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*A Fresh Look at Bulgaria under Tsar Peter (927-69)*

Scholars have all agreed that following Symeon's death in 927 Bulgaria underwent a major decline under his son and successor, Peter, who is generally depicted as being weak and incapable.<sup>1</sup> I want to examine this general view of Bulgarian society under Peter and to show that this view is entirely hypothetical. No sources support such a view, and it is perfectly possible to construct other models that are contrary to it and equally—if not more—plausible.

We are regularly told that after Symeon's wars with Byzantium and his other neighbors, Bulgaria was war-torn, financially exhausted and had suffered great losses of manpower. Though this might be true, we do not know this, and it seems to me that it is probably a great exaggeration. Except for the devastating Magyar raids of the 890s (some thirty years before Peter's accession), Bulgaria itself was not successfully attacked or ravaged by invaders at any point in Symeon's reign. And in the thirty years after the 890s fields, animals and population could recover, and they evidently did since Symeon was able to carry out his wars between 913 and 927 so effectively. Thus, in almost all of Symeon's wars Bulgarians were fighting on foreign soil. In general, the battles fought were raids and sieges which generally do not lead to great losses in manpower. There were few pitched battles (Anchialo in 917 which was a great Bulgarian victory and the unsuccessful invasion of Croatia in 926). Surely men were lost, but the wars were fought over a fourteen-year period (913-27) during which time a new generation was replacing the lost men. The only defeat of any magnitude, that by the Croats in 926, did not lead to a Croatian invasion of Bulgaria. Peace was quickly made. And though men were lost, the losses were only a portion of the overall army since Symeon was ready to march against Byzantium again the next year. Thus, the overall manpower losses in Symeon's wars were probably not that serious. Nor can we be sure that Bulgaria was financially exhausted; possibly Symeon collected high taxes, but the campaigns also brought in great booty. No one knows the balance between his "budgetary" needs and the amount gained in

1. The general picture of Peter's reign which I summarize below can be found in many places. See, e.g., V. N. Zlatarski, *История на Българската държава през средните векове*. 3 vols in 4 pts. (rpt. Sofia: Издателство наука и изкуство, 1971), I, pt. 2, 518-42; R. Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria: A Comparative Study Across the Early Medieval Frontier* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1975), pp. 67-69.

booty. Possibly the state profited, and if profits from war were high, possibly taxes on the Bulgarian population were low. However, we know nothing about taxes under Symeon. And since we are ignorant of this and since the state could have been drawing a high percentage of its financial needs from beyond its borders, we cannot assume a financially exhausted Bulgaria. Thus, the model that we have rejected should not be used, as it generally is, to show popular dissatisfaction to set the scene for a dismal period of decline under Peter and for the rise of the Bogomil heresy during Peter's reign.

Next under Peter we are regularly given a picture of social and economic decay, crises, social antagonisms, rise of the feudal aristocracy, growth of large estates (both clerical and secular), rivalry between these two landholding groups, increase of peasant bondage to the soil, increased Byzantine influence through Peter's Byzantine wife, Maria Lecapena, and her entourage (who were supposedly resented) and the development of the heretical religious sect of the Bogomils. The sect is real and so, probably, is the increase in Church landholding. In addition, Peter did take the Byzantine wife, so quite possibly there was an increase of Byzantine influence at court (though how widespread such influence was elsewhere is not known). However, everything else that I have listed is purely hypothetical.

What do we know about Peter's reign? Sadly, almost nothing. He acquired the throne on the death of his father, Symeon, in 927 and found himself strongly under the influence of his mother's brother, George Sursuvul. They naturally feared that with Symeon gone all their unfriendly neighbors (Byzantium, Croatia and the Magyars) would gang up on them. At the same time an attack of locusts had caused a major crop failure. It was decided to attack Byzantium, and then from strength as a result of this offensive to negotiate peace. This was done, and peace was concluded. Peter received recognition of his title Emperor of the Bulgarians while the head of the Bulgarian church was recognized as a patriarch, and Peter received the Emperor Romanus' granddaughter, Maria, for a bride. We then hear of two revolts over the next two-three years led by a brother and a half-brother of Peter. These revolts both fizzle out quickly, and after that we have no more details about Bulgarian events (except for the Bogomils) or Peter's state until the mid-960s when war breaks out again with Byzantium.<sup>2</sup>

