Despite the fact that rulers of early medieval, pre-Christian Bulgaria were undoubtedly *khans* (‘khana’), a number of scholars, from Mark Whittow to Peter Golden, prefer to refer to Bulgaria as a *khaganate*.\(^1\) András Róna-Tas even claimed that Kuvrat’s polity was a “short-lived Bulghar empire,” something that looks more like an oxymoron than a statement of fact.\(^2\) To be sure, to call Bulgaria a *khaganate* is not entirely incorrect, especially when one does not take into consideration only political concepts, but also their historical content. During much of the ninth century, in any case up to *ca.* 860, Bulgaria was a *de facto* *khaganate*. However, the Bulgar ruler is never mentioned as *khagan* in either contemporary inscriptions or Byzantine sources. Instead, the epigraphic evidence suggests that the title of the Bulgar ruler was either ‘*k(h)anasybigi*’ (attested between 822 and 836) or that described by the rather more common Greek terms ‘archon’, ‘archegos’, *kyrios*, and ‘*hegemon*’.\(^3\) The title ‘*khagan*’ applied to a Bulgar ruler only appears in later sources. For example, the so-called *Chronicle of the Priest of Dioclea*, written in Latin by Gregory, the late twelfth-century archbishop of Bar, calls Boris-Michael (852–889; d. 907) a *khagan*: “Ruler over them [the Bulgars] was a certain Boris, whom they called in his language cagan, which in our language means emperor.”\(^4\)

Gregory wrote his Chronicle in order to justify the elevation of his see to the rank of archbishopric in the circumstances surrounding the coronation of Vukan, ruler of Zeta (Duklja), by Pope Innocent III. Although the status of archbishopric had already been recognized in 1089, the bishop of Bar had been for the entire twelfth century a mere suffragan of the archbishop of Dubrovnik. Gregory’s goal was therefore


\(^2\) Róna-Tas 1999, 219.

\(^3\) See details in Stepanov 2001, 2–3.

\(^4\) *Annales Anonymi presbyteri de Dioclea V*, in Duichev et al. 1965, 170: “Praeerat eis quidam nomine Boris, quem lingua sua ‘cagan’ appellabant, quod in lingua nostra resonat ‘imperator’.”
to put together as much information as possible that could be used to support the papal decision. Judging by various contradictory assertions in his *Chronicle* he was without any doubt not very well informed on things Bulgarian, certainly not on the ninth-century history of Bulgaria. It is quite possible that in equating ‘khagan’ with ‘emperor’ he was in fact borrowing from a line of reasoning attested in Western annals and chronicles preoccupied with Avars. Assuming that Avars and Bulgars were similar to each other, Gregory attributed to a Bulgar ruler a title that he knew only from sources referring to Avars.

Given the lack of interest in Bulgar titulature in later sources, it is therefore quite surprising that the ‘khagan’ title appears in a number of late eleventh-century Bulgarian apocalyptic texts. They all originate from western Bulgaria, most likely from around Sredets (modern Sofia). The title is used in reference to Boris-Michael, who introduced Christianity to Bulgaria, and to Peter Delian, the leader of the anti-Byzantine revolt of 1040/1041. The *Skazanie of the Prophet Isaiah* and the *Vision of the Prophets Isaiah or Daniel*, mention Boris-Michael as “Michael khagan,” while Peter Delian appears as “tsar Gagan,” that is “tsar khagan,” a phrase that may be regarded as the equivalent of “basileus/emperor khagan.” But in the *Vision of Isaiah*, a text most likely written in the 1270s, the title of Michael is already given as knyaz, that is prince, while no mention is made of Peter Delian. Since it has been demonstrated that the scribe copying this text was Serbian, it is possible that the peculiar usage of knyaz simply reflects a Serbian terminology, for in medieval Serbia, rulers called themselves “prince.”

However, there are still unanswered questions regarding the Bulgarian apocalyptic texts of the late eleventh century. How are we to explain the use of the title of khagan by Bulgarian authors of that period, especially since, as we have seen, there is no mention of that title in other written sources? Is there any association between the specific genre of literature in which such a title appears and the millennial fears and expectations of a Second Coming that were prominent in the late tenth and during the first half of the eleventh century? The answer to the first question will have to take into consideration the old idea that in so-called traditional societies, especially during crises, compensatory mechanisms

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5 Tăpkova-Zaimova and Miltenova 1996.