



Across Haimos: Inconveniences and Dangers in Crossing the Mountains of Bulgaria in the Middle Ages

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The location and terrain of the Haimos Mountains (in modern terms, consisting primarily of the massifs of the Stara Planina and the Sredna Gora) were a natural barrier to travellers and troops intending to move from north to south, from south to north, or along the famous *via militaris*, passing through the eastern half of what is now designated as the Balkan Peninsula. The Stara Planina divides the Danubian Plain from the southern regions of Illyria and Thrace, while the Sredna Gora separates the latter two from each other. In the past, these mountains were difficult to cross because of bad weather conditions, including sudden thunderstorms, thermal inversions and mountain rivers overflowing with spring meltwaters. The thick snow cover, which extended to the lower parts of the massifs in winter, created a lot of difficulties even for locals, who knew the terrain very well, but considerably more so for outsiders, who were practically unable to traverse it at that time of the year. The Byzantines were evidently often discouraged from crossing, partly because the image of these mountains and their inhabitants, particularly among members of Byzantine elites, was formed by readings of classical literature and knowledge of past military losses suffered by the Empire in the region. Stories of brigands ravaging the area also played a part, diffused as they were among soldiers and the ordinary populace by oral tradition or devotional literature, such as saints' lives. Analysis of geographical facts and historical sources demonstrates that the Haimos was a dominant geographical feature in the region during the Middle Ages. It was a natural dividing line and a reference for the location of individual territories. It is not surprising therefore that Byzantine military troops and travellers heading northwards wanted to avoid crossing that difficult area and risking ambush; instead, they readily used the sea route along the eastern coast of Thrace and Moesia or instigated various nomadic peoples to invade the Bulgarian-populated lands from the north.

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In his remarks on the significance of the terrain of the Mediterranean peninsulas, Fernand Braudel argued that it had played a vital role in various historical events. His argument referred in particular to the fact that mountainous areas impeded the marching of armies trying to traverse mountain ranges. Such areas, being a natural obstacle in communication between the territories they separated, also constituted a barrier in military terms, especially on account of being particularly suitable for launching successful attacks against the enemy by ambush. The population of impenetrable mountainous areas yielded to the influence exerted by the more advanced civilizations of cities, plains and coasts with difficulty and at a slow pace (Braudel 31–60). This article aims to analyse the case of the massifs, formed by what is known today as the Stara Planina (the Balkan Range, together with the *Predbalkan*, the foothills of the mountain) and the Sredna Gora (the *Antibalkan*), which in the Middle Ages were jointly referred to by the name of *Haimos* (Greek *ὁ Αἴμος*, Latin *Haemus*, Turkic *Balkan*). The former extends in a slightly curved line from the so-called Iron Gates on the lower Danube to the Black Sea coast.¹ These two ranges separate the Danubian Plain from northern Thrace,

¹ For more on these mountains, see Soustal 279–280; Gagova, “Trakiya” 319–322; Nikolov and Yordanova 9–44; Maruszczak 294–304. In fact, modern geographers locate the westernmost edge of this massif in the vicinity of the Belogradchik Pass, but this view is based on the geological structure of the massif rather than its terrain.

and the latter region, from the Sofia Valley. Considering the above, the general remarks on the subject formulated by the eminent French historian and polymath Braudel are at times called into question, as are statements of a similar character by eminent Bulgarian historiographers, such as Petar Mutafchiev (“Balkanat” 65–89). It is argued that Haimos did not pose an insurmountable difficulty for marching armies and other people wishing to cross it (Nikolov 360–364; Ivanov 90–110; Momchilov, “Sashnost” 60–64).² It is not my intention to criticize indiscriminately those sceptical views (some of them may indeed be legitimate), nor does this article aim to provide the reader with a comprehensive analysis of the role of these massifs in the history of the north-eastern regions of the Balkan Peninsula in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, focusing on the eastern Balkans in the medieval period, I would like to discuss a few factors which did obstruct the progress of Byzantine armies and numerous travellers on their way across the Stara Planina (from the south northwards) and the Sredna Gora (from the south-eastern regions of the peninsula towards the north west or in the opposite direction).

Let us begin with questions of a geographical nature. The Haimos mountains were a significant barrier not only owing to their considerably high altitude (in particular, the altitude of their western and central parts), but also because of their elevation above the neighbouring geographical regions. This ranges from 200 metres in the eastern part of the massifs to 1 200 metres in the central part in relation to the area lying to the north, and from 600 to 1 900 metres in relation to the regions to the south of this mountain range (Penchev, Tishkov, Daneva and Gorunova 87). However, the difference between the northern and southern slopes consists not only in the greater height of the latter. The mountains slope southwards at a sharp angle from a considerable altitude (this refers to the central and eastern parts of the Stara Planina; the western part is different in this respect), while the northern slopes are much less steep and their foothills gradually merge with the Danubian Plain (Tishkov, Mihaylov, Ziapkov and Gorunova 71, 74; Penchev, Tishkov, Daneva and Gorunova 86; Koder 28). The terrain is thus undoubtedly much more accessible from the north than from the south (Whittow 275).

The role of the Stara Planina as a geographical barrier is also demonstrated by the fact that it clearly prevents the wide distribution of plant and animal species characteristic of the Siberian-European and Mediterranean zones. It is also a major watershed between the Aegean and the Black Sea. Its role as a climate barrier affects the composition of soil on its northern and southern slopes. A characteristic feature is the gradually increasing penetration of climate features as well as flora and fauna from the west eastwards, which is due to the decreasing height of the mountains and the influence of the marine climate of the Black Sea coast (Tishkov, Mihailov, Ziapkov and Gorunova 66, 67; Penchev, Tishkov, Daneva and Gorunova 85–86, 90, 106, 111, 112). The eastern part of the mountain range slightly differs in this respect from most other parts of the Stara Planina. Considering this, we may easily understand why it was the most frequently used passage through this mountain range in the Middle Ages: it offered the most suitable conditions for crossing and was relatively easy to traverse (Mutafchiev, “Balkanat” 71, 87; Rashev 302–303).

