

KIRIL PETKOV

Boyars and Royal officers

A Case Study on the Social Terminology of the Aristocracy of the Middle Bulgarian Period

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the changes in the expressions applied to the upper strata of Bulgarian society in the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries. The author registers the differentiation of the originally all-encompassing term boyar (boljiari) into groups characterised mainly by wealth or by royal service (vlasteli). The possible reasons for the appearance of additional terms are also explored. It is being proposed furthermore that, lacking sufficient sources, such a terminological analysis may offer an important clue to the social history of Medieval Bulgaria.

Bulgarian medievalists had shown for close to a hundred years a great interest in the study of the upper strata of medieval Bulgarian society. For simplicity's sake, let me refer to these groups as "aristocracy" since our sources, as we shall see, do not allow a more specific term or a more precise analysis of the élite. The first generation of scholars in the 1920s and 1930s based its research on German positivism. It was their great merit to have introduced the notion of an aristocracy in medieval Bulgarias as a feasible subject of inquiry.¹

The years after World War II witnessed considerable decline in the study of the aristocracy. Ideologically biased, post-war research concentrated mainly on problems connected with the lower classes. This trend definitely contributed to our understanding of the fabric of medieval Bulgarian society, only it placed the emphasis too heavily on one part of society—and surely not the decisive one, as far as the government of the realm was concerned. Thus, the present generation of students of Bulgarian social history is faced with painful gaps regarding the politically and socially most significant strata of our medieval society.

This state of affairs is due not only to ideological preferences but also to objective difficulties. The study of the aristocracy—just as many other aspects of medieval Bulgarian history—encounters great difficulties because of the lack of sufficient written sources. Private charters, notarial books, estate surveys, or legal documents, the usual sources for social history for many other European countries, are missing in Bulgaria. An almost total destruction during the centuries of Ottoman domination is to a great extent responsible for this sad state of affairs. However, it seems quite likely that—at least in the secular sphere—not much was written in the medieval centuries. Therefore, we can probably not expect more written evidence from yet unexplored Byzantine or western archives.

A possible way out of this awkward situation was proposed seventy years ago by Jordan Trifonov, whose exemplary study of term *boljar* pointed to a promising track to follow.² He proposed that a study of the social terminology of Middle Bulgarian sources (mostly from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) might serve as a good point of departure for an entirely new approach to the problem. In his study, Trifonov collected and analysed almost all information available to him about the strata designated by the term *boljari* from the ninth to early fifteenth century. Yet, there are several other terms that have not been explored by him, such as *knjaz*, *vlastel*, *velmozha*. Most of them have only occasionally attracted the attention of Bulgarian social historians. If involved in a complex analysis, however, they could supply a surprising amount of information about the aristocracy and especially about its social dynamic, an aspect not explored by J. Trifonov and his successors. The long established assumption that in the time of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom the country's social structure was conservative or almost immobile could be seriously shattered by a complex terminological analysis. Such an inquiry would have to look at all the notions applied to more or less contemporary higher social strata by medieval Bulgarian authors, translators and copists.

A complete picture could be gained, of course, only by including all types of references to social strata in the terminology in all available sources. Moreover, it must be remembered that almost all our sources are of ecclesiastical provenance. Therefore, our information would necessarily be of a rather one-sided character even if included more texts. For the period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there are few surviving royal charters and only six of them are genuine. They, in turn, are biased because of they tend to represent the expectations of the rulers about what the aristocracy ought to be.

In spite of these obstacles it may still be feasible to embark on a short study of the social terminology of the Middle Bulgarian sources in order to establish a notion of at least the main trends of social mobility amongst the aristocratic sectors of society. Without claiming completeness, the following sketch may raise a few relevant questions and provide material for further thoughts about the development of medieval Bulgarian aristocracy as a type of Balkan medieval social stratum.

