

VI

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Wild, Haughty and Menacing Highlanders: Bulgarians and Mountains in the Context of Byzantine-Bulgarian Armed Conflicts



Academics studying the history of the early mediaeval Bulgaria, particularly prior to its Christianisation (seventh to ninth centuries) made us accustomed to see Bulgarians as a solely nomadic people, comprised entirely of riders inhabiting the plains around the capital of Pliska, Dobrudzha, and the Danube Plain. Of course, this view is well substantiated in both the testimony of the written sources, and in the archaeological material. According to some scholars, there is also evidence that during this earliest period of the Danubian Khanate Bulgarians were also taking up agriculture and led a more settled lifestyle. For the tenth and eleventh centuries, and therefore also for the period of tsar Peter I's reign, the literature of the subject rightly presents the Bulgarians as a fully settled people. One should however note that the academic debates regarding these issues do not fully exhaust the matter of the presentation of Bulgarians by Byzantine authors. It turns out that a wealth of information, scattered throughout

the sources, indicates that the southern neighbours saw Bulgarians in part as highlanders.

One of the most important areas during the existence of the so-called First Bulgarian State was the Haimos Mountains massif (Lat. Haemus, Gr. Αἶμος, Tur. Balkan, encompassing the area of modern Predbalkan, Stara Planina and Sredna Gora)¹. This range, cutting the modern Bulgaria in two, was a natural border between the so-called inner area of the Bulgarian state: Danube Plain and Dobrudzha, where the capitals of the early mediaeval state lie, and the Northern Thrace, where the armed conflicts between the Byzantine Empire and Bulgaria had been taking place. It is with this massif that the Bulgarians were most often associated in the Byzantine authors' relations. Another such area was the particularly mountainous territory of Macedonia, and this was the result of emperor Basil II's (976–1025) lengthy and exhausting wars with the Cometopouloi, fought in this very land². It is characteristic that this fact did not escape the attention of the Byzantine experts on the art of war. The anonymous author of the *On setting up the camp* (Περὶ καταστάσεως ἀπλήκτου, also known as Ἀνωνύμου βιβλίον τακτικόν), who wrote his work most likely soon after 986, clearly based his polemological reasoning on the experiences of the Byzantine-Bulgarian skirmishes in the mountainous regions of Macedonia. He treated the Bulgarians as opponents with whom the Byzantines came to fight in the mountains³. Undoubtedly these many

¹ On this massif, see *i.a.*: H. Inalcik, *Balkan*, [in:] *EI.NE*, vol. I, pp. 998–1000; T. Lehrs-Plański, H. Kappesowa, W. Swoboda, *Balkany*, [in:] *SSS*, vol. I, pp. 71–72; W. Swoboda, *Haimos*, [in:] *SSS*, vol. II, p. 182; H. von Geisau, Chr. Danoff, *Haimos*, [in:] *KP.LA*, vol. II, pp. 919–920; I. Dujčev, R. Werner, *Balkan*, [in:] *LdM*, vol. I, cols. 1380–1381; G. Schramm, *Haimos "Balkangebrige" und seine Nachfolgelautungen eine Beispielstudie zur Entwicklung des Thrakischen*, *LBa* 27,3, 1984, pp. 59–69; A.P. Kazhdan, *Balkans*, [in:] *ODB*, vol. I, pp. 248–249; P. Soustal, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, vol. VI, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)*, Wien 1991, pp. 279–280; К. Гагова, *Тракия през българското Средновековие. Историческа география*, София 2002, pp. 319–322.

² Cf. P.M. Stransle, *Krieg und Kriegführung in Byzanz. Die Kriege Kaiser Basileos II. gegen die Bulgaren (976–1019)*, Köln–Weimar–Wien 2006.

³ Cf. Ἀνωνύμου Βιβλίον τακτικόν, XV, XXI, pp. 288.6–8, 304.33–34; П. Мутафчиев, *Книга за българите*, ed. В. Гюзелев. София 1987, p. 81; В.В. Кучма, *Военная организация Византийской империи*, Санкт-Петербург 2001, p. 296.

years of armed struggle reinforced the image of Bulgarians as highlanders⁴. These, however, were not the only examples regarding the perception of the Bulgarian rulers' subjects as mountain warriors.

