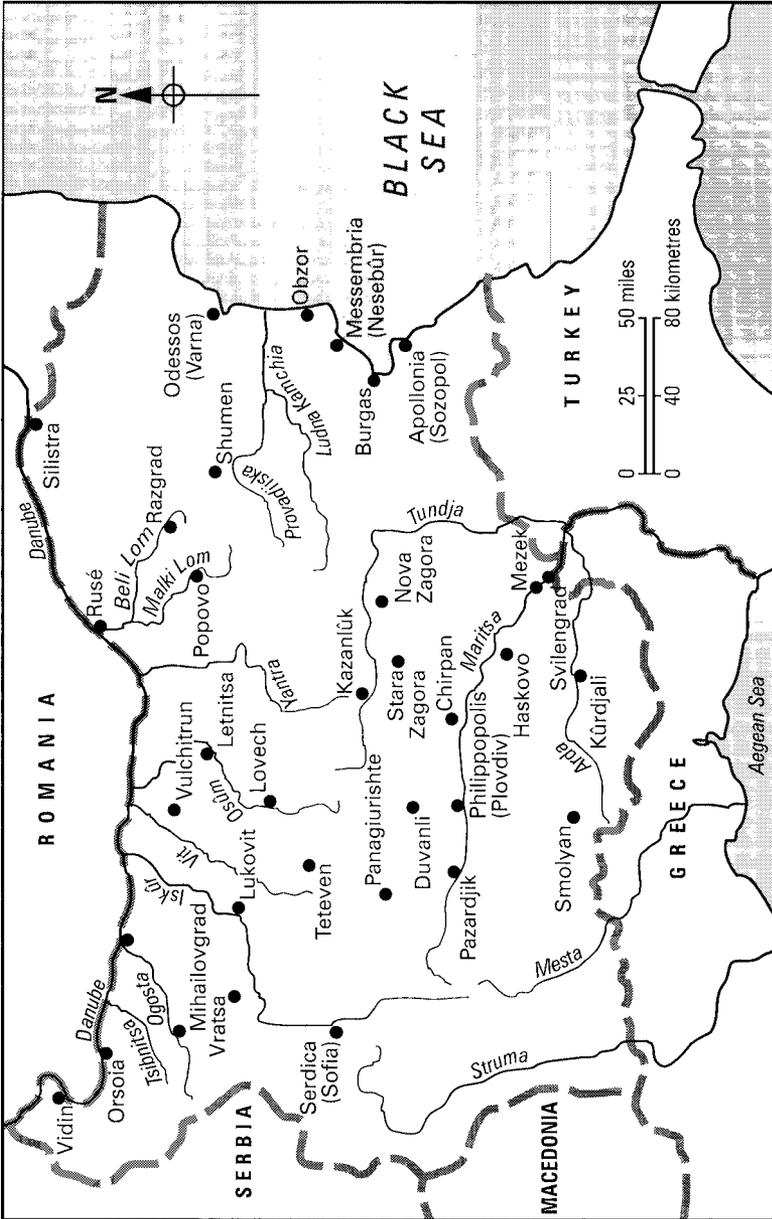


I

The Bulgarian lands from prehistory to the arrival of the Bulgarians

The lands which now constitute the state of Bulgaria were amongst the first in Europe to witness the emergence of organised, social life. Settlements existed in these lands as early as the middle palaeolithic period, from c. 100,000 to 40,000 BC. In neolithic times the population gradually forsook their caves for the plains where they began to work the land. By the third millennium BC they were cultivating non-food crops such as flax and had become adept at metal-working. In the sixth millennium BC an unknown people were producing objects of great originality and which experts consider to be the products of a spontaneously generated rather than an imported culture. This culture, in which the chief object of veneration appears to have been the mother goddess, reached its zenith in the fourth millennium BC.

By the end of the third millennium BC the lands to the east of the Morava–Vardar valleys were falling under the cultural influence of the Thracians. An Indo-European people, the Thracians lived in a loosely organised tribal society. They were masters of metal-working, particularly with silver and gold. Many spectacular hoards have been unearthed in present-day Bulgaria at sites such as Panagiurishte, Velchitrun and Vratsa, and many more remain to be excavated. In addition to a high level of proficiency in metal-working the Thracians were renowned for their horsemanship. Music too was an essential feature of Thracian culture for Orpheus himself was an early Thracian king who managed to unite the disparate tribes of Thrace and Macedonia for a short period. This



Map I.1 Ancient sites in present-day Bulgaria.