2. The sources on Peter's first years all convey the same information which I have summarized in the preceding paragraph. The only matter discussed in any detail is the wedding ceremony between Maria and Peter. See Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia*, VI, 21-23 and 28-29, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* (Bonn: impensis E. Weberi, 1838), pp. 411-20; also in *Извори за Българската история*. *Fontes hist. Bulgariae* (Sofia: Българска академия на науките, 1954-), IX, 135-38; Leo Grammaticus, *Chronographia*, *ibid.*, IX, 166-68; Pseudo-Symeonis, *Chronographia*, *ibid.*, IX, 182; and Georgius Monachus *Continuatus*, *ibid.*, XI, 150-52. After these events we have only references to the four Magyar raids and two theological sources about the Bogomil heresy (telling us nothing about Bulgarian affairs) up to the middle of the 960s when the Byzant-

From these few facts how can one come up with the dismal picture scholars usually give us? I suspect there are two reasons: 1) To find a cause for the heresy that arose, and 2) strength and success are identified by scholars with militarism. If one is at peace, this must mean that one is too weak to fight. However, if this is the reasoning behind the discrediting of Peter's Bulgaria, it is absurd. He may well have made peace because he feared his neighbors would attack him from all sides. This is sensible policy. Symeon also made peace with Byzantium in the 890s when he was attacked from the other side by the Magyars. Possibly also Peter anticipated the revolts of his brothers that were to follow. Making peace with Byzantium would also be important in facing such internal threats. And once peace was made Peter had reasons to maintain it; he had received recognition of his title and of his autocephalous church under its patriarch, and he received a bride. Thus, he had achieved all of the items, except for Constantinople and the empire itself, for which Symeon had so long been at war. And Symeon's long wars had clearly demonstrated that Constantinople would not be conquered. What would be gained by continuing the war?

Now let us turn to the supposed rise of the nobility. We know of a couple of noblemen under Peter who seem to have been powerful: Peter's uncle, the boiar George Sursuvul, and Count Nicholas, the father of the future Tsar Samuel, in distant western Macedonia whom we learn of at the end of Peter's reign. This is hardly evidence of great power going to the boiars or aristocrats in general. In fact, certain nobles had been powerful at every stage throughout Bulgaria's medieval history. We have no evidence that Symeon cowed the nobility or that he even tried to do so. The fact that Symeon's eldest son (by his first wife) was popped into a monastery and succession went to Peter (the eldest son of wife number two) who became ruler under the wing of the boiar brother of Symeon's second wife suggests that the succession may have gone the way it did through the power and influence upon Symeon of that boiar family. If so, then even Symeon did not have all of them subdued. The best way to limit the boiars would be to create an effective administration with officials sent out to the provinces from the center. There is no evidence that Symeon ever created such an administrative structure. Thus, the local nobles probably retained great local authority under him; this situation seems to have continued under Peter. However, there is no evidence that local nobles had more authority in their own counties under Peter than they had

tine-Bulgarian war breaks out. The sources on the war give us no information about the preceding period. I do not discuss the war in any detail here because I have nothing new to contribute. For an excellent account of the war, see A. Stokes, "Background and Chronology of the Balkan Campaigns of Svjatoslav," *Slavonic and East European Review*, 40 (1962), 43-57; and *idem*, "The Balkan Campaigns of Svjatoslav Igorevich," *ibid.*, 40 (1962), 466-96.

held earlier. Probably as a successful war leader (offering the possibilities of booty to be won for supporters and the possibility of punitive raids against the disobedient) Symeon, at least for and on campaigns, had the obedience of most. Possibly Peter could not draw as many to his standard, and this may have hurt him in the 960s. However, we must note that after the end of the civil wars (928-30) we have no evidence of any nobles disobeying Peter either.

The other way to show rise of the nobility is to examine the relations of peasants to the nobility. On this issue we have almost no information. We have no evidence that under Peter more peasants were being enserfed or that more free villages were being annexed to the estates of the nobility than previously. Presumably during both reigns many peasants found themselves as serfs on the lands of the aristocrats. Possibly (even probably) the peasants resented the nobility, but there is no reason to think that they should hate the nobles more under Peter than they had during previous reigns. Under Peter there was very likely further growth of monastic landholding and thus probably more peasants did end up living on church estates; but if Bulgarian church lands were like those of Byzantium these lands would have had more tax exemptions. If this was the case for Bulgaria, then a serf on a church estate would pay less in taxes than a free peasant. This, then, would hardly have been a cause for dissatisfaction or a reason for peasants to oppose the growth of monastic lands.

