

Outlines of the Anti-Christian Policy of the Bulgar Khans from the First Half of the 9th Century

Abstract

This paper explores the persecution of Christians in Bulgaria in the first half of the 9th century and the influence of external and internal factors on this process. The Bulgar khans, guided by primarily political considerations, undertook repressive measures against Christians within their country, who were seen as a potential source of Byzantine influence and a threat to Bulgarian political independence. Eventually, the hostility towards Christians was overcome after the Christianization of Bulgarians in the 860s.

Keywords

Krum, Omurtag, Malamir, Persian, Christian persecution, Bulgarian Khanate

Introduction

Christianity spread throughout present-day Bulgaria long before the establishment of the Bulgarian Khanate in the last quarter of the 7th century. The roots of the Christian faith were laid on the Balkan Peninsula as early as the 1st century through the preaching activity of the Apostles Paul and Andrew. Its foundations were solidified with the Edict of Thessalonica (Thessaloniki, Greece), issued on the 27th of February 380, according to which Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire. Subsequently, the peacefulness of *Christ's flock* in the Balkans was disturbed by the settlement of a number of pagan peoples within the boundaries of the Empire as a result of the Migration Period. Over time, Byzantium succeeded to Christianize a portion of the new settlers (mostly Slavs), but still failed to deal fully with the pagan influx. This process saw its peak with the advent of the Bulgarian state on the Balkans, dangerously close to the heart of the Byzantine Empire. The ensuing political confrontation between these two countries, over the next

two centuries, led to the intensification of the antagonism between pagans and Christians within the Bulgarian Khanate. This antagonism gradually transformed, in the first half of the 9th century, into a real persecution of the khan's Christian subjects. It is this process, which began in Bulgaria under the reign of Khans Krum (796/803–814) and Omurtag (814–831), and continued under Malamir (831–836) and Persian (836–852), that will be covered in this paper.

The Reign of Khan Krum

During the reign of Khan Krum Bulgaria finally overcame its internal political divisions that plagued the country during the second half of the 8th century. This enabled the Bulgarian state to adopt an expansionist policy that incorporated within its borders the remnants of the Avar Khaganate, crushed by the Franks, in the northwest, as well as areas in the southeast with a Byzantine population. By killing the Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus I (802–811) in the Battle of Vărbitsa Pass on July 26th 811, Krum managed to destabilize the Byzantine state and make Bulgaria not only a hegemon on the Balkan Peninsula, but also a third political force on the European continent, after the Frankish Empire of Charlemagne (768–814) and Byzantium. Thanks to these political and military successes, the imperial idea was born in the Bulgarian Khanate. The first significant external manifestation of this idea became the attempt of Khan Krum to conquer Constantinople at the end of July 813. Krum, as a pagan ruler who was also a high priest, personally performed a large number of pagan rituals, including human and animal sacrifices, in front of the astonished eyes of the people of Constantinople. He then decided to make a peace proposal – one of his conditions to lift the siege was to stab his spear at the Golden Gate of Constantinople,¹ an ancient ritual that had the meaning of a conquest.² The Golden Gate was not randomly chosen by the Bulgar ruler, since it was through this gate that the emperors used to come back when returning to the Byzantine capital as victors against the enemies of the Empire.³ Id est, through the act of

¹ Ivan Dujčev et al., ed., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 3 (Sofia: Издание на Българската академия на науките, 1960), 289; Ivan Dujčev et al., ed., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 4 (Sofia: Издание на Българската академия на науките, 1961), 20; Ivan Dujčev et al., ed., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 5 (Sofia: Издание на Българската академия на науките, 1964), 155. The events described above are also recorded in the partially preserved stone inscription from Little Preslav (Preslavets, Bulgaria), in which hints of some kind of providentialism (pagan or Christian?) can be found. Cf. Veselin Beševliev, *Прабългарски епиграфски паметници* (Sofia: Издателство на Отечествения фронт, 1981), 71–72; Idem, *Първобългарски надписи* (Sofia: Издателство на Българската академия на науките, 1979), № 3, 115–116.

² More information about this symbolic act see in Veselin Beševliev, *Първобългарите. История, бит и култура* (Plovdiv: Фондация „Българско историческо наследство“, 2008), 162 and n. 63.