The most common designation of a member of the upper strata of the society was the well known term *boyar*, in Bulgarian: *boljar* or *boljarin*, plural: *boljari*. For the thirteenth-four-

teenth centuries, that is, the time of the Second Bulgarian Empire, at least three periods can be nicely distinguished, during which the term had different meanings. The first of them covers roughly the years of the restoration of the Bulgarian Empire up to the time of Boril (1185/7-1218); the beginnings of the second could be traced already in the times of John Assen II (1218-1241). It developed in full by the end of the thirteenth century, while soon thereafter, in the first quarter of the fourteenth century, we see again new developments.

During the first period, generally, the term was employed by all kinds of sources to denote "a member of the higher classes," but already in the beginning of the thirteenth century there appeared a certain narrowing in its significance. Thus, the *boljari* appears as the only social group different from "the people" in the six relevant texts surviving from this period: the *Translatio* of St. Ilarion (Hilary) of Măglen;³ the Life of St. Michail the Soldier;⁴ the account on the council against the Bogomils in the Synodicon of the Bulgarian Church and similar texts from the same source;⁵ the *ordo* for the coronation of a queen/empress, translated from Byzantine Greek soon after the restoration of the Bulgarian Empire; and the triumphal inscription of John Assen II from 1230.⁶ All these sources use the term very generally, without giving any hint at a possible inner stratification of the group so defined.

Yet by the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century—the second period in the development of the terminology—the term *boljari*, which up to then had a monopoly as a designation for the higher social strata, gradually lost ground. The *boljari* preserved their position in the sources only in the royal charters. Moreover, in the three original charters of the thirteenth century—John Assen II's charter for Vatopedi monastery (1230), his privilege for Dubrovnik merchants (in the 1230s), and the charter of Konstantin Assen giving tax exemptions to the monastery of St. George at Virgino Brdo near Skopje (1257-1270) we cannot find the word *boljar* at all.⁷ All three documents use as social designation *praktori*, *vlasteli*, *vladalci*. *Praktor* had both in original Bulgarian sources and texts translated from Greek the well-known connotation of "royal officer," a functional term, meaning usually a person in charge of collecting taxes. The implication of *vladalec* was also similar but it is only found in Serbian sources.⁸ Thus, these sources imply a terminological shift, spreading from the royal chancery and emphasising the position of members the aristocracy as "officers of the crown."

This shift seems not to have been accidental or reflecting merely the wishful thinking of the royal chancery. The term *boljarin* is also missing from several other sources originating in the mid-thirteenth century: the *Life of St Petka*; the account for the restoration of the Bulgarian Patriarchate under John Assen II (1235); the *Life St Joakim of Osogovo*; and the abovementioned Dubrovnik privilege. Such a change suggests a slow, but constant trend toward stratification among the higher classes.

Indicative of this direction is the slightly discernible trend in the terminology of some other sources of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As mentioned above, in the *Life of St. Petka* we cannot find the term *boljari*. In its social terminology four kinds of persons feature: "very rich people," *vlasteli*, an intermediate category, and "simple people." The

upper classes were thus depicted as consisting of at least two social categories: one of them based on material wealth, and another determined by its connections with the ruler (We know nothing about that intermediary category which the texts merely call "the others.") Two other sources originating in the mid-thirteenth century—a *Life of St. John of Rila* and the *Translatio of St. Petka* from Epivat to Tarnovo—confirm that there was already a division among the upper classes based on having or not a share in public power. We may, therefore, assume that according to the terminology of contemporary sources, there emerged a distinct group from among the *boljari*, which was determined only by its material possessions and not by their service in the government of the realm. It is not clear whether there were other features which helped this group to distinguish itself from other members of the aristocratic strata. This is a trend in the development of the narrow meaning of the term that later in the thirteenth century entrenched itself even more deeply in the social terminology.⁹

Taking into account these developments, it now seems possible to explain the absence of the term *boljari* in the charters of the kings from the second and third quarter of the thirteenth century. If we accept that the terminological borrowings from neighbouring social systems were meant to emphasise the status of the royal officers it is possible to argue that the king's chancery tried to counter—at least in words—the growing division among the élite. These changes may reflect the fact that a number of the members of the upper classes were no more directly dependent on the crown, but made their fortune out of and based their prestige on their landed property. In modern terms we can call this policy of the royal court an attempt to represent the top strata of the society as ruling and governing classes whose position derived from the sovereign. It was an essential step in establishing the idea of the state as a *patrimonium* of the king, but later sources prove the complete failure of its practical realisation. In the fourteenth century *boljari* appeared again in the royal charters but this time with the expressed meaning of wealthy landowners legally defined as one of the two politically powerful sectors of society, the other being the royal officers.¹⁰

