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ON THE RELIABILITY OF CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS' ACCOUNT OF THE “FLIGHT” OF PRINCE ČASLAV FROM BULGARIA*

The present text aims to reflect on the reliability of Constantine Porphyrogenitus' account about the departure of Časlav, a Serbian prince, from Bulgaria at the beginning of the reign of Peter I, the successor of Symeon. The passage devoted to this event is located in the *De administrando imperio* by the learned emperor¹. One needs to stress that this is the only source referring to this event, which places the researcher in a difficult position.

Before I proceed to analysing the passage in question, in order to make the following arguments easier to follow I will first devote some attention to the Bulgarian-Serbian relations during the final phase of Symeon's reign. Said ruler has undertaken steps to subordinate the Serbs to Preslav. A Bulgarian intervention in Serbia took place in most likely 923. It was a consequence of changing of sides by Pavle of Serbia, son of Bran, who was until then a Bulgarian ally. For reasons unknown, and in unclear circumstances, he sided with the Byzantines. In this situation, Symeon decided to remove him from the throne and replace him with yet another nominee of his choosing. Zacharias, son of Pribislav, having been held by the Bulgarian ruler for several years, became this candidate. Thanks to Bulgarian support he was able to remove Pavle. Having attained power, however, the new ruler of Serbia rejected his alliance with Bulgarians and approached the empire instead.

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¹ CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS, *De administrando imperio*, 32, ed. G. MORAVCSIK, trans. R.J.H. JENKINS, Washington 1967, p. 159, 161 (cetera: *DAI*). The work was created between 944 and 952 (perhaps as late as 959), although some of its parts may have been written earlier, e.g. Љ. МАКСИМОВИЋ (*Структура 32. главе снуса De administrando imperio*, ЗРВИ 21, 1982, p. 31) suspects that chapter 32, devoted to Serbs, was created between 927/928 and 944. Relatively recently, T. ŽIVKOVIĆ thoroughly analysed fragments of *De administrando imperio*, regarding Serbs and Croats (*De conversione Croatorum et Serborum. A Lost Source*, Belgrade 2012, p. 38–42), including those about relations with the Bulgarians.

A few years earlier Zacharias was Romanus Lecapenus' candidate for the ruler of Raška². Perhaps this change of loyalties that Symeon had not anticipated was due to personal reasons (Zacharias' long stay in Constantinople could have resulted in strong ties with the imperial court; it was the Bulgarian ruler who previously prevented him from taking the Serbian throne and kept him prisoner in Preslav). Perhaps it was an attempt of gaining independence with Byzantine aid. However, we do not have any sources that would allow us to verify these hypotheses. Regardless of what motives were behind Zacharias' decision, he must have expected Symeon's reaction to his protege's betrayal. The Bulgarian ruler sent against him an army led by Marmais and Theodore Sigriztes. Their expedition ended in a complete fiasco, the clearest proof of which was the death of both Marmais and Sigriztes. Their heads, as Constantine Porphyrogenitus informs, were sent along with weapons to Constantinople as proof of victory³.

In response to the events in Serbia Symeon decided to organise another expedition against Zacharias (924?)⁴, accompanied by another candidate to the Serbian throne. This time it was Časlav, son of Klonimir and a Bulgarian woman whose name we do not know⁵. Hearing the news of the approaching Bulgarian army, Zacharias abandoned Raška and fled to Croatia. The Bulgarians took control of Serbia and, what is noteworthy, did not place Časlav on the throne⁶, but subjected

² *DAI*, 32, p. 158. On the subject of this event cf. also: КОНСТАНТИН VII ПОРФИРОГЕНИТ, *Спис о народима*, FBHPJS, vol. II, ed. В. FERJANČIĆ, Beograd 1959, p. 55, fn. 184–185; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Цар Симеон Велики (893–927). Златният век на Средновековна България*, София 1983, p. 138; J.A.V. FINE, *The Early Medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century*, Ann Arbor–Michigan 1983, p. 152; Т. ЖИВКОВИЋ, *Јужни Словени под византијском влашћу 600–1025*, Београд 2002, p. 416. On Zacharias – Т. ЖИВКОВИЋ, *Портрети владара раног средњег века. Од Властимира до Борића*, Београд 2006, p. 57–63.

