

AN ENTHUSIAST OF WAR AND A PERSECUTOR
OF CHRISTIANS. THE IMAGE OF OMURTAG
IN BYZANTINE LITERATURE
(TENTH-TWELFTH CENTURIES). A RE-EXAMINATION

Mirosław Leszka

ПОЧИТАТЕЛ НА ВОЙНАТА И ГОНИТЕЛ
НА ХРИСТИЯНИТЕ. ОЩЕ ВЕДНЪЖ ЗА ОБРАЗА
НА ХАН ОМУРТАГ ВЪВ ВИЗАНТИЙСКАТА КНИЖНИНА
(X – XII В.)

Мирослав Лешка

Резюме: По всичко изглежда, че образът на хан Омуртаг във византийската книжнина (до XII в.) е оформен в текстове от десетото столетие както по отношение на летописните съчинения („Царе“ на Йосиф Генезий, Продължителят на Теофан, *Vita Basilii*), така и агиографските (*Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*). В по-късни времена, когато българските земи стават част от империята, той е само леко изменен. За византийците Омуртаг не е фигура, меко казано, близка до сърцето им, макар да отчитат, че той сключва мирен договор с империята след години на кървави битки и не го нарушава до края на управлението си. В същото време той е възприеман като човек, който обича да воюва и се наслаждава да придобива плячка и пленници, а това не отговаря на византийската представа за поведението и нравствените качества на владетеля. Това, което особено дискредитира Омуртаг в техните очи, е фактът, че преследва християните, насилствено преселени от имперските територии в България по времето на хан Крум. Анализираният текстове не спестяват на читателя описанията на зверствата, които българският владетел извършва срещу византийците. Според тях Омуртаг е жесток човек, варварин, езичник и враг на християнството. Изглежда, че точно такъв негов облик се утвърждава в съзнанието на византийците.

Ключови думи: средновековна България; Византия; Крум; Омуртаг; византийска книжнина (X – XII в.).

The Bulgarian ruler, Omurtag (814/815 – 826/831)¹, Khan Krum's son, appears in a number of Byzantine texts from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. References

¹ On Omurtag see, for example: [Бешевлиев В. 1967, с. 65–79; Lewicki, T., Swoboda, W. 1967, pp. 482–483; Златарски, В. 1970, с. 376–424; Божилов, И., Гюзелев, В. 1999, с. 144–156; Андреев, Й. 2012, с. 526–531; Божилов, И. 2017, с. 303–328].

to Omurtag can be found both in chronicles (beginning with *the Four Books of Genesios* and *the Continuation of Theophanes* through to John Zonaras's *Extracts of History*²) and in hagiographic works (*Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* [Synaxarium, 1902, col. 415–416] and *History of the Martyrdom of 15 Martyrs of Tiberioupolis* [Theophylactus, 1994, 29–30] by Theophylact, archbishop of Ohrid).

The purpose of the article is to discuss the image of Omurtag as created by Byzantine authors in the period under consideration. Although the topic has already been covered by scholars³, it seems worthy of a closer re-examination.

I would like to begin with the issue of the titles given to Omurtag in Byzantine sources. It should be noted that he was most often referred to, just like his predecessors, as *archon*⁴, *archegos* [Genesios, 1978, I, 12; Scylitzes, 1973, p. 37], and *kyrios* [Genesios, 1978, II, 7]. What comes as a surprise is the fact that the author of the first four books of the *Continuation of Theophanes* referred to him by the title: *basileus* of the Bulgars (ὁ τῶν Βουλγάρων βασιλεὺς)⁵. It is known that the title was reserved for Byzantine emperors [Wasilewski, T. 1985, p. 39; Grala, H. 1995, pp. 143–144]. Bulgarian rulers literally won the right to use it as late as the reigns of Simeon and Peter. How can it then be explained that it was also applied to Omurtag? It seems that the use of the title was not accidental. Omurtag is known to have been the first to be referred to as *ek Theou archon*⁶. Leaving aside the issue of the origin of the title, it is worth noting that the acceptance of it testified both to the sovereignty of Bulgarian rulers and to their aspirations to attain a position similar to that held by Byzantine emperors [Бешевлив, В. 1979, с. 71]. It should be recalled that, at the time, the rulers of the Eastern Roman Empire used the title *ek Theou basileus* [Бешевлив, В. 1979, с. 71; Wasilewski, T. 1985, p. 33]. It is open to debate whether Omurtag assumed the title *ek Theou archon* with or without the consent of the Byzantine ruler. According to V. Beševliev, he received it before

