

A Few Words about Constantine Bodin

In 1018 – after four years of an agonizing, but at the same time of a “stubborn and heroic struggle” (Petrov, 1981: 422), the Bulgarian state lost its political independence. Some of the cities in the region of Macedonia voluntarily surrendered to the Byzantine army. The inhabitants of Ohrid welcomed the emperor Basil II with “battle songs, greetings and praises” (Cedreni, Scylitzae, 1965: 291). Based on this information, the historian Ivan Snegarov (1883–1971) wrote that the Byzantine emperor had promised Bulgarians that he would preserve their old civil and ecclesiastical rights (Snegarov, 1924: 53).

The subjugation of the Bulgarians under the “yoke” of the Byzantines (Sigillia Basilii II, 1965: 40) was interpreted as an event that happened by God’s will (Stamatov, 1940: 8). After the incorporation of the territory of the Bulgarian state into his empire, the emperor destroyed the royal palaces of Ohrid and Prespa, realizing the possibility that they could become “places of memory”, which would incite the Bulgarians to an anti-Byzantine uprising (Kaymakamova, 2011: 157-158; Petrov, 1972: 45). According to the medievalist Miliyana Kaymakamova, the Empire did not embark on a “crusade” against the “Bulgarian cultural heritage”, but turned it into an important means of its ideological program. The researcher accepts that this was a “well-thought-out activity” on the part of the Byzantine emperor, who raised and legitimized, through “our chrysobulls and charters”, the idea that Bulgarians and Byzantines were two parts of the united people of Christ (Kaymakamova, 2011: 177-178).

The local population did not accept the destiny prescribed to them and decided to revolt. Among the great rebellions of the 11th century, we have to mention the Uprising of Peter Delyan (1040–1041) and the Uprising of Georgi Voyteh (1072). During the Uprising of Georgi Voyteh, Constantine Bodin became known in the world of politics. Traditional Bulgarian historiography binds this person only to the uprising, but Constantine also had an important place in medieval Balkan history, as well as in the complex relations between the East and the West.

Sources for the Uprising of Georgi Voyteh are the Byzantine authors John Skylitzes, Nikephoros Bryennios, and Joannes Zonaras, as well as the *Chronicle of the priest of Duklja*. Byzantine historian John Skylitzes clearly defined the time of the uprising: „In the first year of the reign of Michael, the 11th indiction, the Serbian people, also called the Croats, set out to enslave Bulgaria” (Cedreni, Scylitzae, 1965: 334). The quote refers to Emperor Michael VII

Doukas (1071–1078). According to Skylitzes, the reason for the revolt was the dissatisfaction with the reign of the governor of the theme of Bulgaria, Nikephoros Kirianit (Cedreni, Scylitzae, 1965: 334). The local population hoped for support from Mihailo Vojislavljević, king of Dioclea. According to the medievalist Vasil Zlatarski (1866–1935), the choice fell on Mihailo because of his family ties to the last Bulgarian royal family: „Mihailo’s mother was the granddaughter of Tsar Samuel and the daughter of John Vladimir, the prince of Zeta, and Theodora Kosara” (Zlatarski, 1972: 141).

Skylitzes reported that his son Constantine, also called “Bodin”, was proclaimed by the notables of Skopje as the “tsar of Bulgaria” and was renamed from Constantine to Peter (Cedreni, Scylitzae, 1965: 335). The *Chronicle of the priest of Duklja* also testified that Bodin became “lord of the whole kingdom” and “put a crown on his head and proclaimed himself tsar” (Annales de Dioclea, 1965: 179). In this way, continuity with the First Bulgarian Kingdom was sought to be established and it is not accidental that the person of Peter I, recognized by the Byzantines as tsar, is invoked (Petrov, 1972: 44; Chorovich, 1997). Therefore, we would not agree with the opinion of V. Zlatarski, who wrote that Constantine adopted the name Peter “in honor of Peter Delyan” (Zlatarski, 1972: 142).

The *Chronicle of the priest of Duklja* added that “prince Mihailo gave [Bulgaria] as a province to his son Bodin to rule it” (Annales de Dioclea, 1965: 179). Skylitzes reported that after a Byzantine defeat “the Bulgarians openly proclaimed Bodin as tsar, renaming him, as we said, Peter” (Cedreni, Scylitzae, 1965: 335). The Byzantine author presented Bodin in a negative context: “As soon as Bodin arrived in Niš, he began to dispose of Bulgarian affairs as tsar. He plundered everything in his path and killed and tortured those who did not recognize him and did not obey him” (Cedreni, Scylitzae, 1965: 336). Bodin declared his allegiance to Rome. There is also evidence that he was recognized by the Papacy. Constantine was also associated with the Italian Normans through his wife Jaquinta (Nikolov, 2016: 13-14). The medievalist Ivan Bozhilov wrote that the royal proclamation of Bodin became “open, solemn and quite noisy”, because the echo of this event important for the Bulgarians reached Nikephoros Karantenos, duke of Skopje and governor of theme of Bulgaria (Bozhilov, 1999: 404).