It is necessary to emphasize the fact, recorded also in Byzantine sources, that there were numerous caves and precipices in the Haimos area.³ Although the massifs are not particularly elevated⁴, they are nevertheless, especially in their central part, transected by the deepest gorges on the territory of modern Bulgaria. Also, they boast the largest caves in the country and the largest representation of cave fauna observable in Bulgaria’s mountain ranges (Kanitz 136; Dinev and Melnishki 14; Penchev, Tishkov, Daneva

² Only the study by Ivanov covers the entire medieval period, although it is based solely on a single quantitative method of source analysis. The studies by Nikolov and Momchilov refer either to the late Middle Ages or to the period from the seventh to the ninth centuries (the former, however, is based in fact on a single piece of evidence – see the commentary by Gagova, “Krastonosnite” 264).

³ Suffice it to refer to the passage written by Michael Psellos (VII, 68, 125, 1 – 126, 37, specifically 126, 24–26.35–37), on the methods of combat used by the Pechenegs in which he mentions their practice of hiding in mountainous areas, especially in deep gorges or among steep rocks. Although the text does not specify the name of the mountainous areas in question, it is very probable that it refers to the Haimos mountains. First of all, in that passage Psellos indicates that those nomads inhabited the regions between the Danubian Plain and the said mountains, which is evident from the fact that he calls that people “Moesians,” as had been usual for earlier authors with reference to the Bulgarians. Secondly, Haimos was one of the regions where Byzantine troops battled with the Pechenegs – see Zlatarski 95–101, 104–108, 190–195; Mladenov 32–45.

⁴ With the exception of its central part. This statement, however, is not definitive; see e.g. the information on the Vrachanska Planina in the western part of the Stara Planina, the Slivenska Planina in the east, as well as the Ihtimanska Sredna Gora.

and Gorunova 88, 91, 105; Nikolov and Yordanova 24, 31). The sources clearly illustrate that the Byzantines were aware of the role of Haimos as a geographical barrier and of the difficulty that it posed to Byzantine armies attempting to cross it (Marinov, “Strategicheskata” 111–134).

The mountains constituted a natural barrier between the north and the south, even though there were more than twenty passes and gorges (Dinev and Melnishki 191; Maruszczak 142, 144; Koder 28).⁵ The location of the massifs favoured the development of a latitudinal pattern of roads in the Thracian and Danubian lands (Cvijić 20–21; Maruszczak 15, 196).⁶ As a result, two main arteries ran along the Haimos range: the northern one linking coastal Odessos (known as Varna in the Middle Ages and today) to Montana in the west, and the southern running from the port of Anchialos to Sardica.⁷ The most important road, the so-called *via militaris*, stretched from Belgrade on the Danube to Constantinople on the Bosphorus. The key defile on this road was called “Βασιλική κλεισόυρα,” that is, “Imperial Pass”, and enabled the crossing of the strategically important part of Haimos: through the Sredna Gora, on the way to the Byzantine capital (Jireček, “Die Heerstrasse” 30–35, 80–81, 92–93; Mutafchiev, “Stariyat drum” 30–51). Of course, in the north-eastern Balkans, there were also roads running perpendicularly and cutting through the Haimos range, the main ones among which were those passing through the Varbitsa and Rish Passes along with the coastal way stretching by the Black Sea in the eastern part of the mountain (the *via Pontica*), the road across the Troyan Pass, the so-called *Rusaliyska Pateka* and the Vratnik Pass in the central Balkan massif, and the one through the Botevgrad and Zlatitsa Passes, as well as the so-called *Vrattzata* in the western segment of the Stara Planina (Cvijić 23; Lisicov 38–57; Momchilov, “Patna” 71–76, 83–93, 101–104, 114–116, 118–119, 120–125, 128–138, 144–147, 149–150; Gagova, “Krastonosnite” 248–249, 263; Georgiev 84–103; Barakov 395–411).⁸

It was nevertheless difficult to cross (and still continues to be so) due to the rapidly changing weather, in particular, storms starting all of a sudden together with torrential rain. This feature is noticeable especially in the western and central parts of the Stara Planina and the *Predbalkan*, where storms tend to be particularly thunderous. Such storms occur mainly in the colder months, but they are not (and were not) a rarity in the warmer half of the year (Kállay 116–117; Kanitz 17, 119, 128, 129, 164, 216; Ikonov 277; Dinev and Melnishki 32, 34; Tishkov, Mihailov, Ziapkov and Gorunova 68).⁹ When in 1059 the Emperor Isaac I Komnenos camped near present-day Lovech while returning from the victorious expedition against the Pechenegs, the Byzantine army was surprised by a tremendous storm with strong winds and heavy rain: it was particularly surprising given that it was only 24 September. The Osam river overflowed its banks and flooded the imperial camp. The army was also surprised by a particularly biting frost, resulting from a thermal inversion in the *Predbalkan*. Available historical sources attest that many soldiers died, and even the Emperor was within a hair’s breadth of losing his life (Ataliates 51, 23–52, 12; Psellos VII, 70, 127, 1–25; *Annae Comnenae Alexias* III, 8, 8–10, 108, 45–109, 65; *Michaelis Glycae annales* IV, 602, 8–20). That atmospheric phenomenon came from the areas of the range proper or from its foothills, that is, from the vicinity of Lovech.