³ Filipos K. Filipi, *Първата българска държава и Византийската ойкуменическа империя (681–852). Византийско-български политически отношения* (Sofia: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2012), 81.

stabbing his spear into the Golden Gate, Khan Krum wanted to be recognized by the Byzantines as the victor and the rightful successor to the murdered *Basileus ton Romaion* Nicephorus I.⁴ Emperor Leo V (813–820) seemingly agreed to negotiate and invited Khan Krum and his associates to a meeting near the Gate of Blachernae without any weapons.⁵ The meeting, however, turned out to be an ambush and Krum, wounded, barely managed to escape, leaving one part of his entourage to be captured and another killed.⁶ Meanwhile, at the sight of what was happening, the people of Constantinople shouted from the fortress walls: “The Cross has won!”⁷

Angered by the Byzantine deception, Khan Krum ordered his men to wreak havoc on the Constantinopolitan hinterland.⁸ In the course of this military action, the Bulgar ruler, though wounded, personally participated in the conquering of Adrianople⁹ (present-day Edirne, Turkey), from which, according to various sources, between 10,000 and 40,000 Byzantines¹⁰ were resettled in the trans-Danube Bulgarian lands.¹¹ Among these people was the then one-year-old future Emperor and founder of the Macedonian dynasty, Basil I (867–886).¹² Another 50,000 Byzantine prisoners of war from the vicinity of Arcadiopolis (present-day Lüleburgaz, Turkey) were deported to Bulgaria in the winter of 813–814.¹³ These migrants, among whom, according to the

⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁵ Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 4, 20.

⁶ Ibid., 20–21; Idem, *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 3, 289; Mihail Vojnov et al., ed., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 6 (Sofia: Издание на Българската академия на науките, 1965), 135.

⁷ Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 4, 21.

⁸ Ibid., 21–22.

⁹ Ibid., 22; Idem, *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 3, 289. According to Panos Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria, 775–831* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), 256, the sacking of Adrianople happened towards the end of August 813.

¹⁰ Veselin Ignatov, *Хан Крум победоносецът. Историческо разследване* (Sofia: Милениум, 2017), 102, estimates that among these captives there were 10–12 thousand men.

¹¹ According to Vasil N. Zlatarski (1866–1935) they were resettled in the Bulgarian lands north of the Lower Danube, between the rivers Seret and Prut in Southern Bessarabia. Cf. Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 4, 22, n. 9; Vojnov, *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 6, 136, n. 1. However, Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 256–257 and n. 250, believes that the inhabitants of Adrianople were resettled quite possibly in Oltenia, Wallachia and Moldavia, near the mouth of the Siret River.

¹² Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 5, 155 and 287–288; Vojnov, *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 6, 136.

¹³ Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 4, 23. The chronology adopted here is from Vasil Nikolov Zlatarski, *История на българската държава през средните векове*, vol. 1/1, ed. Petar Hr. Petrov (Sofia: Наука и изкуство, 1970), 375. Vasil Gjuzev (Ivan Božilov and Vasil Gjuzev, *История на средновековна България VII–XIV*

Bulgarian historian Cvetelin Stepanov, there were also heretics Paulicians¹⁴, would subsequently play a significant role both in the spreading of Christianity in Bulgaria and in the political events that would preoccupy Krum's heirs by deepening the antagonism between Bulgars and Christians.¹⁵

Christianity, however, was not new to Bulgars. They were confronted with it as they settled south of the Danube, conquering the indigenous Slavic and Byzantine populations. Later evidence, such as the stone inscription from Philippi (near present-day Kavala, Greece), carved in 837 during the reign of Khan Persian¹⁶, clearly testify that the Bulgars were familiar with Christian morals and Christian values. An interesting fact is that, apart from the common people, under the rule of Khan Krum Christianity also penetrated, by way of Christian foreigners, the Bulgarian ruling class.¹⁷ For example, one of the captives from Krum's entourage in the ill-fated meeting with the Byzantines near Constantinople was the Khan's brother-in-law, Constantine Patzikos. From the Second Hambarlian inscription we learn that the Byzantine *stratego*i Leo, Bardanes, Ioannis, Kordyles and Gregorius were appointed personally by the Khan to military administration service in Thrace.¹⁸ Perhaps, in some cases, the most senior servants – foreigners in the court of Khan Krum and his heirs should have accepted the religion of the ruling