³ *DAI*, 32, p. 158.

⁴ Also in this case the dating of the Bulgarian expedition can be argued either way. It may have taken place in 924 or 925, perhaps even in 926 (thus e.g. Т. ЖИВКОВИЋ, *Јужни Словени...*, p. 419, fn. 1423). The Bulgarian troops were led according to Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus by (*DAI*, 32, p. 158): Kninos (Κνήνος), Himnikos (Ἰμνῆκος), Itzboklias (Ἰτζβόκλιας). Constantine's relation suggests that these were the names of Bulgarian commanders. Most likely, however, these were names of positions or dignities – В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История на българската държава през средните векове*, vol. I.2, *Първо българско царство. От славянизацията на държавата до падането на Първото царство*, София 1927, p. 475–476, fn. 1. On the subject of Ἰμνῆκος cf. also Т. СЛАВОВА, *Владелец и администрация в ранносредновековна България. Филологически аспекти*, София 2010, p. 105–109 (chief – one of the commanders of Bulgarian mounted troops; his duties related not only to leading the war effort, but also to participating in peace negotiations).

⁵ About this Serbian ruler – Т. ЖИВКОВИЋ, *Портрети...*, p. 49–57.

⁶ It seems Časlav was used in order to neutralise any stronger opposition from the Serbian notables, who may have given up their support for their current ruler Zacharias more easily knowing that he will be replaced with their compatriot. Constantine Porphyrogenitus (*DAI*, 32, p. 158) writes that Serbian *žirans* were summoned under the pretext of acknowledging a new ruler, only to be subsequently imprisoned by the Bulgarians. Časlav, meanwhile, was transported to Bulgaria, where he remained until the end of Symeon's reign and throughout the beginning of Peter's.

it to their own governance. Part of the Serbian populace was relocated into Bulgaria. It is clear, then, that Symeon drew conclusions from his previous policy towards Serbia. Maintaining an alliance by placing his own candidate on its throne did not work; in this situation the only way of maintaining influence in Raška was to incorporate it into the Bulgarian state. Perhaps this move was partially influenced by the tense relations with Croatia⁷.

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In the beginning of tsar Peter's reign (927–969) Bulgarian-Serbian relations altered. Časlav left Bulgaria and journeyed to the Serbian lands. As was mentioned earlier, the only author to mention this was Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Due to its unique nature, I will quote the account in full:

Seven years afterwards Tzeëslav escaped from Bulgarians with four others, and entered Serbia from Preslav, and found in the country no more than fifty men only, without wives or children, who supported themselves by hunting. With these he took possession of the country and sent message to the emperor of the Romans asking for his support and succour, and promising to serve him and be obedient to his command, as had been the princes before him. And thenceforward the emperor of the Romans continually benefit him, so that the Serbs living in Croatia and Bulgaria and the rest of the countries, whom Symeon had scattered, rallied to him when they heard of it. Moreover many had escaped from Bulgaria and entered Constantinople, and these the emperor of Romans clad and comforted and sent to Tzeëslav.⁸

This passage was examined many times already, however not all the questions it raises have been settled. The first of these is the dating of Časlav's departure from Preslav. Scholarly works place it between 928 and 933/934⁹. This chronological quandary is a consequence of two uncertainties. Firstly, it is unclear from which point one should count the seven years (even leaving aside the question of how accurate that information is). Secondly, the dating of the events marking the opening point of this situation is ambiguous as well. Ostrogorsky dated Časlav's departure from Bulgaria to 928, thinking that Constantine Porphyrogenitus counted the seven years from Zacharias' bid for power in Serbia (920/921)¹⁰. Other scholars

⁷ Т. ТОДОРОВ, *България през втората и третата четвърт на Х в. Политическа история*, София 2006 [PhD thesis], p. 196.