Similar temperature drops occurred even in the eastern part of the Stara Planina, where the climate is milder in the summer and autumn. In the higher parts of the mountains, temperatures at night could drop very drastically, especially in the vicinity of Kotel and Varbitsa. Alexios I Komnenos experienced this while staying for the night after the victorious battle with the Cumans fought in the Sidera Pass in that area (*Annae Comnenae Alexias* X, 4, 11, 295, 48–51).

The southern slopes of the Stara Planina were troubled by heavy rainfall, at times accompanied by abundant hail. As a result, rivers would often overflow, preventing travellers or columns of troops from crossing

⁵ Cf. Cvijić 27, 58, 91, 474–476, who argues that the only barrier was the central part of the Balkan together with the Sredna Gora – this is reasonable from a geographical point of view, but untenable in terms of historical fact.

⁶ Generally speaking, the terrain determined the pattern of communication routes until the twentieth century; see Koder 96.

⁷ Odessos: modern-day Varna, Varna province and municipality; Montana: Montana province and municipality; Anchialos: modern-day Pomorie, Burgas province, Pomorie municipality; Sardica: modern-day Sofia, Sofia-Grad metropolitan province.

⁸ For more on the late antique and medieval communication network in the north-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula, see e.g. Škrivanić 115–129; Soustal 132–146; Belke 73–90; Avramea 64–74; Gagova, “Trakiya” 99–110; Koder 91–99.

⁹ Maximum precipitation levels occur in May and June, according to Maruszczak 154; Nikolov and Yordanova 13. Cf. Maruszczak 143–144, 146–148, 150, who has written mostly of the moderate and mountain climate zones.

and forcing them to linger precariously in the mountains (Dinev and Melnishki 34).¹⁰ During floods, passage would be additionally obstructed by stones and broken trees brought by river waters. As regards the Stara Planina and Sredna Gora, we have evidence of floods caused by the following rivers: Kamchiya, Vit, Rositsa, Yantra, Iskar, Mativir, Osam, Belitsa, Veselina, Leshnitsa, Radova, Luda Yana, Topolnica and Tundzha.¹¹ In addition, significant parts of Haimos (and the passes in particular) were often shrouded by dense fog (Gerlach 344–345; Gerov 90; Kanitz 119, 128, 163; Nikolov and Yordanova 13). These phenomena are hardly surprising since they result from the clashing of two atmospheric fronts on the slopes of the Stara Planina: the cold air mass from the north and the warm one from the south (Dinev and Melnishki 34; Tishkov, Mihailov, Ziapkov and Gorunova 66; Penchev, Tishkov, Daneva and Gorunova 86, 88, 89, 100; Mishev 117).

In the Middle Ages, columns of troops going across the Stara Planina most often used pack animals for transportation because the roads were stony and uneven, which made it difficult, or frequently impossible, to make use of carts.¹² Mountain roads in Bulgaria were narrow, steep and uneven, strewn with large stones, pierced with holes. In addition, they led through undulating terrain, sometimes muddy, in other words, grievous or bad, all of which is attested in Byzantine and medieval Latin sources, as well as in later ones, dating to the Ottoman period (*Nicetae Choniatae historia* 429, 79–81; Ataliates 8, 2–6; Ansbert 27, 8–38, 26; *Historia peregrinorum* 131, 26–140, 5; de Villehardouin § 491, 306–308; de Clari LXIV, CXVII, 63, 109; Borsos 30; Karavelov 220–221; Ikonov 281).¹³ Frequent storms and heavy rainfall occurring in the Haimos mountains resulted in damp ground which greatly impeded travel through the region.¹⁴ Roads were often blocked by trees, especially on the densely forested northern slopes, broken by wind or fire resulting from thunderstorms (Kanitz 163). Such roads, especially those with stony surfaces, were particularly inconvenient for cavalry, irrespective of whether horses were shod or not.¹⁵ Even in the nineteenth century it was still recommended to use special horseshoes, made in the Ottoman Empire, as their European-made counterparts were hardly suitable for stony mountain trails (Kanitz 208–209).

In general, all roads in Haimos were unsuitable for military action throughout the winter (cf. Kazhdan 24, 26–27; Hristov 24–25, 68, 92; Braudel 31–32, 263–264). Aside from exceptional situations, winter was not a season for undertaking military expeditions. Very low temperatures persisted for many weeks and ravaging blizzards intermittently covered high mountain passes with snow (Schweigger 377; von Steinach 431; Jireček, “Patuvaniya” 176; Dinev and Melnishki 34; Nikolov and Yordanova 13; Matanov 245).¹⁶ Claudius Claudianus

¹⁰ See Kanitz 119 as well as, more generally, Jireček, “Patuvaniya” 156. According to Jireček, even in the nineteenth century there was still an insufficient number of bridges to remedy the situation. The existing bridges, wooden and stone alike, were often damaged by floods – cf. von Steinach 430; Kanitz 201, 207, 210, 214; Jireček, “Die Heerstrasse” 129; Jireček, “Patuvaniya” 170.

¹¹ Hankova 166 (Corneille de Schepper, 1533); Dernschwam 240 (the latter two on the Iskar); Kanitz 17, 163–164; Jireček, “Patuvaniya” 161, 163, 169–170; Dinev and Melnishki 75; Danov 20, 22; Nikolov and Yordanova 17; Kiradzhiev 115, 258, 327, 391, 618. On the Rositsa, see Vladislav Gramatik, V, 80 (an event of June 1469). This river flows from the Stara Planina and even though in this particular case it was crossed as it ran through the Danubian Plain, the level of its waters must have also risen in the mountains; see Nikolov and Yordanova 16–17; Kiradzhiev 463. According to Vladislav Gramatik, some monks transporting the relics of a saint were able to cross the overflowing river only owing to a miracle produced by the relics. On the Yantra, see Felix Kanitz, who wrote that even in June crossing the river was very difficult, especially when travelling out of present-day Veliko Tarnovo to the town of Sevlievo in the west; its reservoir was filled to the brim as a result of several days of stormy weather in the Stara Planina. On the Osam, see *Annae Comnenae Alexias* III, 8, 8–9, 108, 48–52. 56–57. Anna mentions the rivers which flooded the field near Lovech. On the Topolnitsa, see Schepper 161 (late July); von Steinach 430 (mid-November). Corneille de Schepper had to extend his route by eight miles in order to cross the river (cf. Hankova 165, who erroneously assumes that the detour added twenty-seven miles to his journey). On the Tundzha, see Kantakuzen, I, 39, 191, 19–192, 3.