For example, the so-called *Scriptor Incertus de Leone Armenio* commented the outcome of the Byzantine-Bulgarian clash near Versinikia in 813 in the following words:

Therefore seeing this [the defeat of Aplakes' soldiers – K.M.] all the theme units fled, and those who recently boasted that they would fight in defence of the emperor and Christians had very nearly abandoned the emperor himself. They spoke thus: *When we entered Bulgaria we were defeated on terrain where it was difficult to move, while we outside [of the terrain] would have been able to win a victory over them* (ἐν τόποις δυσβάτοις ἐκυρίευσαν ἡμᾶς, ἐξωθεν δὲ ἐπὶ κάμπου νικῆσαι αὐτοὺς ἔχομεν). However all of this was untruthfulness; for they fled without a fight.⁵

In the light of the above source passage I say that the opinion of the Byzantine soldiers was that the Bulgarians had won exclusively thanks to exploiting the topographic features of the battlefield⁶. Also emerging from the text is an interesting association which took shape in the thinking of the defeated Byzantines. They associated Bulgaria with inaccessibility and defeat, while a victory gained outside of the area (lit. outside – ἐξωθεν)

⁴ On the importance of mountains in Byzantine-Bulgarian military clashes see e.g. П. Мутачиев, *Книга...*, pp. 65–89, 113–138; К. Маринов, *В дербите на Хемус (За някои страни в ролята на планината през периода VII–IX в.)*, Pbg 37.4, 2013, pp. 60–73; И. Иванов, *Ролята на Старопланинската област във военните кампании през Средновековието: Опит за критичен количествен анализ*, ИРИМГ 2, 2014, pp. 78–90; К. Маринов, *Стратегическата роля на Старопланинската и Средногорската вериги в светлината на българо-византийските военни сблъсъци през VII–XI век*, ИРИМГ 2, 2014, pp. 111–134.

⁵ *Scriptor Incertus de Leone Armenio*, p. 338.6–12.

⁶ Similarly П. Ангелов, *България и българите в представите на византийците (VII–XIV век)*, София, 1999, p. 27. Cf. J. Bonagk, *Romaŋowie i obsy w kronice Jana Skylitzesa. Identyfikacja etniczna Bizantyńczyków i ich stosunek do obcych w świetle kroniki Jana Skylitzesa*, Toruń 2003, p. 129, who – on the basis of John Skylitzes' relation – shows that in this author's opinion (and in others') Bulgarians gained victory as a result of the betrayal and flight of Leo the Armenian.

of the kleisourai (i.e. mountain passes) with fighting on a plain, where it was possible to make use of all of the advantages of the Byzantine armed forces⁷. They therefore thought that in a pitched, open battle they would have easily defeated the Bulgarians, who in turn became dangerous opponents in a mountainous terrain that was advantageous to them.

The account of Leo the Deacon regarding the breakdown of the peaceful Byzantine-Bulgarian relations during the reign of emperor Nikephoros II Phokas refers directly to tsar Peter's times. According to the relation of *History* of Leo, the emperor, having rejected Bulgarian demands to pay out the customary tribute, organised an expedition against the Bulgarians. However, he was said to have given it up once he learned just how inaccessible Bulgaria was. Leo characterised it, initially in general terms, as:

densely wooded and full of cliffs (ἀμφιλαφές καὶ κρημνώδεις) [for, to use the language of the poet, in the land of the Mysians *in every way evil was heaped upon evil*]; an area full of roughnesses and cliffs (σηραγγώδης καὶ κρημνώδης) followed upon a region that was densely wooded and overgrown with bushes (ἀμφιλαφή καὶ λοχμώδη), and then immediately after that would be a marshy and swampy area (τελματώδης τε καὶ σομφώδης); for the region located near Haimos and Rhodope [mountains], which is watered with great rivers, is extremely damp, heavily forested, and surrounded on every side by impassable mountains (ἔρεσι δυσβάτοις)]. When the emperor Nikephoros observed this, he did not think he should lead the Roman force through dangerous regions with its ranks broken (ἀσύντακτος), as if he were providing sheep (τὰ βοσκήματα) to be

⁷ This includes, i.a., the excellent organisation of the army (including supply system), the ability to use various tactical solutions, better equipment and numerical superiority – cf. П. М у т а ф ч и е в, *История на българския народ (681–1323)*, ed. В. Г ю з е л е в, София 1986, p. 123; i d e m, *Книга...*, p. 66; J.V.A. F i n e, *The Early Medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from the Sixth Century to the Late Twelfth Century*, Ann Arbor 1983, pp. 77–78; П. П а в л о в, *Залезът на Първото българско царство (1015–1018)*, София 1999, pp. 24, 27; i d e m, *Бунтари и авантюристи в средновековна България*, Велико Търново 2000, pp. 31, 32; П. П е т р о в, *Самуил – царят воин*, София 2014, p. 127; Т. Т о м о в, *Византия – позната и непозната*, ²София 2014, pp. 206–234.

slaughtered by the Mysians [i.e. the Bulgarians – K.M.], for it is said⁸ that on several previous occasions the Romans came to grief in the rough terrain of Mysia [i.e. Bulgaria – K.M.], and were completely destroyed. He decided therefore not to run any risks in impassable and dangerous territory. So he took the army and returned to Byzantium.⁹

