

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF BULGARIA'S VASSALAGE TO THE MONGOLS: TIMING AND CONTEXT

Aleksandar Uzelac

УСТАНОВЯВАНЕ НА ВАСАЛНА ЗАВИСИМОСТ НА БЪЛГАРИЯ КЪМ МОНГОЛИТЕ: ВРЕМЕ И КОНТЕКСТ

Александър Узелац

Abstract: *The article analyzes the date and circumstances under which medieval Bulgaria became a vassal of the Mongols. The almost universally accepted view in historiography is that Bulgaria became a Mongol vassal in 1242 during their invasion of Europe. However, Plamen Pavlov suggests that around 1247 Bulgaria exposed itself to new Mongol pressure, which led to the establishment of vassal relations. In this article, using various Western and Oriental sources, we find that Bulgaria became a Mongol vassal in 1246 – 1247 in the peculiar historical circumstances that prevented resistance against the Mongols. Thus, Pavlov's opinion is supported by new and hitherto unused testimonies from sources.*

Keywords: *Mongol invasion, Bulgaria, Hungary, 13th century, Vassalage.*

In the year 1242, during the Mongol invasion of Europe led by Batu and Subedei, the medieval Bulgarian state found itself in the crosshairs of the nomadic conquerors. Written sources and archaeological findings bear witness to the considerable devastation and desolation that befell the Bulgarian lands during the Mongol campaign. These traces of destruction are evident in the accounts of both European and Oriental contemporaries, including Roger of Várád, Thomas of Split, Thomas of Cantimpré, Rashīd al-Dīn, and a fourteenth-century Georgian chronicle [Roger. 2010, pp. 214–215; Thomas. 2006, pp. 302–303; Vita 1969, p. 257; Rashiduddin. 1998, p. 332; Kartlis Chovreba. 2008, p. 343]. An intriguing information is also preserved in the Rhymed Chronicle of Phillipe Mouskes, according to which unnamed “king of the Vlachs” (obviously Bulgarians) had a fierce fight with the Tatars on their return and managed to defeat them in a mountain pass [Mouskes. 1838, p. 681]. Moreover, a note of certain Theodore Grammatikos, attesting to the invasion of the “godless Tartars” is preserved in a Greek manuscript from the Vatican archive [Schreiner, P. 1985, pp. 25–29; Zlatarski, V. 2007, p. 425, note 1]. The Mongol destruction of Bulgaria is also reflected in an inscription from the Shumen fortress, which is usually dated at the end of the thirteenth century, although in all probability

can be related to the invasion of 1242 [Uzelac, A. 2021, p. 214]¹. Archaeological findings reveal that the Mongol actions left particularly serious and devastating consequences in the Danubian Plain of northern Bulgaria, and the Danube Delta. Recent excavations and coin hoards suggest that many of the urban centers, such as Silistra, Vetren, Preslav, Shumen, Varna, and presumably Tarnovo, were sacked or attacked by the invaders [Atanassov, G., Pavlov, P. 1995, pp. 234–238; Atanasov, G. 2006, pp. 680–683; Oberländer-Tärnoveanu, E. 1997, pp. 137–140; Atanasov, G., Pavlov, P. 2011, pp. 4–6]. Danubian localities Pakuiul lui Soare, Nufăru, and Isaccea in the river delta were also probably destroyed by the Mongols [Baraschi S. 1987, pp. 123–132; Oberländer-Tärnoveanu E. 1997, p. 140; Madgearu, A. 2016, p. 231]. The invaders withdrew from Bulgaria to the East approximately at the end of 1242, or if we are to believe Rashīd al-Dīn in January of 1243, leaving the country in ruins [Rashiduddin. 1998, p. 332].

The Mongol invasion, as commonly noted in historiography, had severe consequences for the medieval Bulgarian state, not only due to the level of destruction but also as it led to Bulgaria becoming a vassal of the Mongol empire and, in the subsequent decades, its successor – the Golden Horde. The first indication of Bulgaria's vassal status to the Mongols is found in a letter from the Hungarian King Béla IV (1235 – 1270) to Pope Innocent IV (1243 – 1254), composed on November 11, 1247 [for the date: Senga, T. 1987, pp. 604–610]. In this letter, the Hungarian king expressed his concern that all other peoples that had experienced the Tatar strength had agreed to pay tribute to them, especially the regions bordering Hungary in the east, including Rus', Cumania, Brodnici, and Bulgaria [Vetera Monumenta. 1968, p. 231]. Several years later, the full extent of Mongol authority over Bulgarian lands and the nature of the tribute paid to the Mongols were vividly described by the Flemish Franciscan William of Rubruck. According to his account, “westwards from the mouth of the Tanais (Don) as far as the Danube, everything is under their control (i.e., Mongol); and even beyond the Danube in the direction of Constantinople, Blakia – Assan's territory – and Little Bulgaria, extending into Sclavonia, all pay them tribute. In recent years, they have additionally levied on each household one axe and all the unwrought iron that has been found” [Rubruck. 1990, pp. 65–66]. As Rubruck further noted, the power of the then Bulgarian ruler, Michael II Asen (1246–56), “has been eroded by the Tartar yoke” [Rubruck. 1990, p. 277]. Besides, the Bulgarian envoys regularly visited Batu and his son Sartak in the steppes between Don and Volga, bearing gifts as a sign of tribute [Rubruck. 1990, p. 126].

