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THE TRANSLATION OF MEDIEVAL SOURCES AND HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE PROBLEM OF THE BIRTH YEAR OF THE BULGARIAN TSAR JOHN II ASSEN (1218–1241)*

Abstract. The article examines the important topic of the limits of interpretation when studying medieval sources through the prism of a particular example taken from the *History* of George Akropolites. Without sufficient information to establish the facts, scholars often resort to analyzing separate words and expressions from the source text, whose translation and interpretation may prove decisive in clarifying the information contained within it. As the present paper demonstrates, however, the possibilities of this approach are sometimes limited and do not always allow the study to be carried out to completion. In such cases, it is crucial to clearly distinguish between irrefutable conclusions, on the one hand, and assumptions, on the other. The superimposition of a number of hypotheses and a historical reconstruction based on them may lead to long-term negative consequences for researching a given scientific problem by giving inaccurate ideas about historical events, phenomena and processes, and may mislead the next generations of historians.

Keywords: translation, medieval sources, historical reconstruction, Bulgarian medieval studies, translating and publishing historical sources, John II Assen, George Akropolites, Vasil Zlatarski, Ivan Dujčev, children and adolescents in Byzantium, terminology on stages of childhood and juvenility

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Introduction: Translation studies and medieval sources

History and translation are related and the connection between them is of great importance for both disciplines. For historians, encounters with historical sources of foreign origin are almost inevitable, which is why translation is present in their work by default. Moreover, for the reconstruction of the picture of the past, the accuracy of translation almost always plays a decisive role. In research on Bulgarian medieval history, a number of examples can be cited that clearly demonstrate this. It is precisely such a case study that served as the main impetus for considering the important aspects of the relationship between translation studies and medieval studies. The present research, of course, does not attempt to provide definitive answers to all the questions raised, some of which are within the competence of scholars from other scientific fields. It aims rather to emphasize some problems related to the methodology of historical study and to argue for the need for new approaches and a strengthening of interdisciplinary connections. The main tasks facing it are: to provide a general idea of new research and approaches regarding the application of translation theory in the field of medieval studies; to outline the main stages in the development of the translation and publication of medieval sources in Bulgarian historical science; and to examine the problem of the birth year of the Bulgarian ruler John II Assen (1218–1241) in a broader context, in accordance with the current state of research relating to the topic.

Translation studies, a relatively new academic discipline that deals with the theory, description and application of translation, have in recent years more and more turned to new research fields, including those that border on history as a science¹. In the contemporary scholarly literature relating to this area, considerations of the historical aspects of translation activity and, in particular, the problems of translation in a medieval context, tend to occupy an increasingly important place. For illustration, it suffices to mention recent publications such as: *Companion to Medieval Translation* (2019); *Translation in Europe during the Middle Ages* (2020) or *Medieval Translatio. Interdisciplinary Studies in the Translation and Transfer of Language, Culture, Literature* (2024)². The activities of scholars in this

¹ Regarding contemporary trends in the advancement of translation studies, as well as its interconnectedness with the historical science see: W.P. ADAMS, *The Historian as Translator: An Introduction*, JAmH 85.4, 1999, p. 1283–1288; C. FOZ, *Translation, History and the Translation Scholar*, [in:] *Charting the Future of Translation History*, ed. G.L. BASTIN, P.F. BANDIA, Ottawa 2006, p. 131–144; L. LONG, *History and Translation*, [in:] *A Companion to Translation Studies*, ed. P. KUHIWCZAK, K. LITTAU, Clevedon 2007, p. 63–76; C. RUNDLE, V. RAFAEL, *History and Translation: The Event of Language*, [in:] *Border Crossings. Translation Studies and Other Disciplines*, ed. Y. GAMBIER, L. VAN DOORS-LAER, Amsterdam–Philadelphia 2016, p. 23–47; *A History of Modern Translation Knowledge. Sources, Concepts, Effects*, ed. L. D’HULST, Y. GAMBIER, Amsterdam–Philadelphia 2018, p. 233–281; P. WILSON, *The Philosophy of History and Translation*, [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of Translation History*, ed. C. RUNDLE, London–New York 2022, p. 217–232.

² Along with those publications also see: R. COPELAND, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages. Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge 1991; J. RUBIO TOVAR,

new direction cover a wide range of topics related to: the techniques of translation, adaptation and reworking of medieval texts; the cultural and historical role of translation in the Middle Ages; translated literature as a social and cultural phenomenon; translation as a result of the processes of intercultural mediation; the integration of translation into the literature and culture of those who receive it, as well as a number of other theoretical and practical aspects of translation activity in the Middle Ages.

At the same time, another area that also falls within the border zone between history and translation studies and delves into translating medieval literary works and historical documents into modern languages is still in its early developmental stage. Individual articles and several collections of essays, which contain both theoretical observations and examples of strategies when working with specific texts and genres, can be cited. They examine a number of basic problems that translators of medieval texts face today, such as: taking into account the role of the manuscript tradition of the works and the variant readings in the copies of the original text, the loss of valuable information for the translator due to distance in time; the difficulties for their understanding by the present-day reader that arise from the cultural characteristics of the societies in which the texts were created, etc.³

Among the other important topics that are the subject of special research and more closely concern historical sources are: the specifics of the translation of literary historical sources from the point of view of modern theories in translation

Some Reflections on the History of Medieval Translation, [in:] *Europe et traduction*, ed. M. BALLARD, Arras 1998, p. 37–44; *The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. VOADEN *et al.*, Brepols 2003 [= MTr, 8]; *Lost in Translation?*, ed. D. RENEVEY, C. WHITEHEAD, Brepols 2009 [= MTr, 12]; M. YOVCHEVA, L. TASEVA, *Translated Literature in the Bulgarian Middle Ages as a Social and Cultural Phenomenon*, SeS 10–11, 2012, p. 271–323; *Rethinking Medieval Translation. Ethics, Politics, Theory*, ed. E. CAMPBELL, R. MILLS, Cambridge 2012; M. FONT, *Between East and West. Translation as a Means of Cross-Cultural Communication. Examples from Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period*, SHN 20.2, 2016, p. 405–418; *A Companion to Medieval Translation*, ed. J. BEER, Amsterdam 2019; *Translation in Europe during the Middle Ages*, ed. E. BORSARI, Frankfurt am Main 2020; *Le Moyen Âge au prisme de la traduction et de la réécriture contemporaines*, ed. I. GÉNIN, J. STEPHENS, Paris 2022 [= Pali, 36]; *Medieval Translations and their Readers*, ed. P. RYCHTEROVÁ, J. ODSTRČILIK, Brepols 2023 [= MTr, 20]; *Medieval Translatio. Interdisciplinary Studies in the Translation and Transfer of Language, Culture, Literature*, ed. M. BAMPI, S. GROPPER, Berlin–Boston 2024; I. DJORDJEVIĆ, *The Middle Ages*, [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Translation Studies*, ed. A. LANGE *et al.*, London–New York 2024, p. 51–68.

