

A STEPPE PEOPLE IN MEDIEVAL ITALY: THE BULGARS OF MOLISE

Rimuovere filigrana ora

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Due to the enormous peoples' displacement in the aftermath of the Western Roman Empire's downfall, the interactions between steppe peoples coming from Eastern Europe and the "autochthonous" peoples of Western Europe were frequent.

Among the most representative evidence of this "Eurasian" presence in Western Europe is the migration of the Alztek "bulgars" to the Italian Peninsula, proved by documentary sources and confirmed by some archeological data. The towns of Bojano, Isernia and Sepino in Molise¹ are recorded in a very famous passage of the *Historia Langobardorum* (cap. 29, L. V.) by the benedictine monk and historian Paul the Deacon (c. 720s – 13 April probably 799), in connection with an important event in the history of the contacts between the Italian Peninsula and the steppe peoples: the arrival and the settlement of the Third Bulgar Horde, led by the "dux" Alztek:²

Per haec tempora Vulgarum dux Alzeco nomine, incertum quam ob causam, a sua gente digressus, Italiam pacifice introiens, cum omni sui ducatus exercitu ad regem Grimuald venit, ei se servituum atque in eius patria habitaturum promittens. Quem ille ad Romualdum filium Beneventum dirigens, in eius patria habitaturum promittens. Quos Romualdus dux gratanter excipiens, eisdem spatiosa ad habitandum loca, quae usque ad illud tempus deserta erant, contribuit, scilicet Sepinum, Bovianum et Iserniam et alias cum suis territoriis civitates, ipsumque Alzeconem, mutato dignitatis nomine, de duce gastaldium vocitari praecepit. Qui usque hodie in his ut diximus locis habitantes, quamquam et Latine loquantur, linguae tamen propriae usum minime amiserunt³

This horde would have preserved the "steppe's way of life" for a relatively long time in Italy, leaving conspicuous archeological evidence.

However the "Bulgar" presence in Central-Southern Italy is attested before this events, too.⁴ For example a Hunno-Bulgar, force took part in the military Byzantine

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¹ Molise is a region of Southern Italy, the second smallest of Italy's regions. It was formerly (until 1963) part of the region of Abruzzi e Molise. This region covers 4,438 km².

² This Bulgar presence was accepted without problems even by one of the most interesting Neapolitan illuminists of the XVIII century, Giuseppe Maria Galanti (Santa Croce del Sannio, november 25, 1743 – Neapolis, 6 ottobre 1806), in his *Descrizione del Molise*, (ed. F. Barra), Cava de' Tirreni, 1993, p. 101. First edition of this work in 1781.

³ Paolo Diacono, *Storia dei Longobardi*, introduzione di Bruno Luiselli, traduzione italiana e note di Antonio Zanella, Rizzoli, Milano, 2000, p. 450.

⁴ Cf. Giuseppe Cossuto, "Tracce turche" in *Europa medievale. I popoli delle steppe in Europa dalla comparsa degli Unni alla nascita della Turchia*, pp. 147-151.

operations against the Ostrogothic king Totila (or Baduila, *ca.* 552-553), in the Campania area, in 548 A.D.⁵ During this war the Bulgars betrayed the Byzantines, who were exterminated during an Ostrogothic attack. Concerning the fate of this group of considerable dimension arrived in Italy, we have no sure information, but only feeble traces in connection with their permanence in the Peninsula as disbanded units.

More important, for Italian history, is the arrival in the Italian Peninsula of Pannonian Bulgars in the Lombard King Alboin's army in 568 A.D. These people belonged to the Western branch of the Bulgars, the Kutrigurs (who were involved in bloody conflicts with the "Eastern" Bulgars, the Utigurs), and had formed an alliance with the Bayan Khan's Avars, who were the Utigurs' enemies too. The Kutrigurs, autochthonous tribes of the Black Sea and Eastern Europe, constituted an important military factor for the Avar Khanate since its establishment.