⁸ *DAI*, 32, p. 158, 160 (English translation – p. 159, 161).

⁹ Cf. Г. ОСТРОГОРСКИ, *Порфиrogenитова хроника српских владара и њени хронолошки подаци*, [in:] *ИДЕМ, Сабране дела Георгија Острогорског*, vol. IV, *Византија и словени*, Београд 1970, p. 84–86; И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на средновековна България. VII–XIV в.*, София 2006, p. 279; Т. ТОДОРОВ, *България...*, p. 194.

¹⁰ Г. ОСТРОГОРСКИ, *Порфиrogenитова хроника...*, p. 84–86. Ostrogorsky's supposition was accepted by, i.a.: И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Отношенията между южните славяни и Византия през X–XII в.*, [in:] *ИДЕМ, Избрани произведения*, vol. I, *Византия и славянския свят*, София 1998, p. 64–65; P. STERPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier. A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204*,

saw the beginning of the seven year period in the transferring of the Serbian lands under direct Bulgarian rule and imprisonment of Časlav in Preslav. Due to differences in the dating of this event (between 924 and 926) scholars pointed to years between 931 and 933¹¹ as the moment during which Časlav left Bulgaria. This question cannot be resolved although because of the logic of Constantine Porphyrogenitus' argument¹², I am leaning towards the dating which takes as its starting point the imposition of direct control over Serbia by Symeon (most likely in 924). It needs to be pointed out, however, that from the perspective of Časlav's actions and their results, the significance of when exactly he left Preslav is secondary. It will suffice to say that it happened during the first years of tsar Peter's reign.

Constantine Porphyrogenitus presents Časlav's actions, which ultimately resulted in the regaining of independence by Serbs, albeit with the acknowledgement of Byzantium's authority. According to the learned emperor, the Serbian prince acted against the will and interests of the Bulgarian ruler, whose oversight he managed to evade, and achieved success thanks to the Byzantine emperor's support. Modern scholars fairly universally accept this version of events as true, stressing that the loss of Serbian lands during the early years of Peter's reign was a major setback for the tsar¹³. It would seem, however, that one may have certain doubts as to the veracity of this account. Caution is advised due to the clear hostility of Constantine Porphyrogenitus towards Bulgarians. The issue was discussed some time ago by Litavrin¹⁴. The emperor, it would seem, negatively evaluated the 927 peace treaty between Bulgaria and Byzantium. He expressed it through criticism of the marriage, arranged as a result of the conclusion of peace, between tsar Peter and Maria, daughter of Christopher and granddaughter of Romanus Lecapenus¹⁵.

Cambridge 2000, p. 27; Т. ТОДОРОВ, *България...*, p. 194. Criticism of this view – Т. ЖИВКОВИЋ, *Јужни Словени...*, p. 421, fn. 1428.

¹¹ И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История...*, p. 279; Т. ЖИВКОВИЋ, *Јужни Словени...*, p. 421. A compromise solution was recently proposed by П. ПАВЛОВ (*Години на мир и "ратни бедни" (927–1018)*, [in:] Г. АТАНАСОВ, В. ВАЧКОВА, П. ПАВЛОВ, *Българска национална история*, vol. III, *Първо българско царство (680–1018)*, Велико Търново 2015, p. 422) according to whom Časlav's flight took place in 928, and the Byzantines extended help to him in 931.

¹² It would seem the learned emperor is writing about the seven years in the context of Časlav. The latter most recently appeared in Constantine Porphyrogenitus' narrative in a passage devoted to the occupation of Serbian lands by Bulgarians.

¹³ Until recently, such was the view of the one writing these words – M.J. LESZKA, K. MARINOW, *Carstwo bułgarskie. Polityka – społeczeństwo – gospodarka – kultura*. 866–971, Warszawa 2015, p. 154.

¹⁴ Г. ЛИТАВРИН, *Константин Багрянородний о Болгари и Болгарах*, [in:] *Сборник в чест на акад. Димитър Ангелов*, ed. В. ВЕЛКОВ, София 1994, p. 30–37; cf. Т. ТОДОРОВ, *България...*, p. 195.