All of the above features of the terrain constituted serious obstacles for military activities. The irregularities, cliffs and forests listed in the text may be associated with the area of Predbalkan, Stara Planina and Sredna Gora. It would seem that the author put particular emphasis specifically on the mountainous nature of the Bulgarian territory, for later he states that Nikephoros feared to lead the Byzantine army through these dangerous places (δι' ἐπισφαλῶν χωρίων), to avoid it getting slaughtered like cattle by the Mysians (Bulgarians). This fear stemmed from what was said about the *Rhomaioi* (Byzantines) – that they often suffered defeats in inaccessible areas of Mysia (Bulgaria), which resulted in the complete destruction of Byzantine forces¹⁰. There is no doubt that Leo primarily meant those that were suffered by the Byzantines in the passes of Haimos, in particular the disaster from 811 in which the emperor Nikephoros I Genikos (802–811) had perished¹¹. I believe that in abandoning further expedition

⁸ On the question see: A.-M., Talbot, D.F. Sullivan, *Introduction*, [in:] *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, ed., transl. A.-M. Talbot, D.F. Sullivan, assist. G.T. Dennis, S. McGath, Washington 2006, p. 14: *he* [Leo – K.M.] *perhaps seeks to indicate that he has not examined the sources directly or is reporting information derived orally.*

⁹ Leo the Deacon, IV, 5–6, pp. 62.13 – 63.4 (transl. p. 111, with my minor modifications – K.M.). Identifying the Haimos from the sources with Strandzha is in this case unconvincing – thus К. Гагова, *Тракия...*, p. 47.

¹⁰ Leo the Deacon, IV, 6, pp. 62.20 – 63.4.

¹¹ П. Мутафчиев, *Книга...*, p. 81; М.Я. Сюзюмов, С.А. Иванов, *Коментарий*, [in:] Лев Дякон, *История*, transl. М.М. Копыленко, сомм. М.Я. Сюзюмов, С.А. Иванов, ed. Г.Г. Литаврин, Москва 1988, p. 182, fn. 22; П. Мутафчиев, *Лекции по история на Византия*, vol. II, ed. Г. Бакалов, София 1995, p. 250; Й. Андреев, М. Лалков, *Исторически справочник. Българските ханове и царе. От хан Кубрат до цар Борис III*, Велико Търново 1996, p. 111; П. Павлов, *Борби за оцеляване. Упадък на българската държавност*, [in:] *История на българите*, vol. I, *От древността до края на XVI век*, ed. Г. Бакалов, София

Nikephoros II was chiefly considering the dangers of the mountain passages since, as an experienced commander, he knew that advancing through the narrow passes would disrupt his army's formation – cf. Greek ἀσύντακτος, an antonym of the word for an orderly military formation: σύνταξις. It was passing through narrow, uneven and sometimes densely forested mountain passes that caused disruption in the marching military columns, making them much more vulnerable to an enemy attack, especially from one who occupied a higher position in a battle¹². Panic often broke out among soldiers in such circumstances, and the terrain was tactically disadvantageous as well: the Byzantine soldiers could be easy prey for the Bulgarians. In Deacon's words, they become easily slaughtered 'cattle' (τὰ βοσκήματα)¹³.

The prominent role of the mountainous terrain in Byzantine-Bulgarian clashes at the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries was also highlighted by Michael Attaleiates, who first stressed that the Bulgarian soil *is large, broad, accessed through narrow passes* (πολλήν και μεγάλην και στενόπορον οὐσαν), *and had for many years resisted previous emperors precisely because it is so difficult to exit from its defiles* (διὰ τὸ δυσεξιτήτων τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ ἀλῶνων)¹⁴.

2003, p. 281. Other ideas – С.А. Иванов, *Византийско-болгарские отношения в 966–969 гг.*, ВВ 42, 1981, p. 93; *The History of Leo...*, p. 111, fn. 42, associated i.a. with the past of the Phokas family, including the Byzantine defeat at Acheloos in 917. It is worth pointing out that Leo himself, in another part of his work, attested to his knowledge of both Nikephoros I's defeat and of the battle of Acheloos – L e o t h e D e a c o n, VI, 9, p. 104.16–17; VII, 7, pp. 122.23–124.12.

¹² On this subject – К. Маринов, *Преминаването на планинските проходи според византийските и някои антични трактати за военното изкуство*, [in:] *Българско средновековие: общество, власт, история. Сборник в чест на проф. д-р Милияна Каймакамова*, ed. А. Николов, Г.Н. Николов, София 2013, pp. 205–220; i d e m, *Przez wąwozy i lasy. Armia bizantyńska wobec trudno dostępnych obszarów w świetle IX konstytucji Taktyk Leona VI Mądrego*, AUL.FH 99, 2017, pp. 11–32.

¹³ More on this testimony – К. Маринов, *Hémos comme barrière militaire. L'analyse des écrits historiques de Léon le Diacre et de Jean Skylitzès au sujet de la campagne de guerre des empereurs byzantins Nicéphore II Phocas en 967 et de Jean I Tzýmiscès en 971*, ВМд 2, 2011, pp. 444–455.