According to the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great (540-604 AD), the sword-bearer of the Byzantine general Narses (478-573), was of Bulgar origins, and was brought before a youth born and brought up in Italy because he spoke the same language.⁶

Probably the young "Bulgar-speaker" was a descendent of the Hunnish group known as "campano", which had arrived to fight against Totila some years before. However, if the youth had been born in Italy, chronology (this meeting occurred between 552 and 557 A.D.) suggests this was probably a minor group other than the "campano", or at all events a different nomadic group of problematic identification.

There are also news of a Christian (Catholic) Hun that was beatified, Peter Bulgar, who died in Rome in 605 A.D. And had been born in Salussola (North-western Italy) in 560 A.D., before the Lombard invasion, possibly this important prelate was included *a posteriori* by the noble family of Bulgaro in their genealogical tree.⁷

The Kutrugurs remained in the Avaric Pannonian confederation without great problems until 631-632 A.D., when a bloody struggle started between the Avar Khan and a "Bulgar" chief who left consistent traces in the "Italian Bulgars" history: Altzek.

At this point we have Latin chronicles providing information regarding "Alciocus", another Bulgar leader that is generally identified with this one: Altzek. The only relevant exception is the opinion of Steven Runciman, who considers them two different leaders.⁸

⁵ Marcellini Comitis, *Chronicon*: Ioannes magister militum in Campania praedans Gothos, nonnullos liberat senatores: qui postea patitur nocturnum Totilae superventum Bulgavorum suorum proditione in Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 51.

⁶ Gregorio Magno, *Dialoghi, Libri IV*, in *Fonti per la storia d'Italia*, edited by Umberto Moricius, Roma, 1924, p. 269

⁷ http://www.museolaboratoriosalussola.org/s_beato.html

⁸ Steven Runciman, *A History of the First Bulgarian Empire*, G. Bell & Sons, London, 1953, p. 21

The war against the Avars forced Altzek to leave Pannonia with his warriors and with their families. Invited by Frank King Dagobert I he took refuge in Bavaria, where the Bulgar Horde was well received by the Bavarians.

But, during the night, the Bulgars were exterminated by order of Dagobert himself. Only Altzek with seven hundred warriors and their families escaped the massacre and found shelter in Istria, where they became tributaries of the Byzantines.

In 668 AD Altzek and his people went under the Lombard lord Grimoald's (c. 610-671) protection. Grimoald invited Altzek and his people to settle under the dominium of his son Romoald (?-687), duke of Beneventum. This lord settled the Bulgars on his lands, in the deserted area of Isernia, Bojano, Sepino, in Molise and the High Samnium.

Other "bulgar" groups, of smaller importance, were settled by the Lombards in different places, all along the Peninsula, meanwhile we find some of them under the rule of the Ravenna Byzantines.⁹ Indeed, in some ecclesiastical documents issued in Ravenna during the VIII-X centuries there is a clear remark with reference to the Rimini and Osimo areas about a "Bulgar land", a "Bulgar region" and a land belonging to the De Bulgaro baron.¹⁰

Among the groups under the rule of the Lombard Kingdom, we find a *comitatus* to the West of the Milan area, in the East of Lake Maggiore (Bulgarograsso municipality area, not far from Como).¹¹ In the Lombard Duchy of Beneventum we find the toponym Bulgheria Mount (now in Salerno province).

Three documents dated 877,¹² 890 and 919 give a clear description of the

⁹ Vassil Gjuzeev, *Les Protobulgares: introduction a l'histoire de la Bulgarie d'Asparoukh in Mittelalterliches Bulgarien. Quellen, Geschichte, Hauptstädte und kultur*, ISIS, Istanbul, 2001, p. 133

¹⁰ Johann Baptist Bernhardt, *Codex Traditionum ecclesia Ravennatis in papyro scripto in Regia Bibliotheca Bavarica asservatus ex autographo descriptis*, Typis I.E. Seidel Solisbacensis, Monachii, 1810, pp. 35, 44, 76.

