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Medieval, Slavic Macedonia (c. 600–c. 1400)

The Byzantine Commonwealth

The Slav invasions of the Balkans in the sixth and seventh centuries AD launched a new phase in Macedonia's history. The Slavs settled throughout geographic Macedonia in huge numbers, largely absorbed the indigenous local inhabitants, and, most important, imposed on them their Slavic speech. Until well into the twentieth century, the Slavic speakers—the Slav Macedonians, or, in the age of nationalism, the Macedonians—comprised the largest linguistic-ethnic group.

Throughout the medieval period, until the Ottoman conquest at the end of the fourteenth century, Macedonia and its Slavs were integral components of Obolensky's "Byzantine Commonwealth."¹ The neighboring Slav tribes to the north and northeast fell in the late seventh and early eighth centuries to the Bulgars—a Finno-Tatar horde of warrior horsemen. The more numerous Slavs, however, assimilated their conquerors but took their name. The Bulgarians also belonged to the multi-ethnic, multilingual Christian Orthodox Commonwealth, as did the Slav tribes to the north and northwest—the future Serbs. However, unlike the Bulgarians and the Serbs, the Macedonian Slavs did not form a medieval dynastic or territorial state carrying their name.

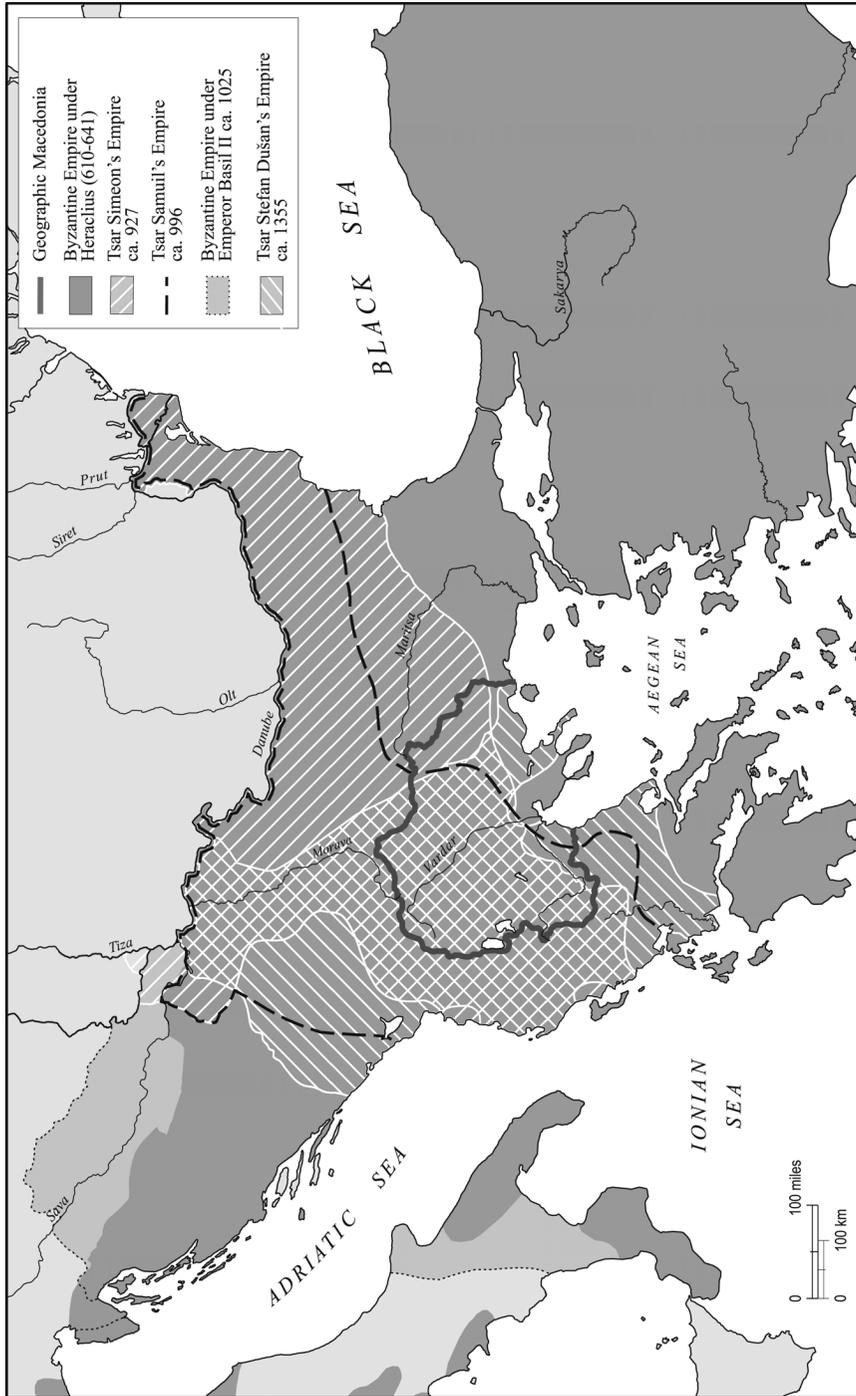
True, the powerful, but short-lived empire of Tsar Samuil (969–1018) centered in Macedonia under a largely domestic ruling elite. This

“Macedonian kingdom,” as the great Byzantologist Ostrogorsky refers to it, “was essentially different from the former kingdom of the Bulgars. In composition and character, it represented a new and distinctive phenomenon. The balance had shifted toward the west and south, and Macedonia, a peripheral region in the old Bulgarian kingdom, was its real center.” However, for reasons of political and ecclesiastical legitimacy, crucial in the Middle Ages, Samuil and the Byzantines thought it part of the Bulgarian empire, and so it carried the Bulgarian name.²

Consequently, in almost all of the Middle Ages Macedonia and its Slavic inhabitants belonged to one or another of three dynastic or territorial states of the Byzantine Commonwealth—Bulgaria, Byzantium, and Serbia.³ That the medieval Macedonian Slavs, like many other European peoples, did not establish a long-lasting, independent, eponymous political entity became significant much later, in the age of nationalism and national mythologies. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such romantic ideologies sought to explain—to legitimize or to deny—national identities, aims, and programs by linking present and past. Bulgarian, Greek, and Serbian nationalists justified their modern nations’ existence and their imperialistic ambitions—including their claims to Macedonia—by identifying their small, ethnically based states with the territorial, dynastic empires of the Middle Ages.