¹⁴ Michael Attaleiates, p. 8.2–6 (transl., p. 15); similar characterisation – p. 370.4–9.

While he was primarily thinking of the mountainous areas of Illyria and Macedonia, his observation could easily have also referred to the southern part of Haimos (specifically, the Pass of Ihtiman in Sredna Gora), since the above remark was made in the context of the Byzantine army entering Triaditsa (nowadays Sofia) in 1041; to reach the city one first had to cross the Pass. The use of adjective *δυσεξίτητον*, literally meaning '[place] difficult to leave' appears to suggest that the historian was primarily considering the dangers that threatened the Byzantine armies, and the defeats they suffered after having entered the treacherous hostile territory. In other words, perhaps it was not particularly difficult to enter them, but safe departure was an entirely different matter. This, in turn, could lead into the question of ambushes, prepared by Bulgarians for the imperial troops, returning from an expedition¹⁵. In relation to the sustained defiance towards the previous Byzantine rulers (among whom Basil II had undoubtedly been the foremost), Attaleiates may have used *δυσεξίτητον* thinking of Basil's the disastrous defeat of 986. It happened during troops' withdrawal through a mountain pass, which at the time lay on the borderland of Bulgarian controlled territory. In any case, the context clearly indicates mountain combat.

Both of the passages cited above clearly show that Bulgarians were seen as inhabitants of an inaccessible land, who made use of its defensive qualities with utmost skill. Although during the early Middle Ages the settlement in the ridge area of Stara Planina proper was not particularly dense (the upper reaches have been gradually occupied during the tenth century), the natural and strong association of the mountains with their foothills (with a much higher population density – we have archaeological evidence of settlements from the Predbalkan from the ninth century)¹⁶

¹⁵ On this strategy see: П. М у т а ф ч и е в, *Книга...*, pp. 72–73 (the Bulgarians), 78–80 (the Pechenegs); К. М а р и н о в, *Стратегическата...*, pp. 114, 118 (the Bulgarians).

¹⁶ On the mediaeval settlement in the Sredna Gora and Stara Planina, see: Л. Д и н е в, Л. М е л н и ш к и, *Стара планина*, София, 1962, p. 60; H. M a r u s z c z a k, *Bulgaria*, Warszawa 1971, pp. 294–295; Р. Р а ш е в, *Появата на средновековни селища във високите части на Стара планина*, ШУЕКП.ТКИБ 1, 1997, pp. 108–113; Н. Х р и с и м о в, *За времето на усвояване на предпланинските и планинските райони в Първото българско царство*, ИРИМГ 2, 2014, pp. 55–69.

led to Bulgarians being thought of as inhabiting Haimos¹⁷. The relatively smooth transition of the Predbalkan into the Plain of Danube was further conducive to this outlook. We have early tenth-century testimony of such views about Bulgarians. In the *Life of St. Evaristus* (819–897), the hegumenos of the Kokorobion monastery near Constantinople, written during the first quarter of the tenth century, we find a characteristic description of the Bulgarian people (ethnos): *there is a Scythian people settled in the Haimos Mountains by the river Danubios, and called Bulgarians* (Ἐθνος ἐστὶ σκυθικὸν ἔνδον τοῦ Αἴμου ὄρους παρὰ τὸν Δανούβιον ποταμὸν ὤκισμένον, οὓς καλοῦσι Βουλγάρους)¹⁸. It is no coincidence that John Geometres, a Byzantine monk, poet and a former soldier, cursed the treacherous Haimos Mountains in relation to the anti-Byzantine activity of the Cometopouloi and the defeat of the imperial troops in the so-called Imperial Kleisoura (the aforementioned Ihtiman Pass):

Begone trees, sinister mountains!
 Begone, rocks unreachable by birds!
 Where the lion feared to face the fawns.¹⁹

The *lion* is of course Basil II, the *fawns* are a contemptuous epithet denoting Bulgarians, indicating their weakness and fearfulness, and the fact that they were living in the mountains (like some species of deer)²⁰.

¹⁷ It needs to be stressed that during the Middle Ages the area of Stara Planina and its foothills (the so-called Predbalkan) have were considered to have been a single massif. Similarly, from the modern general geographic, morphological and structural perspective both of these entities should be treated as a single whole. – H. M a r u s z c z a k, *Bułgaria...*, pp. 296–297; X. Т и ш к о в, Цв. М и х а й л о в, Л. З я п к о в, Д. Г о р у н о в а, *Предбалканска област*, [in:] *География на България в три тома*, vol. III, *Физикогеографско и социално-икономическо райониране*, ed. К. М и ш е в, София 1989, p. 65; П. П е н ч е в, X. Т и ш к о в, М. Д а н е в а, Д. Г о р у н о в а, *Старопланинска област*, [in:] *География на България...*, p. 86.

¹⁸ *Life of Saint Evariste*, 7, p. 301.11–13.