¹¹ Regarding the Bulgarias in North-Western Italy *cfr.* Francesco Pezza, *Profilo della Bulgaria italiana e vicenda comitale di Novara nell' Alto Medioevo*, *Bollettino Storico per la provincia di Novara*, 1935, Societ Storica Novarese, Novara, pp. 39-91.

¹² This document, compiled by the notary Amelpert, is known as *Testament of Empress Angilberga* (or Engelberga, died between 896 and 901) and was reproduced by Pietro Maria Campi, *Dell'Historia Ecclesiastica di Piacenza*, Vol. I, Published by Giovanni Bazachi (in Piacenza), 165, pp. 461-463. The complete story in *Idem*, Book IX, p. 271. The father of Italian historiography, Ludovico Antonio Muratori, *Dissertazioni sopra le antichit italiane: gi composte e pubblicate in latino del proposto Lodovico Antonio Muratori e da esso poscia compendiate e trasportate nell'italiana favella da Gian Francesco Soli Muratori*, Milano, 1751, p. 271) remarked that *Nel Testamento di Angilberga Imperadrice dell'Anno 877 pubblicato dal Campi nella Storia della Chiesa Piacent. si truovano Curtes in Comitatu Burgarenfe: id sunt Brunago & Trecate. Perch il Fiamma chiamasse Ducato di Bulgaria quello che era Comitato non ne so dir la ragione. La menzione di Trecate farebbe da vedere, le indicasse, che il Contado di Burgaria lo steffo foffe che quel di Vigevano de' noftri tempi.*

“Comitatus Burgarensis” in the Lombard-Piedmontese area, and some scholars have also traced the lineage of noble families in the Vercelli's area back to a bulgar origin.¹³

Various place-names confirm the bulgar presence in Italy from South to North, such as Volgari (Gioia Sannitica, Campania) in the South and Bulgaro Vercellese (Piedmont) in the North.

The Altzek Bulgars were settled in Molise for various reasons. First of all there were reasons of a practical order: a large group of warriors could be difficult to administrate for the Lombards in the core of the realm. By establishing them in the extreme South of their dominium, in an unpopulated zone (but suitable for the transumance of middle and big tail animals) from very long time, would mean for the Bulgars that it could be impossible to engage themselves in raids or give serious problems to the Lombards, but not for their enemies: the Byzantines.

The nomadic mobile force of the Bulgars would be immensely augmented following the *tratturi*, the traditional routes for the transumance of Central and Southern Italy. These routes radiate out, forming an intricate web for hundreds of miles across the Peninsula.

Indeed the lands occupied by the Bulgars were probably swampy and malaric in some valleys and plains between Bojano, Castelpetroso, Roccamandolfi and Macchiagodena. Altzek became, at the end, a lombard *gastald* but, for his people, if he had given a land to the “people”, he could also advance the supreme title of *khan*.¹⁴

Indeed, on one of this *tratturi*, the one that connects Pescasseroli (at day in Abruzzo) with Candela (Apulia),¹⁵ at a location called Vicenne, in the municipality of Campochiaro,¹⁶ a little village with no more than 700 souls placed at 731 meters above sea level, in the Campobasso province, a large Lombard necropolis was discovered during the building of industrial sheds in 1987. The necropolis has been dated between 640 and 670 A.D.. Special value is assigned to the presence of typical materials belonging to the “steppe culture”.¹⁷

¹³ Sotto la Città di Milano, come apparisce dalle antiche Memorie, si contava *Ducatus* o pure *Comitatus Burgariae*. Quivi probabilmente abitarono i Bulgari venuti con Alboino, giacché *Burgari* si trovano anche appellati in Muratori, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Cfr. G. Cossuto, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-60.

¹⁵ An accurate description of this *tratturo* in Sarah Gregg & Bruno Petriccione, *Regio tratturo: Pescasseroli-Candela*, SER, Folignano, 2012.

¹⁶ On the road system in Molise during the Medieval age, with attention to the necropolis of Vicenne, cfr.: Italo M. Iasiello, *Sannium: assetti e trasformazioni di una provincia tardoantica*, Bari, 2008, p. 54.