век (Sofia: Анубис, 1999), 137) is more specific and believes that the resettlement of the 50,000 Byzantines took place in 814. As for Ivan Božilov, *История на средновековна България*, vol. 1, *Варварска България* (Plovdiv: Фондация „Българско историческо наследство“, 2017), 300, he assumes that the resettlement may well have happened in November–December 813. For the number of Byzantine prisoners of war captured in 813–814, see: Zlatarski, *Op. cit.*, 357 and 360; Dimităr Angelov et al., ed., *История на България в четирнадесет тома*, vol. 2, *Първа българска държава* (Sofia: Издателство на Българската академия на науките, 1981), 140; Božilov and Gjuzelev, *Op. cit.*, 136–137; Beševliev, *Първобългарите*, 168–169, and the literature cited therein.

¹⁴ Cvetelin Stepanov, *Религии в езическа България* (Sofia: Парадигма, 2017), 181.

¹⁵ However, this does not mean that only the Byzantine captives in question were the leading factor in the spread of Christian and Byzantine influence in Bulgaria. On the contrary, the much earlier Christianized population (predominantly Slavic) located in the Khanate contributed strongly to this process, as well as the thousands of merchants, priests and ordinary people, moving constantly between the Bulgarian Khanate and the Byzantine Empire. Cf. Ivan Dujčev, *Рилският светец и неговата обител. Фототипно издание* (Sofia: Интерпрес-67, 1990), 3.

¹⁶ Cf. Beševliev, *Първобългарски епиграфски паметници*, 79–80; Idem, *Първобългарски надписи*, № 14, 132–134; Petăr Petrov and Vasil Gjuzelev, ed., *Христоматия по история на България*, vol. 1, *Ранно средновековие VII–XII в.* (Sofia: Наука и изкуство, 1978), 113.

¹⁷ The reasons for this process see in Dimitri Obolenski, *Византийската общност и Източна Европа 500–1453* (Sofia: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2001), 113–114.

¹⁸ Cf. Beševliev, *Първобългарски епиграфски паметници*, 36–37; Idem, *Първобългарски надписи*, № 47, 173–174.

Bulgars.¹⁹ In this case, however, the politics of involving not only Christian Byzantines and Slavs, but also representatives of other ethnicities in the Bulgarian ruling elite²⁰, aimed not to convert them necessarily to the pagan faith, but to serve as a means of both consolidating the Khan's sole authority and to uphold the emerging imperial ideology.

Krum's policy towards Christians radically changed after he was wounded beneath the walls of the Byzantine capital. Another reason for the change were the atrocities of Byzantines, committed against the Bulgarian population in the capital Pliska in 811.²¹ In this regard, the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian (XII c.), even if hyperbolized, is eloquent: "[Emperor Nicephorus I's] savagery came to the point where he ordered to bring their young children, put them on the ground and run them over with flinty threshing boards."²² Consequently, it can be concluded that the hostility towards Christianity began not so much because of the nature of the religion itself or because of a Bulgarian predisposition to hate it, but because of the insidiousness and cruelty of the Byzantine emperors. The attempt to assault the Khan also had a negative effect on the local Byzantine clergy. Many clerics, including bishops, were killed. The most significant example of the repressions started against the clergy was the case of Bishop Manuel of Adrianople. It was written in the 10th century hagiographical corpus *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* that, after the takeover of Adrianople, Krum "had the holy bishop thrown on the ground, stepped on his neck and threw him (out of the city) with the others."²³ In this case, we see how the Bulgarian ruler, acting as a high priest, dealt personally with a senior Christian cleric²⁴ by simply stepping on his neck as a sign of victory²⁵ of

¹⁹ Georgi Nikolov Nikolov, *Централизъм и регионализъм в ранносредновековна България (края на VII – началото на XI в.)* (Sofia: Академично издателство „Марин Дринов“, 2005), 99.

²⁰ For the foreigners serving in the Bulgarian Khanate, see Nikolov, *Централизъм и регионализъм в ранносредновековна България*, 97–98.

²¹ Cf. Božilov and Gjuzelev, *История на средновековна България*, 136–137.

