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THE "CHURCH OF BULGARIA" IN MEDIEVAL EPIRUS, THESSALY AND DARDANIA: TWO HYPOTHESES

Jordan Tabov

Abstract: *The paper offers for discussion the problems of Christian tradition and Church organization in medieval Epirus, Thessaly and Dardania. Two hypotheses are made. The first is that the name "Ecclesia Bulgariae" ("Church of Bulgaria") was in use, from at least the ninth century, to denote continuous Church organization in this region, with different degrees of independence at different periods of time. The second is that the "Church of Bulgaria" has always followed the basic teachings of the Apostle Paul, found in specific traditions of early Christians in this region. The arguments in favour of these two hypotheses are presented.*

§ 0. Introduction: the question of the mediaeval "Ecclesia Bulgariae"

As is well known, the Byzantine Emperor Basil I invited representatives of the Christian world to his palace immediately after the Eighth Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople on March 4, 870. "In fact, this meeting became an extraordinary meeting of the now-dissolved Church Council" (Bozhilov, Gyuzelev 1999 p. 184). It was here that the Bulgarian delegate Peter "raised for general consideration the issue of jurisdiction over the Bulgarian church, i.e. whether it should be subordinate to Rome or to Constantinople" (Bozhilov, Gyuzelev 1999 p. 184).

The representatives of the Pope argued that the "Bulgarian church" ought to be under the jurisdiction of Rome. The reason given was that the territories of the

former province of East Illyricum (Epirus, Thessaly, Dardania) had by ancient tradition been under Papal control.

The delegates of Rome and of the Eastern churches continued to dispute the matter. The Eastern delegates formulated their position about the status of the „Bulgarian church” as follows:

“... We decide that Bulgaria, which we know was recently under the rule of the Greeks and had Greek clergy, should now revert in Christendom to the Holy See of Constantinople” (Anastasius Bibliothecarius 1960 p. 192).

The statement that the country of the Bulgarians recently was under the rule of the Greeks implies that ***“the country of the Bulgarians”*** – the subject of the dispute – ***did not include the northeastern part of the Balkan Peninsula.***

The statement that „the country of the Bulgarians” had been under the rule of the Greeks and had had Greek priests means that the ***population was Christian before its conquest by the State of Boris***, therefore was not baptized by him or his representatives. This agrees with Koev and Bakalov’s verdict regarding the mid ninth century: *„Today it is impossible to accurately determine the degree of the christianization of the Slavic tribes in the Balkans, but in any case in Thrace and Macedonia it was significant.”* (Koev, Bakalov 1992 p. 152).

This analysis makes it probable that by “Bulgaria” the participants of the Eighth Ecumenical Council understood the region of Epirus, Thessaly, and Dardania (including the territory of ancient Macedonia). When did this idea become widespread, and where? Can it be linked with “Ecclesia Bulgariae” - the “Church of Bulgaria”?

§ 1. Two maps, Bulgaria and Zagora



Fig. 1. Fragment of the map “South Eastern Europe c. 1000” (Bury 1903).

At the end of the tenth century and during the eleventh, the name „Bulgaria” was widely used for the region discussed at the Eighth Ecumenical Council: Epirus, Thessaly, and Dardania. This can be seen on a number of historical maps. In **Fig. 1** there is a segment of one such map. Here the territory east of Bulgaria – the eastern part of the Balkans – is presented as Byzantine (Some authors call it by such names as Paristrion and Misia).

On the mid fifteenth century map of Fra Mauro (**Fig. 2**) we can see the name Bulgaria used for approximately the same area as in **Fig. 1**. This map is south-oriented; in other words South is at the top. In this segment the Danube is at the bottom and the Black Sea to the left. In this segment, the Danube-Black Sea region, corresponding to what is now northeastern Bulgaria, is labelled „Zagora”. Further to the west, extending from around Sofia and Vidin to (approximately) the river Morava, is „Bolgaria” – Bulgaria. Her western neighbour is „Seruia” – Serbia.



Fig. 2. Fragment of the Fra Mauro World Map (c. 1450) (Fra Mauro 1450).

