

Alexandru Madgearu, *The Asan family. The political-military history of the Asan Dynasty (1185-1280)*, Târgoviște, Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House, 2014. 332 p.

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One of the great challenges a historian has to face is to present to his contemporaries images of the past in an understandable way. When the pressure of the world he lives in presses too hard on the researcher, he tends to look to the past through the present eye, analyzing ancient times through specific concepts and realities of his time. Thus, for the historian who studies the Middle Ages, a real danger is represented by an analysis of the medieval world through different interpretation grids specific to modernity, such as the nationalist one. The territories jointly inhabited in the Middle Ages by groups of people, which were subsequently individualized into distinct modern nations is, undoubtedly, the cause of endless disputes among historians. One of these hot spots - a reason of divergences between Romanian and Bulgarian historians - is the State of the Asan family, to which Alexandru Madgearu has recently dedicated a book.

The political formation existing in the late twelfth century, amid a conflict with the Byzantine Empire, was under the direct leadership of the Asan dynasty, up to the second half of the thirteenth century. This state was based on an anti-Byzantine rebellion led by two brothers, Petru and Asan, the latter obviously giving his name to the dynasty; the rebellion soon became an almost continuous war against the Byzantines worn by the Asan family. The popular adhesion to the conflict against the Byzantines was done, says Alexander Madgearu, by a double manipulation: religious, through the "transfer" of Saint

Demetrius cult (important urban centre of the Byzantine Empire) from Thessaloniki to Tarnovo (the capital of the Asan family state), and political one, by the assumption of Byzantine imperial insignia of Petru (gold crown and red shoes). The institutional fragility of this new political formation was reflected in the killing of two leaders, Asan (in 1196) and Petru (in 1197), by their intimates.

Their younger brother, Ionița Caloian, succeeded them. He initiated a correspondence with Pope Innocent III, in order to obtain the recognition of the imperial title, which was assumed by his older brother, Petru. In 1204, when the Westerners of the Fourth Crusade conquered Constantinople, an emissary of the papacy has crowned Ionița king and did not offered him the requested imperial title.

A dispute arose between the newly crowned king and the Latin Empire of Constantinople, one of the states emerged from the conquest of the Byzantine Empire. The dispute culminated with the victory of Ionița at Adrianople, in 1205, a victory fully substantiated by the Cumanian cavalry; the capture of Balduin of Flanders accounted for Ionița as "ultimate trophy, that he probably never dreamed of" (p. 130). The attack on Thessaloniki in 1207 was, however, fatal to Ionița Caloian, as he lost his life during the siege. Some contemporary testimonies with an aura of legend talk about killing of Ionița by Saint Demetrius himself, the patron saint of the city killing the conquering king. He was followed on the throne by Borilă, the son of Ionița's sister who married the widow of his predecessor. Military conflicts were doubled during the reign of Borilă, by religious conflicts, and triggered persecution against the followers of Bogomil, one of the dualistic heresies of the Middle Ages. "The Council of Tarnovo in 1211 was organized on the model of those previously initiated by the Byzantine emperors. Borilă personally conducted the debate where heretics were convicted, thus taking, consciously or unconsciously, a prerogative of the Basilei of Constantinople, as guardian of orthodoxy and leader of a council works" (p. 158).

Ioan Asan II, who succeeded Borilă, was the most important political leader of the Asan family. Empowered by the victory at

Klokotnitsa on March 9, 1230, "the state of Ioan Asan II became the largest state in the Balkan Peninsula, surpassing even the czardom of Simeon at the beginning of the 10th century" (p. 175). Petru and Ioniță`s vision took form in the time of Ioan Asan II: the State of the Asan family became "the hegemonic power of South-eastern Europe" (p. 180). Ioan called himself not only the tsar (emperor), but "samodržac," self-ruler"(p. 186) - a title that "surpasses" in glory that of autocrat of Byzantine emperors, issued his own coins, raised the Bulgarian Church at patriarchal rank. Moreover, symbolically, as the Byzantine Basileus, he was represented in the iconography of the era, crowned by Christ (p. 185). Death of Ioan Asan II occurred in an unfortunate moment for the medieval history of Eastern and Central Europe - the Mongol invasion. He was followed by a series of political epigones, among them we mention his minor sons Căliman (Koloman) and Mihail, his nephew, Căliman II or other members of "Asan" dynasty who earned their place on the throne and position within the dynasty on female line.

To what extent was the Asan family Bulgarian (as claimed by modern Bulgarian historiography) and to what extent were they Vlachs (as modern Romanian historiography claims)? This is a question that certainly does not find its answer here, as it has not found any categorical response in the interminable dispute the medievalists have had on this topic. In fact, as shown by the American historian John V. A. Fine Jr. (quoted by Al. Madgearu, p. 26): "The problem is not as important as many scholars of the twentieth century believed; the twelfth century was not a time of nationalism". Perhaps what they left behind should not be regarded as a Bulgarian-Romanian cleavage, but as a common heritage of medieval South-eastern Europe.