¹² In his travels across the Balkan range Kanitz (168) had a horse serving as a pack animal. Donkeys and mules were still commonly used for this purpose in the twentieth century and continue to be used in the high mountains to this day.

¹³ It has to be noted, however, that the perilous state of the roads in the Balkans under Ottoman rule was to some extent a result of the indolence of the local administration.

¹⁴ See Kanitz (128–129).

¹⁵ See des Noëttes (183–190).

¹⁶ See *Bios kai politeia* § 6, 122, 30–31 (14th c.), where it is said that in the lower mountains of Paroria (this name probably refers to the Strandja mountain) south of Haimos snow would not melt until April. In winter the climate of the Balkan hinterland is generally characterized by frequent frosts; see Koder 55.

mentions the “cold valleys of Haemus” (*Haemi gelidae valles*) which witnessed the victories of Stilicho (*Claudii Claudiani De consulatu Stilichonis* 1 [21], 194, 130–133; English translation: Claudian, vol. 1, 375). Elsewhere he notes that “thrice ten times has chill winter cast her snowy mantle over leafless Haemus” (*Frigida ter decies nudatum frondibus Haemum tendit hiems vestire gelu totiensque solutis*) (*Claudii Claudiani De Bello Pollentino sive Gothico* III [XXVI], 266, 165–167; English translation: Claudian, vol. 2, 139). Felix Kanitz claims that around the highest point of the central part of the Stara Planina he saw the bare skeletons of horses which had presumably been used by merchants traversing the area, as well as the graves of people who had got lost in the difficult terrain and frozen to death (137). He also quotes Panaiot Hitov, a nineteenth-century Bulgarian *haiduk* and revolutionary leader, who happened to brave the highest Balkan passes in winter:

The wind was roaring madly, we were blinded by the dazzling snow, rivers and creeks screeched with sadness, wolves howled in the mountains and the winter birds cowered; one could not see or hear anything else. It was very hard to move forward, from time to time we were unable to get out of the snow. That night we managed to wade merely three hundred steps forward; the wind tossed us around, often making us fall down. (Kanitz 137–138)

This description, with its characteristic style so redolent of the nineteenth-century Bulgarian manner of expression, especially in the poetic opening of the passage, undoubtedly offers a faithful portrayal of what it felt like to cross the mountains in winter.¹⁷ Significantly, the widespread conviction that these mountains were impassable might explain the reaction of the Ottoman soldiers, who guarded the Troyan Pass in the winter of 1878: they allowed Russian riflemen to come very close to their own positions. Even though they eventually repulsed the enemy, they were nevertheless clearly surprised by their daring in undertaking to cross the mountains in such conditions. It appeared impossible to them that anyone would dare to do so in freezing cold, wading through huge heaps of snow and braving bitter cold and strong winds. This assumption made the Ottomans less vigilant: their guards positioned on the pass proved to be inattentive. It should be noted, however, that the view held by Ottoman soldiers was not totally unfounded, since a great number of Russians died because of low temperatures (Kanitz 158–159). In addition to that, elsewhere in his work, Kanitz (207–208) speaks highly of the valour of elite units of Russian guardsmen, who in spite of hardships, continued their march through the snowy mountains, feeding only on hardtack biscuit and enduring terrible cold at night (lighting fires would have betrayed their positions). Despite all this, they were able to launch a forceful and successful attack against the Ottoman troops based in the fortress of Pravets (23 November 1877). According to Kanitz, Russian fighting men showed exceptional military prowess, especially considering the extremely difficult conditions in which they had to fight.

The Sredna Gora was also regarded as difficult to cross. For instance, in 1583, the Austrian envoy and his retinue, who were on their way to the Sublime Porte, were stricken with fear when they got lost at dusk in the forest covering the Vasilitsa Mountain, especially as temperatures were then very low (von Steinach 431). Conditions may have been made worse by water trickling down the mountain’s rocky slopes and covering all trails with glazed frost, thus making it near impossible for saddle, pack and draft animals to climb (*Antonius de Bonfinis rerum Ungaricarum decades* III, 5, 131, 375–376).¹⁸

¹⁷ See the crossing of the Julian Alps in 312 by the Emperor Licinius (McCabe 95–97) and the fate of the Ottoman army in the Bosnian mountain areas in 1398 (Matanov 215). Until recently [see e.g. Kanitz 115 (dating the event to the year 601); Avramea 67], it was commonly believed that such a calamitous crossing of Haimos happened to the Byzantine army braving the Troyan Pass and heading southward to Philippopolis in the winter of 599/600. Sources tell us that the Byzantine commander Komentiolos, while stationed in Novae, was warned by a local that he should not venture to cross the central part of the range in winter. He ignored the warning, and this resulted in the deaths of many soldiers and pack animals on account of difficult weather conditions and especially because of heavy frosts. See, for instance, the testimony of Theophanes (AM 6093, 282, 27–283, 5), who repeated the accounts of earlier authors (Theophylact Simocatta in particular). The belief that this event occurred on this particular pass leading through the Stara Planina was based on the conviction that the ruins excavated near the modern Bulgarian town of Svishtov represented ancient Novae, mentioned in written sources dating back to Late Antiquity. This identification, however, has been recently questioned: Byzantine historiographers must have been referring to the *castellum* of *Ad Novas* near Serbian Chezava, while the Byzantine army must have marched along the old road near the Danubian Gorge rather than across Haimos – Popoviæ 83–95; Salamon 186–187.