Plate I.I A Mother Goddess figure produced by the unidentified people who thrived in the Bulgarian lands during the sixth millenium BC.

was a considerable feat in that the Thracians showed little disposition towards political cohesion and cooperation, Herodotus once noting that if the Thracians could only unite and subordinate themselves to one leader they would be invincible. As is so often the case in the Balkans, it was external pressures rather than internal inclinations which brought about political unity.

These pressures came from the Greeks who established mercantile centres and colonies along the Black Sea coast. The Greeks held the Thracians in low esteem, unjustifiably so because not only were the Thracians their equal in crafts and horsemanship, they also began minting coins at much the same time as their haughty southern

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neighbours. The Persian invasions of the Balkans in the sixth and fifth centuries BC were a much more serious threat than Greek cultural arrogance. This external danger brought about the Odryssian kingdom which united the Thracian tribes of the central Balkans.

The Persian storm was weathered but in the fourth century BC another threat appeared, this time from within the Balkan peninsula. The powerful new Macedonian state soon clashed with the Thracians. The latter's cultural achievements continued but they suffered chronic political weakness; they accepted Macedonian domination, and Thracian archers and horsemen formed a significant proportion of the army which Alexander the Great took to the frontiers of India. After the disappearance of the Macedonian danger came one much more ominous.

Landing first in the west of the Balkans to suppress pirates in the third century BC, the Romans spread inexorably inland. By the first century AD the entire peninsula south of the Danube was under their control. For a while they allowed a truncated Thracian kingdom to continue as a client state but eventually that too disappeared. The Thracian language survived in remote areas until the fifth century AD and their worship of the horse was continued by later inhabitants of the area; and some scholars still see the 'mummers' found in parts of the south-west of present-day Bulgaria as a relict of Thracian culture.

Roman rule was characteristically efficient and strict, giving the Balkan peninsula a unity and stability enjoyed neither before nor since. Under Roman law and the firm grip of the legions the provinces of Moesia, the area between the Balkan mountains and the Danube, and Thrace, from the Balkans to the Aegean, prospered. The new system of roads bound the Balkans together on both a north–south and an east–west axis. At the crossroad of important diagonal routes across the peninsula was to be found the city of Serdica, the site on which Sofia now stands. Other cities flourished, not least Trimontium, now Plovdiv, whose magnificent Roman theatre was discovered only in the 1970s when a new road was being built.

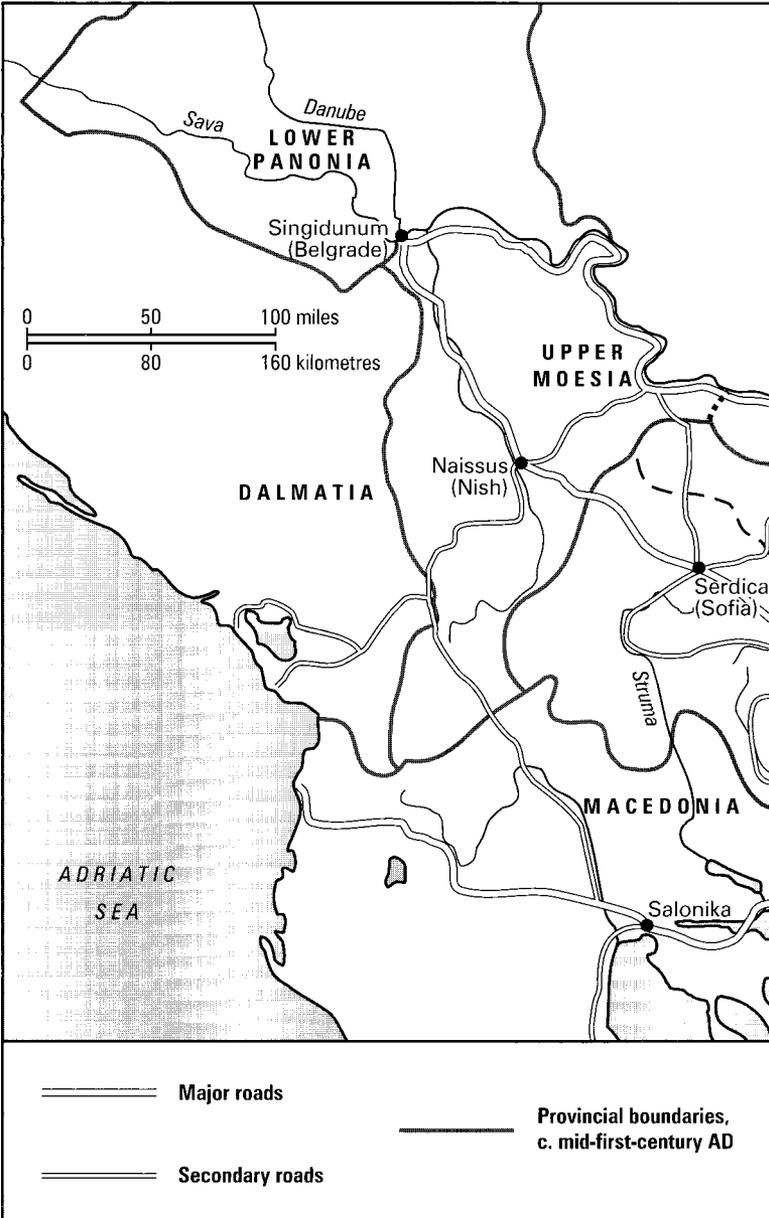
With Roman rule, eventually, came Christianity and when the empire was divided in 395 Moesia and Thrace became part of the