These conclusions drawn from original Bulgarian sources can be strengthened by comparison with the social terminology in works translated from Byzantine Greek. Good examples are to be found in the Middle-Bulgarian translation of the chronicles of Konstantinos Manasses and Symeon Logothetes.¹¹ Clearly, the translators' perception of medieval Bulgarian social structure was crucial for the social terminology they chose to employ. The simpler social structure of medieval Bulgaria found its expression in the translation of the numerous connotations of the many ranks of Byzantine aristocracy by the general term *boljiar*. It is worth noting, however, that more important for our analysis is a reverse connection between a Greek original and its Middle Bulgarian translation: when Bulgarian writers used different words for a Byzantine social term. Elaborating on this trend we find social distinctions, otherwise not clearly expressed in vernacular terminology.

Two main observations can be made on these texts. On the one hand, during the Middle Bulgarian period the term *boljari* preserved its meaning as a term for members of the upper

classes as a whole, regardless of the origin of their status. On the other hand, when power was concerned in the Greek text, *boljiari* was used only to denominate persons with power deriving from outside the Emperor's authority. In all cases when an imperial official was mentioned, no matter how high his position in the hierarchy was (he could be a simple tax collector, or imperial logothete) the employed term was *vlastel*. The same distinction was made even when one and the same person was in question but in his different capacities. For example, in the translation of Constantin Manasses the Greek term *telei* is normally rendered in Bulgarian with *boljari*. The eparch of Constantinople was one of the *telei*, but when he is explicitly referred to in his official capacity, the translation is *vlastel*.¹²

Turning back to original sources, we might proceed to the middle of the fourteenth century when further developments in the meaning of the term *boljari* lead us to the third period of its development. In the writings of the great reformer of medieval texts, the patriarch Euthymius, and his pupils, this term is rarely used: in Euthymius' own works *boljari* appears only once.¹³ Some other references from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries confirm the thirteenth-century usage of *boljiari* as local magnates without governmental office.¹⁴

Another interesting feature in the social terminology of the whole period of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom is the appearance of "major" and "minor" lords: *boljiari malie i velikije*. These two expressions are usually seen as a division in the ranks of Bulgarian aristocracy comparable to "estates." This point of view has its origin in the social history of the First Bulgarian Empire when the *bojls* and the *bagains* in fact represented two legally distinguished strata. Yet the social situation two to three hundred years later was—as far as it is correctly represented in the social terminology of the sources—very different.

A closer investigation shows that the expression "great *boljari*" covers persons included in the wider meaning of the term *boljari*, as it was used in the first half of the thirteenth century. The opposition "great–small" found its way into the sources of the same time, without any precise connotation, and continued to be used in the same way.¹⁵ The contrast "great–small" as expression of a legally established division is not supported by any systematic use of the two terms. They were regarded as interchangeable, a fact which contradicts the implication of a hierarchical order, so clearly visible in the cases when the aristocratic ranks from the First Kingdom were concerned. Thus, the opposition "great–small *boljari*" was a medieval *topos*, and not a real social division during the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries. The designation "great *boljiari*" was not entirely meaningless, though. It often served to describe the highest aristocratic strata from the mid-thirteenth century on, uniting in itself both royal officials and the most important members of the landed aristocracy.