² Georgius Monachus, 1904; Genesios, 1978; Theophanes Continuatus, 2015; Zonaras, 1897.

³ [Ангелов, П. 1999, с. 169–174; Bonarek, J. 2003, s. 134–136] (Omurtag's image in John Scylitzes' work); Leszka, M. J. 2003, pp. 65–70] (this article expands upon a fragment of the work devoted to Omurtag).

⁴ For example, [Vita Basilii, 2011, 4. 26]. On the titles by which Bulgarian rulers were referred to in Byzantine sources (until Omurtag's reign) see, e.g.: [Leszka, M. J. 2003, pp. 19–20; Степанов, Ц. 2023, с. 99].

⁵ Theophanes Continuatus, II, 17. 1; cf. Scylitzes, 1973, p. 37 (this author repeats the account to be found in the Continuation of Theophanes). The unique use of the title was noted by G. Bakalov [Бакалов, Г. 1995, с. 116]. Bakalov claims that Omurtag was referred to by this title in recognition of his assistance in suppressing Thomas's rebellion. However, this author offers no wider justification for his view.

⁶ [Бешевлив, В. 1979, the text of inscription 57 from 822, p. 201, commentary, p. 202; Wasilewski, T. 1985, p. 33]; cf. Степанов, Ц. 2023, с. 97–124].

822, perhaps under the agreement reached with Byzantium at the turn of 819 and 820 [Бешевлиев, В. 1979, с. 202]. This view is doubted by T. Wasilewski, who points out that the title does not figure in the surviving fragments of the Byzantine-Bulgarian treaties, and that Omurtag was designated by Genesisios, “in accordance with the old rules, as how *kyrios Boulgarias*” [Wasilewski, T. 1985, p. 34]. However, it seems that the second argument cannot be considered to support the advanced thesis. Genesisios applied the title *kyrios* neither to Krum nor even to Boris-Michael, using it only with regard to Omurtag, whom he thus clearly distinguished. It was no different with the author of the first part of *the Continuation of Theophanes* who referred to Omurtag as *basileus* of the Bulgars, a title that was used by Bulgarian rulers by consent from Byzantium.

Known by Byzantine authors as Mortagon or Murtagon⁷, Omurtag appears in various chronicles in connection with Thomas the Slav’s usurpation⁸. Based on Byzantine historians’ accounts, Michael II was offered help from Omurtag in fighting the usurper. However, the offer was not accepted⁹. According to Genesisios, the emperor did not want the Bulgars to shed Christian blood and, by doing so, to violate the commitment they made under the agreement concluded with Byzantium ten years before [Genesisios, 1978, II, 7]. Doubtful of the motives behind Michael’s decision, the author of the *Continuation of Theophanes* wrote that the emperor was either concerned about the fortunes of his compatriots (a concern shared by Genesisios) or he disliked the prospect of paying the Bulgars [Theophanes Continuatus, 2015, II, 17. 5–7; Scylitzes, 1973, p. 37]. Chroniclers are in agreement that Omurtag was not bothered by the Byzantine ruler’s refusal and decided to intervene in his favour¹⁰.

⁷ For example: [Theophanes Continuatus, 2015, II, 17. 1 and 11 (Μορταγων); Vita Basilii, 2011, 4. 18] (Μουρτάγων).

⁸ On the course of Thomas, the Slav’s revolt see [Липшиц, Е. 1961, с. 212–228; Lemerle, P. 1965, p. 255–297; Köpstein, H. 1983. S. 61–87].

