

ТЕНЧО РОПОВ, Солун и Епир под върховната власт на цар Йоан II Асен след 1230 г. [Thessalonica and Epirus under the Sovereignty of Tsar Ivan Asen II after 1230]. Sofia: Университетско издателство “Св. Климент Охридски” 2023. 270 pp. – ISBN 978-954-07-5674-5

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The Battle of Klokotnitsa on 9 March 1230 is one of the pivotal events in the history of 13th-century Southeastern Europe: on that date the army of Theodore Komnenos, Emperor of Thessalonica, was vanquished by the troops of the Bulgarian tsar Ivan Asen II who for a while became the region’s strongest ruler. Unfortunately, the available sources provide very scant details about the organization of Ivan Asen II’s kingdom before and after this sudden enlargement. This book by ТЕНЧО РОПОВ addresses a most intriguing question: after Klokotnitsa, what happened to the territories that had been part of the Empire of Thessalonica? Were they incorporated into the Bulgarian kingdom or did they enjoy some degree of autonomy, or even independence? So far, historiography has not been able to reach a consensus on this – not so much for lack of trying or for incompetence (far from it, if one considers the scholars that took up this issue), but because the primary sources are, unfortunately, fragmentary and inconclusive. The main thesis of this ambitious and well-crafted book is that all of Theodore’s domains were incorporated in the Bulgarian tsardom but that Ivan Asen II did not rule them directly: instead, he relied on two proxies, Manuel Komnenos Doukas (brother of Theodore Komnenos, and Ivan Asen II’s son-in-law) and Michael II Komnenos Doukas (son of Theodore’s half-brother Michael I). The former was entrusted with ruling Thessalonica and the latter Epirus; both received from the Bulgarian tsar the dignity of despot. For his conclusion, РОПОВ relies on a vast array of different sources – numismatic, epigraphic, documentary, and narrative, – all presented and discussed in the text.

The book is divided into three chapters, preceded by a very brief introduction and followed by a conclusion. The first chapter (pp. 11–29) is the shortest one. It analyses the coins that, according to the author’s interpretation, represent Ivan Asen II and, in a subordinated position, either Manuel Komnenos Doukas or Michael II Komnenos Doukas. РОПОВ, who

has published extensively on numismatic matters, considers those coins the main proof that Ivan Asen II took control of the whole of the territories that had belonged to Theodore Komnenos and granted their administration to Manuel, confirming or renewing the title of despot that had already been bestowed upon him by Theodore. The author examines, with great detail and with the help of colour illustrations, two coins struck in Thessalonica and another one struck in Arta. All represent on the obverse a coronation scene: a figure in royal garb, that the author identifies as Ivan Asen II, crowns a figure of lesser authority, Manuel, clearly identified with his name and with his title of despot on one of the two coins from Thessalonica, while on the reverse is a bust of Christ. Traditionally the figures have been interpreted (by HENDY, PROTONOTARIOS, LIANTA, MARCHEV, and WATCHER) as Manuel being crowned by St. Constantine, but ПОПОВ rightly points out that on both coins originating from Thessalonica the name of Asen is clearly visible. The coin from Arta, however, presents some peculiarities: on its obverse is a stylized fortress, while the name of Asen is not written on the reverse, but more interestingly, the first three letters of the name of Michael (MIX) are superscribed near the name of Manuel (MANOYHA). This, according to the author, shows that quite suddenly, and after a very short time, the westernmost regions of the Epirote empire were assigned to Michael, for reasons unknown. He also maintains that Michael received the title of despot, although this title is absent from this specific coin and from other coins that Michael issued (analysed at pp. 28–29). ПОПОВ also examines in detail the coins issued by Ivan Asen II that he considers, due to their quality and style, minted in Thessalonica and not somewhere in Bulgaria (pp. 21–26): his opinion is supported not only by most scholars who have studied this topic, but also by the presence of St Demetrius, patron saint of Thessalonica, crowning the Bulgarian tsar as new protector of the city after Theodore’s defeat. While in my opinion this chapter would have benefited from further revisions in order to make it smoother and less cluttered, it is nonetheless extremely interesting and thought-provoking, and without any doubt it will spark debates due to the fact that some of the author’s assumptions are, as he earnestly admits, conjectural – but by no means ungrounded.