³ For a review of previous research and an overview of current problems posed by the translation of medieval texts into modern languages see: M.G. CAMMAROTA, *Translating Medieval Texts: Common Issues and Specific Challenges*, [in:] *Tradurre. Un viaggio nel tempo*, a cura di EADEM, Venezia 2018 [= FMM, 17, Serie occidentale, 14], p. 37–53; J.C. TEIXEIRA, *Dynamics of Translation: Navigating Medieval Texts and Beyond*, *TransM* 5.2, 2023, Special Issue: *Translation In and From the Middle Ages*, guest editor J.C. TEIXEIRA, p. 1–7. Also see: S.M. MAHFOUZ, *Challenges of Translating Medieval Literary Texts From a Translator's Personal Experience: The Case of Ibn Dāniyāl Trilogy*, *TransRev* Published online, p. 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2024.2431337> [20 XII 2024].

studies⁴, problems and methods of historical translation⁵, the challenges facing the editing and publishing of medieval sources⁶.

The complex nature of the tasks that a translator of a medieval text must deal with in his or her work today is clearly outlined by Maria Grazia Cammarota in her article *Translating Medieval Texts: Common Issues and Specific Challenges* (2018):

The analysis of medieval works is further complicated by a number of other factors, which derive mainly from the absence of direct and reliable sources of information. Of course, all translators have to cope with the so-called encyclopedia, or world knowledge. But in texts that are remote in time, allusions to events, habits, people and so forth may be irremediably lost. Also, determining the meaning of words, phrases, sayings and proverbs is often a problem. All translators are dependent on dictionaries, which are the result of a filtering process: they provide selected meanings, which cannot correspond to all the actual uses of a term in the many contexts it may appear. But if this is valid for modern language dictionaries, it is particularly true for historical dictionaries, which provide meanings that are inferred from the texts themselves and from critical editions: therefore, in many cases, meanings are but the hypotheses of scholars⁷.

The theoretical and practical issues of translating medieval texts are of great importance for all sciences that study the various aspects of life in the Middle Ages, and especially for historical science. In fact, the translation of historical sources has always been of fundamental significance for historians, for whom it is a preliminary practical task, which precedes, for understandable reasons, the research process itself. Between the historian and the event there is always a source text and the language barrier associated with this is a primary problem that researchers inevitably encounter. Taking into account even the smallest details in the content of the documents or literary sources with which the historian works is not only important, but also a mandatory condition for carrying out a critical analysis of the text and for obtaining reliable data that can serve to synthesize the final historical narrative. These circumstances explain the close connection between the translation of sources and the work of the historian.

⁴ М. СЛАВОВА, *За превода на литературни исторически извори (Опит за проблематизация)*, ПИФ 1.1, 2017, p. 38–47.

⁵ Ю.Е. КОМЛЕВА, *Проблемы и методы исторического перевода*, ImMun 5, 2008 (= Сер. Интеллектуальная история, 3), p. 202–212.

⁶ Е. SKIWIŃSKI, *Problems with Editing and Translating Historical Sources. Some Polish Examples*, FAH 28, 2015, p. 11–15. About some general observations on the importance of translation for historical reconstruction and the interconnections between linguistics and historical science see: К. ГЕОРГИЕВ, *Лингвистични аспекти на изворовата критика*, ПИД 5, 1991, p. 5–54.

⁷ M.G. CAMMAROTA, *Translating Medieval Texts...*, p. 41–42.

Translating and publishing historical sources in Bulgarian medieval studies: A brief overview

In the initial developmental stage of Bulgarian historical science as an academic discipline, the translation of sources was among the paramount tasks for historians themselves. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, there was still a lack of editions in modern languages of a large proportion of the sources for Bulgarian history. For this reason, the publications of Bulgarian medievalists who were active during said period, such as Marin Drinov (1838–1906), Vasil Zlatarski (1866–1935), Petăr Mutačiev (1883–1943), Petăr Nikov (1884–1938) etc., usually included translations of extensive excerpts from medieval texts, which were accompanied by in-depth analyses and comments. In addition, scientific periodicals began publishing some of the more important sources for Bulgarian history, including excerpts from Byzantine chronicles and historical works, selections from the diplomatic correspondence of Bulgarian rulers, inscriptions, lives of saints, etc. In the early years the greatest merit in this regard went to V. Zlatarski⁸. In 1905, on the initiative of Ivan Šišmanov (1862–1928), an Archeographic Commission was established at the Ministry of Public Education, whose main task was searching for and publishing domestic written records from the medieval era⁹. By the mid-20th century, some of the leading specialists in Slavonic and classical philology were actively involved in this activity, and the first editions of complete translations of medieval works significant for Bulgarian history appeared¹⁰, as well as compendia of selected translated excerpts from texts¹¹.

⁸ Regarding the bibliographic references see: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Апология на Средновековието*, София 2004, p. 148, n. 82.

⁹ For more on this issue see: Д. АНГЕЛОВ, *Нашето историографско наследство в областта на средновековната българска история*, [in:] *Първи конгрес на Българското историческо дружество*, 27–30 януари 1970 година, vol. II, София 1972, p. 555; В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Апология на Средновековието...*, p. 114–115; V. GJUZELEV, *Medieval and Byzantine Studies in Bulgaria in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: a Historiographical Introduction*, [in:] *State and Church. Studies in Medieval Bulgaria and Byzantium*, ed. V. GJUZELEV, K. PETKOV, Sofia 2011, p. 12–13.

¹⁰ Among them can be cited the following: *Посланието на цариградския патриарх Фотия до българския княз Бориса*, ed. et trans. Варненски и Преславски митрополит Симеон, София 1917 [= БСт, 5], p. 3–138; *Отговорите на папа Николай I по допитванията на българите [Responsa Nicolai papae I. ad consulta Bulgarorum anno 866]*, ed. et trans. Д. ДЕЧЕВ, София 1922; *Първобългарски надписи*, introd., text et notes В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, ГСУИФФ 31.1, 1935, p. 1–162; В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарски надписи: добавки и оправки*, ГСУИФФ 32.5, 1936, p. 1–48 + XXX; *Преписката на папа Иннокентия III с българите*, introd., text et notes И. ДУЙЧЕВ, ГСУИФФ 38.3, 1942, p. 1–116. During this period the Old Bulgarian sources were in most cases published with detailed analysis and commentary, but untranslated. For further information on other editions of primary sources see: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Апология на Средновековието...*, p. 114–117.