⁹ It is generally believed that Omurtag’s participation in the civil war in Byzantium was the result of the peace treaty concluded in 815 or 816. On the treaty, see [Treadgold W. 1984, pp. 213–220]. On the issue of dating Omurtag’s intervention see: [Beševliev, V. 1976, S. 339–342; Wasilewski, T. 1972, s. 68–70; Penkov, S. 1981, p. 44; Божилов, И., Гюзелев, В. 1999, с. 145–146]. Contrary to what Byzantine sources say, it is highly unlikely for Omurtag to appear in Byzantine territory on his own initiative, without invitation from Michael II. Cf. [Липшиц, Е. 1961, с. 223; Тивчев, П. 1969, с. 68–76].

¹⁰ Genesisios, 1978, II, 7; Theophanes Continuatus, 2015, II, 17. 11–15; Scylitzes, 1973, p. 37. The only exception is George the Monk [Georgius Monachus, 1904, p. 796–797], the author closest to the event, according to whom it was Michael who turned to the Bulgars for help. However, it needs to be stressed that the Monk does not mention Omurtag by name. His account seems to be most credible since it can be doubted that Omurtag became involved in the civil war in Byzantium without any request from Michael. Later Byzantine authors clearly sought to clear the emperor of the charge of bringing Bulgarian barbarians to the Byzantine territory and using them against his own subjects. Not only his barbarian

The author of the *Continuation* claims that Omurtag took this line of action because he enjoyed war and the spoils it brought, and because he wanted to strengthen the peace, he had concluded with Leo V, Michael's predecessor¹¹. Writing much later than the authors mentioned above, at the time when Bulgarian lands seemed to have already been integrated into Byzantium, John Zonaras argued that the Bulgarian ruler's action was due to his friendly attitude towards the Romans¹². His intervention in support of the emperor proved to be successful. Omurtag defeated the usurper's troops, took many captives and returned home with great spoils, which, as is stressed in the *Continuation*, filled him with joy and pride¹³.

What did Byzantine chronographers think of Omurtag in view of his intervention against Thomas the Slav? Although their works contain no explicit criticism of the Bulgarian ruler, the implicit criticism can be considered to lie in the indication of his fondness for war and the spoils of war, since under the Byzantine political ideology such an outlook was not considered to be positive¹⁴. However, in the case under consideration, the emperor benefited from the Bulgarian ruler's proclivities. The latter became his ally rather than the usurper's¹⁵. Interestingly, some

origin but also the memory of his persecution of Christians may have underlain Byzantine authors' intention to distort the truth and relieve Michael II of the responsibility for making the Bulgarians become involved in the civil war in question. Regardless of the judgement the chroniclers passed on Michael, they also wanted to mitigate the unfavourable impression of the event that hurt the Byzantines' pride.

¹¹ **Theophanes Continuatus**, 2015, II, 17. 11–13: “But Mortagon, who otherwise rejoiced in battles and loved reaping the spoils of these same, and who sought to confirm and make stronger the thirty-years truce concluded by the previous ruler Leo” (transl. p. 97); cf. [Scylitzes, 1973, p. 37].

¹² **Zonaras**, 1897, s. 344. This is the only observation of this kind regarding Bulgaria's pagan ruler. It seems to have been John Zonaras's attempt to explain the Bulgars' participation in the Byzantine civil war. This view of Omurtag may have stemmed from the fact that the Bulgarian ruler was credited with the conclusion of peace that put an end to the years of bloody fighting during Krum's reign. Since John Zonaras made no mention of Omurtag's persecution of Christians, he could take the liberty of formulating such a conclusion. It should also be kept in mind when Zonaras wrote his work. The fact that at the time the Bulgars were the emperor's subjects may have induced him to search the past for examples of good relations between them and the Byzantines.

¹³ **Theophanes Continuatus**, 2015, II, 18. 4–7: “the ruler of the Bulgars, seizing the persons whose lord he had become, and much booty besides, returned to his own land, rejoicing and exulting” (transl. p. 99).