By the same token, they denied the existence or the right to exist of a separate Macedonian identity and people. They seemed to argue that the absence of a medieval state bearing that name meant that a Macedonian identity and nation did not and could not exist, and each claimed the Slav Macedonians as its own. That was the essence of the three nations’ struggle for Macedonia and for its people’s hearts and minds—the so-called Macedonian question—in the age of nationalism (see chapters 5–6).

Contrary to romantic nationalists’ claims, however, the medieval Balkan states were not national in the modern sense, and any connection between them and the ethnically based modern states is tenuous at best. As Jean W. Sedlar points out: “The abstraction which in modern times is called a ‘state’—namely a territory and people under a common government—was a concept foreign to the Middle Ages. The medieval mind was accustomed to thinking in the more human and concrete framework of loyalty to the person of the monarch. . . . The dynastic idea was an important component of power throughout all of medieval East Central Europe.”⁴ Or, as Barbara Jelavich writes: “The government represented



Map 3 Medieval Political Boundaries in Macedonia

primarily alliances of strong nobles around a central leader. . . . Feudal loyalties rested on the mutual interest of the most powerful men in the state in the protection and extension of its frontiers.”⁵

Attachment to religion, family, and place played a much greater role in medieval Europe than did ethnic identity. Even the word “nation” (the Latin *nation*) referred not to people of similar language and cultural heritage, but to a group possessing certain legal privileges.⁶ The masses of the population identified themselves not by nationality, but rather by family, religion, and locality. They considered religion, not nationality, as the primary source of any group’s identification.

Even more important perhaps was political loyalty—“most often an expression of fidelity to a sovereign person, not an emotional attachment to a cultural or linguistic community. Governments were the creations of reigning dynasties and their associated nobilities, not the product of national feeling. Medieval monarchies typically assumed a supranational attitude, since their allegiance belonged to the dynasty, not to the ethnic group.”⁷ “Sovereigns happily annexed lands inhabited by people alien in language and custom both to themselves and to the majority of their own subjects.”⁸

Clearly, the modern, small, ethnically bound Balkan states had little in common with the large territorial or dynastic medieval empires.

In any event, irrespective of shifting political affiliations, the Macedonian Slavs shared in the fortunes of the Byzantine Commonwealth. They contributed to the common Orthodox civilization and, more particularly, to the common south Slav Orthodox cultural heritage, and they benefited from both. Like all peoples whose ancestors belonged to the Byzantine Commonwealth, they can claim it as their common heritage.

The Slavic Invasions

Between the third and sixth centuries, Slavs from northeastern Europe gradually penetrated and settled the Balkans, challenging Byzantine supremacy. We know little about the Slavs’ history before then. Any records begin rather late, with the works of Jordanes and Procopius, the leading historians of the sixth century. Indeed, sources on the Middle Ages, especially for the Balkan south Slav societies, are rather scarce, mostly of Byzantine origin, and religious in nature.

Most scholars believe that the Indo-European-speaking Slavs originated north of the Carpathians, between the river Vistula in the west and the river Dnieper in the east, in lands today in (west to east) eastern Poland, northwestern Ukraine, and southwestern Belarus. During the first century AD, the slow spread began of these numerous, closely related, often-feuding tribes, with no central organization but a shared worship of nature and a common language or closely related dialects.

The Slavs moved in three directions and evolved into the three groupings (western, eastern, and southern) of the Slav world. Some migrated westward (today's Czechs, Poles, Slovaks, and the remaining Slavs of eastern Germany), some eastward (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians), and still others, southward to the Balkans (Slovenes, Croats, Serbians, Montenegrins, Bosnians, Macedonians, and Bulgarians).

It appears that the Slavs heading south crossed the Carpathians and approached the basins of the Danube and the Sava in the second century. They moved slowly, however, and in small groups and, unlike previous nomadic, transitory invaders, were looking for land to occupy and settle. For a time, the Visigoths ruled them, and then the Huns, who destroyed the state of the Visigoths in 375. Late in the fifth century, the Slav invaders reached and began to occupy the banks of the mid- and lower Danube, the frontier of eastern Roman, or Byzantine Europe.

Throughout the sixth century, they repeatedly crossed the Danube and roamed, ravaged, and plundered Byzantine possessions from the Adriatic to the Black Sea. In the second half of the century, taking the lead from their overlords, the Avars—a Mongolian, or Turco-Tatar tribe that had established a powerful state in the area—they extended their raids and plunder further to the south. They penetrated as far as the Peloponnese, reached even the island of Crete, and threatened the walls of Constantinople. On numerous occasions in 584 and 586 and four more times in the following century (616, 618, 674, and 677), they unsuccessfully attacked Salonika, the empire's second largest, most important, and wealthiest center.

The Byzantine rulers, struggling with Persia in the east, could not block the gradual, but massive and continuous Slav infiltration of their Balkan possessions. They could not destroy the Slav danger in battle and resorted to various defensive measures. They set up garrisons in the towns and cities and, during the brilliant reign of Justinian I (527–65), built a series of fortresses and watchtowers along the Danube and

strengthened urban defenses. Such policies undoubtedly slowed the Slavs' southward movement.

By the end of the sixth century, large numbers of Slavs were settling throughout the Balkans. Finally, in 629 Emperor Heraclius (610–64) accepted the inevitable and irreversible and permitted them to settle in certain areas, frequently close to existing Slavic settlements. For their part, the new arrivals, under the rule of their chiefs, acknowledged Byzantine sovereignty and agreed to pay tribute and perform certain military tasks.

During the seventh century, the Slavs colonized virtually the entire peninsula, except for some of the larger cities and most of the Mediterranean coast, which retained a Greek character. The Slav tribes that penetrated farthest south, into Greece proper, came under its culture, and the more numerous Greeks gradually absorbed them. However, the Slavs controlled the Adriatic coast and its hinterland and became dominant in the central Balkans, between the Aegean, the Danube, and the Black Sea.