²² Petrov and Gjuzelev, *Христоматия по история на България*, vol. 1, 102. Echo of the savagery of Emperor Nicephorus I can be found also in some Syrian sources. Cf. Krasimir S. Krăstev, „Арабски и сирийски извори за управлението на хановете Крум (след 796–814) и Омуртаг (814–около 831),“ in Angel Nikolov, ed., *Българско царство. Сборник в чест на 60-годишнината на доц. д-р Георги Н. Николов* (Sofia: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2018), 289–290. To the Byzantine atrocities in Pliska can also be added the information recorded in *Narratio anonyma e Codice Vaticano* (Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 4, 11–12), where it is mentioned that Nicephorus I had burned down all dwellings.

²³ Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 5, 288.

²⁴ Božilov and Gjuzelev, *История на средновековна България*, 137; Nikolov, *Централизъм и регионализъм в ранносредновековна България*, 99.

²⁵ Beševliev, *Първобългарите*, 167–168.

paganism over Christianity. Trampling on a fallen enemy is an ancient triumphal custom borrowed from the Byzantines.²⁶ It was also adopted by the son of Krum – Khan Omurtag, in whose inscription from the village of Chatalar (present-day village Khan Krum, Bulgaria) (ca. 822) is recorded the acclamation that the Bulgar Archon should “trample well with his feet the emperor”.²⁷

The anti-Christian policy, started by Khan Krum, also brought to the surface an instinct to protect the Bulgarian identity, the “Bulgarian self”.²⁸ The attempt to distinguish the Bulgars from the Byzantines through the persecution of Christians made a considerable number of repressed subjects of the Bulgarian Khanate, including some of the Byzantine captives, to seek salvation in Byzantium.²⁹

In the end, Khan Krum’s anti-Christian atrocities did not go unpunished. The *Scriptor incertus* and the *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Symeon noted that on the day of “the Holy Thursday before Easter [April 14th 814] the first Bulgar, the famous Krum” was overtaken by God’s retribution³⁰ and “slaughtered by an invisible hand”.³¹

The Reign of Khan Omurtag

The ascension of Krum’s heir to the throne – Khan Omurtag – marked the beginning of some of the most brutal persecutions against Christians in Bulgaria. The description of the period as noted by the Byzantine chronicler John Skylitzes (ca. 1040 – ca. 1101) in his work *Synopsis Historiarum*, although an anachronistic one, is adequate enough: Omurtag “far exceeded his predeces-

²⁶ More about the custom in question see in: Beševliev, *Прабългарски епиграфски паметници*, 133–134; Ignatov, *Хан Крум победоносецът*, 101–102; Filipu, *Първата българска държава и Византийската ойкуменическа империя*, 122–123. However, Cvetelin Stepanov, *Власт и авторитет в ранносредновековна България (VII – ср. IX в.)* (Sofia: Araro, 1999), 131, is skeptical that the Bulgars borrowed the custom from the Byzantine Empire, because the practice of trampling on a fallen enemy is more common in Western Asia and especially the region of present-day Iran, and therefore the custom is most likely borrowed from there.

²⁷ Beševliev, *Прабългарски епиграфски паметници*, 131; Idem, *Първобългарски надписи*, № 57, 200–201. The question remains unclear, whether the emperor mentioned in the stone inscription is Thomas the Slav, Michael II (820–829), or just any emperor sitting on the Byzantine throne.

²⁸ Stepanov, *Религии в езическа България*, 186–187; Todor Ćobanov, *България и Византия – титани на кръста* (Sofia: Стандарт, 2011), 50.

²⁹ Dujičev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 5, 109–110; Voјnov, *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 6, 227.

³⁰ Petăr Angelov, *България и българите в представите на византийците (VII–XIV век)* (Sofia: Парадигма, 2011), 172; Idem, *Слуховете в средновековна България* (Sofia: Полис, 2019), 88; Vožilov and Gjuzelev, *История на средновековна България*, 138.

³¹ Dujičev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 4, 24; Idem, *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 5, 173.

sor's cruelty"³² The eminent Bulgarian medievalist Vasil Zlatarski gives the following brief assessment of Omurtag's anti-Christian policy: "The results of [Krum's] colonization policy were felt after his death, when his successor [Omurtag] saw himself forced to systematically persecute Christians, at the root of which, as we shall see, lay not so much religious as political motives."³³ Zlatarski's conclusion is completely justified, because thousands of Byzantine captives, besides spreading Christianity among Bulgars and Slavs, were also a potential factor for strengthening the Byzantine influence in Bulgaria. It was the fear of this possible danger that led to the start of mass persecutions against Christians by the order of Khan Omurtag.³⁴ In the end, religious affiliation became the main distinctive feature between the subjects of the Bulgarian Khan and his enemies – the Byzantines.³⁵