¹⁹ J o h n G e o m e t r e s, col. 934 A; J e a n G é o m è t r e, 90, p. 306.

²⁰ Niketas Choniates used the same term to denote Bulgarians in association with the Haimos – cf. K. M a r i n o w, *Hemus jako baza wypadowa i miejsce schronienia w okresie walk o restytucję państwowości bułgarskiej pod koniec XII i na początku XIII wieku*,

In other words, the author wanted to emphasise that due to the difficult and dangerous situation in the mountainous area, something unimaginable had happened – the adult ruler of the animals, symbolically representing here the mighty Byzantine emperor, became afraid of the normally timid, and also young – therefore immature – fawns, personifying the feeble Bulgarian forces (or their leaders), who were in turn afraid to face the basileus in an open field. One should also point to the view illustrated by Emilie Marlene Van Opstall, who noticed the parallel between the appellation of the animal and the name of a Byzantine Magister, Leo Melissenos. Melissenos took part in Basil II's expedition in 986, staying behind to secure the army's rear at the treacherous Ihtiman's Pass, but in the end he abandoned his post. Opstall thought that Geometres's 'lion' referred to this imperial commander and his betrayal – his fear of resisting the fawns. In addition, the discussed scholar thinks the appellation also related to the wretched condition of the entire Byzantine army²¹.

In the face of this defeat, the author urged the emperor Nikephoros II Phokas to rise from the grave and roar like a lion, for the following reason: *Teach the foxes* [i.e. the Bulgarians – K.M.] *to live among the rocks* (Δίδαξον οἰκεῖν τὰς ἀλώπεκας πέτραις)!²² In other words, the basileus was to prevent the Bulgarians from descending upon the plains and plundering the empire's lands, and to make them remain in what is the natural habitat of foxes – rocky clefts. The poet indicates that Bulgarians resided in the Haimos Mountains. In other words he was saying:

Emperor, show them where they belong, may they not dare to leave the mountains! May they sit quietly and obediently in the mountain slits and caves, out of fear of the Roman might!

[in:] *Cesarstwo bizantyńskie. Dzieje. Religia. Kultura. Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Waldemarowi Ceranowi przez uczniów na 70-lecie Jego urodzin*, ed. P. Kruczyński, M.J. Leszka, Łask–Łódź 2006, p. 184.

²¹ Jean G é o m è t r e, 90, pp. 306 (commentary to line 4), 308–309.

²² J o h n G e o m e t r e s, col. 920 B.

The above portrayal of Bulgarians as a people inhabiting the mountain range in question appears to be valid also for the earlier period by a passage from the historical work of patriarch Nikephoros, written during the 780s. Describing one of the expeditions of emperor Constantine V (741–775) into Bulgaria, he stated that upon hearing the news of the approaching Byzantine forces, Bulgarians *fortified the difficult [passes] of the mountain range which they inhabited* (οἱ τὰς δυσχωρίας τοῦ περὶ αὐτοὺς ὄρους ἀνέφραττον)²³. The reference in the passage is, once again, to the Stara Planina massif.

Considering that the Bulgarians resided in the Haimos, it is not surprising that the subjects of the Bulgarian khans and tsars were considered to have been, i.a., highlanders and herdsmen. This portrayal likely became more pronounced after the Bulgarians transitioned into a fully settled way of life and assimilated with the Slavs, during the latter half of the ninth and in the tenth centuries. This image was further influenced by the denser settlement of Stara Planina and Sredna Gora massifs by Bulgarians during that period. On the other hand, the seasonal nature of the mountain life, determined by the annual rhythm of driving the herds, was not unfamiliar to Bulgarians, previously a semi-nomadic and primarily pastoral people²⁴. Furthermore, some sources appear to confirm

²³ Nikephoros, 77, p. 150.13–14 (transl., p. 151 – with my changes – K.M.).

²⁴ The question of the length and of the degree to which Bulgarians remained nomads is still being discussed – U. Fiedler, *Bulgars in the Lower Danube region. A survey of the archaeological evidence and of the state of current research*, [in:] *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages. Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, and Cumans*, ed. F. Curta, assist. R. Kovalev, Leiden–Boston 2008, pp. 200–202. Cf. A. Миличев, *Славяне, протоболгары и Византия в болгарских землях в VI–IX вв.*, [in:] *Actes du XIV^e Congrès International des Études Byzantines, Bucarest, 6–12 septembre 1971*, ed. M. Berza, E. Stănescu, vol. II, Bucarest, 1975, p. 393; J.V.A. Fine, *The Early Medieval Balkans...*, p. 68; T. Wasilewski, *Historia Bulgariae*, Wrocław 1988, pp. 36, 38–39, 40, 41; R. Brown, *Bulgars, Turkic*, [in:] *ODB*, vol. I p. 338; И. Божилов, В. Гюзелев, *История на средновековна България VII–XIV век*, София 1999, p. 88; X. Матанов, *Балкански хоризонти. История, общества, личности*, vol. I, София 2004, p. 37; Г. Владимиров, *Дунавска България и Волжка България. Формиране и промяна на културните модели (VII–XI в.)*, София 2005, pp. 21–26; П. Георгиев, *Раннобългарската култура V–VII век – култура “на колела”*, [in:] *Изследвания по българска средновековна археология. Сборник в чест на проф. Рашо Рашиев*, ed. idem,

Bulgarian settlement in the Caucasus, and the presence of Kouber's kin in the mountains of Macedonia during the early eighth century²⁵.

