

FLORIN CURTA – PANOS SOPHOULIS (eds.), *The Balkans in the Late Middle Ages, 1300–1500*. Abingdon: Routledge 2027. 285 pp. – ISBN 978-1-032-6037-11

• EMIR O. FILIPOVIĆ, University of Sarajevo
(emir.filipovic@ff.unsa.ba)

Some periods in history are more difficult to understand precisely because we know all too well how they ended. Hindsight inevitably clouds our judgement, and the late medieval Balkans are a particularly obvious example in that regard. Read retrospectively, the narrative of the region's history between 1300 and 1500 can easily become an extended prelude to Ottoman conquest: the Byzantine Empire diminishes, Serbia rises and fragments, Bulgaria dissolves under external pressure, Bosnia reaches its political apogee before succumbing, and one polity after another gets drawn into the expanding Ottoman sphere. The chronology is both sound and broadly familiar, yet it gives disproportionate weight to the end of the story and risks reducing two remarkably dynamic centuries to a teleological pattern of decline and defeat. FLORIN CURTA, PANOS SOPHOULIS and their contributors were well aware of this danger, and much of their volume on *The Balkans in the Late Middle Ages, 1300–1500* represents an attempt to move beyond such a perspective and rethink the established narrative of the period, while still offering an up-to-date point of entry into a historiography that remains dispersed across many languages and national scholarly traditions.

General surveys of medieval Southeast Europe in English are still comparatively few, while scholarship devoted to individual countries, regions and political entities has expanded enormously during the last several decades. The editors identified a growing discrepancy between the sophistication of specialist research and its relatively limited influence upon broader interpretations of medieval European history. The volume was consequently conceived as something more ambitious than a collection of regional surveys: the idea was to present the Balkan peninsula as a geographical whole and to offer a fresh interpretation of the period between 1300 and 1500, bringing political and military developments into discussion with society, religion, economy and culture.

Following an introductory chapter by the editors and a survey of written and archaeological sources by ROSSINA KOSTOVA and KIRIL PETKOV,

eight chapters examine the region through separate treatments of Byzantium, Serbia, Bulgaria, Bosnia, Croatia and Dalmatia, Wallachia and Moldavia, Latin Greece, and the Albanian lands. The final two chapters treat the Ottoman advance and the anti-Ottoman crusades. The regional chapters are broadly organised around four common themes: political and military history, society and the Church, economic developments, and culture. The editors present this uniformity as a means of facilitating comparison and moving beyond an exclusively political account of the period. While the balance between these categories differs considerably from one contribution to another, the common framework gives readers a useful degree of orientation and makes regional similarities and differences easier to identify.

The volume has substantial geographical breadth and engages extensively with multilingual scholarship that remains only partially accessible in English. Byzantium and Serbia naturally receive extensive attention without overshadowing the other parts of the peninsula. Bulgaria, Bosnia, Albania, Croatia and Dalmatia, as well as Wallachia and Moldavia, are treated as historical subjects in their own right. Much of Anglophone writing on the late medieval Balkans has traditionally been shaped by Byzantine studies or the history of Ottoman expansion, with areas outside these principal narratives appearing only when they intersect with Constantinople or the Ottoman state. The arrangement adopted here gives greater prominence to political formations that developed according to their own internal dynamics and maintained connections extending towards Central Europe, the Adriatic and the Black Sea. The volume also pays attention to the quality and distribution of the surviving evidence. The first chapter on written and archaeological sources is especially useful in revealing how different the evidentiary foundations of the various regional historiographies are. Serbia, for example, benefits from a combination of locally written royal charters preserved in monasteries, Byzantine material, Hungarian sources, early Ottoman documentation and the extraordinary quantity of records generated by the Adriatic towns, particularly Ragusa. Bosnia must often be reconstructed from material produced or kept outside of the kingdom, from inscriptions, archaeological artifacts, and the earliest Ottoman texts. Specialists will be familiar with many of these problems, but their inclusion serves a valuable methodological purpose in a survey also intended for students and readers approaching the topic from neighbouring fields. The attention paid to the uneven survival and distribution of the evidence is complemented by the considerable use made of archaeology. Fortifications,

settlement patterns, ceramics, churches, burial practices and domestic architecture repeatedly supplement the written evidence and are particularly valuable for regions and subjects for which the documentary record is less abundant.

Several individual contributions stand out. SIMON HASDENTEUFEL's treatment of Latin Greece is particularly effective because it goes beyond a summary of events and explicitly challenges the older paradigm of decline. He questions the traditional interpretation of these developments as signs of deterioration and disorder, showing how they also reflected changing social and political conditions. His discussion of demographic dislocation, plague, rural movement, and Albanian migration into areas affected by population loss moves attention away from courts and armies towards the strategies by which communities responded to instability. The chapter consequently offers some of the clearest examples in the volume of how the conventional political narrative can be reconsidered through social history.

