

= Momchil =

Momchil ( Bulgarian : ?????? , Greek : ??? [ ? ] ?????? or ?????????? ; c . 1305 ? 7 July 1345 ) was a 14th @-@ century Bulgarian brigand and local ruler . Initially a member of a bandit gang in the borderlands of Bulgaria , Byzantium and Serbia , Momchil was recruited by the Byzantines as a mercenary . Through his opportunistic involvement in the Byzantine civil war of 1341 ? 1347 , where he played the various sides against each other , he became ruler of a large area in the Rhodopes and western Thrace .

Momchil achieved initial successes against Turks and Byzantines alike , setting Turkish ships on fire and almost managing to kill one of his main opponents at the time , John VI Kantakouzenos . Despite this , he was defeated and killed by a joint Byzantine ? Turkish army in 1345 . Due to his opposition to the Turks , he is remembered in popular South Slavic legend as a fighter against the Turkish invasion of the Balkans .

= = Brigandage and role in the Byzantine civil war = =

Contemporary and near @-@ contemporary accounts describe Momchil physically as " imposing in appearance " , " as tall as two men " and , in the words of a Turkish poet , " resembling a minaret " . According to a contemporary source , Momchil was a native of the " border area of Bulgarians and Serbs " , which at the time straddled the Rhodopes and the Pirin mountains . The claim that Momchil was born in that region may be reinforced by 15th @-@ century Ottoman registers , according to which his name was the most popular male name in that area . There exist at least a few legends which tie his birth to a particular place , for example the village of Fakia in Strandzha , though evidence is nonexistent . In any case , Momchil was born of humble origin . This was a main factor in his decision to join a band of brigands ( hajduks ) which was active in the scarcely governed border areas between Bulgaria , Byzantium and Serbia .

Persecuted by the Bulgarian authorities , some time before 1341 Momchil fled to Byzantium . He was accepted into the service of Emperor Andronikos III Palaiologos ( r . 1328 ? 1341 ) as a mercenary and tasked with the protection of the territories he previously plundered . However , his brigand activities did not cease . Momchil regularly raided Bulgarian lands , which negatively impacted Byzantine ? Bulgarian relations . Undesired by the Byzantines and " detestable to the Bulgarians " , he deserted the Byzantine army and fled to Serbia to serve its ruler Stephen Du?an . In Serbia , he formed a company of 2 @,@ 000 trusted men , both Bulgarians and Serbs .

During the Byzantine civil war of 1341 ? 1347 , Momchil joined the forces of John VI Kantakouzenos ( r . 1341 ? 1354 ) , who had perhaps known Momchil during his flight to Serbia in 1342 , at the beginning of the war . In 1343 , as per the wishes of the local population , Kantakouzenos gave Momchil governance of the region of Merope in the Rhodope Mountains , a virtual no man 's land plagued by nomadic Slavic brigands . In the words of Kantakouzenos himself , the appointment was because " [ Momchil ] was of the same race these nomads would be favourably disposed toward him , but also because he was not lacking in courage and boldness in battle and was a first @-@ rate expert in robbery and plunder . " As the governor of Merope , Momchil gathered of an army of 300 cavalry and 5 @,@ 000 infantry from different nationalities . Though he considered himself able to " set against any side in the Byzantine war " , along with Umur Bey 's Turkish forces he nevertheless assisted Kantakouzenos in his campaigns in 1344 .

At the time , Momchil was approached by agents of Kantakouzenos ' opponents , the Constantinopolitan regency , and persuaded to turn against him . Thinking that Kantakouzenos and his Turkish allies from the Emirate of Aydin were far away in eastern Thrace , he attacked a Turkish fleet of 15 ships near Portolagos and sank three of them . He then overcame another Turkish force that arrived to exact retribution near the fortress of Peritheorion ( also known as Burugrad ) , and plundered several cities in the area that refused to surrender . Afterwards , Momchil along with 1 @,@ 000 horsemen attacked Kantakouzenos , who had set camp near Komotini with only 60 horsemen to protect him . The Byzantines were thoroughly routed : Kantakouzenos ' horse was killed and he received a powerful hit to the head , which he survived thanks to his helmet . Momchil

captured many of Kantakouzenos ' men , but the claimant to the throne himself managed to escape in the turmoil .