The second chapter (pp. 31–146) is dedicated to Manuel, Despot of Thessalonica – or better, to the administration and the ecclesiastic organization of the Eastern part of Theodore’s old domains, centred around the city of Thessalonica. The chapter opens with a question which is not easy to answer, especially considering that the sources are quite scarce: did Thes-

salonica became part of the tsardom of Ivan Asen II, or did it remain autonomous, or even independent? The author's opinion, as we have already pointed out, is that it became part of the Bulgarian kingdom. As proof, he quotes the document issued by Ivan Asen, regulating the privileges of the Dubrovnik merchants, in which Thessalonica is clearly listed among the lands subject to the tsar's authority;¹ the life of St Paraskeve (Petka) written by Patriarch Euthimius of Tărnovo,² and some Byzantine sources (Akropolites, Skouthariotes, Ephrem) that, while not mentioning Thessalonica, state that all the lands that were part of Theodore's empire came under the authority of Ivan Asen II and thus implicitly recognise his authority over Thessalonica as well.

Manuel's dignity of despot, on the other hand, is not disputed. A charter of 1234, also regulating relations with Dubrovnik, bears Manuel's signature as *despotes* for the region of Thessalonica;³ the Byzantine sources all attest his rank, but are rather vague about the limits of his authority. There is no doubt that the title had been bestowed upon Manuel by his brother Theodore between 1225 and 1228, as mentioned, for instance, by Acropolites – but according to him after the battle of Klokotnitsa Manuel proclaimed himself governor of Thessalonica. POPOV believes that his rank has been preserved after 1230 with the assent of Ivan Asen II, and that it was the Bulgarian sovereign that made him govern Thessalonica on his behalf. There is no consensus in the historiography: while some agree with this interpretation, others maintain that Manuel ruled autonomously, and some even believe that he did so as emperor (HERTZBERG, HOPF, JIREČEK, KAZHDAN, ILIEV, FERJANČIĆ, BREDENKAMP – for the various interpretations see pp. 44–55). In the sources, however, there is no mention of this supposed imperial title – with two notable exceptions. The first one is a letter written by the metropolitan of Corfu Georgios Bardanes in which Manuel is addressed as *domine imperator*: but the same Bardanes, in a letter written to Frederick II in 1235, calls him *domino Emmanuele felicissimo*.⁴ The second instance is another letter that has generated considerable

1. ANGEL NIKOLOV et al., Дубровнишки документи за историята на България и българите през XIII–XV век. Vol. I. Sofia 2017, pp. 30–31.

2. Житие на св. Параскева от Патриарх Евтимий (tr. VASIL SL. KISELKOV). Българска историческа библиотека 3.1 (1930) pp. 190–217, at 210.

3. GOTTLIEB L. F. TAFEL – GEORG M. THOMAS, Griechische Original-Urkunden zur Geschichte des Freistaates Ragusa. Vienna 1851, pp. 507–537.

4. JOHANNES M. HOECK – RAIMUND J. LOENERTZ, Nikolaos-Nektarios von Otranto, Abt von Casole. Beiträge zur Geschichte der ost-westlichen Beziehungen unter Innozenz III. und Friederich II. Ettal 1965, pp. 223–225 (to Manuel), 205–206 (to Fred-

controversies, written by metropolitan Christopher of Ankyra to Ivan Asen II in 1232–1233, in which apparently Manuel is called τοῦ πανυψηλοτάτου δεσπότης καὶ βασιλέως (emphasis mine).⁵ ΠΟΡΟΥ, however, discusses it later (pp. 68–72), in the section dedicated to ecclesiastical matters. We will just note here that from the analysis made by ΠΟΡΟΥ and by other scholars it is quite evident that δεσπότης and βασιλέως refer to two different persons, viz. Ivan Asen II (the emperor) and Manuel (the despot).