¹⁴ On the Byzantines' attitude towards the issue of war and peace, see, e.g.: [Miller, T. S. Nesbitt, J. 1995; Haldon, J. 1999, pp. 13–33; Chrysostomides, J. 2001, Strässle. P. M. 2004, S. 110–129].

¹⁵ Underlining the fact that after defeating Thomas the Slav Omurtag took captives and spoils was designed to show that the Bulgarian leader was more interested in reaping these benefits than in assisting Michael II.

sources emphasize Omurtag's positive view of the Byzantine-Bulgarian agreement from 815, and John Zonaras, the last of the authors I am concerned with here, even described his attitude towards Byzantium as friendly.

The view of Omurtag as *vir militaris*, a man fond of war, who knew how to profit from it and who actually lived off it¹⁶, may have been taken by the

Byzantine reader to be in tune with the criticism of the Bulgarian ruler to be found in Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *Vita Basilii*, in some hagiographic texts, and in those chronicles that mentioned his persecution of Christians¹⁷. Having failed to force Manuel, archbishop of Adrianople, as well as some other Christians, to renounce their faith, Omurtag condemned them to a martyr's death [*Vita Basilii*, 2011, 4. 18–24]. We can see him here as a militant pagan. A similar portrait of Omurtag was provided by John Skylitzes who, writing one and a half centuries later, drew on the account by Constantine Porphyrogenitus. In addition to recounting facts regarding the persecution of Christians, Skylitzes expressed an opinion that Omurtag (who is referred to by the chronicler as Murtagon) was crueller than Krum, his father [*Scylitzes*, 1973, p. 117]. As P. Angelov has rightly noted, such an opinion may only appear to be surprising [*Ангелов, П.* 1999, с. 170]. Drawing a comparison between anti-Byzantine steps taken by both men, for this was the sphere that served as the basis for forming the opinion in question, leads to the conclusion that Krum, whom the Byzantines certainly regarded as cruel¹⁸, abstained from forcing Christians to convert to paganism and did not condemn them to death for refusing to renounce their faith, a line of action followed by his son. No crime could be more hideous

¹⁶ *Theophanes Continuatus*, 2015, II, 17. 11–13. Cf. remarks by P. Angelov [*Ангелов, П.* 1999, с. 173–174], according to whom the passage from the Continuation of Theophanes should be interpreted as an attack on Omurtag who was presented as a belligerent, greedy and proud barbarian. It is worth noting here that the Bulgarian scholar is not justified in using Genesios's testimony to support the view that Omurtag was presented as a typical barbarian [*Ангелов, П.* 1999, с. 174]. Omurtag's name does not appear in the quoted passage [*Genesios*, 1978, I, 12] and the event that the Byzantine chronicler used as a pretext to point out the barbarian nature of Krum's successor on the Bulgarian throne may have taken place during the reign either of Dukum or of Dicewag (on those rulers see, e.g.: [*Beševliev, V.* 2001, S. 90–104; *Wasilewski, T.* 1972, pp. 62–64; *Leszka, M. J.* 2003, pp. 56–58; contra *Божилев, И., Гюзелев, В.* 1999, с. 144]). I do not mean to say that Omurtag was not perceived as a barbarian. What I mean is that in this particular case Genesios's remark may not have pertained to the ruler in question.

¹⁷ On Omurtag's attitude towards Christianity see, for example: [*Fine J. V. A.* 1983, pp. 107–108]. It should be noted that doubts are raised as to the character and scope of the persecution of Christians mentioned in the sources discussed below. On this issue see: However, it should be stressed that it is basically irrelevant to the topic dealt with in this article.

¹⁸ On the Byzantines' perception of Krum see, e.g.: [*Νικολαου, Κ.* 1996, pp. 269–282; *Ангелов, П.* 1999, с. 161–168; *Leszka, M. J.* 2003, pp. 36–55].

for Christians than such coercion, and those who committed it were considered to be evil incarnate. It should be mentioned that according to Skylitzes, Omurtag was punished for his deeds. He suffered defeat at the hands of the Byzantines, who forced him to conclude peace and release captives [Scylitzes, 1973, p. 117].