It is important to note the use, found in other documents as well, of the name “Zagora” for a country (or territories) “around Tarnovo” and for the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula generally. According to some leading Bulgarian historians “Zagora” is synonymous with “Bulgaria”: (Ishirkov 1925), (Koledarov 1973), Bozhilov in the notes to (Muntaner 1994 p. 105) (Gyuzelev 1995 p. 12), and others. This view is summarized by Gyuzelev as follows: “... by the end of the XIIth century, Bulgaria and the revived Bulgarian state were starting to be called Zagora, originally by Byzantine writers and afterwards by Western writers ... a name, which was widespread mainly in XIII – XV c.” (Gyuzelev 1995 p. 12). This would fix the appearance of the name “Zagora” at around the turn of the twelfth century. However the name is found much earlier, in a Bulgarian history from the time of Tervel, who was granted by the Byzantine emperor Justinian II the title of Caesar together with “the region of Zagora.”

This view, that the name Zagora is equivalent to “Bulgaria”, is however in conflict with certain documentary evidence. Charles I, king of Naples, writes in a rescript to the Secretaries of Apulia, Capua, Benevento, Calabria and Sicily:

Si processu temporis aliquos ambassatores seu nuncios de partibus Achaye, Servie, Bulgarie, Albanie aut de Imperio vel de Regno de Sagarach deferentes aliquas litteras ...

[If in course of time there should come any ambassadors or envoys either from the regions of Achaea, Servia, Bulgaria, Albania or from the empire (or kingdom) of Sagarach [!Zagora], with any letters,...]

(Makushev 1871 p. 29).

As Dimitrov observes, "at this first appearance of Bulgarian envoys to the court of Naples on September 12, 1271 a distinction was made: „*ambassatores seu nuncios de partibus ... Servie, Bulgarie ... vel Regno de Zagarach*. For the king of Naples, in other words, there were not one but two Bulgarian states: Bulgaria proper, and Zagora, meaning the Bulgarian Vidin and Tarnovo kingdom" (Dimitrov 1998 p. 196).

The terms 'Vidin Kingdom' and 'Tarnovo Kingdom' are in fact used in modern scientific literature and textbooks. But were they used in the past? And if so, to what extent?

In his monograph Dimitrov quotes a number of examples showing the widespread use of the names "Bulgaria" and "Zagora" in association (Dimitrov 1998). These examples suggest that the name "Bulgaria" was used for the western Bulgarian lands, for territories – conditionally – "around Vidin, Sofia and Skopie".

The above analysis outlines our hypothesis that ***"Zagora" and "Bulgaria" were two separate administrative and political units coexisting over a long period of the Middle Ages.***

§ 2. The Bulgarian Churches under the Asen dynasty (late 12th – late 13th c.)

The use of the name "Bulgaria" for the territories thus marked on the two maps above, and in particular on Bury's map (**Fig. 1**) is closely related to questions about the Christian institutions of the Bulgarians.

After the uprising of Asen and Peter, the so-called "Tarnovo Patriarchate" was established (or perhaps restored) at Veliko Tarnovo. Nikolova sees this act as "the emergence of a completely new ecclesiastical throne", but cautiously adds "...about whose previous existence we have no information".

(Nikolova 2001 p. 91). At the date of its establishment (or restoration) the “See of Ohrid” had already been in operation for many years. With the definer “of Bulgaria” invariably appended to its name. It is interesting to speculate how the See of Ohrid, to say nothing of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, will have reacted to this newcomer. For Nikolova, the change “at the outset awoke no conflict, and provoked no objections, which indicates that it took place with the consent of the founders and the Bulgarians” (Nikolova 2001 p. 91).

We should add: not only did it awake no conflict and provoke objections; this epoch-making event defies all justification and explanation.

Later, when Ivan Asen II extended his authority over the dioceses of the Ohrid and the Tarnovo Churches, he did not combine them into a single church. Why not? Was the history of these two churches – their condition in the reigns of Simeon, Peter and Samuel – in fact known in the time of Ivan Asen? Were the “Tarnovo Patriarchate” and the “See of Ohrid” at that time parts of a unitary whole?

§ 3. St. Clement of Ohrid – “Bishop of Velichi”, “First Bishop”

The supposition that Clement was the head of the Bulgarian Church is proved in detail in an article by Dragova (Dragova 1977). It also follows from a note by Krustanov that “First Bishop”, the appellation of Clement in his lengthy *Vita*, here means “Primate”, that is, “first among all the bishops”, of the Bulgarian people (Krustanov 1998).