Slav colonization changed the region's ethnic character. The original inhabitants suffered losses in battle and absorption and assimilation by Slavs, who displaced them and forced them into smaller, safer areas. Illyrians escaped or were forced south, into the remote areas of present-day Albania. Latinized Thracians and Dacians had to retreat and found safety in the mountains. Their descendants emerged centuries later and survive today in mountainous regions of Albania, Greece, Macedonia, and Bulgaria as Vlachs (Kutsovlachs, Tsintsars, and so on), speaking a Latin language akin to modern Romanian.⁹

The rest of this chapter looks at five phases of Macedonia's medieval history. First, by the early seventh century, Macedonian Slavs occupied most of the land and absorbed the native inhabitants; by the early ninth century, Byzantium reasserted control. Second, in the mid-ninth century, Macedonia became part of the Bulgarian empire. Third, about 971, Tsar Samuil created a Macedonian empire, though with traditional Bulgarian titles, and it lasted until 1018. Fourth, Macedonian Slavs adopted Christianity, and their culture became a cradle of Slav Orthodoxy. Fifth, in the four centuries or so after 1018, a number of powers ruled Macedonia: Byzantium again to the 1070s, and thereafter variously Bulgaria, Epirus, the Normans, Serbia, and others, until the Ottoman conquest about 1400.

Macedonia (c. 600–c. 850)

Macedonia was one of the peninsula's first areas where Slavs settled. Except for major cities such as Salonika, Seres, Edessa (Voden), and Veroia (Ber), numerous Slav tribes had colonized all of Macedonia by the 610s. The Berziti settled northwestern Macedonia, around the upper Vardar River; to their east, along the middle and lower Struma River, lived the Strumjani. Further east, along the Mesta River and the Thracian-Macedonian border, were the Smoljani; to the southwest, along the Aegean and in the Chalcidice Peninsula east of Salonika, the Rinhini; and around that city, the Sagudati. The area west of Salonika and along the Aliakmon (Bistrica) River toward Veroia (Ber) and northwest toward Pelagonia became home to the Dragoviti. Southern Macedonia, bordering on Thessaly, was territory of the Velegeziti.

By the second half of the sixth century, Byzantine writers referred to these Slavic-settled areas in Macedonia as Sklavinii (Sklavinias) and often identified a Sklavinia with a particular tribe—for example, the Sklavinia of the Dragoviti, or the Dragovitia. The Sklavinii had tribal chieftains or elders to whom Byzantine sources ascribed Byzantine titles such as *archon* and *exarch*. Their Slav titles remain unknown.

The relationship between the Sklavinii and the Byzantine empire was in flux. Until the mid-seventh century, the Sklavinii recognized the nominal sovereignty of the Byzantine emperors but in effect governed themselves and, as their attacks on Salonika showed, frequently fought their overlords. In 658, Emperor Constantine II (641–68) decisively defeated the Sklavinii besieging Salonika and forced them to acknowledge the real authority of the Byzantine state.

However, the struggle for control of the Sklavinii continued. At the end of the seventh century, it became part of the wider struggle in the peninsula, when the new Bulgarian state in the northeast began to challenge Byzantium for control not only of the Macedonian Sklavinii but also of Constantinople itself. In the war with Byzantium from 809 to 811, the Bulgarian ruler, Khan Krum, with Avar and Sklavinii support, defeated the army of Emperor Nikiforus I (802–11). In 814, the Sklavinii joined Krum's army that marched on Constantinople. Krum's unexpected death ended the advance and allowed Byzantium to establish its real sovereignty and rule over the Sklavinii in Macedonia.

During the next forty or so years, the empire extended its *theme* administrative and military system into all of Macedonia, consolidating

its direct control there for the first time since the Slav invasions and settlement. The new dispensation eliminated the Sklavinii; the last Byzantine reference to a Sklavinia relates to events in 836–37.¹⁰

For Byzantium, Macedonia's complete reintegration into the empire's administrative and military structure was crucial. Macedonia controlled its communication between the Adriatic and Constantinople (i.e., between its western and eastern halves) as well as the main route to the north, into central Europe. Moreover, unlike some of the empire's outlying Slav-settled areas, Macedonia and its Sklavinii were close to Byzantium and could challenge its stability and security. Their very proximity also made it easier for the imperial authorities to establish and maintain real control over them. Their strategic location may also help explain why the Macedonian Sklavinii did not develop a more advanced politics or state.

Bulgarian Rule (864–971)

As we saw above, early in the ninth century the growing power of the Bulgar rulers was challenging Byzantium's authority in Macedonia and throughout the Balkans. The Bulgars, a Finno-Tatar horde of mounted warriors, had crossed the lower Danube in 679. They conquered the lands north of the Balkan mountains—the province of Moesia—which had been home to Slavic tribes, and founded a state of their own. Emperor Constantine IV recognized it in 681. Although militarily powerful, the Bulgar conquerors were few, and by the ninth century the far more numerous and culturally more advanced Slavs absorbed and assimilated them.

From the very outset, the Bulgar rulers of the new state sought to expand south and southwest at the expense of the Byzantine empire. We saw above Khan Krum's military campaigns (802–14) in Macedonia and Thrace and his march on Constantinople. The Bulgarian offensive against Byzantium resumed and continued with even greater vigor under Khan Presian (836–52) and Khan Boris (852–89). Taking advantage of Byzantium's wars with the Arabs, Presian invaded the lands of the Smoljani, and he conquered much of northern Macedonia.

Boris continued the expansion, taking over the upper Struma valley as well as the Bregalnica valley and extending his state across the Vardar into western Macedonia. His peace treaty with Byzantium in 864 kept

him a large part of Macedonia. In return, he swore to accept Christianity from Constantinople rather than from Rome, with Orthodox Christianity his state's official church and religion.

This medieval territorial state, or the first Bulgarian empire, reached its zenith under Tsar Simeon (893–927), Boris's second son. Simeon, who had had a superb education in Byzantium and admired its culture, harbored great ambitions and aspired to the imperial throne in Constantinople. He extended his frontiers in every direction: to the Sava and Drina rivers, into Serbian lands in the northwest, to the Adriatic in the west, into Macedonian and Albanian lands in the southwest, and into Thrace in the southeast. He assumed the title "Tsar of the Bulgars and Autocrat of the Romans [Greeks]"¹¹ and became master of the northern Balkans and probably the most powerful ruler in eastern Europe. However, his numerous campaigns against Constantinople failed; he could not seize the imperial crown. When he died in 927, he left his vast, multi-ethnic empire in a state of exhaustion and rife with internal dissension.

