

**Alexandru Madgearu, *The Asanids: the political and military history of the second Bulgarian empire (1185–1280)*,
Târgoviște, Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2014, 332 p.**

In the new synthesis regarding the history of the Vlach-Bulgarian Tsardom, published by the Romanian historian Alexandru Madgearu, the political, diplomatic and military history of the new power in the Balkans is reinterpreted in light of the recent articles and books. Taking into consideration the older studies and analyzing a considerable number of primary sources, the author retraces the evolution of the Vlach-Bulgarian Tsardom (or Second Bulgarian Empire) and puts forward new hypotheses about some of its main characteristics.

Alexandru Madgearu is a scientific researcher at the Institute for Political and Defense Studies and Military History from Bucharest and made a name for himself due to his many volumes and studies dedicated to the political and military organization of the Carpathian-Danubian region, from Late Antiquity to Early Modern Period.

Romanian historians, from Dimitrie Cantemir, A. D. Xenopol, Gheorghe I. Brătianu and Silviu Dragomir to present day, have focused on the history of the Vlachs from the south of the Danube, being particularly interested in the origins of the Asanid dynasty and their political and military role, before the foundation of the Romanian Principalities. In various general works on the history of the Romanians, entire chapters were reserved for the study of the evolution of the Vlachs that lived in the Balkans. The collective volume published in 1989, *The Uprising and the State of the Asanids*, coordinated by Eugen Stănescu, has thus far been a reference for many other works on this topic, including numerous studies on political, military, diplomatic, social, economic and monetary aspects. Until now, there has been a lack of a general, up-to-date presentation of this political entity, one based on the newest methodological and theoretical approaches. For this reason, this volume represents a valuable contribution to the field and a useful resource for future historians.

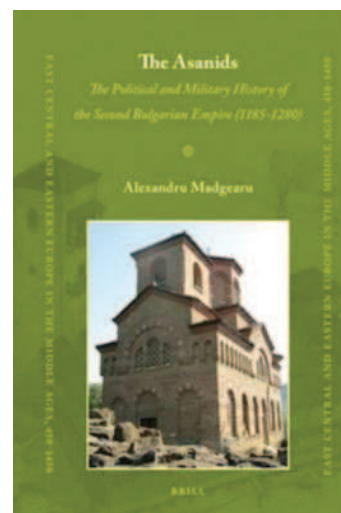
The book is divided into 10 chapters, followed by a section for *Conclusions*, a number of drawings

and suggestive illustrations, an index, a bibliography and abbreviation lists of authors, historical personalities, ethnicities and geographic names. The first chapter presents the historical sources, while the second deals with the historiography. The third is concerned with the situation of the

Byzantine Empire before the beginning of the 1185 uprising and the fourth chapter is focused on the outbreak of the rebellion and the formation of the Vlach-Bulgarian political structures. Sections five to eight describe in a chronological order the reigns of Peter and Ivan Asen I, Ioannitsa Kaloyan, Boril and Ivan Asen II. The ninth chapter recalls the reasons that led to the decline of the dynasty, while the tenth and last section is an analysis of the most important fortresses of the tsardom. It is worth mentioning the emphasis placed on the leadership of the tsardom and the dynastic ambitions and failures of the Asanids.

In the first chapter, there is a brief description of the historical sources. An interesting hypothesis is the mentioning of the tsardom in the *Nibelungenlied*. Another aspect that is worth highlighting is the thorough knowledge of the primary sources, including original Greek texts and less-researched works, like the *Itinerarium peregrinorum*, a chronicle from the 12th century.

In the second section, reserved mostly for the Romanian and Bulgarian historiography, Alexandru Madgearu reviews the most influential investigations on this subject. He shows a remarkable knowledge of the Bulgarian historical books. Another notable element that must be emphasized



is that the specialist is up-to-date with the latest bibliography (including George A. Costan's 2012 article and Dimiter Angelov's study from 2013). Although he recalls numerous Romanian articles, he overlooks the study written by Tudor Sălăgean, within his short presentation on the subject in *The History of Romania. Compendium*. Moreover, this paper is not indicated in the final bibliography.