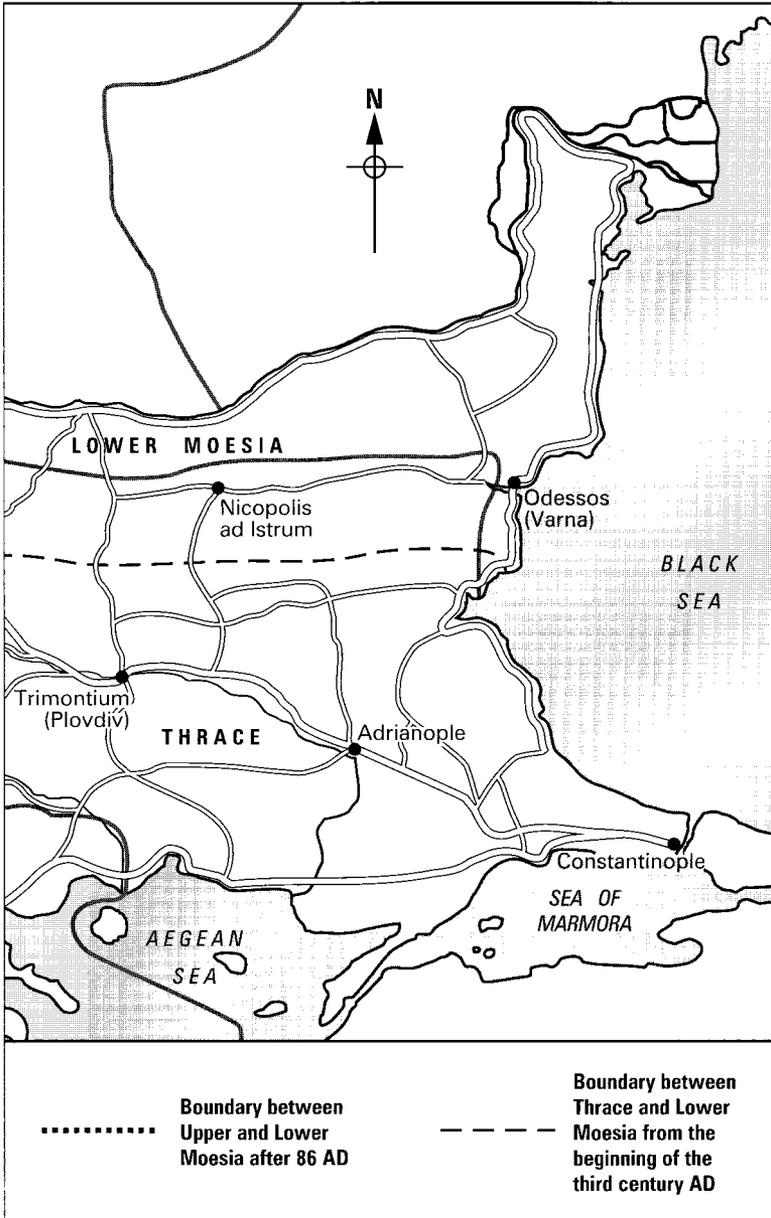


Plate 1.2 A one-handed vase from the Vratsa treasure, between 380 and 350 BC. The vase, 9 cm in height, illustrates the Thracian prowess in horsemanship.

eastern empire focused on Constantinople (Byzantium). For the next millennium and a half the city was to play a hugely important role in the history of the Bulgarian lands.

