

Byzantium and Bulgaria: How an Empire Created its Greatest Threat

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Abstract

The Byzantine Empire is typically discussed in regard to its conflict with the Arab Caliphates that dominated the Middle East, especially when one considers the fact that Byzantium was ultimately conquered by the Ottoman Turks. There is a strong religious connotation attached to these conflicts, and they were but one of many religious struggles that permeated the Middle Ages. However, this paper will discuss what could be considered the most important series of conflicts that Byzantium was ever a part of: its centuries long rivalry and warfare with the Tsardom of Bulgaria. For while Byzantium fought for control of Anatolia and Syria with the Caliphates, they battled for their continued existence far closer to the center of the Empire against the Bulgarians, facing numerous sieges of Constantinople, the seat of the Empire. Upon review and analysis of Byzantine texts such as the *Theophanes Continuatus*, as well as a comparison to the Bulgarian Common Law and the Byzantine *Ecloga*, it will become clear that, although Byzantium sought to create a satellite in the Balkans to serve as a buffer against further nomadic incursions into Imperial territory, they failed in their efforts. Furthermore, despite using practices that had long sustained the Empire against prior enemies, such as diplomatic manipulation, and new practices, like religious assimilation, Byzantium failed to solidify its hold over the Bulgarian state. Instead, Bulgarian rulers were able to take these efforts of diplomatic and religious manipulation and adapt to them, allowing Bulgaria to dominate the Balkans and challenge Byzantium for the title of Roman Emperor.

Historians have discussed at great lengths the conflicts between the Byzantine Empire and the various Arab Caliphates that in one way or another controlled the majority of the Middle East with the exception of the Anatolian Peninsula. These conflicts are generally regarded as the main talking point in regards to Byzantine foreign policy discourse, perhaps because of their religious and cultural nature. Yet, despite the seemingly continuous holy wars that gripped the Empire for hundreds of years, there was perhaps an even greater threat to the survival of Byzantium, one that lay just northwest of Thrace. The Tsardom of Bulgaria, established around 681 AD, would prove to be substantial menace to the Byzantine Empire – not because of its differences, but rather because of how similar the two nations grew to become. Historians such as George Ostrogorsky, John Julius Norwich, and Warren Treadgold have discussed the growth of Bulgarian power in the Balkans and subsequent conflict with the Byzantines as a matter of proximity; that is, the Bulgarians were bound to come into conflict with the Empire due to competition for the same resources based upon how close the two nations were geographically. However, other historians, like Edward N. Luttwak and Collin Wells, have asserted that it was in fact the Byzantines themselves who set into motion the events that allowed the Bulgarians to settle south of the Danube. This, coupled with the influence the Empire attempted to exert over Bulgaria, provided Bulgaria with the means to forge a national identity independent of Byzantium, as well as challenge the Empire for dominance in the region. Thus, despite the fact that these two states were at odds with each other for the better part of three hundred years, the Byzantine Empire's desire to spread its culture and religion played a major role in the formation and expansion of the Tsardom of Bulgaria.

The state of the Balkan region during the late seventh century is a central component of the argument of those historians who advocate for proximity. Each of the three “proximitists,” so

to speak, make reference to the general lack of Byzantine administration in the Balkans during the latter part of the sixth century. For example, George Ostrogorsky, in *History of the Byzantine State*, asserts that the Balkan Peninsula during the reign of Constantine IV (r. 668 AD – 685 AD) was inhabited by seven Slav tribes, and as Byzantine power waned and cities in the region shrank, Imperial authority was effectively non-existent.¹ Thus, according to Ostrogorsky, it was an easy task for the Bulgarians to make the Slavs their tributaries as they met no resistance, and a fledgling Bulgarian kingdom began to take form in what roughly correlates to the Roman/Byzantine province of Moesia.² Following a failed military expedition led by the Emperor himself, the Byzantine Empire was forced to recognize the existence of the Bulgarian kingdom, and was forced, in addition, to pay an annual tribute, to ensure that the kingdom would not threaten to push further into Byzantine territory. However, due to the fact that the Bulgarians were, in effect, living on land that the Byzantines still considered to be theirs, the Byzantines would stage numerous efforts to reconquer their lost territory, beginning under Justinian II in 688.³

John Julius Norwich, another “proximitist,” argues in *Byzantium: The Apogee*, the second in his three volume series on Byzantium, that the conflict between Byzantium and Bulgaria was in fact a matter of proximity. Norwich states that the Bulgarians entered into Byzantine territory that was scarcely governed by the Empire at this point, and was occupied by Slavs.⁴ The lack of Imperial administration and authority in the Balkans grew so severe that, in order to combat the slavification of the Balkan Peninsula, particularly in the *thema* of Hellas⁵, the Emperor

¹ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969.), 126.

² *Ibid.*, 126.

³ Ostrogorsky, *Byzantine States*, 126, 130.

⁴ John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Apogee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 6.