Attempts to forcibly make Christians abandon their religion proved in most cases unsuccessful and, therefore, a certain number of them was sentenced to death.³⁶ The most famous of such stories was the story of the 377 *martyrs of Adrianople*, among whom was the aforementioned Bishop Manuel, who the Bulgars cut with a sword in two, then cut off his arms at the shoulders and threw him as food to the dogs.³⁷ Among these 377 martyrs of Christ were also representatives of the Bulgarian military-administrative elite. The most striking fact is that among them were the names of the Byzantine *strategoï* Leo and Ioannis³⁸, mentioned in the Second Hambarlian inscription. According to

³² Vojnov, *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 6, 240.

³³ Zlatarski, *История на българската държава през средните векове*, 1/1, 376.

³⁴ Živko Žekov, *България и Византия VII–IX в. Военна администрация* (Sofia: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2007), 263. Very interesting is the opinion of Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 303, according to which Omurtag's goal with the started persecution may well have been to break the exclusive ties between the Byzantine clergy – and therefore the Christian god – and the emperor of Constantinople, and use the power of the Christian deity for his own purpose. If we trust Sophoulis' assumption, then it can be said that Omurtag's actions, including the copying of part of the symbols of the Byzantine imperial ceremonial, are in fact part of the imperial politics of the Bulgarian government. More on the subject, that the Bulgars copied elements from the Byzantine political doctrine (the so-called *imitatio imperii*), see for example Stepanov, *Власт и авторитет в ранносредновековна България*, 130.

³⁵ Nikolov, *Централизъм и регионализъм в ранносредновековна България*, 100.

³⁶ Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 5, 288; Obolenski, *Византийската общност и Източна Европа*, 113.

³⁷ Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 5, 288; Petrov and Gjuzelev, *Христоматия по история на България*, vol. 1, 107–108. Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 270, suggests that the execution of Manuel might have taken place in January 815.

³⁸ Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 5, 288; Petrov and Gjuzelev, *Христоматия по история на България*, vol. 1, 108.

historian Vasil Gjuzelev, the reason for their murder was rooted in the defeat at the Battle of Mesembria (present-day Nesebar, Bulgaria) at the beginning of the year 816, for the result of which Khan Omurtag blamed the two.³⁹ Of particular interest is the information contained in *A liturgy for the martyrs killed in Bulgaria for Christ's sake* by Joseph of Stoudios (762–832), since along with the Byzantine names, the text also includes those of Bulgars and Slavs.⁴⁰ This proves that the persecutions were not aimed only against representatives of the Byzantine Empire. There were also reports of countless other martyrs who were not killed, but were put in chains and subjected to inhumane torture.⁴¹ According to the story of Theodore of Stoudios (759–826), Omurtag even issued an order to eat meat during the Great Lent, but when some Christians did not obey, the Khan killed them and had their wives and children enslaved.⁴² This clearly indicates that, along with the tortures, the Bulgarian ruler used other means to make Christians deny their faith, in this case he did so by interfering with their religious practices.⁴³

Khan Omurtag's attempt to personally make his slave Kinamon renounce Christ's faith is also very interesting. In *Historia martyrii XV martyrum Tiberiupolitanorum* archbishop Theophylact of Ohrid (ca. 1050–1126?) recounts the following:

In the division of the prisoners [captured at the conquest of Adrianople] [Kinamon] was won by Krum's son Omvritag [Omurtag] by lot. Adored by his master and by everyone else because he was unsurpassed in everything by anyone, he caused his master sorrow by only one thing, that he is different from them in religion. Therefore, the barbarian made every effort to remove him from Christ.⁴⁴

Thus, Kinamon was brought before various trials, which he endured unwaveringly. One day, however, when he was ordered to eat food sacrificed to idols, the Byzantine Christian could no longer withstand the oppression and openly opposed the efforts of his master to sever the connections between him and his religion. Kinamon started blaspheming against the pagan deities. The words which Theophylact of Ohrid attributes to Kinamon in this case confirm the reports that Bulgars professed a cult of the Sun and the Moon.⁴⁵

Omvritag could not bear all this calmly but angered [...] ordered to beat him without mercy. "Do not humiliate, he said, our gods, that their power is great! As a proof of this serves the fact that we, who worship them, have conquered the entire Byzantine state. Therefore, if your Christ was the true

³⁹ Vožilov and Gjuzelev, *История на средновековна България*, 147.