Other than the attack of locusts which probably caused hardships in 927, the only signs of the crisis which so many scholars speak of are the revolts of Peter's brothers in the early years of his reign (928-30). We do not know the causes; quite possibly there were no ideological reasons, but the revolts simply reflected the ambitions and bitterness of the brothers and their friends. By the end of 930 Peter had put down the revolts (showing some ability either by Peter or his uncle), and we have no more revolts or foreign invasions (except for four known Magyar raids that penetrated through Bulgaria to Byzantium) until the Byzantine war of the late 960s. Thus, the bulk of Peter's reign was basically peaceful, and we find no signs of local unrest after 930. The economy probably improved. Peace with Byzantium (plus the Byzantine princess at court) probably brought about an increase of trade with Byzantium; in addition, the Byzantines also paid an annual tribute. That there was considerable commercial prosperity is also seen in Sviatoslav's description of the Bulgarian commercial town of Pereiaslavets on the Danube he had occupied in the late 960s. Pereiaslavets was evidently more prosperous than Kiev for Sviatoslav wanted to move there. And clearly its prosperity had existed under Peter for it could not have suddenly blossomed into such an emporium in the midst of the Bulgarian-Russian-Byzantine war. The *Russian Primary Chronicle* quotes Sviatoslav as saying: "I do not care to remain in Kiev, but should prefer to live in Pereiaslavets on the Danube, since that is the centre of my realm, where all riches are concentrated; gold, silks, wine and various fruits

from Greece, silver and horses from Hungary and Bohemia, and from Rus' furs, wax, honey, and slaves."<sup>3</sup> Thus, there was commercial prosperity (at least in Pereiaslavets). On Peter's tax policy, we know no more than we do about Symeon's. We know that they both levied whatever they collected in kind. But how high a tax rate existed under Peter, whether it was at all changed from the rate under Symeon, and how difficult it was for peasants to meet Peter's taxes are unknown.

Bulgaria is said to have declined under Peter. The items cited above (though too scanty to prove matters) do not suggest a decline. On the negative side against Peter all that we know is that Bulgaria's armies were inadequate when needed against Byzantium and the Russians in the late 960s. By the 960s under Nicephorus Phocas the Byzantines, of course, had far superior armies to those that the Byzantines had had to oppose Symeon. And the Russians also quickly attacked the Bulgarians. Thus, Peter was faced with more powerful opposition than Symeon. In addition, probably the years of peace had caused Bulgaria to decline militarily. However, a policy of neglecting the army and diverting resources elsewhere—if true—(while evidently a poor policy for a state with Bulgaria's geographic location) is no sign that the state and its people had not had a relatively prosperous and contented thirty years in the interim. Presumably a policy of peace would have been a popular policy for the bulk of society (the military class excepted). Neglect of the military also says nothing about Peter's other policies. Possibly the army was neglected through his incompetence or lack of interest; but possibly it was neglected because he did not collect enough taxes to maintain it. If the latter be true, the failure to collect these taxes would have been popular with the Bulgarian tax-payers. Possibly the warrior class was unhappy with peace and the lack of military activities; however, their possible discontent is irrelevant to the usual pictures of social discontent used to explain the rise of the Bogomils because there is no evidence that the warriors became Bogomils. The same argument also pertains to the supposed resentment of Byzantine influence. If such influence really increased beyond the court (and we cannot prove that it did), then possibly the boiars disliked it. However, the boiars do not seem to have turned to heresy because of it, for once again we do not find members of the elite connected with the heresy. And presumably the peasants in their villages and artisans in provincial towns preferred peace and never saw any Byzantine influence to be bothered by.

Thus, the general model of greatness under Symeon and decline under Peter is dubious. We see no sign of poverty and crisis during the main part of

3. *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, trans. and ed. S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, Mass.: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953), p. 86.

Peter's reign until the defeat by the Russians and Byzantines at the end; and by that time the Bogomil heresy was already established. So, it cannot have arisen out of the military defeats of the late 960s and early 970s. Thus, though there was a heresy we cannot make arguments about its emergence from a critical social situation because we know so little about what sort of social situation there was. In addition, the heresy is supposed to have attracted the little people, and we can present reasons why they were probably better off under Peter than previously. And those who might have been dissatisfied would have been from the elite about whom we have no evidence they were involved in heresy. Thus, the rise of a heresy cannot be used to prove social discontent.<sup>4</sup>

And finally to speak of decline under Peter there must have been relative prosperity under Symeon. Yet did we have it? We had military glory, great titles, prestige, and booty for him and the military leaders (and probably the soldiers as well). But were other aspects of the state (commerce, crop yields, etc.) more prosperous under him than under Peter? That we do not know for we have no evidence that Symeon developed the productive aspects of the state (it would have been difficult without coinage). Symeon took an interest in trade and went to war with Byzantium when the Emperor Leo VI shifted the Bulgarian market from Constantinople to Thessalonika. However, with the Byzantine wars during the last fourteen years of his reign, trade (particularly with Byzantium which was probably the most important trading partner Bulgaria had) surely declined. This presumably picked up after Peter made peace in 927 and is supported by the prosperity of Pereiaslavets and the Greek goods it had there. In addition, the supposed prosperity generally attributed to Symeon's reign is not entirely consistent with the generally advanced conclusion of financial exhaustion at the end of his reign. If the Bulgarian state was really financially exhausted at the end of his reign (which, of course, we do not know), then presumably peace under Peter gave the state a chance to pick up and regain its lost prosperity. Furthermore, lack of financial exhaustion does not mean prosperity. Even if Symeon's state and military had acquired great wealth in booty, it does not mean that it filtered down to the society as a whole. Thus, we have no clear-cut evidence that Bulgaria as a whole enjoyed prosperity under Symeon.