Further arguments in support of this thesis can be found in two articles of mine (Tabov 2011 and Tabov 2014), where on the basis of abundant cartographic material, including twelve of the most authoritative and widely-used geographic atlases and maps from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the medieval

“Velitsa”, seat of Bishop Clement, is to be identified with classical Nicopolis in Epirus.

It should particularly be emphasized that, on all these maps, there is on the site of the classical Nikopolis, near modern Preveza – a city marked as “Velichi” (or sometimes “Velichj”). Thus we can see that in the Middle Ages classical Nicopolis was known to the map-reading European public as Velichi. Of the maps I quote (Tabov 2011) the following should be mentioned:

- Graeciae Universae Secundum Hodiernum Situm Neoterica Descriptio. In: Abraham Ortelius. *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*. Antwerp, 1570.
- Graecia. In: Gerard Mercator Rupelmundanus. *Atlas sive cosmographicae meditationes de fabrica mundi et fabricati figura*. Duisburgi Clivorum, MCXCV [1595].
- Europa, das ist ein Drittheil der Erden nach gelegenheit unserer zeit beschrieben. In: Sebastian Münster. *Cosmographia, Das ist Beschreibung der ganzen Welt*. Basel, 1628.
- Epirus hodie vulgo Albania, Auctore I. Laurenbergio. In: Willem Janszoon, Joan Blaeu. *Theatrum orbis terrarum, sive, Atlas novus*. c. 1650.
- Macedonia, Epirus et Achaia. J.Blaeu excudit. In: *Toonneel des Aerdryck oft Nieuwe Atlas, uytgegeven door Wilhelm en Joan Blaeu*. Derde Deel. Amsterdam, by Joan Blaeu. MDCLVIII [1648].

In his monograph on the history of the Bulgarian Church (Tzuhlev 1910), Tzuhlev discusses the work of the Apostle Paul in the Balkans; on p. 11 we read: “... The Apostle, as he himself mentioned in one of his Letters, spread the doctrine of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Rom. 15: 18-19)”.

Tzuhlev adds a detail of great importance in the present context: “and he founded a church at Nikopol”. This is explained in a footnote, numbered 7, which reads: “Epistle to Titus, III, 12. Nikopol is located at the entrance of the Ambracian Gulf (now the Gulf of Arta), just north of the present town of Preveza (Pauis *ibid*, t. V, p. 637; Leporskiy, *ibid*, p. 326 and map). The founding of the Church at Nicopolis took Paul a whole year” (Tzuhlev 1910, p. 11).

Nicopolis, the medieval Velichi, was the Metropolis of Epirus and later of South Epirus. If Tzuhlev is right, Clement Velichki was head of the Church of Nicopolis, founded by one of the Apostles. Moreover, since this was the Apostle Paul, Clement was the head of a Church of great authority. On Bury’s map (**Fig. 1**), the northern coast of the Gulf of Arta, on which Nicopolis-Velichi (Velitsa) lies, was within in the territory of “Bulgaria”. Velichi was, therefore, a Bulgarian town¹.

§ 3. The “parts” of the Kingdom of Simeon the Great

In the Du Cange *Glossary* we read that “Clement, after becoming bishop of Tiberiopolis or Velika, was charged by Boris, King of the Bulgarians, to supervise the one-third part of the Bulgarian kingdom ...” (translation in Tapkova-Zaimova 2000).

From this text, it would appear that in the reign of Boris I the “Bulgarian kingdom” had three (if not more) “parts”. This is probably an indicator of some degree of feudal fragmentation in the Bulgarian lands. One would like to know the names of these three parts. Was Zagora in the territory of one of them? and

¹ This is explained in detail in the article (Tabov 2014).

if so, what was it called? Does the celebrated Dobrogea – “the land of Dobrotitza” – have ancient administrative and political roots too?