¹⁸ This piece of information refers to the Ihtiman Pass at the time of what is known as “the long campaign” of the years 1443–1444. Cf. Gagova, “Kraostonosnite” 248, 264.

In his description of the second expedition of Isaac II Angelos against the Bulgarians in 1187, Nicetas Choniates notes that the Byzantine Emperor, having arrived at Triaditsa (present-day Sofia) and wishing to cross Haimos, had to abandon the idea of continuing his march as winter approached. Isaac was aware not only of the difficulties posed by weather and terrain, but also of those related to provisioning and access to drinking water. For this reason the expedition was continued only in the spring of the following year (*Nicetae Choniatae historia* 398, 30–399, 53).¹⁹ The Emperor Theodore II Lascaris had a similar experience. He defeated the Bulgarians and pushed them as far as Verroia²⁰, that is, the southern slopes of the Sarnena Gora (the eastern part of the Sredna Gora), and then the onslaught of winter prevented him from continuing his military campaign (*Akropolitēs* § 56, 336–338; *Anōnymou Synopsis chronikē* 514, 16–515, 15). Even in the warmest periods of the year the marching columns of the Crusaders struggled with the main pass through the Sredna Gora, the Imperial Pass mentioned above, or as they mistakenly called it, the St. Basil Pass, mostly because the Byzantines had fortified it (*Ansbert* 37, 22–38, 27; *Historia peregrinorum* 138, 16–140, 5; *Nicetae Choniatae historia* 402, 49–403, 70; for more details see Gagova, “Krastonosnite” 13–18, 28, 39, 42, 55–56, 58, 67–68, 75–78, 91–94, 98, 100, 144, 149, 264; Koycheva 37–48, 99–102, 107, 126, 137, 139–157; cf. Vacheva 49, 51, 55).

Springs and summers in the Stara Planina are rainy and cold. Its climate conditions are more trying than in the mountain ranges in southern Bulgaria. Cloudy and windy days occur more often than elsewhere as well as fog and low temperatures (Nikolov and Yordanova 13–14). This is, of course, due to the fact that these mountains lie in a moderate climate zone as opposed, for instance, to the Rhodopes, which occupy a transitional space between the moderate and Mediterranean climate zones. In the central and highest part of the Stara Planina massif temperatures tend to decrease gradually with height, while yearly precipitation values nearly double. Only the eastern part of the range offers milder climate conditions: rainfall is moderate, snow remains in place for shorter periods of time and average yearly temperature is higher (Penchev, Tishkov, Daneva and Gorunova 88, 89, 100, 106, 110, 112). Autumn, much warmer and drier than spring, is by far the most suitable time of the year for traversing Haimos (Dinev and Melnishki 32, 33; Nikolov and Yordanova 14). In addition to that, given that the mountains are largely covered with forests, visibility is greater after the foliage has fallen. In the past this made it easier for the Byzantines to detect Bulgarian ambushes.²¹ They had to take the season factor into consideration as it was one of the most important elements in the planning of a military campaign (*Ioannis Cinnami epitome* VII, 3, 299, 19–23).

In addition, the Haimos region was covered with dense forests, undoubtedly much more so than is the case today. This did not merely affect the way in which it was perceived, but also impacted the specific character of the military actions that were carried out there.²² It was easy to lose one’s bearings in that difficult terrain: such was the case of John Palaiologos, commander of the Byzantine army during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos, who lost his way as he marched with his troops through the eastern part of the Stara Planina; luckily, a local woman showed him the way (*Annae Comnenae Alexias* VII, 4, 2–4, 215, 84 – 216, 93). Some Cumans, who similarly got lost in Haimos in 1094, only found their bearings after guidance had been provided by Vlach shepherds (*Annae Comnenae Alexias* X, 3, 1, 287, 84–88).

Another important factor which had great consequences for the history of the region is the shape of the mountain range. Its northern side (except for the westernmost part), which slopes gently towards the Danubian Plain, was not only easier to traverse, but also to settle; as a consequence, it usually was under the sway of whatever state extended its dominion over the regions between the Danube and Haimos. The steep and densely forested southern slopes are unevenly inhabited even today (Dinev and Melnishki 53–54).

¹⁹ See *Anōnymou Synopsis chronikē* 387, 1–17. Anna Komnene gave a similar account to that of Choniates about the winter of the year 1091 – *Annae Comnenae Alexias* VIII, 3, 3–4, 241, 78–242, 86. The harsh winters on the southern slopes of Haimos (in Verroia) in the last quarter of the twelfth century are also testified – *Ansbert* 42, 6–12.

²⁰ Verroia – modern-day Stara Zagora, Stara Zagora province and municipality.

²¹ On analogies with the Byzantine military expeditions into the mountainous parts of Serbia, see *Ioannis Cinnami epitome* III, 7, s. 103, 23–104, 2.

