

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”
Faculty of History
Department of Ancient History, Thracology, and Medieval History

REVIEW

of the doctoral dissertation by

Tencho Pavlov Karagyozov

entitled

**“Ethnicity and Identity in Medieval Frontier Societies: Case Studies from the
Thirteenth–Fourteenth Centuries (Castile, Ireland, Hungary)”**

Professional field: **2.2. History and Archaeology**

Doctoral programme: **General Medieval History**

by **Ivelin Argirov Ivanov**, Prof. DsC

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**Information on the Doctoral Programme, Dissertation, Abstract, and
Publications**

The doctoral dissertation by Tencho Pavlov Karagyozov was discussed and approved for public defence by the Department of Ancient History, Thracology, and Medieval History at the Faculty of History of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. The academic jury and the date of the public defence were formally appointed by Rector’s Order No. RD-38-678 of 27 October 2025. The procedure for announcing the doctoral defence fully complies with the Regulations for the Acquisition of Academic Degrees at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, as well as with the relevant provisions of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and its implementing regulations.

The dissertation abstract, comprising 29 pages, meets all formal requirements and accurately presents the content, scholarly contributions, and main conclusions of the dissertation. The results of the plagiarism check conducted through the *StrikePlagiarism* system confirm the originality of the text. In addition, four scholarly articles related to the dissertation topic have been published.

Relevance of the Topic

The problem addressed in the dissertation represents a relatively new field of inquiry within medieval studies. In the final decades of the twentieth century, scholars such as Patricia Crone, in *Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages* (1983), as well as in later works, analysed *gentes* and *nationes* as dynamic, context-dependent groups rather than as stable ethnic categories. Focusing on frontier-related issues, Robert Bartlett in *Medieval Frontier Societies* (1989) defined frontier territories and communities as spaces of cultural exchange, conflict, and negotiation. In *Strategies of Identification: Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe* (ed. W. Pohl and G. Heydemann, 2013), ethnicity is conceptualised as a situational construct (*Traditionskern*), or a core of traditions and strategies of identification, strongly shaped by historical context. Within the East-Central European and Balkan context, Nóra Berend (*At the Gate of Christendom: Jews, Muslims and Pagans in Medieval Hungary, c. 1100–c. 1300*, 2001) and Nándor Kalnoky (*The Szekler Nation and Medieval Hungary. Politics, Law and Identity on the Frontier*, 2021) have examined the dynamics of complex relations with frontier and internal non-Hungarian communities during the High Middle Ages. It should also be emphasised that, beyond the regions analysed in the dissertation, the topic is equally relevant to medieval Prussia and Livonia (A. V. Murray, *The North-Eastern Frontiers of Medieval Europe: The Expansion of Latin Christendom in the Baltic Lands*, 2014).

The dissertation topic acquires particular relevance in the context of contemporary global challenges and crises related to mass migration, ethnic conflict, and the dramatic redrawing of borders – processes that invite parallels with developments in the peripheral and frontier societies of medieval Latin Europe. This relevance is further underscored by

the growing interest in frontier societies within European medieval studies in the early twenty-first century, when borders are increasingly perceived not as fixed lines but as fluid zones of hybrid identity – a concept highly pertinent to current historical and political debates in both European and global contexts. Moreover, the comparative perspective adopted in the dissertation allows for a nuanced understanding of frontier societies not merely as marginal or derivative formations, but as laboratories of social experimentation in which legal norms, religious affiliation, and ethnic categorisation were continuously tested, adapted, and renegotiated. In this sense, the study contributes to the broader scholarly effort to decentre traditional core-periphery models and to reassess the historical agency of frontier communities within medieval Europe.

Content and Remarks on the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, and a separate section of primary sources and bibliography, with a total length of 239 standard pages. The structure is logical and well organised: an introduction outlining relevance and objectives; a theoretical overview in Chapters One and Two; empirical analyses in Chapters Three and Four; a concluding section presenting the main findings; and an extensive bibliographical overview of primary and secondary sources. The text is written in a consistently academic style and employs precise referencing.

The introduction presents the motivation for the choice of topic, the aims and objectives of the study, its scope and chronological framework, the research methods employed, and an overview of the source base and historiography.

