beginning of the insurrection is not.

⁶⁸ See Brüggemann, *Die Staatswerdung Bulgariens*, 462ff.

⁶⁹ He reigned from 1218 to 1241, see G. Prinzing, "Ivan II. Asen" in *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 5 (1991), 833; and J. S. Langdon, "The forgotten Byzantine-Bulgarian assault and siege of Constantinople 1235–36," in Sp. Vryonis, ed., *Byzantine Studies in Honor of Milton V. Anastos*. Byzantina kai Metabyzantina 4. Malibu 1985, 16–135.

⁷⁰ See, in general, Dujčev, "Bulgarien," 922.