Mountain people, including herdsmen, nonetheless evoked deep distrust and contempt on the part of Byzantine intellectuals, including authors of the chronicles and histories of the Empire. This is clearly attested by a remark which Leo the Deacon put into Nikephoros II's mouth. In reply to the demands of the previously mentioned tribute, the emperor was to have commanded the Bulgarian envoys to carry back his negative and contemptuous reply to tsar Peter I (927–969), a *leather-gnawing*

Велико Търново 2007, pp. 22–40; А. Д о н ч е в а-П е т к о в а, *Отново за началото на ранносредновековната българска култура*, SAUS.S 5, 2010, pp. 511–526.

²⁵ On possible identification of Bulgarians as inhabitants of Caucasus and other Asian and European mountains – П. К о л е д а р о в, *Политическа география на средновековната българска държава*, vol. I, От 681 до 1018 г., София 1979, p. 9; Д. А н г е л о в, *Образуване на българската народност*, София 1981, pp. 109–110; И. Б о ж и л о в, В. Г ю з е л е в, *История...*, pp. 85–86; Ц. С т е п а н о в, *Власт и авторитет в ранносредновековна България (VII – ср. IX в.)*, София 1999, pp. 19, 24–27, 31–38; П. Г е о р г и е в, *Българските племенни имена и соционимът уногундури*, [in:] *Civitas Divino-Humana. In honorem Annotum LX Georgii Bakalov*, ed. Ц. С т е п а н о в, В. В а ч к о в а, София 2004, pp. 693–708; i d e m, *Тървеловете “чичовци” в Солунско и Кисиниите (към интерпретацията на Мадарския надпис I, ц)*, [in:] *Приноси към българската археология*, vol. VII, ed. Б. П е т р у н о в а, А. А л а д ж о в, Е. В а с и л е в а, София 2013, pp. 27–44; П. Г о л и й с к и, *В подножието на Елбрус (Българите около Кавказ през II–V век според арменските извори)*, [in:] *Древните българи – дискусиата продължава. Сборник*, ed. Ц. С т е п а н о в, София 2014, pp. 27–35 (however, some of conclusions by the last three authors have a strongly hypothetical character). On Kouber and his family – В. Б е ш е в л и е в, *Първобългарски надписи*, ²София 1992, p. 105; И. В е н е д и к о в, *Прабългарите и християнството*, Стара Загора 1998, pp. 70–71. Cf. W. S w o b o d a, *Kuber*, [in:] *SSS*, vol. II, pp. 554–555; P. C h a g a n i s, *Kouber, the chronology of his activities and their ethnic effects on the regions around Thessalonica*, *ByzS* 11.1, 1970, pp. 229–247; М. В о й н о в, В. Т ъ п к о в а-З а и м о в а, *България на Аспарух и България на Кубер*, *BS* 51.5, 1982, pp. 47–56; В. П о п о в и ћ, *Куврат, Кубер и Аспарух*, *Ст* 37, 1986, pp. 113–126, especially 123–126; Н. D i t t e n, *Ethnische Verschiebungen zwischen der Balkanhalbinsel und Kleinasien vom Ende des 6. bis zur Zweiten Hälfte des 9. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1993, pp. 68–72, 116–117, 219, 294–295, 365–368; К. А д ж и е в с к и, *Пелагонија во средниот век (од доаѓањето на Словените до паѓањето под турска власт)*, Скопје 1994, pp. 24–28; *Testimonia*, vol. IV, p. 14, fn. 4; П. П а в л о в, *Аспарух и Кубер*, [in:] i d e m, *Българското Средновековие. Познато и непознато. Страници от политическата и културната историја на България VII–XIV век*, Велико Търново 2008, pp. 9–20.

*ruler who is clad in a leather jerkin*²⁶. Of course, this statement may be treated as merely a typical and insignificant invective, for the Bulgarian ruler was clad in raiments made of much finer materials. Undoubtedly, however, this wording fits in with other information that confirms a major role of pasturage and herding in the life of contemporary Bulgarians. It also refers to the traditional dress that was characteristic for the nomadic period of Bulgarian history.