¹¹ Such are, for example, the editions made by: Й. ИВАНОВ, *Български старини из Македония*, ²София 1931; И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Из старата българска книжнина*, vol. I, *Книжовни и исторически*

In the decades following the Second World War, despite the struggle declared by some scholars against so-called *philological formalism* in the spirit of attempting to restructure historical science on Marxist–Leninist foundations¹², in reality the discussions reflecting the great significance of the source translation for writing history did not cease, but even continued in the field of medieval studies with greater force. In Bulgarian historiography, the controversy over what the phrase ὑπὸ πάκτων ὄντας taken from Theophanes Confessor’s *Chronicle* signifies is well known. Its interpretation touches on the important question of relations between Bulgars and Slavs during the formation of the Bulgarian state in the late 7th century. For this reason, many prominent Bulgarian medievalists took a position on the problem¹³. In 1954, the Institute of History at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences launched a large-scale project to publish a corpus of translations of foreign-language sources on Bulgarian history, which successfully developed in the following years¹⁴. In the 1970s and 1980s, the translation and publication of historical sources underwent a significant boom. This trend continued into the first decades of the new century¹⁵. Over the past 30 years, Vasil Gjuzelev’s efforts to publish sources

паметници от Първото българско царство, ²София 1943; И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Из старата българска книжнина*, vol. II, *Книжовни и исторически паметници от Второто българско царство*, София [1944].

¹² As regards how the term “philological formalism” was used see: *Съдът над историците. Българската историческа наука: документи и дискусии, 1944–1950*, vol. I, ed. В. МУТАФЧИЕВА, В. ЧИЧОВСКА, София 1995, p. 208–209, 387–388; Ц. ВЕНКОВА, *Идеологията в езика на езиковедството: “формален” като лоша дума*, [in:] *Обществените процеси и тяхното отражение в езика*, ed. Кр. АЛЕКСОВА et al., София 2018 [= Псоц, 13], p. 287–297.

¹³ The discussion on the translation of this expression started in the early 20th century, but it gained special momentum in the 1950s and 1960s. *Vide*: Г. БАЛАСЧЕВ, *Върху държавното и военно устройство на старобългарската държава*, Мин 1.2, 1909, p. 203–216; I. ДУЈЧЕВ, *Protobulgares et Slaves: sur le problème de la formation de l’Etat bulgare*, АИК 10, 1938, p. 145–154; Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА, *Бележки към началния период от историята на българската държава*, ИИБИ 5, 1954, p. 319–350; М. ВОЙНОВ, *За първия допир на Аспаруховите българи със славяните и за датата на основаването на българската държава*, ИИБИ 6, 1956, p. 453–480; I. ДУЈЧЕВ, [rec.:] M. I. Vojnov, *Za p̄rvija dopir na Asparuchovite b̄lġari s̄s slavjanite i za datata na osnovavaneto na b̄lġarskata d̄rġava* (*Über den ersten Kontakt der Protobulgaren Asparuchs mit den Slaven und über das Datum der Entstehung des protobulgarischen Staates*), *Izvestija Inst. f. bulg. Gesch.* 6 (1956) 453–480, *BZ* 50, 1957, p. 527; М. ВОЙНОВ, *Отново по въпроса за възникването на българската държава*, ИИИ 9, 1960, p. 269–276; ИДЕМ, *Някои въпроси във връзка с образуването на българската държава и покръстването на българите*, ИИИ 10, 1962, p. 279–309.

¹⁴ The first volume of the series *Fontes Historiae Bulgaricae* (“Sources on Bulgarian History”) contains excerpts from Greek sources from the period 3rd–6th centuries, presented in the original and accompanied by a Bulgarian translation (FGHB, vol. I, ed. В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, София 1954 [= FHB, 1]). A total of thirty-three volumes have been published over seventy years, with the last one coming into print in 2023 (FGHB, vol. XIII, trans. et notes И. ИЛИЕВ, София 2023 [= FHB, 33]). On the development of the above mentioned series see: В. ТЪПКОВА-ЗАИМОВА, М. ВОЙНОВ, Л. ЙОНЧЕВ, *Проблеми на издаването на средновековните извори за българската история*, ПИД 4, 1986, p. 147–151.

¹⁵ It is practically impossible to list even the main editions with translations of sources printed during this period in this current study. The series that stands out among the publications that include

for the medieval history of Bulgaria, stored in various European archives, have been particularly notable. His contribution in this direction remains unsurpassed to this day¹⁶.

As a result of these collective and individual efforts to develop source studies in Bulgaria, the need for historians to translate the sources they work with themselves is gradually disappearing. The presence of such a solid base of translated texts, on the one hand, gives a significant impetus to the development of Bulgarian medieval studies, but on the other hand, leads to a decrease in the interest of researchers in working directly with the original texts and to an underestimation of the central importance of translation for historical reconstruction. However, the problems and challenges associated with the translation of sources remain particularly relevant in contemporary historical science, and their resolution today almost invariably falls within the field of interdisciplinary cooperation with philologists and specialists in translation studies. This fact was convincingly demonstrated recently in the article *Translating Literary Historical Sources (A Critical*

Old Bulgarian texts is: *Стара българска литература*, vol. I–V, ed. Б.Ст. АНГЕЛОВ *et al.*, София 1981–1992. Important documents related to Bulgaria and the Bulgarians, which are kept in the monasteries of Mount Athos, were published in a series of volumes by Kiril Pavlikianov: С. PAVLIKIANOV, *The Mediaeval Greek and Bulgarian Documents of the Athonite Monastery of Zographou (980–1600). Critical Edition and Commentary of the Texts*, Sofia 2014 [= УБ, 512]; ИДЕМ, *Medieval Slavic Acts from Mount Athos 1230–1734. Bulgarian and Serbian Acts from the Monasteries of Karakallou, Kastamonitou St. Paul, Vatopedi and Xenophontos. Moldavian and Wallachian Slavic Acts from the Monasteries of Docheiariou, Kastamonitou and Zographou. Critical Edition and Commentary of the Texts*, Sofia 2018 [= УБ, 516]; ИДЕМ, *Medieval Greek and Slavic Documents of the Athonite Monastery of “Hagiou Pavlou” (St. Paul) (1010–1580). Critical Edition and Commentary of the Texts*, Sofia 2023. Collections of Old Bulgarian sources in English were also printed: T. BUTLER, *Monumenta Bulgarica. A Bilingual Anthology of Bulgarian Texts from 9th to the 19th Centuries*, Ann Arbor, MI 1996; К. ПЕТКОВ, *The Voices of Medieval Bulgaria, Seventh–Fifteenth Century. The Records of a Bygone Culture*, Leiden–Boston 2008 [= ЕСЕММА, 5]. The publishing of the newly discovered treatise of Petăr Bogdan can be defined as a remarkable phenomenon in recent years. Its translation and editing were carried out by Cvetan Vasilev: ПЕТЪР БОГДАН, *За древността на бащината земя и за българските дела / PETRUS DEODATUS, De Antiquitate paterni soli et de rebus Bulgaricis*, vol. I, Текст; vol. II, Трактатът “За древността на бащината земя и за българските дела”: палеография, текстология, език, ed. critica, trans. et comm. Ц. ВАСИЛЕВ, София 2020.