Created in the tenth century, *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* [Synaxarium, 1902, col. 415–416] provides an account of Omurtag's persecution of the Byzantines who had been resettled by Krum into the Bulgarian lands. The Bulgarian khan demanded that they should renounce Christianity, and when they refused, he condemned them to death. Synaxarium contains a detailed description of the torture to which they were subjected before they died. Among the martyrs were not only ordinary believers, but also church hierarchs (bishops: George of Deultum, Leo of Nice, and Peter), and strategists (Leo and John). 377 Christians are reported to have died at the time¹⁹. The account of their martyrdom is a testament to their sanctity on the one hand, and the accusation made against Omurtag on the other. Not only was he guilty of causing Christians to die the martyr's death, but, even more importantly, he was also to blame for making them commit the gravest and unforgivable sin – the Renunciation of their own faith. He was thus not only a cruel barbarian but also a servant of the devil. His crimes spoke for themselves and entailed no need to formulate a detailed appraisal of his conduct. Synaxarium is as succinct as it is telling in designating him as ὁ μαρώτατος Μουρτάγων²⁰.

Omurtag also appears in *History of the Martyrdom of 15 Martyrs of Tiberiopolis* by Theophylact of Ohrid [Theophylactus, 1994, 29–30], a bishop writing at the end of the eleventh century. At one point in his work, Theophylact recounts the story of Kinamon, a holy man who was among Adrianople's inhabitants resettled by Krum into Bulgaria. After the latter's death, he found himself in the hands of Omurtag, who had a liking for him and held him in high regard. However, there was one thing that worried the Bulgarian ruler, and that was Kinamon's faith. He then decided to persuade him to abandon Christianity. Here we come across the same theme that is to be found in *Synaxarium*. The only differences are the methods of conversion.

Theophylact reports the conversation supposedly held between Omurtag and Kinamon. It arose over the attempt to win the latter over to paganism. Of course, it does not matter whether such a conversation actually took place, as it can certainly be doubted. However, the story shows how Omurtag was perceived by the Byzantines. Omurtag's demanding attitude provoked Kinamon into confessing his indomitable commitment to Christianity, the only true religion, and unambiguously disregarding paganism. Kinamon's stance angered Omurtag to the point where he

¹⁹ Synaxarium, 1902, col. 416. It should be noted that unlike the sources quoted above, this text does not render Omurtag responsible for Manuel's death. The bishop is reported to have been killed by Dicewag, Omurtag's probable predecessor.

²⁰ Synaxarium, 1902, col. 416. The word μαρώς means bloodstained, impure, vile – [Abramowiczówna, Z. 1962, p. 150; Liddell, H. G., Scott, R. 1996, p. 1132].

started threatening him with torture (this is Omurtag known from *Synaxarium*). It is clear that he could not be expected to behave in a different way, for as a barbarian he was impetuous and cruel by nature. This was how the Bulgarian khan's conduct was commented upon by Theophylact, and if this is where the whole episode ended, it could be said that we were dealing here with a well-known pattern: a good, virtuous Christian on the one hand and a bloodthirsty pagan unable to control himself on the other. Another part of the story seems to raise doubt as to Theophylact's perception of Omurtag in such a schematic way since we find the bishop ascribing the khan with a passionate defense of the pagan faith. "Do not degrade our gods, he said, since their strength is great! Bearing witness to this is the fact that we who worship them have managed to subjugate the Romans' state. If your Christ were a real God, as you say, would not he be your ally, and would not he try to defend those who serve and worship him?" [Theophylactus, 1994, 30]. It could be argued that Omurtag presented himself as a man who was deeply attached to his faith, as well as being both proud and full of dignity [Ангелов, П. 1999, с. 172]. In this way, the Bulgarian Khan's attitude is likely to be interpreted by a contemporary reader. Still, the Byzantines must have taken his statement to be just a confirmation of Omurtag's barbarity and an expression of his pride and the inability to mend the error of his ways. The argument he used (scarcely to Christianity not only had no basis in fact but was also unconvincing to Christians who knew that "God works in mysterious ways". Any doubts as to Theophylact's intention to show Omurtag in a bad light are dispelled by the way in which the story ends. After the stormy discussion, Omurtag ordered Kinamon to be thrown into jail, where, according to the hagiographer, he stayed for the rest of Omurtag's reign. It is then clear that Omurtag showed no generosity worthy of a ruler and certainly deserved to be referred to as a persecutor of Christians.