By the fourth century Roman power was weakening. Internal problems were compounded when tribes from the Asiatic steppes raided the north-east of the Balkans. In the following century ultimately fatal damage was inflicted on the Roman body politic by a series of such invaders who included the Alani, the Goths and the Huns, all of whom were enticed by the prospect of looting the fabled wealth of Byzantium. They failed in that aspiration and soon moved out of the Balkans in search of fresh plunder, but if these invaders were transient, the Slavs who also first appeared in the fifth century,





Map 1.2 The Roman empire in the Balkans.

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Plate 1.3 The Roman theatre in Plovdiv which came to light only in the 1970s during the construction of a new inner city road.

were not. They were settlers. They colonised areas of the eastern Balkans and in the seventh century other Slav tribes combined with the Proto-Bulgars, a group of Turkic origin, to launch a fresh assault into the Balkans. The Proto-Bulgars originated in the area between the Urals and the Volga and were a pot-pourri of various ethnic elements, the word *Bulgar* being derived from a Turkic verb meaning 'to mix'. What differentiated the Proto-Bulgars from the Slavs was that they had, in addition to a formidable military reputation, a highly developed sense of political cohesion and organisation. In 680 their leader, Khan Asparukh, led an army across the Danube and in the following year established his capital at Pliska near what is now Shumen. A Bulgarian state had appeared in the Balkans.

2

Mediaeval Bulgaria, 681–1393

Two main problems confronted the new Bulgarian state at the end of the seventh century: the need to establish clearly defined and secure borders; and the need to weld together the two main human components of the state, the Proto-Bulgarian conquerors and the conquered Slavs. The second of these two problems was eventually to be resolved, but the first was seldom out of consideration for more than a few years; this problem was to be a persistent feature of Bulgarian states, modern as well as mediaeval.

The new state commanded a powerful position. From Pliska it could control the north–south routes through the eastern passes of the Balkan mountains and along the narrow lowland coastal strip. In the north, however, its extensive territories beyond the Danube inevitably led it into conflict with both the tribal groups milling around in the plains to the north-east, and with the succession of states which were established on the north-western borders. For the leaders of mediaeval Bulgaria, however, the most persistent and pressing problem was defining Bulgaria's relations with the great power to the south. The first mediaeval Bulgarian state was to be destroyed by Byzantium; the second was to fall to Byzantium's successor, the Ottoman empire.

BULGARIA UNDER THE KHANS, 681–852

After its foundation in 681 the new state enjoyed almost a century of growth. Initial tensions with Byzantium were contained and

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regulated in a treaty of 716 which awarded northern Thrace to Bulgaria and was unusual in the mediaeval era in that it contained purely economic clauses. Immediately after the treaty the Bulgarian state assisted Byzantium in the latter's conflict with the Arabs in Asia Minor. By the middle of the eighth century part of the Morava valley had been added to Bulgaria which then included much of what is now southern Romania and parts of present-day Ukraine.

By this time the Black Sea was a virtual Byzantine lake, and in this sector it went virtually unchallenged by Bulgaria because Bulgaria never developed a sizeable sea-going force. Even if the strategic need for a such a force had been recognised it is doubtful if anything effective could have been done to act upon that need; the Bulgarian state had a relatively low technological base and the degree of planning and coordination needed to produce a navy would have been difficult to achieve in an economy which did not even mint its own coins, preferring instead to rely on Byzantine currency.

The lack of a navy ruled out expansion along the Black Sea coast either to the north or the south, just as the chaos of the steppe area made impossible any territorial gains to the north-east; the natural direction of movement for the Bulgarian state was therefore to the north-west and the south-west. In the north-west the collapse of the Avar kingdom created a vacuum into which Bulgaria's rulers gladly advanced, this taking their frontier up to the river Tisza; Transylvania too became part of Bulgaria. Expansion to the south and south-west was not so easy. Some of Macedonia had been taken late in the eighth century but only at the cost of losing part of Bulgaria's possessions in Thrace. Khan Krum (803–14) determined to remedy this. In 811 he took the recently fortified Sredets (now Sofia) from the Byzantines, went on to seize Nesebŭr on the Black Sea coast, and then marched as far as the walls of Byzantium itself. This was a characteristically vicious war in which, in 811, the Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus became the first of his rank for almost five hundred years to lose his life on the battlefield; Krum encrusted his deceased enemy's skull in silver and used it as a drinking goblet.

In 814 his successor, Khan Omurtag (814–31), concluded a peace which gave Bulgaria some territory in the Tundja valley, and later in his reign he was able to add Belgrade (Singidunum) and its