⁵ The *thema* (pl. *themata*) was an administrative units of the Byzantine Empire first established by the Emperor Constans II around 652. The *themata* were, as Treadgold describes, “simply the mobile armies of the previous period settled in specific districts, also called *themata*, which they served to defend.”(p. 315). The Byzantine armies

Nikephoros I (802-811) enacted a resettlement of the province by Greek speakers from across the Empire.⁶ This move was sparked by the proximity of the growing Bulgarian state and the ease with which it had subdued the Slavs in the northern Byzantine territories as well as the fear that they would look to expand southward with the same ease. According to Norwich, “one huge Slavic block, united and belligerent, extending from the Danube to Cape Matapan, was not a possibility that the Byzantines cared to contemplate” and thus they took measure to try and protect what they could from the threat that existed so close to them.⁷

In *A History of Byzantine State and Society*, Warren Treadgold takes a proximitist approach similar to those of his previously mentioned colleagues. In his depiction of the Bulgarian excursion and ultimate settlement inside Byzantine territory, Treadgold, like Ostrogorsky before him, highlights the failed efforts of Constantine IV to drive the Bulgarians from beyond the Danube. He states that, although initially successful in pushing the Bulgarians back across the Danube, the Byzantines gave chase. Once a stalemate had developed beyond the Danube, the Byzantines were then forced to turn back, and during the retreat came under heavy attack from the Bulgarians.⁸ As Constantine IV fled back into Byzantine territory, the Bulgarians followed, and it became clear that only a full-scale campaign outside imperial territory could dislodge them. He was thus forced to make peace with the Bulgarians, in which he agreed to pay them tribute. In addition, he was forced to recognize the land the Bulgarians had occupied as an

had a tendency to both disperse and revolt following their defeat at the hands of the Arabs during the wars of Arab expansion. As a way to combat these tendencies, and also to supplement payment for the armies, the armies were settled into *themata* and granted land to live on and cultivate. Initially, these *themata* were large and general, but further emperors would divide and reorganize them accordingly as the Empire’s territory fluctuated. In 686, the Emperor Justinian II reorganized the Carabisian *thema*, which up until that time had comprised of all of Greece and the Aegean Islands, into the *thema* of Hellas, which comprised of the central part of Greece, and the now smaller *thema* of Carabisian, which contained the Aegean Islands.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ Norwich, *The Apogee*, 6.

⁸ Warren Treadgold, *A History of Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 328.

independent Bulgarian realm.⁹ However, by 713 AD, the Bulgarians were raiding as far south as Thrace, and even threatening Constantinople itself.¹⁰ Treadgold, like Ostrogorsky and Norwich before him, depicts the Byzantine-Bulgarian conflicts as something purely due to the general proximity between the two states. Following Constantine IV's concessions to Bulgaria, the two states were bound to come into conflict, simply because they would be competing for resources in the area. With the Danube serving as a natural border, there was no better place for the Bulgarians to advance than southward, where they would meet little resistance due to the breakdown of Imperial administration under pressure from the aforementioned Slavic migrations into the Balkans. Logically, it is easy to say that the two states would be inevitably drawn into conflict with each other; they were simply too close to not war with one another. However, there are historians who view the conflict with much more depth and complexity.

Other historians have asserted that it was not proximity, but rather Byzantine attempts to influence Bulgaria that brought these two nations into conflict. For example, Edward N. Luttwak, in his book *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, asserts that Bulgaria was “in large degree a Byzantine creation.”¹¹ Whilst the Avars¹² were laying siege to Constantinople in 626 AD, the Byzantines bribed a tribe of Turks residing just west of the Volga River to migrate westward and attack the Avars. This Turkic tribe, known as the Bulghars, eventually succeeded in defeating the Avars, and in the power vacuum that followed, the Bulghars rose to prominence.¹³ The Byzantines would continue to try and manipulate the Bulgarians to meet their own needs, even after Constantine IV's defeat at the hands of Bulgaria in 679 AD. Justinian II,

⁹ Treadgold, *Byzantine State*, 329.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 343.

¹¹ Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 170.

¹² A Hunnic tribe.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 172.

after being deposed, fled to the Bulgars and sought their help in restoring him to the Imperial throne. In return, he promised the Bulgars more land to the south of Moesia, by this time the center of their growing kingdom. However, after reclaiming his throne, Justinian II reneged on this earlier promise and marched against the Bulgars.¹⁴ Thus, the Byzantines tried their very best to diplomatically manipulate the Bulgarians to suit their needs. It will, however, become blatantly clear that Byzantium was woefully unsuccessful in these attempts, and instead helped to foster a nation which would challenge them for dominance in the Balkans.

Having failed to successfully manipulate the Bulgarians via their diplomacy, the Byzantines then turned to another method of exerting some sort of influence over their western neighbors. In *Sailing from Byzantium*, Collin Wells writes about how the Byzantines utilized religion as a method of influence. Under the Patriarch Photius, the Byzantine Empire sought to convert the Bulgarians to Orthodox Christianity, in an attempt to create an Orthodox Christian ally in the Balkans, where Byzantine influence and military strength was weak. This was in part due to the realization by the Byzantines that a buffer state was needed in the region in order to fend off the growing threat of the Russians.¹⁵ The Byzantines also sought to stymie the influence of the Western Church, and they saw the potential for an Orthodox Slavic region that could, in theory, serve as a buffer to Papal encroachment in the region.¹⁶ However, the Bulgarian *archon*¹⁷, Boris I, was shrewd, and used the Byzantine efforts to convert Bulgaria to his own advantage. He was able to both begin the process of creating a national identity and solidify his

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵ Collin Wells, *Sailing from Byzantium: How a Lost Empire Shaped the World* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2007), 188. The Russians had begun raiding Byzantine land around 860 AD.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁷ A Greek word that means ruler or lord.

position as his country's ruler, which would ultimately help the Bulgarians resist Byzantium and even aid the newly Christian country in occupying more land nominally held by the Empire.¹⁸

The rise of Bulgaria and its conflicts with Byzantium are well documented, but are often left by the wayside in favor of the Byzantine conflicts with the Arab world. To this extent, historians, like Ostrogorsky, Norwich, and Treadgold, have simply chalked up the conflict that occurred between the two nations to one of proximity. By occupying land in such close proximity to each other, these historians argue that the nations were bound to clash over resources and overlapping claims to the land. However, others, Luttwak and Wells among them, have attempted to examine the relationship of the two nations from a different angle, widening the lens, so to speak. Their research has revealed that the Byzantine Empire, which relied so heavily on diplomatic influence to manipulate other nations into doing its bidding, attempted to do just the same with the Bulgarians. When that tactic did not work, the Byzantines then chose to manipulate their neighbors in a different way, by converting them to Christianity. In doing so, the Byzantines created an entity that was so similar to themselves that it was able to challenge them not just for the Balkans, but for the Byzantine throne.