¹⁵ DAI, 13, p. 72. Vide: J. SHEPARD, *A Marriage too Far? Maria Lekapena and Peter of Bulgaria*, [in:] *The Empress Theophano. Byzantium and the West at the Turn of the First Millennium*, ed. A. DAVIDS, Cambridge 1995, p. 121–149; Т. ТОДОРОВ, *Константин Багрянородни и династичният брак между владетелските домове на Преслав и Константинопол от 927 г.*, ПКСИ 7, 2003, p. 391–398; А. ПАРОЊ, "Trzeba, abyś tyimi oto słowami odparł i to niedorzeczne żądanie" – wokół *De administrando imperio* Konstantyna VII, [in:] *Causa creandi. O pragmatyce źródła historycznego*,

Constantine Porphyrogenitus formulated a view, *nota bene* contrary to some of the facts he presented, that the Serbian ruler was never subject to the prince of Bulgaria, and always accepted the authority of the Byzantine emperor¹⁶. With such attitude of the emperor one might expect that he presented the story of Časlav's departure from Preslav and his return to Serbian lands in a manner unfavourable to the Bulgarians and highlighting the prince's subordination to Byzantium, thanks to which he was able to take over Serbia.

Todorov¹⁷ also pointed out that the learned emperor's narrative about the Serbs ended with this event. It is doubtful indeed that no further information concerning the Serbian ruler in the following two decades would have reached the emperor, particularly when the ruler in question acknowledged the emperor's authority. This may indicate (a thought that the Bulgarian scholar did not state clearly) that the subsequent fate of the Serbs (until the time when *DAI* was written) was omitted by the emperor as it would have starkly clashed with the statement about the Serbs' subordination to Byzantium. Nonetheless, it cannot be ruled out that the reason for the narrative's sudden end was not intentional, and that chapter 32 was simply not finished, like the vast majority of chapters in the work of Constantine Porphyrogenitus¹⁸.

Aside from the story's timbre, our doubts may be raised by some of its particular details. It is difficult, in my opinion, to imagine that the Bulgarians would have allowed Časlav, with a group of his companions, to flee Preslav. The story is strikingly similar to an implausible account according to which Byzantines have taken John, Peter's brother, away from Preslav, without the latter's agreement¹⁹. The Serbian prince was, one might presume, too important and potentially dangerous to Bulgarian interests in Serbia to have been left without adequate guard.

ed. S. ROSIK, P. WISZEWSKI, Wrocław 2005, p. 345–361; В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Значението на брака на цар Петър (927–969) с ромейката Мария-Ирина Лакапина (911–962)*, [in:] *Културните текстове на миналото – носители, символи, идеи*, vol. I, *Текстовете на историята, история на текстовете. Материали от Юбилейната международна конференция в чест на 60-годишнината на проф. д.и.н. Казимир Попконстантинов, Велико Търново, 29–31 октомври 2003 г.*, София 2005, p. 27–33; Z.A. BRZOWSKA, *Rola carycy Marii-Ireny Lekapeny w recepcji elementów bizantyńskiego modelu władzy w pierwszym państwie bułgarskim*, *VP* 66, 2016, p. 443–458; ЕАДЕМ, *Cesarzowa Bułgarów, Augusta i Bazylisa – Maria-Irena Lekapena i transfer bizantyńskiej idei kobiecy-władczyni (imperial feminine) w średniowiecznej Bułgarii*, *SMer* 17, 2017, p. 1–28.

¹⁶ T. ŽIVKOVIĆ (*De conversione...*, p. 178) thinks that this passage *had originally belonged to the Constantine's primary source on the Serbs*. Even if this was so, the learned emperor fully shared the view about the Serbs being subject to Byzantium. The topic appeared several times in the earlier parts of chapter 32, although without the Bulgarian context (*DAI*, 32, p. 152, 154, 158).

¹⁷ Т. ТОДОРОВ, *България...*, p. 195.