The portrayal of Bulgarians as barbarians associated with Haimos²⁷ is not surprising, since for the Byzantines mountains were antithetical to civilisation, which developed on plains, in river valleys, and along the coasts²⁸. A nomad, herdsman, a man who did not have a permanent place of residence, forced to continuously wander, appeared to them as someone devoid of any roots, unstable, and therefore untrustworthy and dangerous. Organised communities, including primarily inhabitants of large cities, which were mainstays of cultural life, reacted with fear and aversion to those who remained beyond the pale of the society, the half-wild mountainous communities. These were considered to have been gatherings of thieves, troublemakers, unruly and uncouth people, simpletons, and a kind of social margin. Theophylaktos, the Archbishop of Ohrid from the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, even went so far as to say that the Bulgarian nature nourished all evil²⁹, and he clearly associated Bulgarians with mountain – pastoral – people³⁰. I would further add

²⁶ Leo the Deacon, IV, 5, pp. 61.12 – 62.9 (transl., p. 110).

²⁷ Cf. in regard to the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – K. Marinow, *Hemus...*, pp. 183–197. The truthfulness of this perception of Bulgarians may be attested by the fact that due to the dominant mountainous terrain in the Balkans, the settlement was generally concentrated in the highland, semi-mountainous areas, e.g. Predbalkan (Stara Planina foothills); cf. X. Матанов, *Балкански хоризонти...*, p. 273.

²⁸ А.П. Каждан, *Византийская культура (X–XII вв.)*, Санкт-Петербург 2000, p. 24; F. B r a u d e l, *Morze Śródziemne i świat śródziemnomorski w epoce Filipa II*, vol. I, transl. T. M r ó w c z y ń s k i, M. Ochab, introd. B. G e r e m e k, W. K u l a, Warszawa ²2004, pp. 38–39, 42–43, 48–52, 65.

²⁹ Theophylaktos of Ohrid, *Letters*, 96, p. 485.34–35.

³⁰ Cf. Theophylaktos of Ohrid, *Letters*, 101, p. 513.9–12. The author compared here Bulgarians to a herd of pigs, into which Jesus sent the demons (cf. Matt. 8, 28–32; Mark 5, 2–13; Luke 8, 27–33). The comparison, although not particularly pleasant, is very vivid, and related to the daily reality of the Archbishop, who lived

that such an image of the mountain dwellers was primarily composed of objective factors bound up with the nature of mountainous terrain, naturally hard to reach, with a variable and inhospitable climate, and devoid of sufficient supply of food. These areas, particularly the highest and least accessible, in which people were exposed to extreme natural conditions, tempered and seasoned them, prepared them to face dangers, which made them into excellent warriors, but also brutal and dangerous brigands³¹.

It was no accident that in the oration *On the Treaty with the Bulgarians*, delivered with regard to the conclusion of Byzantine-Bulgarian peace in 927, the anonymous author (possibly Theodore Daphnopates) stated

among pastoral people, whom he must have seen herding their flocks across hillsides many times. The same comparison, although without pastoral connotations, was used by Niketas Choniates in regard to Peter and Assen, leaders of the Bulgarian rebellion of 1185 against Byzantine rule – Niketas Choniates, pp. 372.55 – 373.58; К. Маринов, *Новият Завет и византийската пропаганда. Още веднъж за Никита Хониат и българското освободително движение*, [in:] *Великите Асеневици*, ed. П. Павлов, Н. Кънев, Н. Христов, Велико Търново 2016, pp. 70–83. Notker the Stammerer and Liudprand of Cremona also counted Bulgarians among the wild, cruel and unbridled tribes (*immanissimas gentes; ferocissimas gentes*) – Notker the Stammerer, 27, pp. 37.23–38.1; Liudprand of Cremona, *Retribution*, I. 11. For more extensive considerations regarding the portrayal of highlanders in the Middle Ages, cf. B. Gerek, *Człowiek marginesu*, [in:] *Człowiek średniowiecza*, ed. J. Le Goff, transl. M. Radzycka-Paoletti, Warszawa 2000, pp. 437, 456–457. Although this scholar analysed the position of herdsmen in the mediaeval Western Europe, their status in Byzantium was not much different – cf. the example of the Bessoï, a Thracian tribe, living in the Rhodope Mountains – Strabon, VII, 5, 12, p. 274.6; Paulinus of Nola, XVII, pp. 91.205–92.244; В. Гюзелев, *Княз Борис I. България през втората половина на IX век*, София 1969, pp. 90–94; S. Bărlieva, *Nicetas of Ramesiana and Two Apostolic Missions on the Balkans in the late Fourth – the early Fifth Century*, [in:] *In stolis repromissionis. Saints and Sainthood in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. A. Nagusheva-Tihanova, M. Dimitrova, R. Kostova, R.R. Machlev, Sofia, 2012, pp. 271–278.