According to the peace agreement with Byzantium that Simeon's son and successor, Tsar Peter (927–69), concluded in 927, Bulgaria returned some Byzantine lands, and Constantinople recognized Peter as "Tsar of the Bulgarians." However, Bulgaria did not return the Macedonian lands that Presian, Boris, and Simeon had conquered, and Byzantium acknowledged them as Bulgarian possessions. And Byzantium began to refer to and treat the Macedonian Slavs as Bulgarian subjects, and Byzantine historians and chroniclers soon followed suit.¹²

The Macedonian lands became part of the Bulgarian military-administrative system of provinces, which Boris and Simeon had devised and in which the state chose the governors. Similarly, Bulgaria introduced its methods of administering the church and religious institutions. This centralization of secular and religious authority in Macedonia, which Byzantium started and the Bulgarians continued, gradually broke down the self-governing tribal and later territorial communal system of the Macedonian *Sklavinii*. It also launched a feudal system, with power in the hands of a wealthy land-holding administrative-military ruling elite and rich land-holding religious institutions, at the cost of the vast peasant majority's descent into poverty and servility.

During Tsar Peter's reign, political divisions within the ruling elite and a potent combination of religious heresy and mass popular unrest and discontent—Bogomilism—weakened the empire; Bogomilism in

fact threatened the foundations of both state and church. It started in Macedonia, and its founder was a priest (*pop*), Bogomil (Theophilus, or Dear to God). It mixed primitive, Old Testament Christianity and dualistic teachings that the Paulicians imported from the Near East. Its adherents believed in the eternal struggle between good, or the human soul that God creates, and evil, or the body and the material world, the work of Satan. They rejected the rituals, doctrines, and organization of the established church and denounced the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

In a medieval society, such beliefs and teachings had dangerous political, social, and economic implications; indeed, the movement was also a revolt against the secular feudal order. As Presbyter Cosmas, its most determined enemy, wrote: “They teach their own people not to obey their lords, condemn the *boyars*, regard as vile in the sight of God those who serve the tsar, and forbid every servant to work for his master.” And, as Obolensky stressed: “The Bogomils were not only in revolt against the authorities of the church and the hierarchical structure of Bulgarian society but, by preaching civil disobedience, urged the people to rebel against the established political order.”¹³

Church and state persecuted the Bogomils ruthlessly and violently, but the heresy spread to many areas of the Byzantine world and survived in the Balkans—in Macedonia, Serbia, and particularly Bosnia—until the Ottoman conquest in the late fifteenth century. In the second half of the twelfth century, it also influenced heretical movements in western Europe, such as the Albigensians in Italy and France.

Late in Tsar Peter’s reign, the empire faced external threats from the military might of Byzantium in the southeast and of Prince Sviatoslav of Kievan Rus in the northeast. In July 971, the Byzantine emperor and military leader John I Tzimisces (969–76) routed the forces of Sviatoslav, Byzantium’s former ally, at Silistria on the Danube. Thus the emperor saved Bulgaria from the Rus threat, but Bulgaria paid dearly. John I Tzimisces soon dethroned Tsar Peter’s son and nominal successor, Boris II (969–71), annexed Bulgaria and Raška (the Serbian lands), and in effect shut down the Bulgarian empire of Simeon and Peter.

Tsar Samuil’s Macedonian Empire (971–1018)

After the death of Tsar Peter and the collapse of central authority in Bulgaria, four brothers seized power in the Macedonian lands. David,

Moses, Aaron, and Samuil, or the so-called *cometopuli* (young counts, or princes), were the sons of *Comes* (count or prince) Nikola, governor of a Macedonian province and an influential official in Tsar Peter's state.¹⁴ Historians know little about the rule of the *cometopuli* during the reign of John I Tzimisces in Byzantium. The brothers controlled the Macedonian lands, or the southwestern territories of the former Bulgarian empire, but exact boundaries are not clear. Sources say almost nothing about relations between them and Byzantium or the emperor. The emperor seems to have left them in peace after taking over the other former Bulgarian lands.

When John I Tzimisces died in 976, his throne went to Basil II (976–1025).¹⁵ The same year, the four *cometopuli* organized a revolt against Byzantium in Macedonia. Soon “the rising took on serious proportions and became a war of liberation, which spread over the whole of Macedonia and sought to remove the greater part of the Balkans from Byzantine rule.” At first the brothers ruled jointly, but after the two oldest, David and Moses, were killed, Aaron and Samuil fought for power. In the end, “the heroic Samuil,” younger but more able politically and militarily, eliminated his brother. “Samuil became the founder of a powerful empire which had its center first at Prespa and later at Ochrida” (Ohrid) in Macedonia.¹⁶

A man of enormous vigor, determination, and ambition, Samuil took advantage of Byzantium's weak state, its internal strife, and its preoccupation with the Arabs in the east and struck first in a southerly direction. He attacked Seres and Salonika, launched repeated incursions into Thessaly, and plundered Greek lands as far south as the Bay of Corinth. His first major success was the capture of Larissa in 985 or early 986, after a siege of several years. Basil II's counter-offensive in Bulgaria ended in disaster; Samuil devastated the retreating Byzantine cavalry and infantry at the so-called Trojan's Gate (today's Ihtiman) on 17 August 986.