The focus is on the Vlachian origin of the Asen family, despite the fact that the 1185 uprising is not seen as an event with a "national" foundation, because it was the result of a political action of several local communities of different ethnicities. In this regard, the author believes and acknowledges Alexander Vasiliev's theory that it had a "[...] Vlach-Bulgarian-Cuman character, led by a dynasty of Vlach origins."

The historian places greater emphasis on the first period of the Asen tsardom, until the death of Ioannitsa Kaloyan (1207), who's untimely death was the result of the actions of his successor, Boril of Bulgaria. Regarding the alleged tomb of Ioannitsa, the *Holy Forty Martyrs Church* in Tarnovo, he believes that, in fact, there lie the remains of another historical character, also bearing the same name, but from the second half of the 14th century. "In reality, as was also the case of his brethren, the actual location of Kaloyan's tomb still remains uncertain."

Dealing also with the process of "Bulgarization" of the tsardom, he identifies the first reference to the presence of the Romanians in the area, who had a military function, a relevant information "ignored so far by the Romanian historiography."

Afterwards, the attention shifts on the study of heraldry, believing that, most likely, the coat of arms with a lion's paw belonged to Constantine Asen, who was inspired by the Hungarian King Stephen V. Regarding the coat of arms with the lion without legs, "its affiliation with Litovoi cannot be excluded". Unfortunately, this hypothesis is not developed further.

The last chapter is a description, "which makes no claims of being complete", of the foremost fortifications of the tsardom, including through several excellent plans and sketches. Such a presentation was lacking in the Romanian literature, limited until now to the research of the cities on the Danube and the ones from Dobrogea (Dobruja).

Based on various sources, the author follows the tracks of the Vlach-Bulgarian and Byzantine expeditions, by drawing up a few useful maps, for a better understanding of their evolution. We can also learn more about the Mongols route, including

the attacks on the northern part of the tsardom in 1242.

The latest technology is used to date some events: current astronomical calculations from NASA catalogs enable the author to date the death of Ivan Asen II and Empress Irene Dukas.

The present volume has a certain polemic nature: Madgearu does not hesitate to correct, with a sharp critical sense, some statements of the researchers which wrote before him. An example is disclaiming of the theory formulated by Alexandru Simon in an article, about the first known mention of the Romanians: *Rumerorum* refers to the Byzantines, not to the previous people.

In his *Conclusions*, the historian indicates the main stages of the evolution of the tsardom. The first is a "secessionist" one, the second began with the official recognition from Constantinople, the third was defined by the principle of territorial sovereignty and institutional strengthening and the fourth stage was marked by the claim of legitimacy to the First Bulgarian Tsardom. It is assumed that the new power in the Balkans contributed, to a certain extent, to the emergence of local Romanian rulers and institutions north of the Danube (a very debatable issue that the author does not examine in detail), through the domination over Oltenia in the first decades of the 13th century, but also through the spread of the Slavonic liturgy in the Romanian Church, determined by an ecclesiastical dependence on the Metropolitan of Tarnovo. Alexandru Madgearu finishes his books by saying that "the only certain legacy of the Asen dynasty concerning the Romanians from the north of the Danube was the maintenance of the Slavic language in the Church and state administration." But he does not continue with the analysis of the transmission of this language in the chanceries and in the ecclesiastical organization of the Romanian Principalities. It is worth pointing out that he highlights the cultural heritage of the tsardom, its dynamics and complexity, and does not underline the national importance of the ethnic origins.

The book has convincing arguments, together with rigorous inquiries into the primary sources and the most recent papers on this subject: a work that represents a benchmark synthesis of the political and military history of the Vlach-Bulgarian Tsardom during the Asen dynasty.

Marian Horvat