¹⁸ T. ŽIVKOVIĆ, *De conversione...*, p. 23–24.

¹⁹ *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon*, 136.60, ed. S. WAHLGREN, Berolini–Novi Eboraci 2006; *Theophanes Continuatus*, ed. B.G. NIEBUHR, I. BEKKER, Bonnae 1838, p. 419 (cetera: *ThC*); *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, ed. I. THURN, Berlin 1973, p. 225 (cetera: SKYLITZES).

It would also be difficult to accept as truth that the Byzantines, soon after concluding the peace that put an end to a lengthy armed struggle with Bulgaria, would have taken the risk of entering a new conflict with tsar Peter – which, after all, could have led to renewed military operations. The description of Časlav's taking control of Serbian lands by likewise appears far from the truth and heavily manipulated in order to highlight Byzantium's role. The text states that after arriving on Serbian lands Časlav encountered no more than *fifty men only, without wives or children, who supported themselves by hunting*²⁰, and it was only thanks to the Byzantine emperor's support that he managed to encourage the Serbs to return to their country.

The doubts presented above allow, one might think, to view Časlav's departure from the Bulgarian capital in a different light. It cannot be ruled out that he returned to Serbian lands with an agreement, or perhaps even at the behest of tsar Peter, with Byzantine aid. At the time when a permanent Bulgarian-Byzantine alliance was in effect, Serbian lands ceased to be an area of rivalry between the two states. One might add that the Croatian threat had been neutralised²¹, that threat having been one of the reasons why in the past Symeon decided to introduce direct Bulgarian rule over Serbian lands. It could be said that tsar Peter returned to the policy of enthroning in Serbia rulers friendly to Bulgaria. Časlav, a half-Bulgarian, may have given hope that he would act according to Bulgarian interests, which were not contrary to those of the Byzantines²².

²⁰ *DAI*, 32, p. 158 (trans. p. 159). This fragment is in accord with an earlier passage of *DAI*, stating that after the Bulgarian expedition of 924 *the country was left deserted* (trans. p. 159). One has to agree with Е.П. НАУМОВ (*Становление и развитие сербской раннефеодальной государственности*, [in:] *Раннефеодальные государства на Балканах. VI–XII вв.*, ed. Г.Г. ЛИТАВРИН, Москва 1985, p. 201–208; cf. КОНСТАНТИН БАГРЯНОРОДНЫЙ, *Об управлении империей*, ed. Г.Г. ЛИТАВРИН, А.П. НОВОСЕЛЬЦЕВ, Москва 1991, p. 382, fn. 48) that this is most certainly an exaggeration. Constantine Porphyrogenitus thus deprecated the subjugation of Serbia to Bulgaria. On the Serbian prisoners of war in Bulgaria – У.М. ХРИСТОВ, *Prisoners of War in Early Medieval Bulgaria (Preliminary reports)*, *SCer* 5, 2015, p. 90–91; ИДЕМ, *Военнопленниците в българо-сръбските отношения през ранно средновековие*, *Епо* 23.1, 2015, p. 86–98. Cf. also remarks about the lack of Bulgarian garrisons in Serbia – П. КОМАТИНА, *О српско-бугарској граници у IX и X в.*, *ЗРВИ* 52, 2015, p. 36.

²¹ The sources lack information about Bulgarian-Croatian fighting at the beginning of Peter's reign; there is only information about the anti-Bulgarian coalition which also included Croatia, which, as is known, did not take any action (*ThC*, p. 412; SKYLITZES, p. 221; *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum libri XIII–XVIII*, ed. Th. BÜTTNER-WOBST, Bonn 1897, p. 473). It is thought that a peace treaty was concluded between Bulgaria and Croatia, as a result of the activity of the papal legates Madalbert and John. Cf. И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Отношенията...*, p. 63; D. MANDIĆ, *Croatian King Tomislav defeated Bulgarian Emperor Symeon the Great on May 27, 927*, *JCrS* 1, 1960, p. 32–43; Т. ЖИВКОВИЋ, *Јужни Словени...*, p. 419, fn. 1423; M.J. LESZKA, *Symeon I Wielki a Bizancjum. Z dziejów stosunków bułgarsko-bizantyjskich w latach 893–927*, Łódź 2013, p. 223–224; Т. ТОДОРОВ, *България...*, p. 116, 196.