In the following decades, while Basil II had to concentrate on the renewed and more intense civil war in Byzantium, Samuil extended his rule throughout the Balkans, from the Adriatic to the Black Sea. He consolidated his position in Bulgaria and secured part of Albania and Epirus. He captured Durrës (Dyrachium, Durazzo), marched into Dalmatia, plundered and laid waste to the coast as far north as Zadar, and annexed Dioclea (Montenegro) and Raška (Rascia). And even though in 997, on his return from an invasion of Greece, his army suffered defeat

in central Greece at the hands of the outstanding Byzantine general Nicephorus Uranius, and he himself narrowly escaped death, in the late 990s Samuil had attained the pinnacle of his power. He was master of most of the Balkans: “gradually [he] built a kingdom . . . which by the end of the century comprised most of the former Bulgarian lands between the Black Sea and the Adriatic, with the addition of Serbia up to the lower Sava, Albania, Southern Macedonia, Thessaly and Epirus.”¹⁷

This large territorial empire centered in Macedonia; its capital was first on an island in Lake Prespa and later in Ohrid, and it had an ethnically diverse population. In addition to the Macedonian Slavs and the Slavs of Greece, it included Bulgarians, Serbs, Croats, Greeks (Byzantines), Albanians, and Vlachs. There were also Romans (Italians) on the Adriatic coast and Vardariot Turks and Armenians, whom Samuil settled in Polagonia, Prespa, and Ohrid.

Samuil proclaimed himself tsar of the multi-ethnic “Samuil’s State,”¹⁸ or “Macedonian Kingdom.”¹⁹ A representative of Pope Gregory V (996–99) probably crowned him. And since a great and powerful state had to have its own church, he established the archbishopric of Ohrid, and Rome probably invested the first incumbent. As Ostrogorsky, Obolensky, and others stressed, this “Macedonian kingdom was essentially different from the former kingdom of the Bulgars.” However, since “apart from Byzantium, only Bulgaria at that time possessed a tradition of empire with a patriarchate of its own,” for reasons of legitimacy Samuil sought recognition and acceptance as a direct successor of the empire of Simeon and Peter. Hence the title “Tsar of the Bulgars” for Samuil, ‘Servant of God’; his empire and the Ohrid archbishopric bore Bulgarian names.²⁰ These names had no real or symbolic ethnic, let alone national, significance but acquired importance in the nineteenth century, in Bulgarian and Greek romantic nationalist, anti-Macedonian political discourse and historiography (see chapters 5–6).

Samuil’s Macedonian kingdom, or empire, survived relatively briefly. His opponent, Basil II, an exceptional ruler in charge of the enormous resources and great tradition of the Byzantine state, was eager to destroy him and reconquer his lands. After AD 1000, with internal order and stability in the empire and peace with the Arabs, Basil began to implement his carefully prepared military plan for an all-out offensive. In a series of campaigns he forced Samuil’s armies to retreat, gradually conquered the non-Macedonian lands, and finally struck at the heartland. He moved first into Bulgaria; his armies captured the old Bulgarian

capitals Pliska and Great and Little Preslav and occupied Danubian Bulgaria. Then, in 1001, his forces marched through Salonika toward Verioia (Ber) and seized Thessaly.

Next he turned north, toward Macedonia, and, following a difficult struggle, captured the strategic and naturally well-fortified city of Edessa (Voden). In 1002, he prepared to invade Macedonia from the north. After an eight-month siege, he captured Vidin, the strategic fortress on the Danube, and his troops advanced south toward Skopje. When they reached the Vardar, Samuil had set up camp on the other side, not far from Skopje. He was confident that the Byzantine forces would not be able to cross the swollen river. However, they did; Samuil's surprised troops fled in disarray without resistance, and Basil secured Skopje's surrender. By 1005, when Byzantium took Dyrachium (Durazzo, Durrës), Samuil found himself besieged in his shrinking heartland. "The Byzantine state, backed by centuries-old tradition, had once again shown its superiority. The valiant tsar could not match the skillful military leadership, organization and technical resources of the old empire."²¹

Historians know little about the two warlords' clashes in the next decade. However, a detailed record survives of their final battle for control of the Balkans, on 29 July 1014. Ostrogorsky recounted it well and succinctly: "Samuil's army was surrounded in a narrow pass of the Belasica mountain, the so-called Kleidion, in the region of the upper Struma; it is true that the tsar managed to escape to Prilep, but a large number of his army were killed and still more were taken prisoner. Basil the Bulgaroctonus celebrated his victory in a terrible fashion. The captives—allegedly numbering fourteen thousand—were blinded, and were then dispatched in batches of a hundred men, each group having a one-eyed man as a guide, to their tsar in Prilep. When Samuil beheld the approach of this gruesome cavalcade, he fell senseless to the ground. Two days later [6 October 1014] the gallant tsar was dead."²²

Samuil's family and empire soon crumbled. His son and successor, Gabriel Radomir, perished less than a year later at the hands of his first cousin John (Jovan) Vladislav—Aaron's son—who also killed Gabriel's wife and his brother-in-law John (Jovan) Vladimir of Deoclea (Montenegro). John Vladislav continued resisting until his own death in February 1018, during the siege of Dyrachium (Durrës, Durazzo). In the following months, Basil II received the submission of the tsar's widow, other mem-

bers of the royal family, and most of the nobles and crushed the resistance of some of Samuil's commanders.

By the summer of 1018, when Basil entered Samuil's capital, Ohrid, the four-decades-long struggle was over. Samuil's Macedonian kingdom was no more; Macedonia would remain under direct Byzantine rule for two centuries. The Byzantine empire was master of the Balkans for the first time since the Slav occupation.

Macedonia: Cradle of Slav Orthodox Culture

The last two hundred years of the first millennium profoundly shaped the historical evolution of east, west, and south Slavs. The Slavs experienced active contact with the more advanced Christian world. They officially adopted its religion, either from Rome or Constantinople, along with its culture and civilization. From then on, western Roman Catholicism or eastern Orthodoxy shaped their historical development.

Early on, Macedonia became a major religious and cultural center and as such played a role in the cultural beginnings of all the Slavs. And it made a special contribution to the common cultural heritage of the Slavs of the Orthodox Byzantine Commonwealth during what Dvornik calls the "Golden Age of Greco-Slavonic civilization."²³

Christianity arrived in Macedonia during the Roman era. St. Paul engaged in missionary activity in the area, and Macedonian urban centers were among the first in the Mediterranean region to embrace the faith. By the fourth century, Christianity was flourishing all over Macedonia. The invasion and settlement of pagan Slavs in the area over the next few centuries altered the situation, but only temporarily. The papacy began missionary work among them in the seventh century, and the patriarchate of Constantinople continued such efforts.