NEVEN ISAILOVIĆ's chapter on Bosnia is another substantial contribution. Medieval Bosnia is presented neither as an appendix to Serbian history nor solely within the framework of Hungarian claims and Ottoman conquest. Particular attention is paid to the composite character of the Bosnian polity, the territorial units of lands (*zemlje*) and counties (*župe*), the political role of the state assembly (*stanak*), customary law, and the relationships that connected the ruler with the aristocracy. The treatment of the Bosnian Church is appropriately cautious and ISAILOVIĆ avoids the prevailing tendency to identify it straightforwardly with dualist heresy, paying greater attention to its institutional development, local ecclesiastical traditions and the polemical nature of much of the existing evidence. Since older interpretations continue to circulate well beyond specialist scholarship, their reassessment is particularly useful in a book intended to serve as a general reference point.

Taken individually, chapters such as these provide substantial and often nuanced accounts of their respective regions. Reading them together, however, also reveals some of the limitations imposed by the organisation of the volume. Despite the common thematic structure, economic connections that extend beyond individual political units tend to appear in separate places. The chapter on sources, for example, notes the concentration of documentation concerning Bosnian silver mines in Venetian and Ragusan archives, while the chapter on Croatia and Dalmatia stresses the role of Ragusan merchants as mine owners and investors in Bosnia and Serbia.

These observations invite a broader interpretation of the Balkans as an increasingly interconnected economic space, but that interpretation has to be assembled by the reader from material dispersed across the volume.

The strengths of these individual chapters also point towards the fundamental structural difficulty of the book. While seeking to move beyond traditional political history and provide an integrated point of reference for the Balkans as a whole, the editors retain states and territories as the main units around which the volume itself is constructed. There are obvious practical advantages to this arrangement, particularly in a reference work, as it allows contributors to examine particular political societies in considerable detail. The consequence of this, however, is that the Balkans frequently appear as a series of adjacent regional histories whose connections become visible intermittently rather than systematically, which makes processes extending across their boundaries more difficult to follow.

This is especially evident in cases where political borders mattered less than networks of commerce, kinship, religion or military service. Ragusa (Dubrovnik) is perhaps the most obvious omission in this respect. Although it appears throughout the volume, it surely deserved more sustained treatment in a book seeking to examine the late medieval Balkans as a geographical whole. Its merchants were active in Bosnia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania, the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere, while its archives constitute one of the most important bodies of evidence for the history of the western and central Balkans. References to Ragusan merchants, political activities, and documentary material consequently appear in several chapters, and the chapter on Croatia and Dalmatia notes that the growth of Ragusa contributed to urbanisation in Bosnia and Serbia and that Ragusan commercial colonies formed networks across political frontiers. Yet Ragusa receives no sustained treatment as a historical phenomenon whose activities connected several of the states discussed in the book. Its significance is instead distributed among the histories of the territories with which it interacted, leaving these connections largely to be reconstructed by the reader.

Something similar occurs with other regions that do not fit comfortably into the existing chapter divisions. Their histories surface in discussions of Serbia, Albania, Byzantium, or Ottoman expansion and are generally subordinated to those larger narratives. The last two chapters, for example, mention the domains of King Marko and the Dragaš brothers, the Balšići of Zeta, the Albanian principalities and the rulers of Epirus while reconstructing the expansion of Ottoman influence. The reader therefore encounters

these territories repeatedly, although seldom with the coherence afforded to the larger political units.

The two final chapters also merit some qualification. BORIS STOJKOVSKI's work on the Ottoman advance provides an accessible chronological overview of the main stages of Ottoman expansion, but remains more firmly within the conventions of political and military history than most of the preceding contributions, focusing primarily on campaigns, rulers, and territorial change. Recent scholarship has devoted increasing attention to frontier societies, raiding economies, negotiated submission, tributary relations, collaboration, vassalage, local continuity and the gradual incorporation of Balkan elites into Ottoman structures. A fuller engagement with these processes would have complemented the regional chapters and conveyed more effectively the gradual and uneven character of Ottoman expansion. As a result, the chapter does more to trace the territorial progress of Ottoman power than to explain the different processes through which Ottoman rule became established across the peninsula.

ADINEL C. DINCĂ's discussion of anti-Ottoman crusading is more ambitious in its conceptual approach and begins with a useful acknowledgement that crusading cannot be reduced to a sequence of military expeditions. The author explicitly defines the limits of the chapter, presenting it as an empirically grounded reconstruction rather than a comprehensive analysis of the religious, cultural, and ideological dimensions of the crusading movement. Particularly welcome is the attempt to situate Balkan crusading within papal institutions, fiscal mechanisms, indulgences, and the broader historiography of the crusades, thereby distinguishing crusading from religious and anti-Ottoman warfare more generally. The conceptual apparatus employed at the beginning of the chapter is, however, substantially more elaborate than the predominantly chronological narrative that follows.