¹⁶ Among the more important publications that he has compiled, edited and, in most cases, translated, we can mention: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Извори за средновековната история на България (VII–XV в.) в австрийските ръкописни сбирки и архиви*, vol. I, Български, други славянски и византийски извори, София 1994; ИДЕМ, *Извори за средновековната история на България (VII–XV в.) в австрийските ръкописни сбирки и архиви*, vol. II, Италиански, латински и немски извори, София 2000 [= АГ, 9]; Венециански документи за историята на България и българите от XII–XV в., ed. ИДЕМ, София 2001 [= АГ, 18]; ИДЕМ, *България е огромна област и многоброен народ: земя на блажени. Средновековни географски съчинения за българските земи и българите (IV–XIV в.)*, София 2012; *Сметководна делова писменост от българското и европейското Средновековие*, introd., comp. et notes ИДЕМ, Пловдив 2013; “Бях в три страни, които и трите се казват България”. Географско-пътешествни съчинения за България и българите от XV в., introd., comp. et notes ИДЕМ, Пловдив 2014.

Approach) by Mirena Slavova¹⁷. Through examples from translations of the New Testament and the historical works of Xenophon and George Pachymeres, it vividly presents the application of the principles of formal equivalence established in the theory of translation studies when translating literary historical sources. The guidelines set out in this study, carried out by a classical philologist and in line with contemporary tendencies in the development of translation studies, can serve as an important starting point in the future work of both historians and translators of historical sources.

In the context of the above observations, the next part of the present study will put the problems related to the role and the significance of the translation of sources for historical research under scrutiny, again examining them through the prism of a specific example from Bulgarian medieval history, but without touching on general theoretical issues.

Translation and historical reconstruction in medieval studies: The case of the birth year of Tsar John II Assen

Along with the controversy already mentioned concerning how to translate and interpret the expression ὑπὸ πάκτων ὄντας, which took place in scholarly periodicals in the 1950s and 1960s, other important discussions in Bulgarian historiography on key issues concerning the translation of words or phrases from the sources and revealing its impact on the interpretation of historical events can be cited¹⁸. Such is the case with the attempt to determine the birth year of the Bulgarian ruler John II Assen. This year is not explicitly indicated in the surviving sources. There are also no tangential data that would allow it to be accurately calculated, such as information about his age when he ascended the throne or when he died, for example. For this reason, researchers have so far expressed various assumptions on the issue, based mainly on philological analysis of the text or on logical reasoning.

As is known, John II Assen (1218–1241), son of one of the brothers who re-established the Bulgarian state in 1185, often called *the old Tsar Assen* (1185–1196) in the Old Bulgarian sources¹⁹, was left an orphan in 1196 after the murder of his

¹⁷ М. СЛАВОВА, *За превода на литературни исторически извори...*, p. 38–47.

¹⁸ As an example, we can give the scientific disputes surrounding the translations of the inscriptions on the Madara rock relief or the word *населници* from the Russian chronograph “Повесть временных лет” (Tale of Bygone Years), which refers to the settlement of the Bulgars among the Danubian Slavs at the end of the 7th century. Regarding the research history and the opinions expressed on these issues see: В. ВЕЛКОВ, *История на изучаванията на мадарските надписи*, [in:] *Мадарският конник: проучвания върху надписите и релефа*, ed. В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, София 1956, p. 5–36; А. НИКОЛОВ, “И населници словеном быша”: замечания к интерпретации сведения “Повести временных лет” о поселении болгар среди дунайских славян, [in:] *ΘΕΟΔΟΥΛΟΣ. Сборник статей памяти профессора Игоря Сергеевича Чичурова*, ed. П.В. КУЗЕНКОВА *et al.*, Москва 2012, p. 261–269.

¹⁹ Cf. К. РЕТКОВ, *The Voices of Medieval Bulgaria...*, p. 276, 340, 426.

father, and in 1207, following the death of his uncle Tsar Kalojan (1197–1207), was forced to leave the country due to the threat of persecution. Before he returned and took over the throne, information about his life is very scarce. For this earliest period of his life, only two mentions of him appear in the historical work of George Akropolites (1217–1282), the main source we have available – at the end of the XII chapter, where the future ruler is mentioned in the following words: *and Assen's son John was not yet of age* (καὶ ὁ τοῦ Ἀσάν δὲ υἱὸς Ἰωάννης ἔτι ἀφῆλιξ ὑπῆρχεν)²⁰, and again, at the end of the following XIII chapter, where his removal to the Scyths (Cumans) is noted: *someone secretly abducted Assen's son John, who was not yet of age, and said that he had gone to the Scyths* (τὸν δὲ τοῦ Ἀσάν παῖδα Ἰωάννην ἀφήλικα ἔτι ὄντα κρύφα τις λαβὼν ἐπειρήκει, ὡς περὶ τοὺς Σκύθας κεχώρηκε)²¹. It becomes clear that based on this scant information, a meaningful account of the life of John II Assen before his accession to the throne cannot be constructed. This is a common problem in studies devoted to the Middle Ages. Medieval sources rarely contain detailed information about the historical figures they mention. Even when it comes to rulers, they are often laconic and usually report the year of their death and the date of their enthronement, but not the year in which they were born. Therefore, a discussion has arisen in Bulgarian historiography around the attempt to indirectly calculate the approximate birth year of this, the most significant ruler in Bulgarian history in the 13th century.

In Bulgarian historical science, Vasil Zlatarski (1866–1935) was the first to take a position on this issue. He believes that John II Assen was 14–15 years old in 1207, when Tsar Boril (1207–1218) took power, since Akropolites used the word ἀφῆλιξ for him, which the editor of the critical edition, August Heisenberg (1869–1930), translated as *nondum maturus*, literally *not yet mature*²². Thus, the researcher

²⁰ *Georgii Acropolitae Historia*, [in:] *Georgii Acropolitae Opera*, rec. A. HEISENBERG, ed. corr. curavit P. WIRTH, vol. I, *Continens Historiam, Breviarium historiae, Theodori Scutariotae additamenta*, Stuttgartiae 1978 (Editio stereotypa editionis anni MCMIII correctior) (cetera: ACROPOLITES, ed. HEISENBERG/WIRTH), p. 21.4–5. A translation by R. Macrides in: GEORGE AKROPOLITES, *The History*, introd., trans. et comm. R. MACRIDES, Oxford 2007 [= OSB] (cetera: AKROPOLITES, ed. MACRIDES), p. 137.

²¹ ACROPOLITES, ed. HEISENBERG/WIRTH, p. 24.7–9. A translation by R. Macrides in: AKROPOLITES, ed. MACRIDES, p. 140–141. Akropolites returns to these events again in chapter XX, where he presents the return of John II Assen from exile and his accession to the throne after the deposition of Boril. *Vide*: ACROPOLITES, ed. HEISENBERG/WIRTH, p. 32–33.