Macedonia probably became the focal point of Byzantine proselytizing. Its extremely high concentration of Slav settlers lived very close to Constantinople and Salonika, the empire's major political and religious cities, and it controlled the routes linking Byzantium with its western territories. Its Christianization almost guaranteed imperial power in the area. The Slavs of southern Macedonia, closest to the Byzantine centers, became Christian well before the mid-ninth century; those in the north followed suit later in the century, after conquest by the new Bulgar state.

Macedonia became a cradle of Slav Orthodox culture. There must

have been efforts to convey Christian teachings to the Slavs in their own language during this period. Constantine (monastic name: Cyril) and Methodius—two brothers from Salonika, the ‘Apostles of the Slavs’ and later saints—represented the pinnacle of this process. These linguists were sons of the military deputy commander of the Salonika region and received an excellent education. Cyril was librarian to the patriarch of Constantinople and taught philosophy at the palace school or university in the city. Methodius was a high-ranking administrator and diplomat. They must have learned the speech of the Macedonian Slavs in their childhood. Their native Salonika “was in the ninth century a bilingual city,” with many Slavic inhabitants and Slav communities all around. According to one source, even the emperor believed that “all Thessalonians speak pure Slav.”²⁴

In 862, at the request of the Moravian prince Rostislav (reigned 846–70), Byzantine emperor Michael III (842–67) named the two brothers to lead a Slavic-language mission to take the Christian faith to the Moravians. Before departing, Cyril invented the so-called Glagolitic alphabet and adapted it to the speech of the Salonika-area Macedonian Slavs. Cyrillic script emerged later, probably in Bulgaria, from disciples of Methodius. It was simpler than the Glagolitic and more resembled the Greek alphabet. All Orthodox Slavs still use Cyrillic.

In the ninth century, Slav dialects were very similar, and so the Moravians and all the other Slavs could understand the Macedonian dialect. Cyril, Methodius, and their disciples then translated the Holy Scriptures and liturgical books into this Slavic language. “The dialect of the Macedonian Slavs was thus promoted to be a literary language and was adapted to the needs of the Slavs first in Great Moravia and later in other regions.”²⁵

The Moravian mission did not succeed. Rome’s German bishops and missionaries, influential in central Europe, prevailed in Great Moravia. In 870, Prince Svatopluk, an ally of the pro-German party, overthrew his uncle Prince Rostislav and sealed the mission’s fate. Cyril had died of a broken heart in 869 in Rome. Methodius, whom the German bishops had imprisoned for nearly three years, continued the struggle, but after his death in 885 Moravia drove out his disciples.

However, the brothers’ linguistic and literary work and legacy transformed the Slavic world. From the Macedonian Slav dialect and a Greek model, they created a new literary language, Old Church Slavonic, “the literary language of all Slavs in the oldest period of their cultural evolu-

tion.”²⁶ Moreover, as Obolensky writes, that tongue “became the third international language of European people . . . who gained entry into the Byzantine commonwealth.” Cyril and Methodius established the foundations of a “composite Graeco-Slav culture,” which served as “a channel for the transmission of Byzantine civilization to the medieval peoples of Eastern Europe.”²⁷ Or, as Ostrogorsky stresses: “For the southern and eastern Slavs this achievement was of undying significance. These people are, indeed, indebted to the brothers from Thessalonika, ‘the Apostles of the Slavs’, for their alphabet and for the beginnings of their national literature and culture.”²⁸

After leaving Moravia, many of the brothers’ most prominent disciples returned to the Balkans. Tsar Boris welcomed them to his newly Christian, rapidly expanding Bulgarian state, where they helped spread the new faith and Byzantine culture. The most outstanding among them were Kliment (died 916) and Naum (died 910), later saints. About 886, Kliment went to Ohrid, in southwestern Macedonia, as a teacher; in 893, Tsar Simeon made him bishop. Kliment’s life-long friend and collaborator Naum succeeded him.

Under their leadership and direction, Ohrid and its district became the cradle of Slavic liturgy, literature, and culture, long before Tsar Samuil made the city his capital and an archbishopric. They founded the famous Ohrid Literary School, which continued the endeavors of Cyril and Methodius in spreading Byzantine Christianity and civilization among the Slavs. Unlike in Preslav, the Bulgarian capital, where Cyrillic became the official alphabet in 893, the Glagolitic survived co-equal “in the geographically remote and culturally more conservative Macedonian school founded by Clement.”²⁹

Under Kliment and Naum’s guidance, the Ohrid Literary School trained about 3,500 teachers and priests. It also continued translating religious texts from Greek into Old Church Slavonic and maintained the Salonika brothers’ high literary standards. Indeed, “few, if any, of the subsequent translations into that language equaled those of Cyril and Methodius and their immediate disciples, carried out in Constantinople, Moravia and Macedonia.”³⁰ Kliment himself wrote many sermons, prayers, hymns, and songs of praise to God, Christ, the Mother of God, and so on. Finally, both Kliment and Naum helped build many churches and monasteries. They introduced Byzantine architecture, decorative arts, and music to Orthodox Slavs.

The quality of work from the Ohrid Literary School declined after

the deaths of Naum (910) and Kliment (916). Nevertheless, the institution remained a cultural center of the southern Slavs through the twelfth century and, to a lesser extent, until the abolition of the Ohrid archbishopric in 1767 by the Ottoman sultan and the patriarch of Constantinople.

At its height, under Kliment and Naum and their immediate disciples, however, the Ohrid Literary School helped disseminate Byzantine civilization among the Orthodox Slavs. Indeed, it played a role in creating the common Byzantine-Slavic culture, which all Orthodox south Slavs shared throughout the Middle Ages, whoever their rulers.

Byzantine Rule and Chaos (1018–c. 1400)

Basil II's policy after 1018 toward his new Balkan conquests was rather conciliatory. He divided Samuel's empire into *themes* and integrated them into his imperial military administration. Much of Macedonia, the heart of Samuel's state, now formed the *theme* Bulgaria, with its capital at Skopje. Paradoxically, Bulgaria proper, along the lower Danube, became the *theme* of Paristrion, or Paradunovon. The other major *theme* in Macedonia was Salonika, and Macedonian lands also joined the *theme* of Durrës (Dyrrachium), the major Byzantine stronghold in the Adriatic. Macedonia's smaller *themes* included Ohrid, Pelagonia, Prespa, Kastoria (Kostur), Vardar, Strumica, and Seres.