The conflict between the Byzantine Empire and the Empire of Bulgaria would ultimately reach new heights following the Bulgarian conversion to Christianity. To further understand this trend, a proper understanding of the relationship between the Byzantine Empire and Tsardom of Bulgaria during this particular time frame is required before one can continue to analyze just how Byzantium's influence was key in shaping the development of Bulgaria. The Bulgarian ruler Boris ascended to the throne of Bulgaria in 852 AD, and quickly looked to form an alliance with

¹⁸ Wells, *Sailing from Byzantium.*, 196-197.

the Eastern Frankish King Louis the German (r. 843-876). During this process, Boris had suggested to Louis that he desired to convert to Christianity. Hoping not only to gain favor with Rome but also an ally in the Balkans to help combat the Moravians, Louis offered to be Boris' baptismal sponsor.¹⁹ While it looked at this point like the Bulgarians would be converting to a Christianity influenced by the West (and therefore under the authority of the Bishop of Rome), the Byzantines launched an offensive into Bulgarian territory, their first since the expiration of the thirty year peace treaty in 845 AD. This offensive caught the Bulgarians completely off guard, and in addition to recapturing territory once lost to the Bulgarians, the Byzantines forced Boris to be baptized under the Emperor Michael III, effectively placing the Bulgarians in the Eastern Christian tradition.²⁰

The conversion of Bulgaria also marks the creation of what became known as the 'Law Code for the Common People.' This law code, written in Bulgarian, traces its roots from a portion of the Byzantine *Ecloga*, which was written by the Emperors Leo III and Constantine V of Isuria in 726 AD.²¹ While the judicial segment of the Bulgarian version of the laws are heavily influenced by their Byzantine counterpart, there is an abundance of additional content that, in a way, modifies the laws. Specifically, there is an incredibly prevalent inclusion of religious punishments included in the 'Law Code for the Common People.' It is in this way that the Bulgarians were able to prevent themselves from assimilating into Byzantine culture: by using Christianity to bring unity to their nation, they were able to place a heavy emphasis on religious

¹⁹Florin Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages 500-1250* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 166-7.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 168. This is obviously what we know today as the Orthodox Church.

²¹*Monumenta Bulgarica*, trans. Thomas Butler (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1996), 71.

customs as they related to their society, creating a blend of legal and religious law unique from Byzantium. In the Byzantine *Ecloga*, article 29 of Chapter 17 states:

Anyone who seduces a virgin, with her consent, but without the knowledge of her parents, and afterwards they know it, if the seducer wishes to take the girl in marriage, and the parents' consent, the union shall be effected. But if in the circumstances the seducer does not wish to marry the girl, and he is a man of means, he shall give the seduced girl a pound weight of gold; and if he is poor he shall give the half of his property. But if he has no property at all and cannot pay a penalty he shall be flogged, tonsured and exiled.²²

In comparison, article 8 of the Bulgarian 'Law Code for the Common People' states:

Whoever has intercourse with a chaste maiden, and without the permission of her parents, and afterwards they are found out: if he wishes to take her and her parents agree, let there be a marriage. But if for any reason he shall not want it, if he has a decent fortune let him give the girl on liter of gold for her shame, that is seventy-two *st'ljaz* pieces. If he is well-off, let him give her half his property. If he is a pauper, let the judges of the land flog him and send him away from their province. He is also liable to a penance of seven years, as we have written.²³

Article 25 of Chapter 17 states:

Anyone who, intending to take in marriage a woman who is his goddaughter in Salvation-bringing baptism, has carnal knowledge of her without marrying her, and being found guilty of the offense, shall, after being exiled, be condemned to the same punishment meted out for other adultery, that is to say both the man and the woman shall have their noses slit.²⁴

Whereas article 7 of the 'Bulgarian Law Code for the Common People' states:

He who takes his co-godparent as his wife: according to civil law they should both have their noses cut off and be separated, and according to cannon law they should be separated and given a penance of fifteen years. And the order of that penance is as

²²*A Manual of Roman Law: The Ecloga Published by the Emperors Leo III and Constantine V of Isauria at Constantinople A.D. 726*, trans. Edwin Hanson Freshfield (Cambridge: University Press, 1926), 110.

²³*Monumenta Bulgarica*, 77.

²⁴*The Ecloga.*, 109.

follows: they should stand outside five years, weeping and listening to the liturgy; four years inside the church until the holy gospel; three more years until the Creed; three more years until the end of the liturgy. And all that time on bread and water. And so having finished their sentences, in the sixteenth year they may take everything. He who takes his own goddaughter should suffer the same penalty, as well as he who has congress with a married woman.²⁵

Articles 40 and 41 of the *Ecloga* state:

Anyone setting fire to another person's forest or cutting down trees out of it shall be condemned to make twofold restitution.