On the other hand, the wider meaning of *boljiari* after the time of John Assen II did not correspond to the social stratification of the aristocracy and was ambiguously employed. Another social group of the upper strata was more clearly defined in the contemporary social terminology: the *vlasteli*. We have already seen the chief feature which distinguished

them from the rest of the aristocracy: their being the actual ruling classes—stricto sensu—of late medieval Bulgaria. There was only one necessary element in the *curriculum vitae* or *cursus honorum* of a person for being designated as *vlastel*—to be a royal officer. Original Bulgarian works throughout the period confirm that *vlasteli* were regarded state officials, and—with the development of the more typically medieval patrimonial concept—royal officers. As early as the last years of the twelfth century we find them as a social category, belonging to the aristocracy but distinct from the *boljiari*.¹⁶

The fourteenth-century royal charters recognise the existence of only two groups apart from the clergy and the peasantry—*boljiari* and *raboutniki* (i. e., persons working in the royal administration). Etymologically *raboutnik* (derived from *rab*, "slave, servant") is just the opposite of *vlastel* (derived, of course from *vlast*, "power"). Yet, from the point of view of the royal chancery, both terms meant the same. People who were regarded *vlasteli* by the common people represented the royal power in action, while for the supreme source of power, the king, they were servitors, ministerials.

Translated works allow us to grasp a further feature in the social identification of the *vlasteli*. Their position in the society was a consequence of their connection to the Emperor or the king, the sources of all power in the Byzantino-Balkan *oikoumene*. For example, when translating Greek *ekskousiatai* with *vlasteli*, Bulgarian authors connected the administrative and financial privileges implied by the Greek term with the meaning of *vlasteli*.¹⁷

By the end of the thirteenth century the inner development of Bulgarian aristocracy produced a new social stratum. For their designation the old term *boljiar* was not suitable and new terms came into being in order to mirror the changes in the social structure. The first such term was *velmozha* (derived from "great men," "leader") which we meet in the *Life of St. Joakim of Osogovo* (presumably written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries).¹⁸ From the second quarter of the fourteenth century this word gradually replaced the *boljiari* in every context when the upper aristocratic strata or magnates were concerned.¹⁹ By the middle of the century they had already been clearly formed as a separate group, mainly incorporating persons of the *vlastel* category.

A second term is the old Slavic *knjaz*. It is indicative that we find *knjaz* for the first time in the very beginning of the thirteenth century and later again in the second half of the fourteenth.²⁰ Both periods are very similar as far as the appearance of mighty, half-independent local oligarchs is concerned. In all known texts this word refers to the top of the social hierarchy with extensive rights in their apanages. They were obviously the aristocratic élite whose power and privileges were so wide, that anything but the old Slavic term for ancient local autonomous tribal leaders was able to convey their status. Thus, as with the case of *velmozha*, we encounter a linguistic phenomenon, reflecting far-reaching social changes which the traditional terminological system was not able to accommodate.

My terminological analysis does not claim to be complete. Still less complete are the conclusions drawn from it, as far as real changes in the society are concerned. Social terminology was—and still is—a relatively conservative part of the language. Nevertheless,

it could be argued that for late medieval Bulgarian authors the notion of aristocracy kept changing throughout the period. Studies based on traditional methods of research have been thus far not able to grasp this important feature of the social mobility in medieval Bulgaria. A terminological analysis cannot answer the question why there was such a development, it merely records it. Yet, in the almost desperate absence of any other source, the possibilities of terminology are still not entirely explored and further research would probably prove these conclusions as generally valid.

Notes

1. A good example from this school with a summary of all previous research can be found in Jordan Trifonov, "Kâm vâprosa za starobâlgarskoto boljarstvo" [About the Medieval Bulgarian Boljars], *Spisanie na Bâlgarskata Akademia na Naukite*, ser. 14, 26 (1923), 1-70.

2. See note 1, above.

3. Jordan Ivanov, *Bâlgarski starini iz Makedonia* [Bulgarian Antiquities in Macedonia] (Sofia, 1970), 419-420 (henceforth BSM).

4. *Ibid.*, 422-24.

5. M. G. Popruženko, *Sinodik tszarjia Borila* [The Synodicon of Emperor Boril] (Sofia, 1928), 79-80, 74, 82.

6. A. Popov, *Zarevgrad-Târnov* [The Royal City of Târnovo] (Sofia, 1984), 8-9.

7. BSM, 576, 578-586; M. Andreev, *Vatopedskata gramota i vâprosite na bâlgarskoto feodalno pravo* [The Vatopedi Charter and Some Problems Connected with the Law of Feudal Bulgaria], (Sofia, 1965), facsimile.