Chapter One, entitled “*Theoretical Approaches to the Concept of Ethnic and Religious Identity*”, examines the conceptualisation of ethnic and religious identity and the relationship between ethnicity, race, ethnos, and nationality. In view of the aims of the study, the author identifies *ethnicity* as the most appropriate, objective, and analytically sound term. Tencho Karagyozev emphasises the interconnection and interdependence of societies and regions, drawing attention to the ways in which global processes influence ethnic identities. A distinct section is devoted to the contribution of medieval studies to the

investigation of ethnicity and its historical dynamics. Not least, the chapter introduces the author's integrated methodological approach, combining different research perspectives.

Chapter Two, "*The Kingdom of Castile*", examines the place of ethno-religious communities within the Castilian legal system and the attitude of central authority towards them across two distinct sub-periods. The author analyses the transformations within Castilian society that led from *convivencia/coexistencia* to a policy of ethno-religious antagonism by the end of the period under study. Karagyozov reconstructs *convivencia* in detail as a model of coexistence during the Reconquista, analysing Christian–Muslim–Jewish interactions in the periods 1217–1252 and 1312–1412. Particular attention is paid to the *Laws of Ayllón* (1412), which dismantled the existing hierarchy based on ethnicity and religion by restricting the rights and legal protection of minority groups within the legal system. The author demonstrates a profound analytical approach and a well-structured use of sources and scholarship, illustrating how identity was legitimised through legal and economic negotiations and acts. The balanced and critical stance toward *convivencia* as a harmonious model deserves special note, reflecting both familiarity with existing historiographical positions and the author's scholarly objectivity. The argument in this chapter could be further strengthened through the use of quantitative demographic data (Muslims, Jews, Christians, migration flows, settlement patterns before and after the Reconquista) and comparative references to developments in al-Andalus.

Chapter Three, "*The Lordship of Ireland*", examines the island as a stage for ethnic confrontation between English and Irish populations across two sub-periods. According to Karagyozov, processes of internal self-identification among both English and Irish groups led the *Communitas Hiberniae* to acquire the character of a frontier society from an early stage. Of particular interest is the hybrid identity of the *medie nacionis* – English born in Ireland – and the stereotyping of the Irish as *gentes indomitae* and *gentes bestiales*, which contributed to ethnic polarisation between the two groups during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The author applies the case-study methodology effectively, analysing significant developments of the fourteenth century through key primary sources.

Particularly valuable is the author's sensitivity to the discursive dimension of identity formation, as reflected in the language of administrative records, legal texts, and narrative sources. The analysis of ethnic stereotyping and rhetorical categorisation highlights how symbolic violence and legal exclusion operated alongside, and sometimes independently from, military conflict. In this respect, the Irish case study effectively illustrates the gradual transformation of cultural difference into institutionalised ethnic hierarchy.

Chapter Four, "*The Kingdom of Hungary*", follows the same analytical model, dividing the discussion into two sub-periods: from the beginning of King Andrew II's reign in 1205 to the fall of the Árpád dynasty in 1301, and from the accession of the Angevins in 1308 to their removal in 1395. The author concluded that between 1205 and 1301 Hungarian rulers implemented a series of measures to define the socio-legal status of ethno-religious groups within their realm, thereby establishing mechanisms and ideologies aimed at preserving Hungarian identity. A distinctive feature of the Hungarian model was the conceptualisation of the eastern frontier with the Eurasian world as a contact zone, where different ethnic groups interacted and continuously negotiated their identities. The Hungarian case further demonstrates that frontier dynamics cannot be reduced to binary oppositions between centre and periphery or Christian and non-Christian populations. Instead, the evidence presented suggests a complex spectrum of interaction, accommodation, and selective integration, shaped by royal policy, economic incentives, and external pressures. This multifaceted perspective significantly enhances the comparative value of the chapter and strengthens its contribution to the overall argument of the dissertation.

The analysis is grounded in reliable primary sources and is relevant not only to the dissertation topic but also to broader discussions of Southeast Europe and the Balkans, particularly concerning nomadic groups and Saxon settlers. A more explicit treatment of the Mongol invasion of the mid-thirteenth century and its impact on ethnic reconfigurations, as well as the short presence of the Teutonic Order in Burzenland

(Transylvania) during the second and third decades of the thirteenth century, could further enhance the chapter.