Those who with malice, or for plunder, commit arson in town, shall be burned; and if out of town they willfully commit arson, either of the country, fields, or country houses, they shall be punished capitally with the sword. And if anyone wishes to burn stubble or thistles in his own field, and sets them alight, and the fire spreads beyond bounds and burns the fields or vines of another person, the matter shall be referred to the magistrates; and if the fire spread by ignorance or carelessness, compensation shall be made to the person who suffered; and if by day a high wind blows on the kindled fire, and no precaution had been taken to prevent the fire from spreading, the offender shall be condemned by law for indifference and negligence. But if every precaution is taken and a violent wind happens to blow and in consequence of it the fire spreads about, the person lighting it shall not be condemned by law.²⁶

On the other hand, article 15 of the 'Bulgarian Law Code for the Common People' states:

Whoever, because of some grudge or to plunder some property, sets fire to a building: if it be in a town let him be burned by fire, and if it be in a settlement or village let him be cut down with the sword. But if he is tried by ecclesiastical law, let him be given a twelve-year penance, because he is an enemy. If someone wishing to burn stalks or thorn bushes in his own field, lights a fire and that same fire spreads, setting fire to another's field or vineyard, it is appropriate to bring him to trial and to investigate whether it was out of ignorance or slow-wittedness that he set that fire, and he has to pay compensation for what was burned. Or if he should start a fire on a windy day and doesn't keep after it, telling himself that the fire won't spread, or if he was lazy or wasn't able to keep after it, let him pay for the loss. Or if he should keep after it but all in

²⁵ *Monumenta Bulgarica*, 75.

²⁶ *The Ecloga.*, 112.

vain, as a wind storm strikes, and because of that the fire spreads farther, he will not be tried.²⁷

Clearly, these passages are incredibly alike, and therefore it is easy to see the profound influence that Byzantium had on the foundation and growth of not only the Bulgarian law system, but the Bulgarian government. It also shows how the Bulgarians were able to adapt this Byzantine influence to suit their own needs, allowing their nation to flourish and grow. Even prior to Boris I's conversion to Christianity, cultural diffusion had to have been taken place, and in any event the Byzantine efforts to manipulate Bulgaria prior to the country's conversion had the effect of strengthening the fledging institutions of a newly formed nation, which would ultimately serve to provide Bulgaria with a sound foundation from which to assert its dominance over the Balkans and lay claim to Constantinople.

In any event, the conversion of the Bulgarians was not without turbulence, and it highlights the growing conflict between the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Bishop of Rome. For when Boris appealed to have his own autonomous Church under his control, the Patriarch of Constantinople declined Boris' request. As a result, Boris sent out emissaries to Pope Nicholas I (856-867), who in return delivered a lengthy document which addressed Boris' concerns point-by-point²⁸. Boris' actions can be seen as an attempt by the Bulgarian ruler to escape the growing influence of the Byzantine Empire over Bulgaria in the form of Greek priests roaming his country, instilling the notion that the Bulgarians were subservient to the Empire. Nicholas I's commentary on the authority of the Patriarchs²⁹ proves to be a pivotal point in both East-West

²⁷*Monumenta Bulgarica*, 79.

²⁸*Ibid.*,57.

²⁹ In the early Christian Church, the Pentarchy (Greek for "Five Rulers") was established. There was the Patriarch in Rome, who would later become known as the Pope, the Patriarch of Constantinople, the Patriarch of Antioch, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and the Patriarch of Alexandria. These Patriarchs would oversee the churches in their specified regions. The Patriarch of Rome was responsible for Italy, Greece, and North Africa. The Patriarch of Constantinople was responsible for Thrace and most of Anatolia. The Patriarch of Antioch was responsible for Syria and Cilicia. The Patriarch of Jerusalem was responsible for Palestine and the Sinai. The Patriarch of Alexandria was

relations and in the amount of influence Byzantium held over the Bulgarian Church. Boris poses the question as to which Patriarchs carry the most legitimacy, to which Nicholas I answers:

True patriarchs are considered those who hold apostolic thrones as successors of the pontiffs, i.e., who preside over churches which the apostles established, namely, the Roman, Alexandrian, and Antiochian... The heads of the churches at Constantinople and Jerusalem, however, who are called patriarchs, nonetheless do not have the same authority as the above....³⁰

Nicholas I's delineation of Apostolic succession highlights the ongoing power struggle between the Pope in Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople. The origin of the conflict, which actually led to the two excommunicating each other several times prior to the Great Schism in 1054, lay in both the question of primacy, and the Iconoclast Controversy, that rocked the Byzantine Empire for the better part of the eighth and ninth centuries.

Byzantine Iconoclasm can trace its roots to the ascension of the Emperor Leo III the Isaurian, who came to the throne in 717 AD and was immediately confronted with the Arab threat at the gates of Constantinople. Although he was able to defeat the Arabs besieging the city, he still suffered several setbacks at their hands, most notably the loss of Byzantine Armenia to the Caliphate in 722 AD. Such setbacks by the Byzantines were seen throughout Byzantine society as God's divine wrath. It was Leo III who attributed God's wrath to the veneration of icons, a practice that was widespread in the Byzantine church. Either in an attempt to try and curb the political influence that monasteries had accumulated over the centuries or because of further military setbacks, Leo III sought to limit the use of icons throughout the Empire; he began by ordering the picture of Christ which hung over the main entrance of the Imperial Palace

responsible for Egypt and Libya. For more, see Milton V. Anastos, *Aspect of the Mind of Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

³⁰*Monumenta Bulgarica*, 57.