8. A. P. Naumov, *Gospodstvujuščii klass i gosudarstvennaja vlast' v Serbii XIII - XIV veka* [Ruling Class and Government power in Thirteenth-Fourteenth Century Serbia] (Moscow, 1975), 90-93.

9. For instance in a *Life of St. Joakim of Osogovo* from the middle of the thirteenth century, see BSM, 405-418.

10. Evidencies to be found in the so-called Mraka charter of John Alexander from 1347 and the charter of John Šišman for the monastery of St. John of Rila from 1378, see BSM, 590-599.

11. Middle Bulgarian texts in: Ivan Dujčev and Dimitri S. Lihačov eds., *Srednebolgarskii perevod hroniki Konstantina Manassii v slavjanskah perevodah* [Middle Bulgarian translation of Konstantin Manasses in the Context of Slavic Translations] (Sofia, 1988); and I. Srežnevský, ed., *Simeona Metafrasta i Logoteta Spisanie mira ot bytija i letovnic* [A History of World from the Beginning and a Chronicle by Simeon Metaphrastes and Logotethos] (Sankt Petersburg, 1905). Byzantine Greek comparisons are made to *Constantini Manassis Breviarum historiae metricum*. Rec. I. Bekkerus (Bonnae, 1837) and V. Muralt, ed., *Georgii Hamartoli Chronicon* (Sankt Petersburg, 1861).

12. See for instance Dujčev-Lihačov, *Srednebolgarskij perevod*, 165-66 and cf. *Breviarum*, Ins. 3343 ff.

13. E. Kalužniacki, *Werke des Patriarchen von Bulgarien Euthymius (1375-1393)* (London, 1971), 115.

14. In the *Translatio of St. John of Rila*, described by Vladislav Gramatik, see E. Kalužniacki, *Werke, Erste Beilage*, 420; Jordan Trifonov, "Kâm vâprosa," 30.

15. Socially not defined groups are designated with the opposition "small-great" in some texts of the Synodicon of the Bulgarian Church; in a treatise for the tavern-landlady Theophano, see E. Turdeanu, ed., *Le dit de l'empereur Nicéphore II Phocas et de son épouse Theophano* (Thessaloniki, 1976), 66. It must be noted, however, that Turdeanu believes the version T now in the so-called Tikveski sbornik to be the most closest to the lost original. Furthermore, he calls it a "Macedono-Serbian" (?) redaction. Yet the terminology of this version is definitely different of that in version S, a truly Serbian redaction of the fifteenth century. This, as well as other linguistic indications make us accept its prototype as a Bulgarian version of the mid-thirteenth century. Further references can be found in the *Laudatio* for King John Alexander of 1337 and in the Bulgarian translation of the Troy legend, see Chr. Kodov, *Opis na slavianskite råkopisi v bibliotekata na BAN* [Inventory of the Slavic Manuscripts in the Library of the Bălgarian Academy of Sciences] (Sofia, 1969), 23 ff., and Dujčev-Lihačev, *Srednebolgarskij perevod*, 244.

16. The early short *Life of St. John of Rila* in the Sofia Prolog (the late twelfth century); the *Visio* of Isaiah from the collection of priest Dragol (early thirteenth century); and in the Troy legend the *vlasteli* are the symbol of the highest status for the average soldiers, see Dujčev-Lihačev, *Srednebolgarskij perevod*, 247; for the *Life of St. Theodosi* from Tamovo (mid-fourteenth century) see V. Zlatarski, "žitie i žižn prepodobnago otza našego Theodosija" [The Life and the Deeds of Our Venerable Father Theodosius], *Sbornik za narondi umotvorenia* (Sofia, 1904), vol. 20, 30; for the homily for Euthymius written in early fifteenth century by Gregory Tzamblak, see P. Rusev et al., *Pohvalno slovo za Evtimii ot Grigori Tsamblak* [Homily for Euthymius by Gregory Tzamblak] (Sofia, 1971), 184 ff.