³¹ G. Cherubini, *Chłop i życie na wsi*, [in:] *Człowiek średniowiecza...*, p. 164; X. Матанов, *Балкански хоризонти...*, pp. 194, 296. John Geometres in one of his poems contrasted the luxury of living in a palace with the poverty and difficult living conditions found, i.a., in the mountains – John Geometres, col. 909 A. A positive portrayal of highlanders as warriors can be found i.a. in Anna Komnene, VIII, 5, 2, p. 246.32–35. So-called hajduks were active in the Balkans during the Osman period – X. Матанов, *Балкански хоризонти...*, pp. 275, 292.

that it was the atmospheric conditions prevailing i.a. in the Haimos that stirred up the soul of the Bulgarian ruler Symeon I against Byzantium. According to the orator, it was gale, whirlwind (ὁ τυφών), downpour (ὁ ὑετός), hail (ἡ νιφάξ), and even more powerful phenomena that shook these mountains that influenced the attitude of the Bulgarian ruler (οἷα καὶ μάλιστα τὸν Αἰμόν... κλονεῖ ἅ τῆ τοῦ ἄρχοντος προσεῖρήνη ψυχῆ)³². It was no accident after all that the Haimos Mountains appeared here, that symbol of Bulgarian haughtiness in the Byzantine eyes. In another part of his oration the rhetorician mentions wild and cruel mountain animals which, with God's help, will be tamed by the Byzantine emperor³³. The wider context indicates that the author was thinking here of the Bulgarian ruler and his subjects. Thus the orator made it clear that it was the wild nature of the land in which Symeon grew up that shaped him into a violent and unrestrained man. In a veiled manner he suggested that the Bulgarian was not guided by his reason, as a mature Christian ought to be, but was subject to the influence of elements. He therefore acted like a mindless animal, driven by its desires, instincts and external circumstances³⁴, instead of following Divine decrees. This eventually pushed him to starting a war with his southern neighbour³⁵. As can be seen, the Byzantine orator's attitude towards the highlanders was not particularly favourable.

For mediaeval people, then, mountains constituted a certain margin (periphery, fringe – ἡ ἐσχατιά)³⁶ in both geographic and social terms, mysterious and untamed (for it was sparsely populated and inhabited by wild animals). They appeared to them as a culturally backward area, filled with dangers and surprises, uncertain, even dangerous; a land that was under a kind of taboo. The atmospheric conditions prevalent in the

³² *On the Treaty with the Bulgarians*, 12, p. 274.307–310.

³³ *On the Treaty with the Bulgarians*, 5, p. 262.138–142.

³⁴ Here: violent atmospheric phenomena, which according to the Byzantine were characteristic to Bulgarian lands.

³⁵ More on the image of Symeon in that speech, see: K. M a r i n o w, *In the Shackles of the Evil One: The Portrayal of Tsar Symeon I the Great (893–927) in the Oration 'On the Treaty with the Bulgarians'*, SCer 1, 2011, pp. 157–190.

³⁶ In this way the rhetorician indicated territories (plural in the text) where the Byzantine prisoners of war were taken as a result of the war with tsar Symeon I – *On the Treaty with the Bulgarians*, 5, p. 260.107.

mountains, which made them more difficult to cross, had no lesser influence on this image³⁷. Like dense forests, mountains were outside of the organised social life, as if outside the law, and were inhabited by those who were either excluded from the society, or were hiding from justice³⁸. Even known trails were crossed with fear, let alone making forays into their inner reaches. Besides, Byzantines considered the entirety of Bulgaria to be a wild land, inhabited by barbarians³⁹; and they treated barbarians with a certain dose of superiority and suspicion⁴⁰.

The few passages from the various historical Greek sources cited above, written between the eighth (patriarch Nikephoros) and twelfth (John Kinnamos) centuries, complement the image of Bulgarians emerging from Byzantine sources. Even these few passages make it possible to state that during the Middle Byzantine period the inhabitants of the Eastern Rome saw their northern neighbours as a people strongly associated with mountainous regions. The fragments show that Bulgarians resided in the mountains, had an economy appropriate to surrounding conditions, and skilfully exploited the qualities of the ranges in fighting Byzantium. It was the latter fact that was particularly noted by the Byzantine authors. Knowing that the tendency to present Bulgarians as highlanders continued throughout the Late Byzantine period⁴¹, one may conclude that the stereotype of the Bulgarian-highlander, who eagerly used his environment in fighting the southern neighbour, became permanently rooted among the Byzantines. This portrayal, while to a large extent corresponded to the truth, nonetheless permanently marked Bulgarians with the stigma of barbarism – savagery, primitiveness and bellicosity.

³⁷ *The Life of Blasius of Amorium*, 9–10, cols. 661 C – 662 A; John Kameniates, 18, p. 18.29–31; John Geometres, col. 934 A; John Kinnamos, II, 13, p. 70.17–22.

³⁸ B. Geremek, *Człowiek...*, pp. 438–439.

³⁹ J. Bonarek, *Romajowie...*, p. 141, fn. 228.

⁴⁰ П. Ангелов, *Българската средновековна дипломатия*, София 1988, p. 37.

⁴¹ K. Marinow, *Hemus...*, pp. 183–197.