²² For more on the forests of the *Predbalkan*, Stara Planina and Sredna Gora, see: Poulet 228; Galt 223; de Lamartine 227, 228; Kanitz 125, 133, 210, 212; Dinev and Melnishki 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 37–39; Czeppe, Flis and Mochnacki 242; Danov 12, 13–14, 23; Maruszczak 160; Koledarov 24; Tishkov, Mihailov, Ziapkov and Gorunova 67, 69, 72, 74, 75, 77, 79, 80–81, 82, 84, 85; Penchev, Tishkov, Daneva and Gorunova 89–90, 93–94, 95, 96, 98–99, 101, 103, 105, 107, 109, 110–111, 113; Mishev 118, 131, 132, 133–134; Nikolov and Yordanova 10, 19–24, 38, 39, 42, 43, 44

In addition to the geographical and climate conditions discussed above, attitudes towards Haimos were also shaped by stereotypical images of mountains and their inhabitants and by the specific experiences of travellers and soldiers (especially invaders) traversing the ranges of the Stara Planina and Sredna Gora. There can be little doubt that the perceptions of Byzantine authors were influenced, to a considerable extent, by views of the massifs found in ancient sources. The Greeks conceived the Stara Planina and Sredna Gora as a massive mountain range extending without interruption from Pontos (the Black Sea) in the east to the Adriatic shore in the west. Some authors believed that Haimos was one of a few distinct massifs forming a continuous line between the two seas (*The Geography of Strabo* VII, 5, 1, 250, 9–12; VII, 10, 328, 5–15), while others considered it a single and massive mountain range (Anōnymou periēgēsis 225, 743–226, 747; Anōnymou periplous Euxeinou Pontou § 82, 421, 9–13). There were authors who opined that Haimos was the highest of all mountain ranges and that from its peaks one could see both the seas mentioned above.²³ In any case, they viewed these mountains as both a natural and an abstract border between the lands of the Getae and the Thracians, or between the southern and northern Balkans. They may have borrowed this view from Eratosthenes, an Alexandrian poet and polymath of the third century BCE, or, more specifically, from his discussion of the division of the Earth (Boshnakov 162–167). These statements, reiterated and expanded, had an impact on at least some inhabitants of Byzantium with regard to their attitudes towards mountains and highlanders.

For medieval people, mountains constituted a sort of a periphery, an outer edge (Gr. ἡ ἐχάτιά)²⁴ in geographical and social terms: mysterious and untamed (being only sparsely populated, but inhabited by wild animals), dangerous, treacherous, and, in a way, placed under a taboo, and presumably underdeveloped. No less important were the severe conditions of weather and terrain which made mountains difficult to cross (*Bios tou hosiou patros hemōn Blasiou* § 9–10, 661 C – 662 A; *Ioannis Cameniatae de expugnationae Thessalonicae* § 18, 18, 29–31; *Ioannis Geometrae carmina* 934 A; *Ioannis Cinnami epitome* II, § 13, 70, 17–22). Kanitz explicitly writes about the pain suffered by saddle animals during the strenuous effort of crossing the central parts of the Stara Planina (133, 135, 166). More sparsely populated than the plains, at times even completely uninhabited, mountains were a problematic area on account of the difficulty of finding appropriate sustenance (*Bios tou hosiou patros hemōn Blasiou* § 9–10, 661 C – 662 A).²⁵ Like thick forests, mountains were on the periphery of organized societal life insofar as they were perceived as being lawless and inhabited by outlaws or other socially marginalized groups (Geremek 438–439; Kotłowska 131–144). Indeed, the mountainous areas of medieval Bulgaria were infested by brigands (*Bios tou hosiou patros hemōn Blasiou* § 9–10, 661 C – 662 A).²⁶ A story on the subject can be found in the twelfth-century *Life of St Cyril of Philea*. While staying in the monastery of the Holy Saviour near the fortress of Derkos in the eastern part of Thrace on the Black Sea coast, the saint got acquainted with an Armenian from present-day Varna. The man confessed to him that his wife and children had been kidnapped, presumably by Pechenegs. The saint organized a collection among Christians in the locality and made it possible for the man to ransom his family. Having received the money, the man wished to travel back on foot to his home city, which was part of the Byzantine theme of Paristrion at the time. Cyril warned him that he should rather board a ship, which seemed to be much safer, given that the saint could vouch for the integrity of local seamen. By travelling on foot the Armenian of Varna would be exposed to the risk of being robbed or even killed by brigands. Heedless of the saint's advice, which was repeated several times and presented as an expression of God's will, the man

²³ Medieval authors from beyond the Byzantine Empire also regarded these mountains as exceptionally high. See Nedkov 86 (Arabic text) and 87 (Translation).

²⁴ An anonymous rhetorician used this term, albeit in plural form, to refer to the territories to which Byzantine captives were taken in the wake of the war with the Bulgarian Tsar Simeon in the first half of the tenth century. See *Epi tē tōn Boulgarōn symbasei* § 5, 260, 107.

²⁵ The author of the *Life* asserted that the saint miraculously survived the crossing of an uninhabited mountain range, despite the dearth of food in the area.

²⁶ In this text concerning the life of Saint Blaise of Amorion († 908), the hagiographer indicates that pirates took the holy man by force from the Danube river to some uninhabited mountainous area where they left him on his own. We may presume therefore that they knew the terrain fairly well and sought refuge there in times of trouble. There are late Byzantine testimonies attesting to the presence of brigands in the vicinity of Cape Emine, the tip of the Stara Planina protruding over the Black Sea, and in the Strandja region in the south. See Kallistos § 10, 16, 28 – 17, 19; *Bios kai politeia* § 8, 124, 13–125, 39; Sophoulis 339–350. The Stara Planina was also traversed by brigands during the Ottoman period; see Kanitz 131, 133; his testimony concerns 1871.

decided to go by land. He believed he had to make haste, and the wind at sea was unfavourable. The story has it that the man found two soldiers in a nearby village, who agreed to accompany him on his way to Zygos, that is, along the shortest route to Varna. Having discovered the reason for his journey and the fact that he had a considerable sum of money on him, the soldiers killed him and took the money. The author of the *Life* comments on the story and emphasizes that this was the result of ignoring the saint's advice, which should have been taken as a divine warning and prophecy (the event took place at some point between 1056 and 1071) (*La Vie de saint Cyrille le Philéote* XXVIII, § 4, 126–127).²⁷