²² *Georgii Acropolitae Historia*, [in:] *Georgii Acropolitae Opera*, rec. A. HEISENBERG, vol. I, *Continens Historiam, Breviarium historiae, Theodori Scutariotae additamenta*, Lipsiae 1903, p. 316. Some of the more important dictionaries indicated the following meanings of the word: ἀφῆλιξ, ion. ἀπῆλιξ, ἴκος, ὁ, ἡ – *beyond youth, elderly* II. *minor, infant* (H.G. LIDDELL, R. SCOTT, H.S. JONES *et al.*, *A Greek-English Lexicon*,⁹Oxford 1996, s.v.); *not of full age, young* (G.W.H. LAMPE, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, p. 274); *one who has passed adolescence, no longer a boy, adult* II. *still a boy, minor* (F. MONTANARI, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, Leiden–Boston 2015, p. 354); *past the prime of life, old* (J. DIGGLE *et al.*, *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon*, vol. I, (A–I), Cambridge 2021, p. 254). In *Greek sources for Bulgarian history*, Mihail Vojnov, probably guided by the context and without

calculated that the son of John I Assen must have been born in 1191 or 1192²³. Ivan Dujčev (1907–1986) also focused specifically on the problem and tried to define the meaning of this lexeme in the vocabulary of Akropolites more precisely. He pointed out three more places in the work of the Byzantine historian, referring respectively to the early years of the lives of the emperors Theodore II Laskaris (1254–1258), John IV Laskaris (1258–1261) and Baldwin II (1228–1261), in which the adjective ἀφῆλιξ serves to denote the ages of eight to eleven. These observations gave the scholar a reason to conclude that the more likely date of birth of the future Bulgarian ruler is 1195 or 1196, since as of 1207 he *would have been 11–12 years old at most*, and after his escape *he returned to Bulgaria around 1218, only when he came of age*²⁴.

In historiography over the following decades, most researchers adhered to one of these two opinions, with Dujčev's opinion being more widely held, as it was supported by more solid arguments taken from the text of Akropolites. Moreover, it began to serve as a basis for formulating new hypotheses. Jordan Andreev (1939–2008), for example, relying on Dujčev's conclusions, attempted to determine the birth year of Tsarina Elena, the mother of John II Assen²⁵. They were later adopted by Ruth Makridis (1949–2019) in the comments to the English translation of the *History* of George Akropolites²⁶. Among the scholars rejecting Dujčev's arguments, one might mention Ivan Božilov (1940–2016), who, after a brief review of the data on the issue, came to the conclusion that the sources leave us no other

additional explanations, translates ἀφῆλιξ in both places that refer to John II Assen, with the word: *dete (child)* (ГЕОРГИ АКРОПОЛИТ, *История*, trans. М. Войнов, [in:] FGHB, vol. VIII, comp. М. Войнов, ed. М. Войнов, В. Тъпкова-Займова, Л. Йончев, София 1972 [= FHB, 15], p. 154, 156). Pётr Žavoronkov in the Russian edition of the *History* by George Akropolites, referring to Ivan Božilov's notes (И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици (1186–1460). Генеалогия и просопография*, ²София 1994, p. 77), offers the following translations of the two excerpts: *был еще в детском возрасте* (he was still in childhood) and *был еще юн* (he was still young) (ГЕОРГИЙ АКРОПОЛИТ, *История*, trans., introd. et comm. П.И. ЖАВОРОНКОВ, Санкт-Петербург 2005, p. 56, 58). In the English edition by Ruth Macrides these passages were translated by *was not yet of age* (AKROPOLITES, ed. MACRIDES, p. 137, 140). Jean Dayantis in the end of the XII chapter translated ἀφῆλιξ by *encore mineur* (still a minor), but he erroneously referred it to Tsar Kalojan; in the second passage the same phrase has not been translated at all. *Vide*: GEORGES ACROPOLITÈS, *Chronique du XIII^e siècle. L'Empire grec de Nicée*, introd., trans. et notes J. DAYANTIS, Paris 2012, p. 17, 19.

²³ В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История на българската държава през средните векове*, vol. III, *Второ българско царство. България при Асеневици (1187–1280)*, ²София 1994, p. 106, n. 1; p. 260, n. 2. According to Zlatarski, the adjective ἀφῆλιξ, translated by A. Heisenberg as *nondum maturus*, should mean *getting out of childhood*.

²⁴ И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Приноси към историята на Иван Асен II*, [in:] ИДЕМ, *Българско средновековие. Проучвания върху политическата и културната история на средновековна България*, София 1972, p. 289–290.

²⁵ Й. АНДРЕЕВ, *Някои хронологични бележки за царуването на Иван Асен II*, ТВТУ 15.3, 1977–1978, p. 18, n. 28.

²⁶ AKROPOLITES, ed. MACRIDES, p. 140, 144, n. 23.

option than: *to reason logically and assume that John Assen was born around 1190–1192 at the latest*²⁷. However, he does not provide any new evidence to support this view.

From this brief introduction to the problem, it turns out that the dispute over the birth year of John II Assen can be reduced to determining the exact meaning of the adjective ἀφῆλιξ, which the Byzantine historian uses. The present text offers some additional observations in this direction, which are in line with new research in Byzantine studies and aim to bring more clarity to the discussion. These observations focus on two key questions: what is the meaning of this word in Byzantine official documents or narrative sources, and how precise is George Akropolites in the use of the words used to denote childhood and adolescence in Byzantium.

* * *

In recent years, research on children and adolescents in Byzantium has made significant progress. Several collections and monographs have already been published in this scientific field, as well as a number of articles, some of which specifically address issues of terminology²⁸. This circumstance allows the problem considered here to be studied on a broader basis.

Byzantine texts contain diverse lexemes for the concept of *child*. In principle, the designations used since Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 375 BC) are preserved: παιδίον (small child), παῖς (child), μεράκιον (youth, a male adolescent), νεανίσκος (young man). In various, mainly hagiographic sources, but also in secular and

²⁷ И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици...*, p. 77.