⁴⁰ Quoted by: Vožilov and Gjuzelev, *История на средновековна България*, 147.

⁴¹ Duičev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 5, 288.

⁴² Idem, *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 4, 29.

⁴³ Vožilov and Gjuzelev, *История на средновековна България*, 147.

⁴⁴ Ilija G. Ilijev, ed., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 9/2 (София: Издателство на Българската академия на науките, 1994), 63.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 64.

God, as you say, he would undoubtedly be your ally and keep you safe from being enslaved, because you serve him and worship him.” That being said, he ordered Kinamon to be chained and taken to prison. And so, the servant of Christ was a prisoner until the death of Omvritag.⁴⁶

Khan Omurtag’s arguments in the aforementioned dialogue clearly show that the main contradiction stood in the confrontation between the Bulgarian Khanate and the Byzantine Empire, while religious problems were only the motivation for the repressive measures by the Bulgars.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, in the second half of 816, a 30-year peace treaty was concluded between the Bulgarian Khanate and Byzantium⁴⁸, which enabled Omurtag to settle his internal political problems and concentrate his attention northeast on the Khazar Khaganate and northwest on the Frankish Empire. Especially important for the regulation of Bulgarian-Byzantine relations had been the fourth clause of the treaty, preserved in the Sulejmankjoj inscription⁴⁹ (near Sečište village, Bulgaria) which determined the exact way captives could be exchanged. For common soldiers, it stipulated the exchange of person for person and for the captured soldiers outside of fortress walls, the *Basileus ton Romaion* was obliged to give two oxen per head. This turn of events probably contributed, to some extent, to the calming of the political life in the Bulgarian state and the stopping, at least partly, of Christian persecution. This was true especially because the Byzantines from the region of Adrianople and Arcadiopolis had been among the exchanged prisoners.⁵⁰ Connected with the exchange of prisoners is also a later legendary episode about the future Emperor Basil I. According to the *Chronicle* of John Skylitzes, Basil I, at that time a young boy, before leaving for Byzantium with his parents, was seen by Khan Omurtag, who, seeing the innocence and nobleness of the child, wished not only to hug and kiss him, but also to put him into his lap.⁵¹ Here we see the paradox that, although portrayed as a merciless persecutor of Christians by most of the Byzantine authors, in the story of Basil I, Omurtag is portrayed as a philanthropist⁵² because of the influence of a single Christian boy.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Dimităr Ovčarov, *Омортаг кана сюбиги – от бога владетел на българите* (Sofia: Танга ТанНакРа, 2002), 54.

⁴⁸ Cf. Vožilov, *История на средновековна България*, I, 307–312; Vožilov and Gjuzelev, *История на средновековна България*, 145–146; Beševliev, *Първобългарите*, 184–187; Zlatarski, *История на българската държава през средните векове*, 1/1, 384–391, and the literature cited therein. More about the different opinions when the peace treaty was signed, see Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 278, n. 66.

⁴⁹ Cf. Beševliev, *Първобългарски епиграфски паметници*, 104; Idem, *Първобългарски надписи*, № 41, 152–154.

⁵⁰ According to Ovčarov, *Омортаг кана сюбиги*, 55–56, the signing of the 30-year peace treaty puts an end to the anti-Christian persecutions in Bulgaria.

⁵¹ Voјнов, *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 6, 240.

⁵² Angelov, *България и българите в представите на византийците*, 180–181; Idem, *Слуховете в средновековна България*, 95–96.

The Reign of Khan Malamir

The persecution of Christians undoubtedly continued long after the death of Khan Omurtag, because the development of the events shows that the faith of Christ had managed to break through even to the court of the Khan himself.⁵³ “Not only the aforementioned too profane Murtagon [Omurtag] – as it was written in the *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* – but also the others who, by succession, became rulers of Bulgars, destroyed all those who professed Christ.”⁵⁴ In this case, Khan Omurtag’s immediate successor became his third son Malamir. Probably the reason why the first-born Enravota was deprived of his rights to the throne was the fact that he had shown, from a young age, an attachment to the teachings of Christ.⁵⁵ This is evident from *Historia martyrii XV martyrum Tiberiupolitanorum*, where it is written that after the death of Omurtag, Enravota asked his brother Malamir to release Kinamon from prison. Shortly after this, Enravota, possessed by Kinamon’s words, converted to Christianity, changing his name to Voin or Boyan. Upon learning this, Khan Malamir immediately summoned his brother, very worried that Christianity had made its way into the Khan’s own family.⁵⁶ In the interrogation, however, Enravota-Voin remained steadfast and refused to renounce his faith, as a result of which he died martyred.⁵⁷ Thus, the first Christian martyr of Bulgaria, coming from the sovereign’s house, was killed in 833⁵⁸ (most likely Kinamon shared his fate). With this short story ends the information about the persecution of Christians in Bulgaria during the brief reign of Malamir.