On his way to Skopje – the chronicler said – Bodin was captured by the Byzantines at a “place called

Taonios". He was then sent to the emperor in chains. He was imprisoned in the monastery "Saints Sergius and Bacchus", then handed over to Isaac Komnenus and taken to Antioch (Cedreni, Scylitzae, 1965: 336-337). The *Chronicle of the priest of Duklja* also reported the defeat of Bodin and his capture and deportation to Antioch (Annales de Dioclea, 1965: 179). Skylitzes reported about the subsequent events: Mihailo Vojislavljević did not reconcile with the fate of his son; he sent people to kidnap him and return him to Shkodër. Skylitzes noted that Bodin "reigns after his father's death" (Cedreni, Scylitzae, 1965: 337). Venetian sailors are believed to have been involved in the liberation of Bodin (Irechek, 1878: 273; Zlatarski, 1972: 147; Petrov, 1972: 46; Tivchev, 1982: 73).

The *Chronicle of the priest of Duklja*, after calling Bodin a "false witness and fratricide", claimed that he forcibly took power in Duklja. From the very beginning of his reign, Bodin expelled his uncle Radoslav to Travunija (Zhivkovich, 2005: 46). Later, he would begin to remove some of his relatives, who may have been threatening the ascension to the throne of Bodin's sons (Zhivkovich, 2005: 51). The close ties that Mihailo Vojislavljević maintained with papal Rome are also known. At the same time, the diocese of Bar was elevated to an archbishopric by the Western clergy. The principality of Raška was also separated from the jurisdiction of the Archbishopric of Ohrid. It seemed that the Papacy's dream of regaining the province of Illyricum, which was taken away from it in the 8th century, was about to be fulfilled. At the insistence of Bodin, antipope Clement III (1080–1100) issued a bull defining the scope of the Archdiocese of Bar (Zhivkovich, 2005: 49).

Nikephoros Bryennios did not write anything about the personality of Constantine Bodin. He noted briefly that "the tribe of Slavs rejected the Romans¹ yoke and ravaged and plundered Bulgaria; Skopje and Niš were also looted; Sirmium and the lands lying around the Sava River and the towns along the Ister near Vidin were in a state of emergency. And then Croats and Diocleans revolted and ravaged all of Illyricum" (Bryenii, 1968: 115). The particulars given by Joannes Zonaras are also brief: "In the third year of his reign [that of Michael VII Doukas], the tribe of Croats, who some people also call Serbs, moved and tried to take the land of the Bulgarians. After capturing parts of it, after many battles and heavy casualties on both sides, they were driven from the Roman frontiers and they were forced to return to their homes" (Zonarae, 1968: 202).

Among the sources for Constantine Bodin is the work of the Byzantine princess Anna Komnene. She

described him as an insecure ally of her father Alexius I (Zhivkovich, 2005: 45) because he initially opposed the Normans, but later left the Byzantines alone against the common enemy. Here again we have to recall the connections that Constantine Bodin had with the Italian Normans through his wife. The last time Anna Komnene mentioned Constantine Bodin was in 1091, when her father learned that Bodin was preparing to go against the Byzantines (Zhivkovich, 2005: 46). The question of when Constantine Bodin made peace with the Byzantines is still unclear. In this respect, the sources contradict each other. Anna Komnene does not offer a specific date. The *Chronicle of the priest of Duklja* dates it to the period soon after the death of Robert Guiscard (July 17, 1085) (Zhivkovich, 2005: 47).

It is not yet clear what really happened in the Balkans after Guiscard's death and whether Bodin took advantage of the Norman crisis after the death of their leader to take Durrës. With Guiscard's death, Constantine Bodin faced a much more serious problem. Until now, the Byzantine Empire could not fight effectively on several fronts (especially the Norman invasions). However, after the death of the Norman leader, there was a real danger that the Byzantines would direct their forces against Constantine Bodin. Forced to conclude a peace treaty with the Byzantines, he had to give up the previously conquered areas (Zhivkovich, 2005: 50; Rosser, 2012: 130).