²⁸ H. ANTONIADIS-BIBICOU, *Quelques notes sur l'enfant de la moyenne époque byzantine (VI^e–XII^e siècles)*, [in:] *Annales de démographie historique. Enfant et Sociétés*, Paris–La Haye 1973, p. 77–84; E. PATLAGEAN, *L'enfant et son avenir dans la famille byzantine (IV^e–XII^e siècles)*, [in:] *Annales de démographie historique. Enfant et Sociétés*, Paris–La Haye 1973, p. 85–93; A. MOFFATT, *The Byzantine Child*, SRes 53.4, 1986, p. 705–723; *Becoming Byzantine. Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. A. PAPACONSTANTINOU, A.-M. TALBOT, Washington 2009; C. HENNESSY, *Young People in Byzantium*, [in:] *A Companion to Byzantium*, ed. L. JAMES, Chichester 2010, p. 81–92; D. ARIANTZI, *Kindheit in Byzanz. Emotionale, geistige und materielle Entwicklung im familiären Umfeld vom 6. bis zum 11. Jahrhundert*, Berlin–Boston 2012 [= *MiL.S.*, 36]; *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, ed. L. BRUBAKER, S. TOUGHER, Farnham 2013 [= *BBOS*, 14]; J. BAUN, *Coming of Age in Byzantium: Agency and Authority in Rites of Passage from Infancy to Adulthood*, [in:] *Authority in Byzantium*, ed. P. ARMSTRONG, Farnham–London–Burlington 2013 [= *PCHS*, 14], p. 113–135; D. ARIANTZI, *Terminologische und sozialhistorische Untersuchungen zur Adoleszenz in Byzanz (6.–11. Jahrhundert)*, Teil I, *Theorien, Konzepte, narrative Quellen*, *JÖB* 63, 2013, p. 1–31; *Coming of Age in Byzantium. Adolescence and Society*, ed. D. ARIANTZI, Berlin–Boston 2018; A.-M. TALBOT, *Childhood in Middle and Late Byzantium: Ninth to Fifteenth Centuries*, [in:] *Childhood in History. Perceptions of Children in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, ed. R. AASGAARD, C. HORN, with O.M. COJOCARU, London–New York 2018, p. 240–256; O.M. COJOCARU, *Byzantine Childhood. Representations and Experiences of Children in Middle Byzantine Society*, New York 2022; I. KOMATINA, *The Ages of Man in Serbian Medieval Literary Tradition: A Case Study of Serbian Hagiographies*, *AA.ASH* 64.3–4, 2024, p. 415–428.

ecclesiastical legal documents, other terms are found. The word βρέφος means *a child still growing in the womb*, as well as *a newborn*, and also *a baby*. Sometimes *a newborn* is also called νεογνός, -ον or νήπιος, -ον. A child who is still being breastfed is designated ύπομάζιος, -ον. For children in the first phase of childhood (up to 7 years) the following terms are used: νήπιος, -ον or παιδίον, παιδάριον, παῖς, ἴμφας (= ἴμφανς, lat. infans), in the second phase (up to 12 years for girls and 14 years for boys) – παῖς, also rarely – πρόσηβος παῖς. The child in puberty is called μεῖραξ, μειράκιον or μειρακίσκος²⁹.

Günter Prinzing is among the authors who have specifically studied the terms for children and adolescents in Byzantium. He draws attention to a model of the stages of human life set out by Patriarch Photios (858–867 and 877–886) in a poem written about the otherwise unknown Markellos³⁰, which can be considered a Byzantine version of the ancient paradigm. The first four ages presented there cover childhood and youth: these are βρέφος (up to the age of 4), παιδίον (between 4 and 10 years), βούπαις (from 10 to 18 years) and μειράκιον (covering ages 18–20). The next age, ἀκμή, extends from 20 to 35 years, so for Photios adolescence ends at the age of 20, just as it does in the Old Testament – a very likely source for his pattern. In Byzantium, according to the tradition of Roman law, formal adulthood occurred at the age of 25. Before that age, individuals were considered ἀφήλικες (or ἀφήλικοι)³¹.

As a result of a detailed and precise analysis of the legal texts in the same publication, Prinzing distinguishes three categories of designation, each of which describes a relatively well-specified age or status group among children and juveniles³²:

- For children aged approximately 3 to 7 years:
ἄνηβος, νήπιος, -ον and ἴμφας.
- For children from 7 to 12–14 years old:
ἄνηβος, ἀνήλικος/ἀνήλιξ and ἐλάττων.
- For children or minors aged 13–15 to 25 years:
ἔφηβος, ἀφήλιξ/ἀφήλικος and νέος.

²⁹ The use and significations of the said terms have been thoroughly examined by D. ARIANTZI, *Kindheit in Byzanz...*, p. 36–37; also see: A. ΚΙΟΥΣΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ, *Χρόνος και ηλικίες στη βυζαντινή κοινωνία. Η κλίμακα των ηλικιών από τὰ ἀγιολογικά κείμενα τῆς μέσης ἐποχῆς (7^ος–11^ος αἰ.)*, Αθήνα 1997 [= IAN, 30], p. 46–58; G. PRINZING, *Observations on the Legal Status of Children and the Stages of Childhood in Byzantium*, [in:] *Becoming Byzantine...*, p. 18–19; D. ARIANTZI, *Terminologische und sozialhistorische Untersuchungen zur Adoleszenz in Byzanz...*, p. 1–31; O.M. COJOCARU, *Byzantine Childhood...*, p. 28–29.

³⁰ The text was published by N.B. ΤΩΜΑΔΑΚΗΣ, *Φωτίου, Ἡλικίαί τῶν ἀνθρώπων*, ΕΕΦΣΠΙΑ 23, 1972–1973, p. 13–14.

³¹ G. PRINZING, *Observations on the Legal Status of Children...*, p. 17.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 20.

However, the more common terms in the sources, such as βρέφος, παιδιον, παιδάριον and παῖς, νήπιος, -ον, etc., often served not to mark any specific phase of the children's development or a specific age group, but to mean *a child* more generally. Sometimes they were also used metaphorically³³. In a number of cases, their usage also exhibits discrepancies or deviations from common practice. Despoina Ariantzi gives examples of such discordances, which are not uncommon in hagiographic literature³⁴. The Life of Nicetas of Medikion mentions the phrase χρόνος τῶν μειρακίων³⁵, which should refer to young men between 18 and 20 years old, but the fact that it was about a father who took the boy to a tutor suggests that he was still in early childhood, when he was seven or eight years old. David of Mytilene was sent to school by his parents when he was nine and was called μειρακίσκος or νεανίσκος³⁶. The first lexeme is generally used for a youth in puberty, and the second for a young man. The same discrepancy is present in the case of Symeon, the brother of David of Mytilene, who was called μείραξ when he was eight years old³⁷.

According to Ariantzi, in these cases the authors either did not know the exact meaning of the respective terms, or they followed some usage specific to their time. Therefore, in her words, one cannot accurately determine the age of a person solely on the basis of the designation used for an age benchmark if additional information is not available³⁸.

* * *

All the data and conclusions mentioned so far put the discussion about the birth year of John II Assen in a completely different light. It can be seen that the example usages of the word ἀφῆλιξ, which I. Dujčev takes from the text of George Akropolites, do not correspond to the meaning which it is usually found to have, i.e. as a term for young people in the age group from 13–15 to 25 years. It becomes clear that in narrative sources the age designations are sometimes used quite freely or in a sense different from the established one in official documents. For this reason, it often turns out to be impossible to reveal the specific content that the author has instilled into the word. In this respect, the work of Akropolites is no exception. I. Božilov draws attention to the fact that the Byzantine historian actually called John II Assen ἀφῆλιξ twice – once in connection with the accession of Kalojan in 1197 and again after his death in 1207, i.e. 10 years later – and this circumstance

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

³⁴ D. ARIANTZI, *Kindheit in Byzanz...*, p. 39–40.