Thus, to conclude there is no real evidence to support a model of crisis and decline in Bulgaria under Peter. An equally plausible (though also impossible

4. Professor Ivan Dujčev lends support to my thesis here. He points out that the sources only note that Pop Bogomil was active and that the heresy was spread under Peter, and Dujčev suggests that its origins may well be earlier (possibly back to the ninth century). If this be true, then there is no need to particularly look for social crisis during Peter's reign. See I. Dujčev, "I Bogomili nei paesi Slavi e la loro storia," rpt. in I. Dujčev, *Medioevo Bizantino-Slavo* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1965-), I, 262.



to prove) setting of peace and prosperity (despite a possible policy of neglect of the army) can be suggested. Of course, since things in life are seldom black or white, it is most probable that there actually existed some sort of "grey" situation in between the two opposite extremes of prosperity versus rampant crisis. However, one would expect life to have been grey to black for much of the medieval population throughout the Middle Ages. There would, therefore, have always been reason for people to turn to movements of protest. However, what I am stressing here is that there is no evidence that things were any blacker under Peter than at other times.

### *Epilogue*

One of the unfortunate things about the subject we have examined here is that there are so few sources. Frequently when major questions requiring answers are found to have no sources, scholars have fallen prey to the great temptation to speculate and to create hypothetical models of what might have been; and then soon either they themselves or scholars who come after them convert these models into facts. Though the few bare secure facts we have are not sufficient to portray our past civilizations and thus are unsatisfactory, such hypothetical models are even worse—minus quantities—since the generalizations they lead to may often be incorrect.

Lynn White has well stated the sad reality we historians must face:

Voltaire to the contrary, history is a bag of tricks which the dead have played upon historians. The most remarkable of these illusions is the belief that surviving written records provide us with a reasonably accurate facsimile of past human activity. "Prehistory" is defined as the period for which such records are not available. But until very recently the vast majority of mankind was living in a subhistory which was a continuation of prehistory. Nor was this condition characteristic simply of the lower strata of society. In medieval Europe until the end of the eleventh century we learn of the feudal aristocracy largely from clerical sources which naturally reflect ecclesiastical attitudes; the knights do not speak for themselves. Only later do merchants, manufacturers, and technicians begin to share their thoughts with us. The peasant was the last to find his voice.<sup>5</sup>

And for Medieval Bulgaria we are faced with a situation where there are almost no Bulgarian voices at all. Frustrated by this situation and wanting to be able to say something about these major trends and events that did exist—whether the sources exist to describe them or not—historians have turned to

5. L. T. White, Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). My citation comes from the 1966 Oxford Galaxy Book edition, p. v.

hypotheses which soon become "facts." Yet as Cipolla says: "Easy explanations of complex historic phenomena fascinate people, precisely because they are easy and, therefore, comfortable. The explanation pleases, the problem irritates. And yet the explanation is often unattainable, while the problem remains the only valid thing."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, sad as it is, it is better to avoid the fictitious answer; historians must be satisfied with elucidating the major questions and problems and then answering them to the limited extent allowed by our fragmentary sources. Beyond that we must be willing to honestly—and without shame—say: We do not know.

At the present moment in the study of Medieval Bulgaria's fascinating history the most important task is to return to the bedrock of facts in our sources and to remove the hypotheses stated as facts and the sweeping generalizations (which really are not known and have no source basis) from the scholarship. For the removal of error is every bit as important as the discovery of new facts. And since, owing to the lack of sources, few new facts are to be found, and, since probably a good quarter of the broad statements made about the First Bulgarian Empire (i.e., broad statements such as the general characteristics of reigns, relations between Slavs and Bulgars, relations between nobility and khan or tsar) are really just constructs which are very likely false, this is clearly the major task facing all historians of Medieval Bulgaria. This is a fitting note on which to end this paper for Professor Ivan Dujčev whom we are honoring in this volume is one of the few scholars of Bulgarian history who has consistently taken finite problems and on the basis of meticulous source study come up with the limited non-sweeping conclusions that his sources have allowed. His work and methods should be models for all students of Medieval Bulgaria.

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6. C. M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000-1700* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), p. 173.