to be taken down.³¹ This began what would be the aforementioned century long internal struggle that would see the Empire decimated from the outside in. More importantly, however, it also played a major role in souring the relationship between Rome and Constantinople. During Leo III's reign, Rome was still under Byzantine control, as were other parts of Italy, including the Exarchate of Ravenna. However, the first cracks in Imperial control over the city were seen when Leo III had attempted to raise taxes in Italy in order to pay for his wars against the Arabs in Asia Minor. The Pope, Gregory II (715-731), refused to pay these taxes, and from that point on was nominally independent of the Empire due to Byzantine concentration on their Arab foes. After Leo III renounced the veneration of icons, however, the ties were permanently severed. While the clergy in Greece, as well as the Patriarch of Constantinople himself, quietly opposed the ban of icons, it was Gregory II in Rome who was the most vocal opponent of the move, publically denouncing the Emperor's action. Following this, the soldiers of the Exarchate revolted against their officers and stopped short of proclaiming their own Emperor only "because the Pope was opposed."³² From this point on, Rome, and the Pope, were completely independent of the Byzantine Empire's influence, and would go on to seek alliances with the Franks of Western Europe, which would ultimately culminate in the proclamation of the first Western Emperor in almost four hundred years, in 800 AD.

Pope Nicholas I's statement in regards to the authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople presented a clear challenge to Byzantine influence in Bulgaria. Boris was delighted by the Pope's answers, and kept regular correspondence with Rome, even after the events of the synod³³ of Basil I that sought to reunify the Churches. During the synod, a Bulgarian delegation questioned

³¹Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 352.

³²*Ibid.*, 352.

³³A council of the church

whether they owed their allegiance to the Patriarch of Constantinople or the Pope in Rome. The Patriarch Ignatius appointed an archbishop to Bulgaria, amid protests from the Papal delegation, and the bishop Nicholas I had sent to Bulgaria was soon overthrown.³⁴ It seemed that Byzantium was victorious in influencing Bulgaria and ‘winning’ the battle with Rome over who had dominance over the Bulgarian Church. However, the stipulation that the archbishop of Bulgaria would enjoy a great degree of autonomy would pave the way for Bulgaria to escape Byzantine influence in the coming centuries and would then seek to dominate the Empire.

After a period of instability following the retirement of Boris and the ascension of his son Vladimir, who attempted to reintroduce paganism to Bulgaria, Vladimir’s brother and Boris’ younger son Symeon took the Bulgarian throne.³⁵ Symeon had been sent to Constantinople in his youth to study under the theologians of the time and was ultimately supposed to become a prominent figure in the Bulgarian church. However, his rule would usher in a golden age for Bulgaria, seeing his land expand deep into Byzantine territory and even threaten Constantinople itself. Although he had been raised and educated in Constantinople, he was by no means sympathetic toward Byzantium. In fact, he was an adamant proponent of an independent Bulgarian Church, and even went so far as to appoint native Bulgarian clergy as well as replaced Greek with Slavonic as the official language of both the Bulgarian State and Church.³⁶ Up until that point, Greek had been the language of the Bulgarian Church, providing Byzantium with a form of influence over the nation. However, Symeon’s change helped to further instill a sense of Bulgarian identity separate from Byzantium.

³⁴Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 171-3.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 177.

³⁶Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 463.

In 913 AD, Symeon had launched an invasion into Byzantine territory, showing up at the gates of Constantinople with an army that was prepared to lay siege to the great city. This was in retaliation for the Byzantines refusing to pay Bulgaria the yearly tribute they were promised in 897 AD.³⁷ According to the *Theophanes Continuatus*, a collection of chronicles of Byzantine history that were modeled after the way Theophanes the Confessor wrote his history of Byzantium, Symeon is referred to as “archon.” This distinction in his title will have increased significance in later writings from the *Theophanes Continuatus*.³⁸ Symeon demands an audience with the Emperor, but since Constantine VII was but a small child, the Patriarch Nicholas (901-907, 912-925), the boy-Emperor’s regent, was left to deal with the situation. Thus, it was the Patriarch who, in order to come to an agreement for the resumption of payment of the tribute, went out to negotiate with Symeon³⁹. The *Theophanes Continuatus* makes mention that the Patriarch went out to meet with Symeon and “placed his own *epirrhiptarion*⁴⁰ instead of the crown (*stemma*)...on Symeon’s head.”⁴¹ The text makes a clear distinction between the *epirrhiptarion* and the crown, which could imply that this was done for symbolic but also for manipulative reasons. To the Byzantines, it was a validation to Symeon that, as a Christian who followed the Eastern tradition, he derived all power to rule from the Patriarch of Constantinople, and was thus subservient to the Byzantine Empire. However, this was not how Symeon interpreted it, and upon his return to Bulgaria, he began to style himself as the Emperor (Greek *basileus*) of Bulgaria. Symeon’s aspirations did not cease there, however.⁴²

³⁷ Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 225.

³⁸ “Theophanes Continuatus: The Ascension of Constantine VII and the “Coronation” of Symeon of Bulgaria, AD 913”, <http://www.paulstephenson.info/trans/theocont1.html>.

³⁹ Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 473.

⁴⁰ The traditional black veil of the patriarchal headgear.

⁴¹ “Theophanes Continuatus 913.”

⁴² Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 225.