The Reign of Khan Persian

That religious denomination had become a symbol of state affiliation is especially clear from Khan Persian’s rule. Unfortunately, very little is known about Christian persecution in Bulgaria under his reign. However, the available information clearly indicates that during Persian’s reign religion had become a major distinguishing feature between the Pagan Bulgars and the Christian Byzantines. The best example of this process is the already mentioned inscription from Philippi, carved in the town’s Basilica. The following remarkably synthesized historical thought, refracted through the philosophy of pagan providentialism⁵⁹, is emphasized in the inscription: “If someone tells the truth,

⁵³ Zlatarski, *История на българската държава през средните векове*, 1/1, 392.

⁵⁴ Dujčev et al., *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 5, 288.

⁵⁵ Jordan Andreev et al., *Кой кой е в средновековна България* (Sofia: Изток-Запад, 2012), 214.

⁵⁶ Here is meant the main family of the Khan, not some side branch, as is the case with Krum’s sister and her Byzantine husband Constantine Patzikos.

⁵⁷ Пиев, *Гръцки извори за българската история*, vol. 9/2, 65–67.

⁵⁸ Andreev et al., *Кой кой е в средновековна България*, 215.

⁵⁹ Milijana Kajmakamova, *Българска средновековна историопис (от края на VII – до първата четвърт на XV в.)* (Sofia: Наука и изкуство, 1990), 93.

god sees. And if someone lies, god sees that too. Bulgars did a lot of good things to Christians, but Christians forgot them. But god sees!”⁶⁰ In this case, it is not clear whether the text refers to the Christian God or the Proto-Bulgarian Tangra (Tengri). However, one thing is certainly clear: the purpose of the inscription. One could hardly choose a more suitable place than the Christian Basilica to carve an inscription in which Christians are accused of severe transgressions, fraud and lies, and to grant God the right to give them their well-deserved retribution.⁶¹ Thereby, the idea that the actions of Bulgars were God-pleasing and righteous was propagated.⁶²

Conclusion

The persecution of Christians in the Bulgarian Khanate in the first half of the 9th century was a complex and multilayered process caused by the idea, saturated with religious and mostly political considerations, that many Christians within the borders of the Bulgarian state would act as a source of Byzantine influence. The strengthening of the Bulgarian state during this period intensified such processes and saturated them with anti-Christian and anti-Byzantine biases. The persecution aimed not only to counter the Bulgarian political thought to the Byzantine imperial doctrine, but also to ensure the protection of Bulgarian identity. In the end, however, the adoption of Christianity by the Bulgars became inevitable, mainly because of the external and internal political situation, which changed drastically after the middle of the 9th century. The repressions against a large percentage of the population of Bulgaria have shown the son of Khan Persian, Knyaz Boris I – Michael (852–889), that the rift in the internal political life would only deepen. Therefore, the act of adopting Christianity in 864 was meant to secure the religious and political unity of the Bulgarian state and to stimulate the merger between Bulgars and Slavs, which, we can say with hindsight, was the process that established the foundations of the modern Bulgarian nation.

⁶⁰ Petrov and Gjuzelev, *Христоматия по история на България*, vol. 1, 113. Cf. Beševliev, *Прабългарски епиграфски паметници*, 80; Idem, *Първобългарски надписи*, № 14, 132–134.

⁶¹ Beševliev, *Прабългарски епиграфски паметници*, 87–88.

⁶² Milijana Kajmakamova, „Зараждането и начално развитие на българската дворцова култура през първата половина на IX век,“ in Angel Nikolov, ed., *Българско царство. Сборник в чест на 60-годишнината на доц. д-р Георги Н. Николов* (Sofia: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2018), 265.

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