The conclusion synthesises the main findings regarding ethnic and religious identity and their treatment within the late medieval legal framework. The author argues that in Castile, Ireland, and Hungary two distinct phases can be identified: during the thirteenth century, legal protection for “others” was guaranteed and expanded, while in the fourteenth century religious, ethnic, and legal diversity gave way to policies of homogenisation and a rhetoric of difference.

The bibliography is extensive and well balanced, comprising over 350 titles of primary sources and scholarly works. It demonstrates an effective balance between primary and secondary sources and includes both classical nineteenth-century authors and modern sociologists and medievalists. The majority of the literature is in English, with additional works in French, Spanish, and Hungarian.

Scholarly Contributions

First and foremost, the dissertation represents a significant scholarly contribution, as no systematic analysis of ethno-dynamic processes in medieval Castile, Ireland, and Hungary has previously been undertaken in Bulgarian historiography. A key contribution lies in the author’s consistent application of a comparative framework across three geographically and culturally distinct regions. By maintaining a shared analytical vocabulary while remaining attentive to regional specificity, the dissertation achieves a balance that is often difficult to attain in comparative medieval studies.

The author introduces several lesser-known primary sources and scholarly works into Bulgarian academic discourse and offers a legal-historical analysis through the prism of identity formation. This constitutes a valuable contribution to the study of ethnic and religious identity in medieval legal culture and enriches the source base for future research. The translation of numerous primary source texts into Bulgarian is an additional contribution.

The theoretical framework is ambitious and effectively integrated. By drawing parallels with modern sociological theories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the author successfully contextualises the topic for an interdisciplinary audience. The work represents an innovative attempt within Bulgarian medieval studies to integrate sociological theory into the study of frontier and peripheral communities.

The application of case-study methodology, frontier studies, and ethnoarchaeological perspectives further enhances the contribution. The dissertation presents a multidisciplinary synthesis incorporating sociology, anthropology, and classical history, and successfully applies frontier studies beyond the Iberian context, opening avenues for future research on the eastern and southeastern borders of the medieval Latin world. The analysis highlights the dynamic formation of ethnicity through everyday interactions between dominant groups, minority communities (Muslims, Jews, nomads), and institutional mechanisms, while also suggesting parallels with Balkan phenomena such as Cuman–Bulgarian alliances, Vlach–Hungarian frontier relations, and the Saxon presence in Transylvania.

The study also engages critically with scholarly debates on ethnicity, nationality, and race in medieval contexts, emphasising the historical specificity of medieval identities while acknowledging their role as precursors to modern concepts. The author's critical stance toward the anachronistic application of modern categories, as well as toward the idealisation of *convivencia* as an ideological construct, deserves particular recognition.

Recommendations

A careful and analytical reading of the dissertation suggests several recommendations. Certain repetitions occur within the theoretical sections, with the same authors and concepts appearing in multiple parts of the work.

Furthermore, the use of specific papal bulls of Innocent III related to the Reconquista (such as *Post miserabile* (1198), *Devotioni vestrae* (1208), and *Cum martyrio* (1213) from *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* or *Regesta Pontificum* would further strengthen the analysis by illustrating the universalisation of the frontier, the normative

rather than geographical conceptualisation of borders, and the perception of the periphery as the boundary of Christendom.

For future publication, the inclusion of maps illustrating the political and ethnic realities of the three regions, as well as a chronological table or infographic visualising key events and ethnic transformations (e.g. the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the *Diploma Andreanum* of 1224, the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366), would be highly beneficial.

Final Assessment

The dissertation represents a valuable, multi-layered, and interdisciplinary contribution to medieval studies, particularly in the field of ethnicity and frontier societies. Its strong theoretical and methodological foundations, carefully selected case studies, and extensive bibliography make it a solid basis for future research on medieval European borderlands.

On the basis of the above, I vote unequivocally **in favour** and recommend that the esteemed committee confer the academic degree of **Doctor** upon **Tencho Pavlov Karagyozov**.

27 December 2025

Veliko Tarnovo

Reviewer: 

Prof. DSc Ivelin Ivanov