According to a frequently repeated opinion in historiography, in 1242, the authorities in Tarnovo, acting on behalf of the underage ruler Kaliman Asen (1241 – 1246), submitted to the Mongols to avoid further suffering [see, for example, Sinor D. 1999, p. 28; Vásáry, I. 2005, p. 70; Zlatarski, V. 2007, p. 425; Madgearu,

¹ The inscription reads: “I, George, looked up and down and said: Oh God, by thy name, save us from the Tatars” [Inscripfen. 1997, p. 131].

A. 2016, pp. 233–234]. However, considering the severe consequences of the Mongol devastations revealed by archaeological findings and traces of local resistance documented in written sources, such an interpretation does not seem acceptable. On the contrary, the prominent Bulgarian historian Plamen Pavlov has recently presented a different perspective: around 1247, the Empire in Tarnovo faced a new Mongol attack, which consequently led to the recognition of their overlordship [**Pavlov, P. Vladimirov, G.** 2021, pp. 62–63]. Unfortunately, Pavlov did not provide a detailed explanation of his interpretation; nonetheless, as we will explore further in the text, it undoubtedly has its merits.

To support this conclusion, it needs to be mentioned that several other sources provide corroborating evidence that Bulgaria did not submit to the Mongols in 1242. The Franciscan monk John of Plano Carpini, who embarked on a journey to Mongolia as an emissary of Pope Innocent IV in 1245 – 1247, along with the monk C. de Bridra², the author of the ‘Tartar Relation’ (*Hystoria Tartarorum*) based on the testimonies of Carpini’s mission participants, meticulously listed the nations subjected to Mongol rule. In their enumerations of conquered populations in Eastern Europe, they included the Alans, Russians, Cumans, and Circassians, among others [**Pian di Carpine.** 1989, pp. 289–291; *Hystoria* 1967, pp. 22–23]. However, there is no mention of Bulgarians (or Vlachs, as the population of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom was often referred to in Western sources) [**Uzelac, A.** 2021, p. 215]. Worth noting is that in 1247, upon his return from Mongolia, Carpini encountered a certain dignitary named Olaha, mistakenly listed among Rus’ princes, who was departing from the Mongols with his entourage [Pian di Carpine 1989, p. 331–332]. The name closely resembles the Hungarian term for Vlachs (Oláh), suggesting it likely refers to a Vlach political representative from the region east of the Carpaths. While his inclusion among the Rus’princes is undoubtedly an authorial error, it can be attributed to the Vlach community’s association with the Orthodox world [**Spinei V.** 1986, p. 131; **Russev, N.** 1999, p. 380]. What is essential to underscore, however, is that the reports of Carpini’s mission composed in 1247 provide no indication of the Bulgarian subjugation to the Mongols.

This is hardly surprising when one takes into account another crucial detail: the Mongol sphere of influence had not extended to the borders of the Kingdom of Tarnovo before the second half of the fifth decade of the thirteenth century. During Carpini’s eastward journey in 1245, the westernmost point of the area under Mongol control was the region on the right bank of the Dnieper, southeast of Kiev, where a Mongol commander named Correnza or Kuremsa resided [**Pian di Carpine.** 1989, pp. 305–306, 309]. However, exactly at that time, Batu took decisive steps to con-

² Usually named ‘C. de Bridia’ after the 15th-century manuscript of ‘*Hystoria Tartarorum*,’ now kept at Yale University. However, according to an earlier manuscript of this source, which is held in the Library of Luzern, the author’s name was ‘C. de Bridra’ [**Hautala, R.** 2021, pp. 82–83].

solidate his authority in the neighboring lands on the fringes of Mongol domains. Prince Danylo Romanovych of Galicia, after prolonged hesitation, paid homage to Batu and recognized his overlordship at the end of 1245 [**Ip̑at'evskaya letopis'**. 1908, col. 805–806]. His rival, Prince Mikhail Vsevolodovich of Chernihiv, followed suit the following year, but he met a different fate, being executed in Batu's camp. The official reason for his execution was his alleged disrespect for Mongolian customs [**Novgorodskaya letopis'**. 1950, pp. 298–303; **Hystoria**. 1967, p. 26; **Pian di Carpine**. 1989, pp. 237–238]. Concurrently with Danilo's recognition, the Mongols evidently implemented other steps to strengthen their dominance in the lands between the Dnieper and the Danube, as reflected in Carpini's mention of the unnamed Vlach prince who went to the Mongols, and in the letter of Béla IV to Innocent IV, which records the dependent status of the lands of Cumania and Brodnici.

