CHAPTER TWO

The First Bulgarian Empire

Byzantine-Bulgarian relations dominated Balkan affairs between the ninth and early eleventh centuries. Asparuh’s small Bulgar state was transformed into a large and powerful Slavic Bulgarian empire controlling the central and eastern Balkans. By officially embracing Orthodox Christianity and creating a Slavic literary language and culture, Bulgaria became both the primary Balkan political rival of the Byzantine Empire and Byzantium’s chief competitor for the mantle of leadership in the Orthodox world. But the late ninth- and early tenth-century “Golden Age” of Bulgaria proved ephemeral. The Bulgarian decline that set in soon after preserved Byzantine political and cultural hegemony in the Balkans and opened the door to the political development of other Balkan peoples, particularly the Croats and Serbs.

Bulgaria’s Rise to Empire

During the 790s forces of Frank King Charlemagne (771-814) attacked the Avar kaganate, inflicting on it a crushing defeat and winning Charlemagne control over western Pannonia, northern Dalmatia, and Slavonia, which were inhabited mainly by Croats. Those Avars remaining in Pannonia may have been dealt a second blow around 803 by a group of former Bulgar clients led by Krum (ca. 803-14), who by 807 was undisputed ban of all the Bulgars. Much historical speculation surrounds Krum’s reign. He supposedly expanded the Bulgar state to the Tisza River and a common border with Charlemagne’s Frank Holy Roman Empire. He is portrayed as cementing centralized autocratic power and as favoring the Slav tribal leadership over the traditional Bulgar bolyar elite. Sadly, primary sources supporting such contentions are lacking.
An attack on the Bulgar state by Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros I in 807 gained only Krum’s animosity and seven more years of unrelenting warfare, during which Krum captured large swathes of the empire’s lands south of the Balkan Mountains. In 811 Krum ambushed and destroyed Nikephoros’s army in those mountains and the emperor was killed. It is said that, after the battle, Krum had Nikephoros’s skull fashioned into a silver-lined ceremonial drinking cup, from which he and his chiefs drank—a traditional steppe nomadic ritual assertion of military dominance over a defeated enemy. Krum quickly capitalized on his victory and overran much of Thrace and Macedonia. Cities and fortresses either were captured or abandoned by their inhabitants, and large numbers of Byzantine troops voluntarily deserted to Bulgar service or were taken prisoner. Byzantium fell into political turmoil.

In 812 Krum offered the empire mild peace terms, given his military position: The return of all lands taken during the war in exchange for an annual tribute, an exchange of war prisoners, and free bilateral trade relations. The imperial authorities refused and the Bulgars continued their depredations, plundering the environs of Constantinople and threatening to assault the city. Unable to breach the land walls, however, the Bulgars could not force a peace on the empire. Krum was still menacing the capital at his death in 814, but a military impasse had developed.

Two years later the stalemate was broken. In 816 Emperor Leo V (813-20) negotiated with Krum’s successor Han Omurtag (814-31), essentially agreeing to the terms Krum had originally offered. The ensuing peace lasted for thirty years, during which time the Bulgar state underwent significant expansion. Omurtag and his successor, Malamir (831-36) (who may have reigned until 852 under another name, Presyan), benefited greatly from the peace. They took advantage of the Avars’ collapse to enlarge their state in the north and west, acquiring Belgrade, eastern Slavonia, and the northern territories of future Serbia. A firm hold on Pannonian territories east of the Tisza River was secured and efforts made to secure control over Transylvania. (See Map 3.)

By the time the Bulgars appeared in the Balkans’ northwest, two fluid Croat states in western Pannonia and northern Dalmatia lay under Frankish authority. The Franks recognized the Croats’ native rulers as tributaries and pursued active Roman Catholic missionary efforts among them. In 819 the Pannonian Croats rebelled against Frank rule and were joined by a group of Slav tribes hailing from the Timok River region, who technically were under Bulgar authority. This event led Omurtag to campaign in the northwest during the 820s to prevent the Franks from pushing eastward and threatening Bulgar lands. When hostilities ended, Omurtag’s state bordered on the Franks’ Croatian tributaries.

In the mountains south of Dalmatian Croatia and west of the Morava River, a small Serb state ruled by one Vlastimir arose by the ninth century. Bulgar westward expansion may have inspired some Serb tribes to unite defensively under Vlastimir’s authority. The Byzantines, seeking potential allies against the Bulgars,