The Bulgarian Tsar Symeon amended his title upon returning to Bulgaria, styling himself as “Emperor of the Bulgarians and Romans”.⁴³ The language used in the text is tricky: it could very well be claimed that by styling himself in such a way, Symeon was trying to further legitimize his claims to lands that had previously belonged to the Byzantines in an attempt to appease the large Byzantine population under Bulgarian rule. However, the term in the text used to identify the people Symeon claimed power over, “*Christianoi*,” refers strictly to the term *Romaioi*, which is the term that the Byzantines used to refer to themselves (since the term “Byzantine Empire” is a modern creation used to describe the Eastern Roman Empire). Indeed, it has been asserted that Symeon laid claims to the Byzantine throne when he first attempted to lay siege to Constantinople in 913.⁴⁴ After adopting these titles, Symeon then proceeded to launch an invasion into Byzantine territory, seeking to besiege Constantinople once again. A force under the Byzantine Admiral Roman Lekapenos was supposed to support the army of Leo Phokas, and also to shuttle the Pechenegs, a group of semi-nomadic Turks, across the River Danube to aid in the fighting against the Bulgarians.⁴⁵ However, Phokas and Lekapenos quarreled over trivial matters and the Pechenegs refused to enter their service, instead choosing to attack the Bulgarian-held territory that lay north of the River Danube instead.⁴⁶ Lekapenos and Phokas’ disagreement led to the Bulgarians engaging Phokas’ forces near Achelous (a small city now located in modern-day Bulgaria). Phokas’ army was completely routed by Symeon’s, and the *magistros*⁴⁷ himself barely escaped for his life, fleeing to Mesembria.⁴⁸

⁴³ “Theophanes Continuatus: Symeon of Bulgaria wins the Battle of Achelous, 917”, <http://www.paulstephenson.info/trans/theocont2.html>.

⁴⁴ Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 473.

⁴⁵ “Theophanes Continuatus, 917.”

⁴⁶ Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 475.

⁴⁷ Magistrate

⁴⁸ “Theophanes Continuatus, 917.”

Symeon, so invigorated by this crushing victory, drove further southward, toward Constantinople, intent on laying siege to the city and claiming Byzantium for himself. At the very least, he demanded that his daughter be married to the young Emperor Constantine VII, who by this time was still not ready to rule on his own. The Empress Zoe, who had assumed power over the Patriarch Nicholas in a coup in 914, refused Symeon's demands, and so the Bulgarian ruler proceeded to attempt to lay siege to Constantinople. He was, however, briefly preoccupied with the Serbs who, at Byzantium's insistence, attacked Bulgaria. As a result, he was forced to divert his attention from attempting to capture Constantinople until he could first topple the Serbian kingdom.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the implications of Symeon's expedition and his ability to so thoroughly manhandle the Byzantine armies thrown at him would ultimately set the stage for a confrontation between Symeon and the soon-to-be crowned, extremely capable Byzantine Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos.

While Symeon was busy fighting to subjugate Serbia, the Empress Zoe's power was fading quickly in Constantinople. Leo Phokas, who earlier had escaped death at the disastrous Battle of Achelous in 917 AD, and his brother-in-law, Constantine, who was the grand chamberlain, were rumored to be plotting to overthrow young Constantine VII.⁵⁰ This prompted a certain Theodore, who was the young Emperor's tutor, to call upon Romanos Lekapanos, who previously had played an indirect role in handing the Byzantines their defeat at Achelous, to help in protect Constantine VII. The admiral arrived at Constantinople and put an end to the supposed coup, arresting the grand chamberlain. Whilst this was occurring, the Patriarch Nicholas was once again restored as regent over the Empress Zoe at Theodore's suggestion. Nicholas in turn

⁴⁹Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 473-5.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 475.

deposed Leo Phokas, who in turn looked to Romanos Lekapenos to rectify the situation.

Lekapenos, however, had different plans. Sailing to the Imperial Palace, he took control, and married his daughter Helen off to Constantine VII, assuming the title of *basilepator*⁵¹ as a result.⁵²

The deposed Leo Phokas, upon hearing of this and realizing that his own aspirations were evaporating before him, rose in revolt under the pretense of liberating Constantine VII from the influence of Lekapenos.⁵³ However, Phokas' revolt was short lived. The forces that he had initially amassed were deserting him and pledging their loyalty to the *basilepator*, and eventually he was captured and blinded. With his primary rival out of the way, Romanos sought to solidify his position of power, first by having Zoe put into a monastery after, he claimed, she attempted to poison him.⁵⁴ Once Zoe was out of the way, Romanos turned his attention to Theodore, the very man behind Lekapenos' rise to power. Ultimately, Constantine VII's tutor was exiled on charges of conspiracy.⁵⁵ It finally seemed that Romanos Lekapenos' position was secure. However, there was one final step that the Armenian chose to take: in the fall of 920 AD, Romanos Lekapenos had Constantine VII and the Patriarch Nicholas proclaim him Emperor, effectively usurping power from the legitimate Emperor.⁵⁶

By this time, the self-titled Bulgarian *basileus* Symeon had completed his incursion into Serbia, establishing a pro-Bulgarian puppet on the Serbian throne. Upon returning to Bulgaria, he received word that Romanos I Lekapenos had married his daughter Helen to Constantine VII and

⁵¹Literally "father of the Emperor," one who became *basilepator* was generally regarded as the Emperor's most senior advisor. The term was first granted to Stylianus Zautes, father of the Emperor Leo VI's mistress, Zoe, in 893 AD. For more, see Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 945.

⁵²Norwich, *The Apogee*, 136.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 136.