The following part of the chapter (pp. 55–72) is dedicated to another thorny issue, the ecclesiastical relations between Thessalonica and the Bulgarian kingdom. According to the author it was a proper union, with the local ecclesiastical hierarchy subordinated to the Bulgarian one. As proof, the author quotes the letter written by Manuel to pope Gregory IX, in which the despot asks the pope to put under the authority of the Roman Church the Western dioceses of Theodore’s old domain. This letter was written in all likelihood in 1230 and its text has not been preserved, but it can be reconstructed by Gregory’s answer: the pope did not agree, because he wanted those lands to be put under the authority of the Latin patriarch of Constantinople.⁶ Since at that time the Bulgarian Church was still subordinated to Rome, ΠΟΡΟΥ considers that Manuel’s request has been made in accordance with the wishes of Ivan Asen II.

The question of the ecclesiastic relations between Thessalonica and Tărnovo became much more complicated with the progressive distancing of Ivan Asen II from Rome and his parallel rapprochement with the Patriarchate of Nicaea. This had important consequences both in the religious and in the political sphere. In the area now under Bulgarian control there were three different religious authorities: Tărnovo, Ohrid, and the Epirote Church. None of them was fully autonomous and Ivan Asen II, as well known, sought from the Patriarch of Nicaea autocephaly for the Bulgarian Church, because his imperial ambitions envisaged a fully independent Church not subordinated either to Rome or to Nicaea/Constantinople. The Church of Thessalonica followed the tsar’s decisions, facilitated by the fact that, unlike Bulgaria, obedience to Rome had already been rejected when those lands were wrestled away from the Latin Empire of Constantinople and included in Theodore’s state. The book follows in great detail the various stages of the rapprochement between Ivan Asen II and Nicaea, and the par-

erick II).

5. EDUARD KURTZ, Christophoros von Ankyra als Exarch des Patriarchen Germanos II. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 16 (1907) pp. 120–142, at 141.

6. LUCIEN AUVRAY, *Les registres de Grégoire IX*. Vol. 1. Paris 1896, pp. 401–403.

allel evolution of his ‘imperial’ ideology that brought him, already in 1231, to sign his documents as ‘Tsar of the Bulgarians and the Greeks’ (pp. 60–63); and while the Bulgarian Church was establishing new relations with Nicaea, the latter took under its jurisdiction Thessalonica and Epirus, healing the schism that had separated them back when Theodore was crowned emperor (pp. 64–69). Again, POPOV sees Manuel as a simple enforcer of Ivan Asen’s will – in this regard, to underscore again Manuel’s subordination to the Bulgarian tsar, he pays particular attention to the aforesaid letter of Metropolitan Christopher of Ankyra.

A large part of this chapter (pp. 73–120) is dedicated to the analysis of a document conventionally called *Notatio Athonensis ad annum MCCXXXV* and known in Bulgarian historiography as ‘Атонски разказ за 1235 г.’⁷ This text, which some scholars consider a forgery, mentions a certain Michael Bratan, a Bulgarian, sent by Tărnovo as Metropolitan of Thessalonica in the years before 1235. Should this source be trustworthy, the presence of a Bulgarian prelate as head of the Church of Thessalonica would definitely confirm that Ivan Asen’s control over the city, mediated by Manuel or not, also extended to ecclesiastical matters. With his usual abundance of notes and details, POPOV carefully examines the information provided by this source (not much, actually) and the historiographical debate it has sparked. In the absence of other evidence, it is difficult to take a position on this matter (which does not mean, of course, that the *Notatio* should be discarded in principle); in any case, the period in which the Church of Thessalonica was allegedly under Bulgarian control was quite short, since the agreement between Ivan Asen and Nicaea brought under the patriarch’s jurisdiction the lands inhabited by Greeks that had been part of Theodore’s domains. According to POPOV, putting Thessalonica under the ecclesiastic authority of Tărnovo was a political ploy to have a bargaining chip for future negotiations with Nicaea, and giving it away was planned from the beginning. The section closes with an interesting analysis of a fresco in the Thessalonian church of the Παναγία Ἀχειροποιήτος, representing the Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebaste whose cult was massively promoted by Ivan Asen II, so much that a church dedicated to these martyrs, that he extensively renewed and embellished, became the most important one in Tărnovo (they