17. Dujčev-Lihačev, *Srednebolgarskij perevod*, 165, 180, 186, 215, cf. *Breviarum*, lns. 3343, 4219, 4569, 6169.

18. BSM, 405-418.

19. For example the *Laudatio* for John Alexander from 1337 they are the closest friends of the king; in the marginal note of Prvoslav 1360 the logothetes Mita—one of the highest officials of the kingdom—is called the most honorable *velmoža* of the kingdom; according to Tzamblak "even the highest officials of the kingdom (*velmoži*) were inclined toward heresy."

20. The earliest references we have in Latin translation. see I. Božilov, "Belota—bălgarski vlastel ot načaloto na trinadeseti vek" [Belota, a Bulgarian Noble from the Beginning of the Thirteenth Century] *Istoričeski Pregled*, 1 (1977): 71-81; and I. Dujčev, "Prepiskata na papa Inokentii s bălgarite" [The correspondence of Pope Innocent with the Bulgarians] *Godišnik na Sofijskija Universitet, Istoričeski Fakultet*, (1942), 37 Nr. 3, 1-116, yet in his *Life of St. Phylotea* patriarch Euthymius definitely supported the translation of the term *princeps* with the Slavic *knjaz*, see E. Kalužniacki, *Werke*, 96. For the fourteenth century sources see A. Jacobs, *ZONARA-SONARA. Die byzantinische Geschichte bei Johannes Zonaras in slavischer Übersetzung* (München, 1970), 21-24; E. Kalužniacki, *Aus der panegyrischen Literatur der Südslaven* (London, 1971), iii; P. Rusev et al., *Pohvalno slovo*, 208; J. L. Scharpe and F. Vyncke, eds., *Bdinski Zbornik. An Old-Slavonic Menologium of Women-Saints—A.D. 1360* (Bruges, 1973), 61, 76, 77, 135, 136.

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2
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**Nobilities in Central and Eastern
Europe:
Kinship, Property and Privilege**

edited by

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LECTORIS ALUTEM!

The aim of the editors and publishers of this series of occasional papers is to present recent results of research in social history to the international public. In the spirit of the Hungarian historian of Europe, István Hajnal (1892-1956), we believe that the history of "small nations" may highlight aspects of general development that are less visible in the life of major civilisations.

The volumes in this series will address specific aspects of social development in medieval and modern central Europe. We intend to focus on the region between the German lands and the Byzantine-Russian world, to explore similarities and differences in this area. Instead of arguing the validity of the term, we shall publish studies that may enable our readers to decide to what extent is "central Europe" a historical reality or merely a dream of intellectuals and politicians. That is why we chose a medieval map for our cover: it emphasizes the centuries-old connecting function of the great rivers but contains no ephemeral political boundaries.

It is also our hope to contribute to the understanding of present developments and upheavals in a region about which few critical analyses are available in the English-speaking world. At the same time we should like to foster modern methods and approaches in social history, for so long neglected in our countries.

The present volume appears in close cooperation with the *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* Society and contains studies mainly on medieval and early modern nobilities of the region. The papers of two recently deceased Hungarian medievalists as well as articles of a Czech, a Polish and a Bulgarian historian discuss the social history of medieval nobilities. Two articles, on Hungarian and Austrian nobles of the *ancien régime* look at social mobility and estate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The volume closes with an essay by István Hajnal on the end of the noble-corporatist world in nineteenth-century Hungary. With publishing three articles of the generations preceding ours, we wish to bow to those who taught us, without wanting to hide that their questions and answers are not necessarily ours. By printing papers of younger scholars, in turn, we hope to present recent research in the area on topics that are discussed among social historians everywhere.

The volume editor wishes to express his gratitude to those friends and colleagues who assisted in the - often almost unscramountable - task of translating and editing the Czech, Magyar and Polish contributions: Catherine Allen, Simon Carne, Tamás Domahidy, Vera Gáthy, Ryszard Grzesik, and Paul Knoll. Needless to say that he alone feels responsible for the remaining shortcomings, which are, probably, many. Maybe, we shall publish once a volume only on the intricacies and pitfalls of translating medieval and medievalist texts.

H & S

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