These final two chapters attempt to shift the perspective from individual states and territories to developments affecting the peninsula more broadly. One or two additional chapters devoted to transregional processes would nevertheless have strengthened the editors' principal argument considerably. Mining, commerce and communications could have brought Ragusa, Bosnia, Serbia, the Adriatic coast and even the Ottoman Empire into the same discussion. Religious institutions and confessional interaction offer another obvious possibility, connecting Orthodox churches, the papacy, Franciscans, the Bosnian Church, and the earliest Ottoman Islamic institutions. Migration, captivity and aristocratic networks provide further themes

around which comparisons might have been developed. Much of the evidence required for such discussions already appears in the regional chapters, though its wider implications are rarely pursued.

It is for this reason that the absence of a substantial concluding chapter is more keenly felt. After the final chapter on crusading, the volume ends abruptly, without drawing the regional studies into a sustained comparative discussion. Several patterns that recur throughout the preceding chapters would have benefited from closer consideration: political fragmentation, economic exchange, the changing position of aristocracies, the reach of Venetian and Ragusan commercial networks, institutional continuities during Ottoman incorporation, and the extent to which the regions covered by the book shared historical processes sufficient to justify treating the Balkans as a coherent field of enquiry. A conclusion addressing some of these themes could have given greater coherence to a collection whose individual chapters repeatedly provide opportunities for comparison.

There is also some unevenness between the contributions, despite the editors' efforts to limit this through the common chapter structure. Some authors employ the proposed categories to construct their interpretative arguments; others remain closer to conventional chronological survey. Vocabulary and historiographical temperament likewise vary. The chapter on Albania, for example, contains a valuable account of commodities, maritime exchange and the divergent interests of Ragusan and Venetian merchants, while going noticeably further than most other contributions in describing international trade as resembling 'colonial exploitation' (p. 172) and presenting foreign commercial powers as important agents in the weakening of the country.

A reference work of this kind also invites scrutiny at the level of factual and editorial precision. There are occasional slips that should ideally have disappeared during copy-editing. One passage in the crusading chapter places Završje in 'northern Istria' (p. 207), an obvious geographical error, while elsewhere the Ottomans are said to have taken Dyrrachium (Durrës) shortly after 1391 (p. 212), although the city passed under Venetian rule in 1392 and remained Venetian until its Ottoman conquest in 1501. In the chapter on the Ottoman advance, John Alexander of Bulgaria, who died in 1371, is mistakenly made to respond to events of the 1380s, evidently in place of John Shishman (p. 191), while in the chapter on anti-Ottoman crusading King Louis I is also incorrectly said to have succeeded to the Polish throne in 1372 (p. 209), although he had become king of Poland in 1370.

The explanatory text accompanying the general map (p. xi) lists both 'SI' and 'SK' as abbreviations for Slovenia, although the latter plainly refers to Slovakia. Elsewhere one encounters awkward syntax and minor linguistic imperfections. Such details have little bearing on the scholarly substance of the book, although they are noticeable in a volume intended to function as a dependable reference work.

Set against the breadth and usefulness of the volume as a whole, these remain relatively minor shortcomings. By bringing together scholars working with markedly different source traditions and historiographies, the volume makes an enormous quantity of specialist research accessible to an Anglophone readership. The bibliography will be especially useful to students entering fields where much of the essential literature remains published in a variety of languages and scripts. Archaeology, economic history and religious institutions occupy a much more substantial place than in the older political surveys that provide the historiographical background against which the editors position their project.

Some of the book's limitations are in part a consequence of its ambition. A history of the Balkans between 1300 and 1500 has to accommodate distinct political entities alongside processes that crossed their frontiers, radically unequal bodies of evidence, and historiographical traditions that have often developed in isolation from one another. Ottoman expansion presents an additional difficulty because its eventual success so easily imposes retrospective coherence upon developments whose outcome was far from obvious to contemporaries. Within fewer than three hundred pages, CURTA, SOPHOULIS and their contributors have produced a series of informed and often admirable regional and thematic surveys. Taken together, they show both the advances made in the study of the late medieval Balkans and the continuing difficulty of integrating these regional histories within a common interpretative framework.

Indeed, one of the more productive effects of this volume may be to expose precisely where future synthesis is required. Through the book the reader encounters phenomena that move across the boundaries separating the chapters: Ragusan merchants and silver from the Balkan interior; Venetian political and commercial interests along the Adriatic and into Albania and Greece; noble families whose ambitions crossed political frontiers; clerics and religious movements linking local communities with Rome, Constantinople and Mount Athos; captives, migrants and soldiers moving through zones of conflict; and Ottoman institutions that expanded through

a landscape already structured by older political, social, and economic relationships. Although these connections remain an important aspect of the book, the organising principle of the volume prevents them from becoming more prominent.

The volume succeeds particularly well as a guide to the remarkable amount of work now being done on individual parts of late medieval Southeast Europe. At the same time, reading these chapters together reveals how much remains to be done in bringing those histories into closer conversation. The difficulty is no longer simply one of recovering regions once marginalised in broader accounts of medieval Europe, but of finding ways to write their histories together without obscuring their differences or allowing the eventual Ottoman conquest to determine the narrative in advance. In that sense, this volume performs a valuable service by drawing attention to that problem while making a large body of recent scholarship accessible to an Anglophone readership.

Keywords

medieval Balkan history