7. PHILIPP MEYER, *Die Haupturkunden für die Geschichte der Athosklöster*, grösstentheils zum ersten Male herausgegeben und mit Einleitungen versehen. Leipzig 1894, pp. 187–189; ILIYA ILIEV, *Narratio Athonensis ad annum MCCXXXV*. *Bulgarian Historical Review* 19.1 (1991) pp. 74–81. Further extensive bibliography is cited by POPOV in his notes 88–91.

are commemorated is 9 March, the date of the victory at Klokotnitsa). According to *ПОПОВ*, the presence of this subject in a fresco in Thessalonica is another proof of subordination to Bulgaria, since the cult of the Forty Martyrs was not particularly developed in the Greek church.

The chapter ends by describing Manuel's participation in the anti-Latin alliance of 1235, once again as subordinate to Ivan Asen II (pp. 121–127), his sudden removal from his position of governor of Thessalonica, and his substitution with Theodore's son John Komnenos Doukas (pp. 127–142). This removal dates from 1237 and was a consequence of the new marriage of Ivan Asen II with Theodore Komnenos' daughter Irene. Unlike Manuel, John would employ the title of Emperor, as abundantly proved by various numismatic sources. The reasons that may have brought Ivan Asen II to tolerate this are unclear and are not explained in the sources, which generally conjecture a passion so strong for Theodore's young daughter that it clouded the tsar's judgment and made him oblivious to political matters. As *ПОПОВ* rightly observes, this can hardly be a reason. Similarly implausible is that it was the result of some scheme devised by the cunning Theodore, who managed to exploit his new role as father-in-law to Ivan Asen. It is much more probable that the reason was purely political: to oppose the pretensions of Nicaea over Constantinople with another 'Byzantine' empire under Bulgarian control. The last pages follow the final years of Ivan Asen II's reign and his wavering politics towards Nicea and the Latins of Constantinople; pp. 143–146 provide a very useful and detailed chronology of Manuel's rule in Thessalonica from 1230 to 1237.

The third chapter (pp. 147–225) is dedicated to the much more complex issue of Michael II Doukas and his rule over Epirus. The primary sources here are quite fragmentary and inconsistent, and the historiography in greater disagreement, especially on the possibility that Michael may have ruled as an autonomous sovereign not subordinated to Bulgaria. *ПОПОВ* presents the various theories at length and in great detail at pp. 149–159, although, as we have already stated, according to him Michael ruled the region exclusively on behalf of Ivan Asen II. The rank of despot was also bestowed upon him by the Bulgarian tsar, and not, as some authors believed, by Manuel (*NICOL, HENDY*), John Komnenos Doukas (*BREDENKAMP*) or even by the emperors of Nicaea (*HERTZBERG, FERJANČIĆ*). This analysis is especially detailed and extensive (pp. 161–181), and the author takes great care in refuting all theories that date the bestowal of Michael's title of despot to various years after 1230–1231. This date appears the most reasonable one anyway, and it is attested in the Genoese annals that mention,

for the year 1231, a *Michaele despoti Commiano*.⁸ In order to present a clearer picture of a very complicated issue, the author lists in a very useful chart, at pp. 182–184, all mentions of Michael, along with his title, in every available source for the years 1230–1254.