There are several noteworthy points to consider while interpreting this story. First of all, considering the distance which the traveller intended to cover from Derkos in Thrace to Varna, we have to assume that the name “Zygos” refers to the Stara Planina, or, more precisely, its eastern part, which stretches as far as the Black Sea coast and lies directly south of the Armenian's native city. Eleventh- and twelfth-century authors referred to Haimos by the name of “Zygos” or “Zygon,” although one has to remember that these terms were also common designations for other Balkan massifs.²⁸ The aforementioned direct land route from Derkos to Varna ran along the Thracian coast of the Black Sea from the south northwards. Along the way, travellers would need to cross only two relatively high mountain ranges. The Armenian and his fellow travellers had to go first through the Strandja (along with the so-called Hasekiyata) and then through the Stara Planina. The text, however, leaves no doubt that the travellers were on their way to the latter, for Varna lay just at the foot of its northern slopes. It was for this reason that these mountains were mentioned as an important point of reference on the route leading to the port city of Varna. Besides, the Armenian would certainly have been disappointed if his two soldier companions had left him after reaching the Strandja, that is, only about half the distance on his way back home. I believe that Haimos (Zygos) was mentioned in this context on account of the perils of travelling through the region. The Armenian of Varna counted on the support of the soldiers especially while making that notoriously perilous crossing.²⁹ It is also very likely that Cyril, too, referred primarily to that mountain range when cautioning the Armenian against brigands. The author of the *Life* certainly attests to travellers' fear of crossing the mountains even when they chose to follow well known trails; the danger was much greater when they had to go through less accessible parts of the massifs. Generally speaking, the Byzantines regarded Bulgaria as a whole as a land inhabited by savage barbarians (Bonarek 141, n. 228).³⁰

In order to fully assess the significance of Haimos as an obstacle on the path of groups or individuals wishing to cross it, it is vital to discuss briefly the significance and characteristic elements of the neighbouring regions divided by the mountains. I have already mentioned the dominant pattern of roads which ran from the east to the west in the north-eastern part of the Balkans. The routes led along the Danubian riverbed and the southern slopes of the Stara Planina and the northern slopes of the *Predbalkan* or from north-west to south-east (the military trail from Belgrade to Constantinople). There were two natural communication corridors running from the north to the south: the western route ran along the valley of the Morava river, while the eastern one ran along the Black Sea coast. It was through these two trails that various invaders raided the south, seeking booty and eventually settling on Balkan territories (such was the case with the Slavs and the Proto-Bulgars).³¹ It is therefore not without reason that the region of the lower Danube was the object of

²⁷ I follow Gyuzelev, “Svedeniya” 62, with regard to the dating of these events.

²⁸ See Duichev 151–159; Gyuzelev, “Svedeniya” 66, n. 19.

²⁹ See the relation of Kanitz (136) in which he states that it was with great reluctance that he agreed to reduce the number of Turkish gendarmes who accompanied him when going across the waste lands in the inner areas of the central Stara Planina. The same refers to the Bulgarian writer Ivan Vazov, who undertook a journey through the central part of the Stara Planina (out of Sopot and over Mount Sveti Nikola) in 1882 and was accompanied by armed guides. See Vazov 350, 368.

³⁰ The Byzantine attitude towards barbarians was one of haughtiness and suspicion; see Angelov 37. Modern scholars have demonstrated that emphasizing the dangers resulting from prolonged stays in foreign lands (the danger of being robbed) or from crossing natural barriers (rivers, marshes, mountains, shrubs and forests) was a recurrent literary topos; for more details on this, see Galatariotou 221–241; Polovina 59–88. This is not to say, however, that late medieval sources are completely inaccurate; see Mavrommati 95–107, especially 100–101, n. 26; on Poland in the later Middle Ages, see Bylina 340. In view of the factual character of Byzantine military treatises, these perils seem to have been real; see Marinov, “Preminavaneto” 205–220.

³¹ See Maull 12, 13; Maruszczak 197; Koder 96–98.

constant military and diplomatic efforts by the Constantinopolitan authorities (Obolensky 46, 50–52). The route running along the Morava Valley did not cross the Stara Planina range and is for this reason of little relevance to my present argument. As the mountains reached down to the Black Sea, travellers along the coast had to cross them, and this could be dangerous.

The accessibility of the north-eastern parts of Bulgaria (from modern-day Dobrudja to the southern edge of the Madara plateau) resulted from the fact that these areas were a natural extension of the Asiatic steppes running from Central Asia along the northern and western coasts of the Black Sea. This steppe strand ended in Dobrudja, which is why for centuries on end various nomadic invaders quite naturally headed towards the former Roman provinces of Scythia Minor and Lower Moesia.³² It was therefore not without reason that, when fighting the Bulgarians, who lurked in the mountain fortifications of Haimos, the Byzantines connived with steppe nomads to invade northern Bulgaria.

In addition to that, we must not overlook the importance of the sea: one could sail along the seaside slopes of Haimos (instead of braving the massifs by land) and, finally, attack Bulgaria from the north by entering the waters of the Danube. One could only penetrate into the territories north of Haimos from the mouths of rivers, such as the Provadiya near Varna, the Batova near Kranevo and obviously the Danube Delta, or from the lowlands around small *liman* lakes (in the vicinity and north of the Romanian city of Constanța). Long sections of the north-eastern shores of Bulgaria were inaccessible for the Byzantine fleet, which resulted from the predominantly cliff-shaped coast of the north Bulgarian geological platform (Czeppe, Flis and Mochnecki 243, 244; Kostova, “Bypassing” 579–597; Marinow, “Zadania” 381–392; Marinow, “Działania” 119–141; Kostova, “The Lower Danube” 269–281).