⁵⁴Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 476.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 476.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 476.

flew into a rage, believing that he had been denied his rightful position of *basilepator*. He was further enraged that another had risen to the rank of Emperor of the Romans, a title he also claimed. Thus, Symeon amassed a force of Bulgarians and marched on Constantinople, intent on taking the city and having himself crowned as *basileus*. Acting with great haste and urgency, Romanos I once again stirred up a revolt in Serbia, forcing the Bulgarian *basileus* to once more turn his attention away from his ultimate goal, for the time being. This brought Romanos only a limited amount of time, however, as by 922 AD Symeon was back in Byzantine territory, as far south as the Hellespont.⁵⁷ The Bulgarian *basileus* went on to defeat a large Byzantine army near Stenum (modern-day Istinye), and proceeded to ravage the entire surrounding countryside. Then, in 923 AD, he recaptured Adrianople, and tortured the city's governor to death.⁵⁸ It seemed that once more, Symeon would be marching his soldiers to the Theodosian Walls, seeking to capture what had so far eluded him. For his part, the Emperor Romanos I had done everything in his power to secure peace with Symeon since the former had ascended to the throne in 920 AD. However, any negotiation that the Emperor would bring to Symeon would be rejected, and any negotiation that Symeon would bring to the Emperor began and ended with Romanos I's abdication of the Byzantine throne.⁵⁹ Thus, as these talks broke down, Symeon gathered the largest force he possibly could, and in 924 AD, embarked on one final, epic siege of Constantinople.

Where Symeon had failed in the past, he sought to succeed in the present. In order to do so, he had to secure naval help to truly surround, and ultimately starve out, the city. It was for this reason that Symeon opened a dialogue with the Fatimid Caliph in North Africa. He hoped to

⁵⁷Norwich, *The Apogee*, 142.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 142.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 142.

make use of the Caliphate's navy, for the reasons discussed above. Initially, the two sides seemed to be close to reaching an agreement, but when the Fatimid Caliph sent a delegation back to Symeon to further discuss the finer details of the two states' accord, it was captured by the Byzantine navy.⁶⁰ To ensure that the Fatimids would not be a future threat to the Empire, Emperor Romanos I sent them a hefty tribute, much larger than anything that Symeon could hope to provide, effectively buying their loyalty from the Bulgarians.⁶¹ By this point in time, Symeon had amassed a large force, and despite the setback, or perhaps even because of it, he moved his forces southward, to begin a siege of Constantinople once more.⁶²

After laying waste to Macedonia and Thrace, Bulgarian *basileus* Symeon had settled in to his siege of Constantinople. According to the *Theophanes Continuatus*, the Byzantines sought to negotiate with Symeon, and sent the Patriarch Nicholas and several nobles out to discuss peace with the Bulgarian. Upon receiving the Byzantine delegates, however, Symeon sent them back to Constantinople, demanding an audience with Emperor Romanos I himself.⁶³ Symeon's demands signify the position of power that he held over the Byzantine Empire. As if to underscore his demand to negotiate only with Romanos I, Symeon razed the Church of the All-Holy Virgin, originally built by the Emperor Justinian I, to the ground, along with a palace at Pege, which was a supposed favorite of the Emperor.⁶⁴ Eventually, an agreement was agreed upon that established a meeting time and place for the rulers to negotiate a peace treaty. Once the destination had been searched by the Bulgarians to ensure that there were no traps or ambushes, and the proper hostages had been exchanged by both sides, the two rulers, each with a contingency of soldiers,

⁶⁰Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 478.

⁶¹Norwich, *The Apogee*, 143.

⁶²Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 478.

⁶³"Theophanes Continuatus: The Peace Agreed Between Romanos Lekapenos and Symeon of Bulgaria, AD 924", <http://www.paulstephenson.info/trans/theocont3.html>

⁶⁴Norwich, *The Apogee*, 142

finally met on the 9th of November, 924 AD.⁶⁵ Interestingly enough, and quite telling of the status of Bulgaria in relation to Byzantium, is the way in which the Byzantines addressed Symeon. “They acclaimed him emperor in the language of the Romans” says the *Theophanes Continuatus*; a dramatic shift from how the Bulgarian ruler had previous been styled by the Byzantines (as an *archon*, or ruler). What this tells us is that by this point in time, it had become apparent to the Byzantine Empire that the Bulgaria was, at the very least, politically and militarily on par with the Empire.

The negotiations between Romanos I Lekapenos and Symeon culminated in the Byzantine Empire recognizing the independence of the Bulgarian Church from the yoke of the Patriarch of Constantinople, thus officially creating the autocephalous Patriarchy of Bulgaria.⁶⁶ The Peace of 924 AD also saw the restoration of the Byzantine tribute to Bulgaria, which was more or less the same amount as the tribute of 897 AD.⁶⁷ However, despite Romanos I and the rest of the Byzantines addressing Symeon as *basileus* at the onset of the negotiations, the Peace of 924 AD did not address the status of the Bulgarian ruler. Indeed, this question went unanswered until the death of Symeon in 927 AD, and his young son Peter ascended to the Bulgarian throne. Peter was, however, still too young to govern on his own, and so his uncle, George Sursuvul, was appointed as his regent. Sursuvul continued the anti-Byzantine policies that his brother-in-law had pursued.⁶⁸ Under his authority, Bulgarian forces conducted raids of the Thracian and Macedonian *themata*. These forces even went so far as to raze several towns in Thrace to the ground.⁶⁹ The raids apparently sent the Byzantine populace in and around

⁶⁵“Theophanes Continuatus: 924 AD.”

⁶⁶Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 227.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 227.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 227.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 227.