³⁵ *Vita S. Nicetae Confessoris*, AASS 10, April part 1, 1866, Appendix, p. XIX (5).

³⁶ *Acta Graeca SS. Davidis, Symeonis et Georgii Mitylenae in insula Lesbo*, ed. J. VAN DEN GHEYN, AB 18, 1899 (cetera: *Acta Graeca SS. Davidis, Symeonis et Georgii Mitylenae*), p. 214, 6–8, 13–14.

³⁷ *Acta Graeca SS. Davidis, Symeonis et Georgii Mitylenae*, p. 217, 29–30.

³⁸ D. ARIANTZI, *Kindheit in Byzanz...*, p. 39.

compromises the hypothesis put forward by Dujčev, since it excludes the possibility that in both cases the future ruler would have fallen within the age range of eight to eleven³⁹.

As confirmation of the fact that Akropolites is not always precise in his use of age terms (or in some cases uses them metaphorically), other examples can be cited. At the beginning of chapter XXXIX of his history, he tells of his meeting with the imperial family in the summer of 1239, at which John III Doukas Vatatzes (1221–1254) called him *μειράκιον*⁴⁰. This designation corresponds to the usual usage of the word, since the historian was then 21 years old, but at the beginning of chapter XL, Akropolites uses the same lexeme to describe the Bulgarian Tsar Kaliman I Assen (1241–1246), when he was only eight or nine years old (*καὶ μειράκιον ἦρχε τῆς τῶν Βουλγάρων*)⁴¹. Bulgarian Tsar Michael II Assen (1246–1256), who inherited power in Târnovo in 1246, is called a *βρέφος*⁴² several times in the text, even though he was seven or eight years old, and this term is usually used to refer to newborns or very young children under the age of four⁴³. Not only the choice of appropriate expressions, but also the actual judgment of Akropolites was sometimes not accurate regarding the age of the historical characters he was describing. For example, he claims that when he personally saw John of Brienne in 1231, he was *80 years old or even more*⁴⁴. However, based on other evidence, it has been convincingly proven that the former king of Jerusalem was at that time about 20 years younger⁴⁵.

In this situation, it is not possible to resolve the issue on the basis of the lexemes for age used by Akropolites, and the analysis cannot be grounded only on this type of data. However, the sources give us a starting point for further observations. The fact that the son of John I Assen was taken away by someone secretly (*κρύφα τις λαβῶν*)⁴⁶ in 1207 shows that he was of an age at which he could not defend himself and needed protection and patronage to prevent any possible aggression towards him. The presence of a companion in this case is essential, and even more importantly, the information is confirmed and specified by Ephraim of Ainos, who adds that this companion was his educator (*παιδαγωγός*)⁴⁷.

³⁹ И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Фамилията на Асеневици...*, p. 77.

⁴⁰ ACROPOLITES, ed. HEISENBERG/WIRTH, p. 63.21.

⁴¹ ACROPOLITES, ed. HEISENBERG/WIRTH, p. 65.5–6.

⁴² ACROPOLITES, ed. HEISENBERG/WIRTH, p. 74.4,10.

⁴³ Cf. G. PRINZING, *Observations on the Legal Status of Children...*, p. 17; D. ARIANTZI, *Kindheit in Byzanz...*, p. 36.

⁴⁴ ACROPOLITES, ed. HEISENBERG/WIRTH, p. 44.21–22.

⁴⁵ J.M. BUCKLEY, *The Problematical Octogenarianism of John of Brienne*, S 32.2, 1957, p. 315–322; G.J.M. PERRY, *John of Brienne. King of Jerusalem, Emperor of Constantinople, c. 1175–1237*, Cambridge 2013, p. 26.

⁴⁶ ACROPOLITES, ed. HEISENBERG/WIRTH, p. 24.8.

⁴⁷ *Ephraem Aenii Historia chronica*, ed. O. LAMPSIDES, Athens 1990 [= CFHB, 27], p. 278, v. 7850–7855. A translation by V. Gjuzev see in: *Самият Търновград ще разтърби победите. Средновековни*

In both Greek and Roman societies and likewise in Byzantium, wealthier parents and those who belonged to the elite usually entrusted their children to personal mentors, often called *pedagogues*, who took care of them, accompanied them, carried their textbooks, and provided their education⁴⁸. Their role in the development of children had always been valued as particularly important. Talking about the relationship between John Italos and Michael Psellos in the *Alexiad* Anna Komnene hints that only the wildly conceited try to study alone⁴⁹. Theodore II Laskaris described his tutor in a satire, from which we learn more about his role in the royal court during this period. The future emperor states that he was in the twelfth year of his life (1233) when his parents decided to choose a tutor for him⁵⁰. According to Dimităr G. Angelov, who has specifically researched the issue, the position of the *pedagogue* in this case can be described as that of a head teacher, responsible for the education and training of the adolescent prince⁵¹.

поети за България, introd., comp. et notes B. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, София 1981, p. 79. The corresponding verses are not included in the newest edition of the text, translated by Iris von Bredow. Cf.: B. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Средновековна поезия от и за българите*, София 2015 [= СЪЧ, 5], p. 364–365. The information in Ephraim's work is usually ignored by researchers due to the understanding that it follows the text of Akropolites as per its content and has no independent value. However, this and other important additions to the verse chronicle, which are not found in the work of the Byzantine historian, show that he enriched his story with new data, which, although not many in number, are specific and essential and are not related to the stylistic and rhetorical devices of the author. For other additions by Ephraim see: А.В. МАЙОРОВ, *Малоизвестные источники по истории русско-византийских отношений начала XIII века: текст, перевод, комментарий*, УИЗ 12, 2009, p. 294–297.

⁴⁸ The role of the *pedagogue* in Roman society is thoroughly dealt with by J. McWILLIAM, *The Socialization of Roman Children*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*, ed. J. EVANS GRUBBS, T. PARKIN with the assistance of R. BELL, Oxford–New York 2013, p. 274–277. On the same topic see also: G. BUCKLER, *Byzantine Education*, [in:] *Byzantium. An Introduction to East Roman Civilization*, ed. N.H. BAYNES, H.St.L.B. MOSS, Oxford 1969, p. 209–211; R. CRIBIORE, *Writing, Teachers and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Atlanta 1996 [= ASPa, 36], p. 16–17; N. KALOGERAS, *Byzantine Childhood Education and its Social Role from the Sixth Century until the End of Iconoclasm*, Ph.D. Dissertation: The University of Chicago, Chicago 2000, p. 198–200, 240–243; V. VUOLANTO, *Elite Children, Socialization, and Agency in the Late Roman World*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood...*, p. 588–590; V. VUOLANTO, *Family Relations and the Socialisation of Children in the Autobiographical Narratives of Late Antiquity*, [in:] *Approaches to the Byzantine Family...*, p. 51–52.