Although he disempowered the old ruling elite, Basil sought to conciliate the local feudal landlords, allowing them to retain or even expand their landed estates and rewarding them with favors and titles. He respected local customs and traditions and sought to ease the financial burdens on land that had experienced almost forty years of continuous warfare.

Most noteworthy in this respect was Basil's enlightened treatment of the patriarchate of Ohrid—if it was ever a patriarchate. Although he reduced it to an archbishopric, he ensured its special status within the Byzantine Orthodox church. It enjoyed many privileges as well as control of all the bishoprics of Samuel's empire. Most important, it was autocephalous, "Subject not to the Patriarch of Constantinople but to the will of the Emperor, who reserved for himself the right of appointment to the see. This arrangement—a masterstroke of imperial policy—secured for Byzantium control over the churches of the south Slavs, but

avoided any further extension of the already vast share of jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople, and at the same time properly emphasized the special claims as an ecclesiastical center of Ohrid, whose autocephalous archbishops occupied in the hierarchy of the Greek Church a significantly higher place than other princes of the church who were subordinated to the Patriarchate of Constantinople.”³¹

Basil’s conciliatory policies expired after his death in 1025. His weaker successors appeared anti-Slav and helped alienate the Slav majority of Macedonia’s population. Hellenizing measures included appointment of Greeks to the higher positions in the Ohrid archdiocese, including the archbishop and bishops; attempts to exclude Old Church Slavonic from worship; settlement of non-Slavs among Macedonian Slavs; and resettlement of some of the latter in Thrace and Asia Minor.

At the same time, the empire sent many lay officials—administrators, military personnel, tax collectors—to Macedonia to fill positions that local feudal lords had valued. These interlopers—and ecclesiastical dignitaries, churches, and the growing number of monasteries—received generous grants of lands or control over the remaining free peasant villages. These policies virtually completed the long process of disbanding the once-free peasant communities, just as financial and economic obligations on the lower classes were increasing rapidly.

Both Hellenization and mounting hardship provoked unrest, opposition, and even organized rebellions. Leaders of the two largest uprisings had close family ties to Tsar Samuil and claimed to be his legitimate successors. The first rebellion broke out in 1040 around Belgrade under Petar Deljan, Gabriel Radomir’s son and Tsar Samuil’s grandson. The rebel army proclaimed him tsar, marched south toward Niš, and took over Skopje, before the imperial authorities grasped the situation and responded.

The initial encounters proved disastrous for the imperial armies. The rebels then moved in all directions: they took the *theme* of Durrës (Dyr-rachium), advanced into Epirus and Thessaly in the south, and moved toward Sofia (Serдика) in the east. Thus, before the end of the year, the rebellion had spread over a huge area stretching from the Danube to central Greece and from the Albanian coast to Bulgaria, and the rebel army was ready to attack Salonika. From the very outset, however, dissension among rebel leaders had threatened unity and success. A dangerous rivalry erupted between Petar Deljan and his blood relative Alusian, the second son of John (Jovan) Vladislav. Alusian had defected from the

imperial service and joined the rebellion; when his large army suffered a disastrous defeat near Salonika, he turned against Deljan, blinded him, and rejoined the imperial camp. In the spring or summer of 1041, Emperor Michael IV (1034–41) routed the rebel forces at Lake Vegoritis (Ostrovo), captured the blinded Petar Deljan, and defeated the rebellion in the region of Prilep.³²

The second uprising broke out in 1072 at Skopje under a local notable, Georgi Vojtech. With support from local feudal landlords, he appealed for help to Michael (Mihailo), ruler (1052–81) of Zeta (Montenegro), who had connections to Tsar Samuil's dynasty. He dispatched his son Konstantin Bodin with a contingent of armed men to Prizren, where the rebel leaders proclaimed him tsar.

This revolt lasted almost as long as, but did not attain the dimension or the success of, Deljan's. The rebels took control of the Skopje-Prizren region and then split. One group, under Bodin, moved north toward Niš (Nissus); the other, under his trusted commander Petrilo, marched southwest and, virtually without a serious fight, gained control of the Ohrid region. The Byzantine army had withdrawn in an orderly fashion and reestablished its positions further south, in the fortified lake town of Kastoria (Kostur). There, it outmaneuvered and crushed Petrilo's forces.

The defeat at Kastoria sealed the uprising's fate. A united Byzantine army marched on Skopje, the center of the uprising, which surrendered without a fight, and then intercepted and defeated Bodin's retreating army in Kosovo Polje. It captured Bodin and sent him, together with the already imprisoned Vojtech, to Constantinople. Vojtech did not survive the journey; Bodin eventually found his way back to Zeta (Montenegro).³³

Byzantium's difficulties in suppressing the rather localized uprisings in Macedonia reveal its gradual weakening. The empire's decline, which began in the decades after the death of Basil II in 1025, speeded up after the 1060s. In 1071, Byzantium suffered a catastrophic military defeat at the hands of the Seljuk Turks at Manzikert in Armenia, and within a decade it lost its rich possessions in Anatolia. Also in 1071, another costly setback occurred; the Normans captured Bari, the last Byzantine outpost in southern Italy, and turned their attention to the Balkans.

These defeats brought into question Constantinople's ability to stop the empire's decline, let alone to revitalize it. This in turn launched a long and many-sided struggle for domination of the Balkans and ultimately for the Byzantine inheritance.

During the more than three centuries of uncertainty that followed, which ended with Ottoman victory, control over Macedonia and its people—the heart of the Byzantine possessions in Europe—shifted rapidly. Between 1081 and 1083, the Normans roamed through and devastated most of Macedonia. Rulers of Zeta and Raška, early states of the Serbs, took advantage of the chaos and occupied the regions of Ohrid and Skopje, respectively. In the 1090s, the First Crusade ravaged and pillaged everything in sight as its forces traveled east along the Via Egnatia. In 1107 and 1108, Normans again laid waste to western Macedonia. Byzantium then reestablished its nominal authority. The imperial government was too weak, and local or regional feudal lords usurped real authority. And after the death of Emperor Manuel II Comnenus (1143–80), imperial authority in most of Macedonia disappeared almost completely.