Macedonia and Thrace into a panicked frenzy.⁷⁰ Upon hearing the news of the Bulgarian raiders, Emperor Romanos I prepared to set out with an army to confront them. However, before he did so, George Sursuvul sent emissaries to Romanos, offering to negotiate a last peace treaty.⁷¹ Romanos, eager to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, agreed to meet with Sursuvul to discuss the possibility of peace.

The peace agreement that would eventually be agreed upon by the Emperor Romanos I and Bulgarian regent George Sursuvul would solidify once and for all the position of Bulgaria as an equal (or possible superior) of the Byzantine Empire. Sursuvul, having arrived in Constantinople to negotiate, demanded that the young Bulgarian ruler Peter be married to Maria Lekapene, the daughter of Romanos' son and co-emperor Christopher. In addition, the Byzantine Empire would continue its payment of tribute to Bulgaria, once again along the lines of the tribute established in 897 AD. Furthermore, Peter would drop "Emperor of the Romans" from his title only if Romanos recognized him as Emperor of the Bulgarians. While Peter would be giving up his claim to the Empire, he would be gaining official recognition of his own.⁷² Romanos agreed to this peace treaty, and Sursuvul wrote to the young Peter, urging him to travel quickly to Constantinople, for the two nations had, it seemed, finally reached a peace agreement that appealed to both sides.⁷³ Peter thus made haste to Constantinople, and upon the arrival of the young Bulgarian *basileus*, Emperor Romanos I went forth and greeted him in peace. With Peter now present, the peace negotiations were formalized, with both rulers signing the treaty.⁷⁴ Following the signing of the treaty, the two rulers also officially agreed upon the marriage

⁷⁰ "Theophanes Continuatus: The Marriage Between Tsar Peter of Bulgaria and Maria Lekapena, AD 927", <http://www.paulstephenson.info/trans/theocont5.html>.

⁷¹ "Theophanes Continuatus: 924."

⁷² Curta, *Southeastern Europe*, 227.

⁷³ "Theophanes Continuatus: 924."

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

contract that had been drawn up by Romanos and Sursuvul. On the 8th of October, 927 AD, the Byzantines held the beginning of a multiple-day celebration. The Byzantine Senate, along with the entire royal family, and the Patriarch Stephen II (925-928) went forth along with Peter, George Sursuvul, and the rest of the Bulgarian contingent, to the Church of the All-Holy Mother of God in Pege (which had, it seems, been rebuilt since it was razed by Symeon in 924 AD).⁷⁵

There, the Patriarch Stephen performed the marriage rite, and the celebration began. The significance of this marriage was two-fold. First, it affirmed the Bulgarian ruler's equal standing to Byzantium. The *Theophanes Continuatus* says that Maria rejoiced that she had been given an emperor for a husband, once more signifying a shift in the way Bulgaria was viewed even by the most biased Byzantine writers. It also demonstrated the power that Bulgaria wielded over Byzantium. During a feast on the second day of the celebration, the Bulgarians took issue with the fact that Constantine VII had been introduced and formally placed before the co-Emperor Christopher Lekapenos, Romanos I's son. The Byzantines, for the remainder of the celebrations, responded by placing Christopher ahead of Constantine VII in all events and formalities.⁷⁶ On the surface, this change seems superficial; however, the Bulgarians had forced the Byzantines to promote Christopher, the son of a usurper to the throne, over Constantine VII, the only Emperor to have any legitimate claim to the Byzantine throne. The ability of the Bulgarians to make such a demand and how it was realized reflects changing relationship between the two states.

Bulgaria would ultimately wind up losing its influence in the Balkans as it was struck by internal conflicts, a string of weak leaders, plague and famine. Eventually, the Byzantines, under the warrior-Emperor John I Tzimiskes annexed most of western Bulgaria in 971 AD.⁷⁷ It would

⁷⁵ "Thophanes Continuatus: 924."

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 509.

ultimately fall to Basil II, the child of Constantine VII, the legitimate Byzantine Emperor who was overshadowed by Romanos I Lekapenos, to complete the conquest of Bulgaria, in 1018 AD.⁷⁸ While this would spell the end of the First Tsardom of Bulgaria, the nation would rise again, and by the time of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 AD, would once more be a prominent player in the politics of the Balkans.

Bulgaria had accomplished, in the short span of time between Boris I's conversion to Orthodox Christianity and the ascension of Tsar Peter I, in bringing the Byzantine Empire to its knees. Although the decline of Byzantium's influence in the Balkans was apparent even prior to the Islamic invasions of 636 AD, yet the Empire had always been incredibly adept at manipulating and bribing various tribes and countries to do their bidding. When the Avars laid siege to Constantinople in 626 AD, the Byzantines did what they had always done: paid off another tribe to attack the Avars, alleviating the siege and allowing for the two tribes to war amongst themselves, to Byzantium's gain. However, no one could have foreseen that this tribe of Bulgars would settle down and assume regional power in the subsequent power vacuum. Nor could anyone have foreseen that, despite Byzantium's best attempts at influencing these tribesmen, they would not only take and learn from the Empire, but be able to use the influence to foster a sense of identity separate from their influence. This ultimately allowed them to rise to a position where they, as Bulgarians, were able to claim the throne of Byzantium, and dictate Byzantine policy in the Balkans. Byzantine writings of the time avoid coming right out and addressing the fact that Bulgaria was able to hand the Empire several political and military defeats, yet in the writings of scholars, like Theophanes the Confessor and his successors, there exists a subtle admission of Bulgarian superiority in the verbiage used in their chronicles.

⁷⁸Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 528.

Ultimately, these events are reflective of the lack of Byzantine foresight when it came to exerting influence over neighboring states.

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