Other proofs of Michael's early presence in Epirus as despot are a golden and a silver seal, respectively dated 1236 and 1251, as well as a very interesting medallion that surfaced at an auction in 2018: it dates from 1232 and is inscribed ΜΙΧΑΗΛ ΟΡΘΟΔΟΞΟΣ ΔΕΣΠΟΤΗΣ Ο ΔΟΥΚΑΣ (pp. 186–191). Michael's subordination to Bulgaria, on the other hand, is more difficult to prove. According to ΡΟΡΟΒ it can be inferred from a letter written by George Bardanes to Manuel,⁹ in which he comforts him because part of his land has been taken away by a 'malicious barbarian'. This 'barbarian', ΡΟΡΟΒ maintains, cannot be anyone else but Ivan Asen II, and the land of which Manuel has been deprived must be Epirus, allotted to Michael (pp. 196–199). ΡΟΡΟΒ also mentions a passage in Nikeporos Blemmydes' autobiography,¹⁰ where the author states that Michael did not receive his authority from John III Doukas Vatatzes: according to ΡΟΡΟΒ this means that he must necessarily have received it from the only other ruler who could bestow it, namely Ivan Asen II. Furthermore, Blemmydes writes that Michael offered him the position of Archbishop of Ohrid: but he had no authority to do so, because Ohrid was not part of his domains but was part of the Bulgarian tsardom. If he really made such a proposal, he must have been acting on behalf of Ivan Asen II.

The last part of the chapter (pp. 203–225) is dedicated to an extremely detailed analysis of a fresco at the Ταξιάρχης Μητροπόλεως Church in Kastoria. The fresco represents the archangel Michael with two small figures, a man on the left and a woman on the right, whose identity is unknown. The inscription above the man's head is very damaged, but the words 'Michael' and, most importantly, 'Asen' ([Α]σανι in the text) are discernible. The figures have thus been usually interpreted as those of Michael II Asen, son of Ivan Asen II, and of his mother Irene, daughter of Theodore Komnenos (DUJČEV, BOŽILOV, IVANOVA, KALOPISSI-VERTI, SUBOTIĆ). Others identify the man as Michael Asen, son of Ivan III Asen (CHATZIDAKIS, MLADJOV). Very recently ALEKSANDĀR STOJKOV proposed that the

8. CESARE IMPERIALE DI SANT'ANGELO (ed.), *Annali genovesi di Caffaro e de'suoi continuatori dal MCCXXV al MCCL*. Vol. 3. Rome 1923, p. 57.

9. For which see above, note 4.

10. AUGUST HEISENBERG (ed.), *Nicephori Blemmydae Curriculum Vitae et Carmina*. Leipzig 1896, pp. 36–37.

two figures may actually represent Michael II Doukas and his mother, and that the name [A]σάνη refers to Ivan Asen II. POPOV accepts this latter interpretation which, other evidence being absent, remains problematic. In any case, it is true that the male figure is shown without royal garb, insignia, or indication of a royal title, and the same goes also for Irene, whose royal rank is not mentioned either (on pp. 215–216 the author compares some details of the Kastoria fresco with representations of the Bulgarian royal attire). Furthermore, the archangel Michael was not associated with Tsar Michael II Asen, but appears on the coins issued by Michael II Doukas (pp. 219–220, with illustrations).

In his concluding remarks (pp. 227–239) POPOV sums up the main points of his book, provides a short treatment of the relations between despot and sovereign, making parallels with the political practices of Constantinople and of the Latin Empire, and recounts some events in the history of Thessalonica after 1241, the year of Ivan Asen II's death. The book is supplemented with ten maps reproduced from earlier publications (pp. 240–249), showing how the territories of Thessalonica and Epirus during the reign of Ivan Asen II have been represented in 20th and 21st-century historiography. The maps are interesting and useful, but unfortunately their quality is uneven and they are (at least in my opinion) too small. An index of names would have been a welcome addition to the book. There are also many typos in the footnotes and in the bibliography: J. FINE is systematically referred to as 'J. Fein', AUVRAY is called 'Auvrey', and so on. Notwithstanding these minor flaws, the book is very well written and very thoroughly researched. It provides the reader with fresh interpretations that, although at times conjectural, will surely be of great interest. It is a thought-provoking piece of scholarship and a very welcome addition to a field of studies where there is still much to investigate – as POPOV himself so competently demonstrates.

Keywords

Bulgaria; Byzantine Empire; Thessalonica; Epirus; Ivan Asen II; Empire of Nicaea