§ 4. The two Bulgarian archiepiscopal Sees in the Charters of Basil II

A passage from a charter of Basil II dated 1020 gives information (excerpted here as **Fig. 3**) about the Archiepiscopal Sees in Bulgaria (GIBI6 1968 p. 45):

Ἦγον κειλούμεν ἔχει τὸν Ἀρίστρα ἐπίσκοπον εἰς τὰ κάστρα τῆς ἐνορίας αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ κάστρα τὰ περὶ αὐτὴν κληρικὸς μὲν καὶ παροίκους μὲν Ἐπὶ Πέτρῳ γὰρ βασιλεύσαντος ἐν Βουλγαρίᾳ αὕτη μὲν τῷ τῆς ἀρχιεπισκοπῆς ἀξιόματι ἐλαμπρύνετο, μετὰ δὲ τοῦτο ἀπὸ τόπων εἰς τόπων μεταβαλόντων τῶν ἀρχιεπισκόπων τοῦ μὲν εἰς Τριάδιτζαν τοῦ δὲ ἐν τοῖς Βοδηνοῖς καὶ ἐν τοῖς Μογλιάνοις, εἴθ' οὕτως ἐν τῇ Ἀρχιδᾷ τὸν νῦν εὔρομεν ἀρχιεπίσκοπον, καὶ αὐτὴν μὲν τὴν Ἀρχιδᾷ ἀρχιεπίσκοπον ἔχειν, ἐπίσκοπον δὲ εἰς τὴν Ἀρίστραν χειροτονῆσαι.

Прочее заповядваме, щото епископът на Дристра² да има в градовете на своята епархия и в другите градове около нея 40 клирици и 40 парици. Защото при царуването на Петър в България тая [епархия] е блестяла с архиепископско достойнство, а след това архиепископите [и] са се премествали от едно място на друго, единият в Триадица, другият във Воден и в Мъглен, и след това ние намерихме сегашния архиепископ в Охрид. Затова [заповядваме] самият Охрид да има архиепископ, а за Дристра да бъде ръкополаган епископ.

Fig. 3. Information in a passage from a Charter of Basil II dated 1020 about the Archiepiscopal Sees in Bulgaria (GIBI6 1968 p. 45).

Then we command that the bishop of Dristra shall have, in his diocese and in the other surrounding towns, forty clerks and forty *paroikoi*. For during the reign of Peter in Bulgaria, this [diocese] shone with archiepiscopal dignity. Then the archbishops [of the diocese] moved from place to place, the one to Triaditza, the other to Vodena and Moglena. This is how we find the present Archbishop at Ohrid. So Ohrid shall itself have its Archbishop, and a bishop shall be ordained at Dristra.

Snegarov (Snegarov 1925 p. 12) makes an important comment on this text, that in it the term "Archbishop" implies residence. "It is stated explicitly", he writes, "that the throne of the Bulgarian Patriarch (the imperial decree simply says "Archbishop") was transferred &c".

Thus the term "Archbishop" includes the meaning "archiepiscopal residence". And this is logical for two reasons.

Firstly, "moving the archbishops" implies the transfer of their seats. For comparison, our sources state that St. Clement Ohridski often changed his residence and spent much time in Ohrid; here it is clear that Clement's own personal "move" did not entail moving the seat of the archbishopric.

Secondly, since "Archbishop" in the Charter refers to the single person heading the Archbishopric, the form of words "the one ... the other ..." requires two individuals. Damian moved from Dristra in Triaditza; then German /Gabriel moved from Triaditza to Vodena and Moglena. However, we know from the Vodena inscription that German/Gabriel was preceded not by Damian but by one Jeremiah. Thus there is a contradiction within this argument.

To avoid ambiguity in the translation and interpretation of the passage from the Charter, let us replace the term "Archbishop" by "archiepiscopal seat". That gives us:

Then we command that the bishop of Dristra shall have, in his diocese and in the other surrounding towns, forty clerks and forty *paroikoi*. For during the reign of Peter in Bulgaria, this [diocese] shone with archiepiscopal dignity. Then **the archiepiscopal seats** [of the diocese] moved from place to place, the one to Triaditza, the other to Vodena and Moglena. This is how we find **the present archiepiscopal seat** at Ohrid. So Ohrid shall itself have its Archbishop, and a bishop shall be ordained at Dristra.

This leads to a conclusion important for our *hypothesis*: at the end of the reign of King Peter I in the Bulgarian lands there were two different Churches, each with its respective Head (Patriarch, and Archbishop). The Charter of the Byzantine Emperor (Basil II) of 1020 is interpreted as describing the movement of the seats of these two Heads.