Soon , however , Momchil sent messages to Kantakouzenos asking for forgiveness . The latter , loath to alienate Momchil and open another front in his rear , pardoned him in exchange for promises of future good conduct , and even awarded him the title of sebastokrator . Momchil nevertheless continued to entertain parallel ties with the regency , and even secured the title of despotes from the Empress Anna of Savoy .

= = Ruler in the Rhodopes and death = =

In the summer of 1344 , Momchil finally broke with both parties and seceded from the Byzantine Empire . He proclaimed himself an independent ruler in the Rhodopes and the Aegean coast , " capturing cities and villages and appearing all @-@ powerful and invincible " . With his army he captured Xanthi , which became the capital of his domain . Bulgarian historian Plamen Pavlov theorises that Momchil was in friendly relations with Bulgarian emperor Ivan Alexander ( r . 1331 ? 1371 ) , with whom he shared a lengthy border , and believes the two may have acted in co @-@ ordination against the Byzantines .

In late spring 1345 however , Kantakouzenos , reinforced with allegedly 20 @,@ 000 troops from Aydin under their ruler Umur Bey , marched against Momchil . Momchil tried to prevent this by asking again for pardon and offering to submit to Kantakouzenos , but the emperor refused to heed him .

The two armies met near Peritheorion on 7 July 1345 . Momchil tried to seek refuge behind the city 's walls ? scholars debate whether he actually held the city or not ? but they were shut against him and his men by the locals . The locals did let in Momchil 's cousin Rayko along with 50 men , which they hoped would persuade Momchil not to take vengeance on the city if he defeated his opponents . In the subsequent battle before the city walls , Momchil 's forces used the Peritheorion 's ruined old fortifications as a first line of defence , with the city walls behind them .

After the foremost Turkish troops crossed the fortifications and dealt with the Bulgarian defenders , they began plundering the vicinity . However , to the surprise of Kantakouzenos and Umur Bey , the majority of Momchil 's men were standing in front of the city walls and had not yet participated in the skirmishes . As the Byzantine ? Turkish force advanced towards the defenders , Momchil led his troops ahead into battle . His cavalry was promptly eliminated by Turkish sharpshooters and his remaining troops were surrounded on three sides by heavily armed horsemen . Momchil 's remaining men continued the fight on foot and for the most part did not surrender until Momchil himself perished .

Out of respect for Momchil , Kantakouzenos spared his wife , a Bulgarian woman he had captured during his conquest of Xanthi . He allowed her to flee to Bulgaria along with all of her property . However , it is unknown whether Momchil had any children from this marriage or a previous one , if any . Pavlov presents the hypothesis that Momchil 's wife was a noblewoman from the Bulgarian capital Tarnovo , whom he married as part of an agreement with the Bulgarian court .

= = In popular culture = =

In Bulgarian and South Slavic folklore in general , Momchil is glorified in numerous songs and epic tales as a brigand , defender of the people and a prominent fighter against the Turks . Indeed , some of the earliest heroic songs in Bulgarian folklore tradition deal with Momchil 's exploits . In some folklore material , Momchil , referred to as a duke , acts as the uncle of Prince Marko , another legendary figure who in epic poetry is a fighter against the Turks . In the folklore version of Momchil 's last battle , his wife , and not the citizens of Peritheorion , betrays him and is to blame for his death . On the other hand , Momchil 's legendary sister Yevrosima is described as the mother of Prince Marko as well as a major influence on him .

The town of Momchilgrad and the village of Momchilovtsi in southern Bulgaria , as well as Momchil Peak on Greenwich Island of the South Shetland Islands in Antarctica are named after Momchil . His

life served as the basis for an opera piece , eponymously named Momchil and written by Bulgarian composer Lyubomir Pipkov . Momchil 's biography also inspired a 1988 children 's comic book , The Lord of Merope , which tells a largely fictionalised version of his story .