¹⁷ The bibliography regarding these excavations is quite extensive: Ceglia, V., Lo scavo della necropoli di Vicenne, *La necropoli di Vicenne nella piana di Bojano. Il Sannio tra tardo impero ed alto medioevo, Atti del Convegno, 1- novembre 1988* in *Conoscenze. Rivista annuale della Soprintendenza Archeologica e per i Beni Ambientali Architettonici Artistici e Storici del Molise*, 4, pp. 31-48; Nella stessa pubblicazione: Genito, B., Materiali e problemi, pp. 49-67; Ceglia, V., Varietà di influssi culturali nelle necropoli di Campochiaro.

In this area about 350 graves were found, 19 of them with a together with its rider.¹⁸ Furthermore, in the tombs there were also Avar-type swords and various ornaments, both male and female. A certain number of women are buried with typical Eurasiatic jewellery and a good number of coins of different provenance, were placed in the graves, for cultural or merely ornamental motivations.¹⁹ In various graves the Eurasiatic materials (for example the sword in grave 102 at Morrione, the stirrups of the graves 16 and 33 at Vicenne, the earrings with overlapping globules in the graves 6 and 15 at Vicenne) are close to materials of typical Italic origin or from other cultural contexts.²⁰

Amongst the more interesting findings there is an "Eurasian" horseman with his horse, complete with stirrups and bits of harnesses. This horseman is currently preserved in the Museo Provinciale Sannita "Mazzarotta" of Campobasso and represents, with his richness in equipment, a very important attestation of the presence of Eurasiatic nomadic peoples in Southern Italy in Medieval times.²¹

The Italian identity, in the specific case, was not only formed by the cultural contribution of ancient Italic, Celtic and Germanic peoples, only to mention the human cultures more decisive for the Italian past, but also by the contribution of the steppe peoples who, in certain areas, as the Molise case shows, adapted themselves without too many problems to the pre-existing socio-cultural and natural conditions, effecting a downright colonization of the territory, as the Avars also did in some Friuli areas in Northeastern Italy.

However the history of ancient contacts and *mélanges* among steppe peoples, Italy and the other parts of Europe, remains to this day a largely unexplored field and, for this reason, full of interesting discoveries.

Considerazioni preliminari, in (a cura di) De Benedictis, *I beni culturali nel Molise. Il Medioevo, Atti del Convegno* (Campobasso, 18-20 novembre 1999), Campobasso, 2004, pp. 79-86; Ceglie, V., La necropoli di Campochiaro (Italia), in (a cura di) Aillagon J. J., *Roma e i barbari. La nascita di un nuovo mondo*, 2008, Milano, pp. 469-475; Ceglie V.; Genito B. La necropoli altomedievale di Vicenne a Campochiaro, in Capini S., Di Niro A. (eds.) *Sannium. Archeologia del Molise*, Roma, 1991, pp. 329-334; *ibid.* Genito B., Tombe con cavallo a Vicenne, pp. 335-338.

¹⁸ Ceglie 2004, p. 81, Ceglie 2008, p. 470.

¹⁹ Ermanno A. Aslan, Le monete della necropoli di Campochiaro e la monetazione anonima beneventana del VII secolo, in *Atti del Convegno "I Beni Culturali nel Molise"*, Campobasso 18-20.11.1999, Campobasso 2004, pp. 87-131 e 387-391.

²⁰ Carlo Ebanista, Gli usi funerari nel Ducato di Benevento. Alcune considerazioni sulle necropoli campane e molisane di VI-VIII secolo, in (eds.) C. Ebanista e M. Rotili, *Archeologia e storia delle migrazioni. Europa, Italia, Mediterraneo fra tarda età romana e alto medioevo*, Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi Cimitile-Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 17-18 giugno 2010, Cimitile, 2011, p. 18

²¹ An image of the Bulgar horseman from the official site of Museo Provinciale Sannitico Mazzatosta: <http://www.centrostoricocb.it/immagini/IMM/museos/Tomba-cavaliere1200.jpg>