Here, it is necessary to briefly turn to the contemporary events in Hungary, a country that suffered the most devastation during the Mongol invasion of 1241 – 1242. The expansion of the Mongol sphere of influence in the mid-forties of the thirteenth century raised significant concerns for Béla IV, driven by rumors of their intentions to invade his kingdom once more. Around the end of 1246, the king turned to Innocent IV, asking for his help in order to strengthen the defense of his kingdom. From the Pope, at the beginning of the following year, assurances arrived that the fate of Hungary concerned every Christian and that, should the country be in danger, the Pope would immediately send the crusaders who had set out for the Holy Land [**Vetera Monumenta**. 1968, pp. 203–204]. However, the assurances failed to alleviate the king's concerns. Consequently, Béla IV dispatched envoys (or rather scouts) to the east to gather additional information about Mongol plans. They returned toward the end of the summer in 1247, coinciding with Carpini's own return from the east. As corroborated by an addition in the so-called Luxembourg Manuscript of Carpini's account, both the king's envoys and the Franciscan traveler, whom Béla IV likely met in Zvolen, confirmed the imminent threat of a new Mongol invasion of Hungary [**Sinor, D.** 1957, p. 203; **Senga, T.** 1987, pp. 593–594; **Hautala, R.** 2016, pp. 277–278]. It was precisely this news that prompted Béla's new letter to the Pope from November 11, 1247, in which he explained in detail the expansion of the Mongol sphere of influence in the region.

Rumors of a new Mongol attack on Hungary had already spread throughout Europe. The English chronicler Matthew Paris wrote that the Tatars had once again attacked the borders of this land in 1246, leading to the king's decision to evacuate the population from vulnerable areas [**Matthew Paris**. 1877, p. 547]. The following year, the return of the Mongols to Hungary was mentioned in a letter composed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Boniface of Savoy [**Matthew Paris**. 1882, p. 133]. Both of these reports, recorded in England, were likely distorted echoes of Béla's appeals to the Pope for help, rather than reliable information from the field [**Pow, S.** 2019, p. 244–245]. However, the fact that the danger at the Hungarian borders was real is confirmed by an intriguing reference from a short biography of the Mongol

lord Uryanqadai, son of Subedei, preserved in the Chinese fourteenth-century historiographical compilation *Yuán Shǐ*. According to his biography, Uryanqadai, along with Batu, in the year of *bingwu* ('fire horse', i.e. 1246 – 1247), was on a punitive campaign against the people of *Beilie'r* and *Niemisi* [Zolotaya Orda. 2009, p. 241]. The former are occasionally identified with the Poles and the latter with the Germans [Zolotaya Orda. 2009, p. 241, notes dcviii–dcix]. Nonetheless, as Stephen Pow recently argued, the more probable identification of the peoples mentioned in the Chinese text would be with the Danube Bulgarians and Transylvanian Saxons [Pow, S. 2019, p. 245, note 6]. Such identification is not only philologically sound but also aligns perfectly with reports from Western sources about Mongol pressure on the borders of the Kingdom of Hungary and neighboring lands during that period.

The brief notes from Uryanqadai's biography hold significant importance for several reasons. They indicate that Bulgaria didn't come under Mongol overlordship before 1246, as a Mongol campaign against this land at that time would have been pointless. Additionally, they are in complete accordance with the information contained in King Béla IV's letter to the Pope, attesting to Bulgaria's simultaneous subjugation to the Mongols. Clearly, in 1246 – 1247, when facing a new Mongol threat (as documented in Uryanqadai's biography), Bulgaria submitted to the conquerors (as substantiated in the letter from the Hungarian king to the Pope). In this context, Plamen Pavlov was undeniably correct.

The anticipated new Mongol invasion, which greatly troubled Béla IV, failed to materialize. This outcome resulted from the conflict between Batu and the Great Khan Güyük (1246 – 1248), which erupted in late 1247. Nevertheless, the expansion of the Mongol sphere of influence in the west during 1246 – 1247 led to Bulgaria's vassal dependence on the Mongols. It is important to note that during these tumultuous years, Bulgaria, still recovering from the devastating Mongol invasion of 1242, grappled with a significant internal and external crisis. The underage Kaliman Asen passed away under mysterious circumstances in the early autumn of 1246 [Akropolites 2007, p. 225; Zlatarski, V. 2007, pp. 427–428; Madgearu, A. 2016, p. 236]. John III Doukas Vatatzes (1221 – 1254), the ruler of Nicaea, seized an unexpected opportunity by violating the existing peace agreement with the Bulgarians and launching an attack against their leaderless neighbor. Within a mere three months, Nicaean forces successfully captured Serres and Melnik, followed by the surrender of numerous cities in Macedonia and western Thrace. The authorities in Tarnovo acknowledged Vatatzes' conquests, which were officially confirmed by a new peace treaty concluded either during the winter or, at the latest, in the following spring [Akropolites 2007, pp. 225–235; Zlatarski, V. 2007, pp. 430–435; Madgearu, A. 2016, pp. 236–238]. Reflecting on these well-documented events along the southern border, it becomes evident why Bulgaria was unable to effectively counter the looming threat of a new Mongol invasion from the north at that particular juncture. Consequently, the authorities in Tarnovo had no other choice but to acknowledge Mongol overlordship and accept the temporary harsh tribute imposed on the

Bulgarian lands, as described by Rubruck. This decision significantly shaped the relations between the medieval Bulgarian state and the Golden Horde throughout the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

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