The regions south of Haimos include the westernmost Sofia Valley, one of the communication hubs of the Balkan Peninsula (Maruszczak 305, 308–309; Koder 28), and, to the east, the northern part of the Thracian Plain and the region of shallow valleys of the Tundja river and the Strandja, some of the best agricultural areas of that part of the Balkan Peninsula. Northern Thrace is surrounded on three sides by mountain ranges. It was fairly easily accessible from the east (that is, from the seaside) and the south-east (that is, through the Strandja mountains, the lowest of all massifs around northern Thrace), which quite naturally opened it to closer contacts with Asia and the Aegean, and, consequently, made it susceptible to the influence of Constantinople; after all, the capital was connected with this area owing to the most important communication trail of Thrace running along the river Maritsa, that is, ancient Hebros (Cvijić 21; Maruszczak 314–315; Soustal 132–146, with a map on 133; Momchilov, “Patna” 71–72, 74, 93–100, 104, 114–115, 121–122, 123–126, 128, 136–137, 138, 142–145, 147–150).

The Sofia Valley and northern Thrace are separated by the range of the Sredna Gora, which is connected to the Stara Planina and is contiguous with the Rhodopes in the south; from there it was possible to control the *via militaris* and make incursions into northern Thrace. The Sredna Gora, a natural dividing line and a sort of defence, made it easier for the Bulgarians, who usually controlled Haimos, to organize raids into Macedonia and hold sway over the Sofia Valley for long periods of time. One may therefore say that Haimos was to some extent a dividing line between zones of interest in these two regions.

The sources from that historical period make use of the term “Zagora” (or “Zagoria,” that is, “the land behind the mountains”): even though the name refers to the territory on the other side of Haimos,³³ this clearly illustrates the great significance of this mountain range in defining the borders of the neighbouring geographical regions. As a dominant feature in the landscape of the north-eastern Balkans, Haimos was an excellent reference point for delineating other geographical units. In addition, the very term “Zagora” indicates that the territory that it denoted was fenced off by the mountains which one had to cross when travelling from the north southwards or in the opposite direction.³⁴ John Skylitzes stated that (*Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum* § 26, 343, 83–85; English translation: Skylitzes 326) in the year 1000 “the Emperor [Basil II; my addition] sent a large and powerful force against the Bulgarian strongholds beyond the Haemos range (*δύναμιν*

³² See Cvjić 18, 19, 56–57, 468–469, 470, 471, 474; Maruszczak 24, 158, 161; Gyuzelev, “Ezicheska” 88, 91; Matanov 10, 17, 59–60, 78–79, 205. It is no coincidence that the territory of Dobrudja was attractive to Proto-Bulgar settlers as it looked similar to their steppe homelands, see Gyuzelev, “Ezicheska” 91; Fiedler 154.

³³ In the historical period in question it refers first to the territories south of the eastern Stara Planina, in northern Thrace, and second, in late medieval times, to the Bulgarian Empire north of the massifs.

³⁴ Depending on the direction in which one wished to go while crossing the mountains.

βαρεῖαν ἐκπέμψας ὁ βασιλεὺς κατὰ τῶν πέραν τοῦ Αἴμον Βουλγαρικῶν κάστρων),³⁵ which clearly means that this mountain range was seen as the dividing line between northern Thrace and the Danubian Plain and as the reference point for locating the fortresses mentioned in the source. In essence, the name “Zagora” underlines the significance of the Stara Planina for the geographical divisions of that part of the Balkan Peninsula and its role as a natural obstacle.³⁶ According to Petar Koledarov, the term “Zagora” was used by Balkan Slavs with reference to the regions belonging to other political entities separated from their state by a high mountain range, which means that it implied a political border.

In the light of the above considerations, a variety of sources (historical and hagiographical texts as well as poetry and travelogues from Late Antiquity to the nineteenth century) and my own research of various aspects of the mountain chains in question, it can be stated that the crossing of these massifs could entail a number of inconveniences and dangers. This statement reflects strictly geographical conditions, the experiences of various individuals and the image of these mountains, formed by the inhabitants of the Balkans and specifically by Byzantine elites. The difficulties in crossing these mountains were twofold. On the one hand, they had to do with the natural features of the terrain such as uneven and often steep rocky or muddy trails, usually leading through or beside densely forested slopes, sudden thunderstorms or thermal inversions, heavy snowfall in winter and floods in spring; all of those made Haimos difficult to cross. On the other hand, some difficulties were caused by people: robbers or enemy troops waiting in ambush. Another important factor influencing the attitudes of soldiers and travellers intending to cross these mountains was the negative image of the area that their education had imparted to them (in the case of Byzantine elites, the image was formed under the influence of ancient literature), or the experience of previous generations, or readily accessible common knowledge (e.g. oral traditions of stories about crossing these mountain ranges). As regards the military context, one has to remember that on account of the position of Haimos the Byzantines attacked the core territories of the Bulgarian state from the north by using the fleet to transport their own troops to the Danube Delta or to help their nomadic allies to make the crossing to the other side of the Danube and raid Bulgarian territories from there at the instigation of the imperial court in Constantinople. Of course, this is not to say that Haimos was an insurmountable obstacle, which was crossed only very rarely. Nevertheless, under certain conditions, at times it did prove to be impassable for both ordinary travellers and military expeditions who neglected the obvious safety precautions which should be followed when crossing mountain ranges, to say nothing of the usual difficulties of tiresome climbing on uneven paths in unknown terrain and of the only very slight chances of receiving support in trouble while traversing sparsely populated mountainous areas.

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³⁵ At times this expedition is dated to the year 1001 (Ostrogorsky 274), although more recent studies usually return to the traditional dating of the summer of 1000; see, among others, Antonopoulos, Dendrinis 172–173. Cf. Jenkins 323.

³⁶ On such names as *Zabronie* or *Zaborovo* in Poland, see Kowalczyk 15–16, 22, 31, 43, 73.

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