⁴⁹ *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, ed. D. REINSCH, A. KAMBYLIS, vol. I, *Prolegomena et Textus*, Berlin–Boston 2001 [= CFHB, 40.1], p. 162–163; ANNA KOMNENE, *The Alexiad*, trans. E.R.A. SEWTER, rev. with introd. and notes P. FRANKOPAN, London 2009, p. 147–148; G. BUCKLER, *Byzantine Education...*, p. 209.

⁵⁰ THEODORUS II DUCAS LASCARIS, *Opuscula rhetorica*, ed. A. TARTAGLIA, Monachii–Lipsiae 2000 [= BSGR], p. 161.174–175.

⁵¹ D. ANGELOV, *The Byzantine Hellene. The Life of Emperor Theodore Laskaris and Byzantium in the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge 2019, p. 70–71. About the education and upbringing of rulers in Byzantium and medieval Bulgaria, see also: IDEM, *Emperors and Patriarchs as Ideal Children and Adolescents: Literary Conventions and Cultural Expectations*, [in:] *Becoming Byzantine...*, p. 105–111; B. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Παιδεία на средновековните български владетели (VII–XIV в.)*,

Furthermore, it emerges in the sources that John II Assen did not join the struggle for power with Boril's other opponents, something he would have done if he had already reached manhood. Such participation would have implied reaching a certain age, not so much in terms of passing the formal age limit for adulthood, but in terms of attaining a certain physical maturity required for the ability to handle weapons, as well as the accumulation of experience and authority necessary to gain support in society. Although legal adulthood commenced at 25 in Byzantium, the real boundary between adolescence and adulthood was not precisely defined and in reality occurred around the ages of 16–18, when most individuals were able to enter life independently, assume certain responsibilities, and make their own decisions⁵².

As for royalty who inherited power as children, political circumstances often practically required their involvement in the government at the earliest opportunity. This was the case with Michael II Assen, who, due to the political conditions that were ripe for an offensive against Nicaea in 1254–1255, assumed his royal duties, stood at the head of the army, and personally participated in hostilities at barely 16 or 17 years old⁵³. During the ruler's lifetime too, the young heir, whether crowned co-ruler or not, could be given important tasks in the governance of the state while still in his adolescent years. At the age of 19, Theodore II Laskaris had already begun his political career in the empire, as evidenced by the treaty of John III Vatatzes with Baldwin II, concluded in June 1241⁵⁴. Similarly, in the 1360s, again during a time of great hardship for the empire, the 16-year-old Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425) had to interrupt his education and become involved in state affairs. The future ruler describes this significant moment in his life in a letter to Alexius Iagoup as a period of transition, in which he had already emerged from childhood but had not yet reached the age of manhood (Τὴν δὲ τῶν παίδων παρελάσαντα ἡλικίαν, πρὶν εἰς ἄνδρα εἰσελθεῖν)⁵⁵.

In summarizing the observations presented so far, it can be said that the current condition of the source base does not allow us to give a definitive answer to the question of which year John II Assen was born. Dujčev's approach of searching for and examining the places where the word ἀφῆλιξ occurs throughout the

[in:] IDEM, *Седмъкнижие за средновековната история на България (IV–XV век)*, vol. I, *Тълкувания върху българското и европейското Средновековие*, София 2018, p. 393–404.

⁵² H. ANTONIADIS-BIBICOU, *Quelques notes sur l'enfant...*, p. 77–78; *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. I, ed. AL.P. KAZHDAN, Oxford 1991, p. 421; B. CASEAU, *Too Young to Be Accountable: Is 15 Years Old a Threshold in Byzantium?*, [in:] *Coming of Age in Byzantium. Adolescence...*, p. 19–28; O.M. COJOCARU, *Byzantine Childhood...*, p. 30–32.

⁵³ ACROPOLITES, ed. HEISENBERG/WIRTH, p. 107.

⁵⁴ D. ANGELOV, *The Byzantine Hellene...*, p. 92.

⁵⁵ *Manuel's Letter-Discourse to Alexius Iagoup*, [in:] J.W. BARKER, *Manuel II Palaeologus (1391–1425). A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship*, New Brunswick–New Jersey 1969, (Appendix XXIII), p. 529.47–48; S. ÇELİK, *Manuel II Palaiologos (1350–1425). A Byzantine Emperor in a Time of Tumult*, Cambridge 2021, p. 53.

text of the *History* of George Akropolites is completely appropriate, but the new data presented here, which are based on a significantly larger number of Byzantine sources, do not confirm his conclusions. The fact that *the son of the old Tsar Assen* is mentioned for the first time in connection with the accession of Kalojan in 1197, when his father had already died, shows that his age in 1207 could not have been less than 11–12 years. At the same time, the circumstances that he did not join the power struggle at the accession of Boril and that he still had a tutor or mentor at that time indicate that he was probably no older than 16–17 years old. Therefore, the year of his birth cannot be determined with precision either and must be placed in the period between 1190 and 1196.

Conclusions: The significance of translation and the limits of interpretation

As has been made clear so far, the translation and analysis of the original source text are of utmost importance for historical reconstruction. They form the basis of the research that the historian carries out. Therefore, despite the availability of translations into modern languages of most medieval sources, historical research today must continue the old practice of working directly with the original texts, which should include attention to the details of the content, as well as the study of important keywords and expressions in a broader context, an activity that usually remains outside the focus of translators. Only in this way can the reliability of the conclusions drawn be largely guaranteed. In cases where the expertise of the historian is not sufficient to perform this careful study of the source text, collective work by historians, philologists and translation specialists is necessary. In a time of ever-deepening specialization in the sciences and the accumulation of an extraordinary amount of information in the separate branches of historical knowledge, interdisciplinary cooperation proves to have no alternative as a direction for the future of historical research.

Of course, this exchange between disciplines is not one-way. The philologist who translates a literary historical source or document is dependent on the knowledge generated by historical research. He or she inevitably faces a number of challenges related to the knowledge of the facts and realities in the texts he or she works with. In order to understand certain events or to make sense of certain cultural phenomena and features contained in these narrative testimonies, knowledge of the broader context is always necessary. It is precisely in the accumulation of this stock of information, which is required for any translation of a text from the past, that the contribution of historical science to this interdisciplinary collaboration lies.

Last but not least, high professionalism also includes the scientist's responsibility to avoid the construction in his work of scientific propositions and statements that are not well argued and are not based on reliable sources, accurate translation and in-depth analysis, because each study subsequently serves as the basis for further

studies, and building hypothesis upon hypothesis could ultimately compromise the historical reconstruction in its entirety.

Besides that, the specific example from the field of Bulgarian medieval studies, which has been scrutinized in this study, refers to a basic issue related to the methodology of scientific research – this is the problem of being aware of and complying with the limits that the text and the translation thereof place before historical interpretation, limits beyond which we sometimes cannot go in search of an answer to our scientific inquiries.

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