I would like to close my analysis of the image of Omurtag in Byzantine sources by discussing an episode that could be considered to throw a different light on the Bulgarian ruler if it had any basis in fact. The episode concerns the Bulgarian khan's encounter with Basil, a future emperor, and the founder of the Macedonian dynasty. The event was recounted by Constantine Porphyrogenitus (in his *Life of Basil*)²¹ and by John Skylitzes who added some minor details to Constantine's account [Scylitzes, 1973, pp. 117–118; cf. Ангелов, П. 1999, с. 173; Bonarek, J. 2003, p. 135]. Before Byzantine captives were sent back home, young Basil drew the attention of the Bulgarian khan who asked the boy to come up, took him into his lap, kissed him, and gifted him with a big apple [2]²². Acting naturally and trustingly, Basil surprised everyone with his dignified attitude. The episode was

²¹ Vita Basilii, 2011, 4. 29–39. Suffice it to mention that Basil's birth is dated to between 830 and 836, which of course rules out his encounter with Omurtag. On the dating of Basil's birth see: [Wasilewski, T. 1972, p. 84–85; The Oxford Dictionary..., 1, 1991, p. 260].

²² The apple conveys a symbolic meaning here. It symbolizes favour on the one hand and power on the other. By giving Basil an apple, Omurtag foretells his rise to imperial power. On this issue see: [Moravcsik, Gy. 1961, S. 78sq; Bonarek, J. 2003, p. 135].

of course mainly designed to underline the uniqueness of the future emperor, but recounting it also had the effect of showing the Bulgarian ruler in quite a good light. The latter was not portrayed as a bloody persecutor of Christians, but as a normal man who was friendly towards children (although special ones). Again, it is irrelevant whether or not this episode actually took place. What matters is the fact that it must have been considered possible for the Bulgarian ruler, even as cruel as Omurtag, to behave in this way. The Byzantine authors may have wanted to use Omurtag in order to strengthen the aura of greatness that began to surround Basil while still a child. It is worth noting in passing that by linking Basil both to Krum, for Krum was the reason why Basil's parents and Basil himself found themselves on Bulgarian soil, and to Omurtag, the Byzantine authors indicated that of all the Bulgarian rulers who reigned in the mid-ninth century, those two were the only ones who became ingrained in the Byzantines' historical consciousness and were in a sense perceived as eminent men.

To conclude, the Byzantine image of Omurtag seems to have been shaped in the tenth century. It is to be found both in Byzantine chronicles (Genesios's *on the Reign of the Emperors, the Continuation of Theophanes, Vita Basilii*) and in hagiographic texts (*Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*). In later times, when the Bulgarian lands became part of the Byzantine Empire, the image was only slightly modified. Omurtag, to put it mildly, was not close to the Byzantines' hearts. However, they appreciated the fact that he had made peace with the Empire after years of bloody fighting and did not violate it for the rest of his reign. At the same time, he was seen as a man who was fond of war and who took pleasure in winning spoils and taking captives. Such preferences certainly were not in agreement with the Byzantine vision of a good ruler. If they were not denounced by Byzantine authors, it is because they were referred to in the context of Omurtag's intervention in support of the emperor involved in fighting the usurper. What discredited him in the eyes of the Byzantines was his persecution of Christians who had been forcibly resettled into Bulgaria during Krum's reign. The Byzantine authors with whom I have been concerned here did not shy away from describing the cruelties to which the Byzantines were subjected by Omurtag. These descriptions made it clear that the Bulgarian khan was a cruel man, a pagan, a barbarian, and the enemy of Christianity. And this was the image that became perpetuated in the Byzantine consciousness.

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