Among the sources on Constantine Bodin is a seal kept in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum. The inscription on the seal is: "Constantine, protosebastos and exousiasth (ἐξουσιαστή) of Duklja and Serbia". Researchers associate the mentioned person with Constantine Bodin and date the seal to the beginning of his reign – around 1081 (Komatina, 2011: 62). This is probably the only mention of Constantine Bodin as an "exousiasth". Anna Komnene wrote of Bodin and his father Mihailo as "exarchs of Dalmatia", and Latin and Serbian sources referred to Constantine as "king" (Komatina, 2011: 62). The Byzantine scholar Predrag Komatina accepts that the title is one of the highest royal titles that the Byzantine imperial court was giving to the rulers of neighbouring countries (Komatina, 2011: 67). A problem is clearly forming here. If we accept the traditional comparison of the Western title "rex" with the Eastern "emperor" as almost identical, it does not correspond to the Byzantine imperial idea, following the well-known maxim "One God in heaven, one king on earth". The figure of the emperor occupied a special place in Byzantine society. He declared himself the "vicar of Christ" on earth, and his empire was perceived as a projection of the Kingdom of Heaven, created and established by God's will. At the same time,

1 = Byzantines'.

this relates to the way Byzantine society perceived the world: Constantinople was at the centre of the world, and other peoples were part of the periphery.² The Byzantines resided in time and space with the consciousness and self-confidence that they are “God’s chosen people”. The image of Constantinople as an earthly Paradise, “lord of all cities”, “center of the four parts of the world” also began to form in Byzantine literature (Kochev, 1998: 40). Following this, the emperor would give the other rulers a title much lower than his own. At the same time, the memory of Constantine’s participation in the Uprising of Georgi Voyteh and of the perception of his status as being elevated to even that of an emperor (*imperatorem*) was still fresh (Panov, 2019: 129).

The seal raises another question. How and why did the Byzantine Empire decide to recognize Constantine Bodin as a ruler, given that he took part in the Uprising of Georgi Voyteh against the Byzantines? The answer to this complex question can be found in the dynamic events of the late 70s of the 11th century, when Michael VII Doukas was forced to abdicate and become a monk, and not only new figures came to power, but also a new dynasty.

The *Chronicle of the priest of Duklja* sheds light on another moment in the life of Constantine Bodin – the conquest of Dubrovnik. Historiography does not pay much attention to this event, and some historians tend to describe it even as “legendary” (Zhivkovich, 2005: 51). To punish his disobedient relatives (king Radoslav’s sons) who had taken refuge in Dubrovnik, Bodin laid siege to the city. During the siege, Radoslav’s son Kočapar killed someone named Kozara, whom Bodin’s wife Jaquinta loved very much. At the insistence of his wife, Bodin beheaded his cousins Branislav and Goyslav, as well as Branislav’s son (Zhivkovich, 2005: 51). So far, the narrative really seems legendary, and the biblical story familiar to medieval authors is being followed: „Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, for John had been saying to him: ‘It is not lawful for you to

have her.’ Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet. On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, ‘Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.’ The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison” (Matthew 14: 3-10). Assuming that the medieval world is full of symbols, we have to agree with the opinion of the anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) that “symbols are memories and reminders” (Boas, 1992: 67). But let us go back to the story of the siege of Dubrovnik. The *Chronicle of the priest of Duklja* testified that after the described events, the city government began to hesitate about handing Dubrovnik over to Bodin. Fearful, Bodin’s other relatives hurried to sail from Dubrovnik to Constantinople: “Then Bodin captured Dubrovnik and built a fortress. Then he returned to Shkodër” (Zhivkovich, 2005: 51).

The authors of the Russian *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1891) noted that Constantine Bodin died in 1097 and left no heir (Brokgauz, Efron, 1891: 213-214). However, modern researchers do not agree with this view. The *Chronicle of the priest of Duklja* reported that Bodin ruled for 26 years: “After 26 years and five months in power, he died”. Based on this notice, Tibor Živković assumes that Bodin died in 1107 (Zhivkovich, 2005: 51-52).

The examination of the personality of Constantine Bodin casts light on the trends of this historical period and on the essential characteristics of the rulers of the countries in the Byzantine neighbourhood. Constantine Bodin gained prominence during the Uprising of Georgi Voyteh. There, he introduced himself as the heir of the old Bulgarian royal family. He later linked himself to the fate of Serbs and Croats. Apparently irreconcilable with the official Byzantine framework, he sought ways – through relations with other peoples or ecclesiastical institutions – to express his claims to royal power.

2 For more information about the visual reflection of this idea see Grozdanov, Tsv. Golemiot rastsep megu Rim i Vizantiya od 1054 godina i negoviot odraz vo freskite na tsrkvata “Sv. Sofija” vo Ohrid – V: Predalanja na XXIII seminar za makedonski jazik, literatura i kultura. Skopje i Ohrid. 3-22.VIII.1990 godina. Skopje. 1991, s. 122 [Грозданов, Цв. Големиот расцеп меѓу Рим и Византија од 1054 година и неговиот одраз во фреските на црквата „Св. Софија“ во Охрид – В: Предавања на XXIII семинар за македонски јазик, литература и култура. Скопје и Охрид. 3-22.VIII.1990 година. Скопје. 1991, с. 122]. See also Dzurich, V. Vizantiyskie freski. Srednevekovaya Serbiya, Dalmatsiya, slavyanskaya Makedoniya. Moskva. 2000, s. 28 [Джурич, В. Византийские фрески. Средневековая Сербия, Далмация, славянская Македония. Москва. 2000, с. 28].

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