²² Т. ТОДОРОВ, *България...*, p. 196.

Our knowledge of Časlav's reign is practically non-existent, aside perhaps for its finale. In the work of the so-called Priest of Duklja we find a Serbian ruler named Časlav²³ who is identified with Časlav from *DAI*. It is known that he fought with Hungarians and after initial successes he was defeated, and was imprisoned by them in Srem²⁴. He was then to have been drowned by them in the river Sava. The Serbian-Hungarian conflict is considered by some scholars to be a consequence of the Serbian alliance with Byzantium against a Bulgarian-Hungarian coalition²⁵. The very existence of the latter, however, is far from obvious. On the contrary, it seems that at least until the early 940s Bulgaria and Byzantium had a common policy towards the Hungarians, who threatened both of the states²⁶. In fighting Hungarians, the Serbs were promoting not only Byzantine, but also Bulgarian interests²⁷. Časlav's death occurred ca. 943/944²⁸ and one might think that at least until that time (and possibly until the end of tsar Peter's reign) Serbia maintained ties with both Bulgaria and Byzantium²⁹.

While the above reconstruction of the events is, of course, merely a hypothesis, one may, with a high degree of certainty, state that Constantine Porphyrogenitus' relation about the "flight" of Časlav to Serbia should be treated as manipulated, and approach it with considerable caution.

Translated by Michał Zytka

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²⁴ It is not certain whether the cited author had in mind the Srem settlement or the region. Cf. *Historia Królestwa Słowian czyli Latopis Popa Duklanina*, trans. J. LEŚNY, Warszawa 1988, p. 152, fn. 135.

²⁵ X. ДИМИТРОВ, *Българо-унгарски отношения (927–1019)*, ИПр 50/51.2, 1994/1995, p. 6–7; ИДЕМ, *Българо-унгарски отношения през средновековието*, София 1998, p. 73–74.

²⁶ This view is presented by T. ТОДОРОВ (*България...*, p. 197–201), supported with strong arguments.

²⁷ Е.П. НАУМОВ – КОНСТАНТИН БЯГРЯНОРОДНЫЙ, *Об управлении империей...*, p. 382, fn. 53; Т. ЖИВКОВИЋ, *Јужни Словени...*, p. 422; Т. ТОДОРОВ, *България...*, p. 199; П. ПАВЛОВ, *Години на мир...*, p. 428.

²⁸ Т. ЖИВКОВИЋ, *Јужни Словени...*, p. 422; 423; ИДЕМ, *Портрети...*, p. 72. Other dates of Časlav's death are also present in the scholarly works – e.g. X. ДИМИТРОВ, *Българо-унгарски отношения през...*, p. 74 (between 950 and 960).

²⁹ Cf. remarks of T. ŽIVKOVIĆ (*On the Northern Borders of Serbia in Early Middle Ages*, [in:] ИДЕМ, *The South Slavs between East and West. 550–1150*, Belgrade 2008, p. 255) on the subject of Belo, the legendary successor to Časlav (*Gesta regum sclavorum*, LXXII).

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Abstract. The present text aims to reflect on the reliability of Constantine Porphyrogenitus' account about the departure of Časlav, a Serbian prince, from Bulgaria at the beginning of the reign of Peter I, the successor of Symeon. The passage devoted to this event is located in the *De administrando imperio* (32, p. 159, 161) by the learned emperor. Constantine Porphyrogenitus' relation about the "flight" of Časlav to Serbia should be treated as manipulated and approached with considerable caution.

Keywords: Časlav, Simeon the Great, tsar Peter, Constantine Porphyrogenitus, Bulgaria in the 10th century, Byzantium in the 10th century

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