§ 5. In support of the above hypothesis

The Du Cange *Glossary* contains a list of the Heads of six Churches over a long period of time. It begins with the Heads of the Church of Constantinople, the first being the Apostle Andrew (Barlieva 2000). It then names the Heads of the Church of Rome, the first of which are Christ and the Apostle Peter. The list continues with the Churches of Alexandria (Christ, the Apostle Mark, and the Apostle Ananias), Antioch (Christ and the Apostle Peter), Jerusalem (Christ and St. Jacob). Finally comes the Church of Bulgaria, its first Head being a fourth-century bishop named Protogen.

According to Barlieva (Barlieva 2000), the passage in the *Glossary* which names the bishops of the first five Churches – (i.e. the *Glossary* except of the part with the bishops of the Church of Bulgaria) – is based on the Apostolic Succession. This predicates that Christ's teaching was transmitted through His Apostles, and from them to the hierarchy of the Christian Church. Thus local bishops can be seen as bearers of the Apostolic tradition, while an episcopal list of individual Churches founded by one of the Apostles demonstrates their apostolicity¹. (We should remember that the New Testament implies a *personal*

¹ Wikipedia summarises well known facts in the following way: "Apostolic succession is the method whereby the ministry of the Christian Church is held to be derived from the apostles by a continuous succession, which has usually been associated with a claim that the succession is

apostolic succession – from Paul to Timothy and Titus, for example, and that the tradition of the first centuries of Christianity gives the Apostolic Churches the right of individual and relative autonomy – ‘autocephaly’, to use the later term.)

However, the description of Barlieva is not complete: the first five churches are not five Apostolic Churches chosen at random; they are precisely the Churches of the Pentarchy, as it is called – the five most authoritative Apostolic Churches in the Christian world. The list assigns to each of them its Founder.

If we compare this list with the modern version of the Pentarchy, there are important differences in details.

First of all we should note that the list of the *Glossary* starts with the Church of Constantinople, unlike the present-day official order, in which the Pentarchy is headed by the Church of Rome. The second and important difference is that the Apostle Paul is not mentioned as one of the founders of the Churches. The third, and still more important difference is that the addition of a sixth Church to the “classic” Pentarchy actually creates a Hexarchy - a group of not five, but six Apostolic Churches. According to Barlieva, the presence of the Church of Bulgaria (the See of Ohrid) in the list is an explicit claim to apostolicity (Barlieva 2000).

So the apostolicity of the Church of Bulgaria is a concept inserted by the compiler of the list. If we accept the hypothesis proposed above, that the “Church of Bulgaria” is identical with the “Church of Nicopolis-Velichi”, this

through a series of bishops. This series was seen originally as that of the bishops of a particular see founded by one or more of the apostles.” Apostolic succession. *From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved 12. Oct. 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostolic_succession

entails that the latter Church was “apostolic”, in the sense of having been founded by an Apostle. This would have entitled it, by tradition, to autocephaly and veneration.

Following this line of thought, we may connect the high ranking obtained by Justinian for his Justiniana Prima with the claim to apostolicity by its constituent - the church of Nicopolis-Velichi, alias the “Church of Bulgaria”. In other words, the prestige and rank of Justiniana Prima was due to its origins in the Church of Nicopolis-Velichi.

Now let us return to the details given in the list of Heads of the Bulgarian Church, in order to support the hypothesis that it has come down to us not in its original, but in a censored form.

In favor of this hypothesis, first of all, are certain unexpected features in the list:

- The Church lacks the name of its Founder. This ought to be one of the Apostles, most probably St Paul.

- The names of bishops after the Founder, up to Protopogen, are also missing.

- The name of Jeremiah, German's predecessor, though mentioned in Tzar Samouil's inscription at Vodena, is also missing here.

Jeremiah is the name of a well known heretic. This name, and another or others before it, were very probably omitted deliberately by a copyist who decided that these were names of heretics. For example even the name of Paul could be understood as the name of the heretic Paul of Samosata; and so on.

§ 6. Problems

The above considerations and hypotheses pose interesting questions about the large component parts of Bulgarian territory; about their changes of name; about the degree to which they were autonomous (within the Byzantine Empire, within Bulgaria, or within Zagora or some other state); about the processes and the advance of Christianity among the Bulgarians in various regions; and about the creation and the development of Bulgarian Christian institutions. To address these questions requires research and analysis in depth across a wide field, making use of the most up-to-date information technology.

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