In 1185, the Normans again landed in Durrës (Dyrrachium, Durazzo) and marched east. In August they entered and looted Salonika and then moved on to Seres. Moreover, chaos in the imperial domains encouraged Macedonia's neighbors to challenge Byzantine rule. In 1185, Bulgaria declared its independence, and, under the Asen dynasty, the second Bulgarian empire sought to dominate the Balkans. The Serbs, now united under the native Nemanja dynasty, had similar hopes. Ambitious feudal lords in Macedonia followed the Bulgarian and Serbian examples and declared their own independence from Constantinople. Dobromir Hrs for almost two decades (1185–1202) ruled his domain, which centered on Strumica and Prosek, north and northeast of Salonika, respectively, in eastern Macedonia.

The disintegration of Byzantium was complete on 13 April 1204, when the Fourth Crusade, against the infidel in Egypt, captured and looted Constantinople. The victorious Latins, who held the imperial capital only until 1261, abolished the Orthodox Byzantine empire and set up their own feudal states, with the most important being the Latin empire at Constantinople and the Latin kingdom in Salonika. Various states competed for the Byzantine tradition and inheritance: the empire of Nicaea, across the Straits; the despotate of Epirus, on the Adriatic; and the kingdom of Serbia and the empire of Bulgaria, which controlled the northern Balkans.

Throughout Latin rule in Constantinople, control of Macedonia and/or its parts shifted from one power to another. At the beginning, one area was under the kingdom of Salonika, while the regions of Skopje

and Ohrid became parts (1204–7) of the Bulgarian empire under Tsar Kaloian (1197–1207), the third Asen monarch. After Kaloian died while besieging Salonika, most of his Macedonian possessions—from Prosek northeast of Salonika to Ohrid in the west—went, with Serbian aid, to the enigmatic aristocrat Strez, his relative. After the latter's unexpected death in 1214, part of Macedonia, which included Skopje and Ohrid, fell to the despotate of Epirus.

In the 1220s, especially after 1224, when it conquered the Latin kingdom of Salonika, Epirus appeared the rising power in the Balkans and successor to Byzantium. However, in 1230, at the battle of Klokonitsa, Ivan Asen II (1218–41), that dynasty's greatest ruler, defeated the Epirotes and eliminated Epirus from the succession struggle. Bulgaria annexed Thrace, most of Macedonia, and part of Albania.

After Ivan Asen II died, internal power struggles weakened Bulgaria, and Mongols threatened it from outside; when the Asens expired in 1280, the country descended into complete feudal anarchy. The Nicaean empire challenged Bulgaria's dominance in Macedonia and the Balkans and began to expand its influence on the European side of the Straits. Its armies moved into eastern Macedonia and threw Epirus out of Salonika in 1246. Nicaea, Epirus, Bulgaria, and Serbia struggled over the rest of Macedonia until the Nicaeans forced the Latins out of Constantinople and reestablished the Byzantine empire. Byzantium once again and for the last time was master of all of Macedonia.³⁴

However, merely two decades later, the Serbian king Milutin (1282–1321) began to challenge Byzantium's position. In the first months of his reign, he invaded northern Macedonia and occupied Skopje, Tetovo, and Ovče Pole. Before peace came in 1299, his army had advanced to the walls of Strumica in the east, to Ohrid in the west, and to Prilep in the south.

His son and successor, Stephen (Stefan) Dečanski (1322–31), continued the expansion to the south along the upper Bregalnica and the middle Vardar, taking towns such as Štip and Veles. Serbia was thus acquiring control of the approaches to Salonika and threatened to cut off Byzantium from its western provinces. In order to stop Serbia's advance and growing power, Byzantium allied with Bulgaria, but after the latter's decisive defeat on 28 July 1330 at Velbuzlid (Kiustendil), where its tsar, Michael (Mikhail) Shishman, perished, Emperor Andronicus III (1328–41) abandoned the campaign.

Serbia completed its conquest of Macedonia under Stephen (Stefan)

Dušan (1331–55), the empire’s greatest medieval ruler. In 1334, his forces captured Ohrid, Prilep, and Strumica; a decade later, Kastoria (Kostur), Florina (Lerin), and Edessa (Voden) further south. The occupation of Seres in 1345 consolidated Serbian control of Macedonia except Salonika, and Stephen assumed the title “Tsar of the Serbs and Greeks.” The following year, he made the Serbian archbishopric a patriarchate, and on Easter Sunday his new patriarch, Joannakie, crowned him at Skopje.

During the next decade, Stephen pushed his empire’s boundaries west and south. He occupied Albania, Epirus, and Thessaly and reached the Gulf of Corinth. Like his illustrious predecessors—Simeon, Samuil, and Ivan Asen II—he ruled a vast, multi-ethnic, territorial empire, dominated the Balkans, and dreamed of taking Constantinople, the imperial prize. And, as with his predecessors, the impressive edifice that he created did not long survive him.

Already at the beginning of the reign of his son and successor, Tsar Stephen (Stefan) Uroš (1355–71), central authority was on the decline and power was passing to regional feudal lords. Ten such potentates controlled Macedonia. The most powerful were two brothers: Vukašin (1366–71) declared himself king and lorded over the Prizen-Skopje-Prilep area; Ugleša ruled the southeast. Ugleša’s domains faced the advancing Ottoman forces, and he persuaded his brother to launch a joint military campaign to stop them in the Maritsa valley. Hostilities culminated at Chernomen, between Philippopolis and Adrianople, on 26 September 1371. In a surprise dawn attack, the Ottoman forces won decisively. The Christians suffered extremely heavy losses, including the two ruling brothers. Vukašin’s son and successor, Marko Kraljević, a popular subject of Serbian, Macedonian, and Bulgarian folklore, became an Ottoman vassal.³⁵

The battle of Chernomen marked the beginning of the Ottoman conquest of Macedonia. Before 1400, the Ottoman empire ruled all Macedonia except Salonika, which it occupied temporarily in 1387 but would not conquer until 1430. Macedonia would remain under Ottoman domination for well over five hundred years, until the Balkan Wars of 1912–13.