



Списание ЕПОХИ
Издание на Историческия факултет на
ВТУ „Св. св. Кирил и Методий“
Journal EPOCHI [EPOCHS]
Edition of the Department of History of
“St. Cyril and St. Methodius” University of Veliko Tarnovo



Том / Volume XXX (2022).
Книжка / Issue 1

DOI: 10.54664/OXYX3030

AN UNEXPECTED ASPECT OF SLAVERY?

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Abstract: *This article states the hypothesis of the social origin of two representatives of the Eastern Orthodox Church clergy in the period between the 9th and 12th centuries. Bishop Sergii, who was a eunuch, took the Belgrade Bishopric during the rule of Knyaz Boris I. Mikhail, who was called Maxim, was a bishop of Ohrid in the 1120s. It is an indisputable fact that both of them were eunuchs, and this contradicts one of the basic rules of the Church about cheirotonia (ordination). It is specified in which cases persons with impaired “physical integrity” and disabilities were allowed to be elected and to hold senior Church positions. The sources analyzed point towards a slave origin of both of them. The author proposes the thesis that the ideal (desired) model of construction of the Eastern Orthodox Church has been corrected during its long-term history by practice through a real model, which, in some cases, radically contradicts the basic, declared rules.*

Keywords: *slavery; slaves; First Bulgarian Empire; Knyaz Boris I; Bishop Sergius (Sergii); liberation from slavery; eunuch; consecration of a bishop; slaves – clerics*

Slavery and its consequences in the socio-economic sphere have marked the history of almost all European nations in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. The slave institution has played an important role throughout the existence of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) and the Byzantine world. As part of it, medieval Bulgaria did not make an exception.

In this article, we focus on two sources. Although they do not have much in common in terms of slavery, their contents allow certain interpretation in this direction. They refer to the history of the Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Church. In particular, they concern two heads of bishoprics in the period from the 9th to the 12th centuries. These sources allow us to comment on the interplay between ideal and real models of existence of a very important ideological institution, such as the Church in the Middle Ages.

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The first document is part of the correspondence of Pope John VIII (872–882) with Knyaz Boris I – the Bulgarian head of state at that time [**Johannis VIII Papae**, Epistolae, – ЛИБИ, II. p. 147 (translated by Al. Milev)]. The letters were not preserved in the original, but their content was brought to us by a later copy from the papal office dating from the 11th century. Seven of them are addressed to Knyaz Boris I and one to the “boyars and counsellors” of the Bulgarian ruler. The correspondence

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went on for a period of nine years covering the entire pontificate of Pope John VIII. A basic motive was the possible orientation of the Bulgarian Church to the supremacy of Rome [Гюзелев, В. 2009, с. 126–129].

The decisions of the Eighth Ecumenical Council of 4 March 870 and Bulgaria's final inclusion to the Patriarchate of Constantinople were a defeat for the Roman Church. However, the hope that Rome would regain the Bulgarian diocese did not die. Pope John VIII was considered to be one of the most vigorous successors of St. Peter, and his main ambition was to revise the decisions of the so-called Photian Schism. The correspondence between him and Knyaz Boris I was conducted in a situation of tense relationships between Rome and Constantinople on whose basis the Bulgarian Church orientation lies [Гюзелев, В. 2009, с. 127].

The letter we are interested in is dated 16 April 878. Its contents criticize the Greek clergy who have taken the place of the Latin priests in the Bulgarian lands after 870. In history, it is known as the letter in which Pope John VIII protects the Bulgarian prince Mikhail from heretical communication with the Greeks, thanking him for the gift sent; he ordered the removal of the eunuch Sergii, ordained to the Diocese of Belgrade by the false bishop George [Johannis VIII Papae, Epistolae, – ЛИБИ. II. p. 147 (translated by Al. Milev)]. Here is how the letter goes: "... *By the way, let your grace know that the eunuch Sergii has been taken down from his position by the authority of the holy apostles and the holy canons and according to our decision. Although he was of a Slavic origin, he obtained this position by means of deceit, and he was also tied to many other sins. He was accused and found guilty by his episcopo, but after that, in too undignified a manner, was brought to the Belgrade Episcopal Bishopric by Georgi, who fraudulently appropriated the episcopal title. We communicate this to you in canonical order, both to you and to your entire community, so that those who are excommunicated are not accepted by others, so that they do not find themselves bound to them with such a punishment of condemnation, which we do not wish*" [Johannis VIII Papae, Epistolae, – ЛИБИ. III. с. 150–151 (translated by Al. Milev)].

According to researchers, this text gives rise to two issues. The first one is the localization of the Belgrade Bishopric. In 1873, Marin Drinov "placed" bishop Sergii in Belgrade that is set on the Danube River [Дринов, М. 1909, с. 209, note 12]. After him, Dimitar Tshulev equated the Belgrade Bishopric with the old Singidunum Bishopric in Upper Moesia, which was destroyed after the Bulgarian conquest of the city, and rebuilt after the conversion to Christianity, with Belgrade as its centre [Цухлев, Д. 1910, с. 126–127, 365]. This conclusion is accepted and imposed in the science of history by renowned church historians, such as Ivan Snegarov, Todor Sabev, Vasil Zlatarski, etc. [Снегаров, И. 1924, с. 182; Събев, Т. 1987, с. 255, с. 279; Златарски, В. 1971, с. 224, and others].

The Russian church historian Y. Golubinsky has another opinion about the location of the Belgrade Bishopric. According to him, until 1019, there was no episcopal bishopric in Belgrade on the Danube, and it was Belgrade in Epirus (now Berat in Albania) where there was also an episcopal centre founded during the reign of Knyaz Boris. Golubinsky finds arguments in favour of his claim in the official documents (*sigillion*) of Emperor Basil II, in which Belgrade on the Danube does not appear as a diocesan centre [Голубинский, Е. Е. 1871, с. 69, 96–97].

The same opinion is also supported by Trendafil Krastanov. There is a hypothesis that the bishopric of Clement of Ohrid was set exactly here. While studying the Vatican Greek Codex (Codex Vat. Gr. 2492, f. 82 r) [Кръстанов, Т. 1999, с. 164–186], in 1999, he found a document of Stavraki Aristarchi Bey whose main and long-term work is devoted to the search for and documentation of all bishoprics and their heads that were subordinated to Constantinople (present-day Istanbul). He traced them back from St. Andrew to the end of the 19th century [Кръстанов, Т. 1999, с. 168]. The text, which is important in this case, says: "*Bishopric of Velegrad or Velegrad (Berat) and Kanina, South Epirus. A town in Albania, now called Berat. Bishopric first to the Diocese of Drach, called Pulcheriupol, then Velagrad Diocese to the Ohrid Archbishopric, and from 1767 to the Patriarchate of Constantinople with the metropolitan title 'Reverend and Exarch of All Albania'. Bishops: 1. Filarct (Αρθρομον Βελεγραδων. Περγραφη); 2. Seraphim (also there); 3. Sergii – 16 April 878; 4. Daniel*

(also there); 5. *Clement 906 until 25 July 916... We borrow these ten names without chronology from a research of the Velegrad's bishop Antim, written for his bishopric centre, which he found in the archives of the bishopric centre...* [Кръстанов, Т. 1999, с.167–168, 184–186]. It is clear from the content that Stavradi Bey completed the list of Bishop Antim with two more names to which exact dates have been assigned. These are Sergii and St. Clement. What is impressive is the complete coincidence of the date connected with Bishop Sergii – 16 April 878, with the date of the letter of Pope John VIII to Knyaz Boris.

Stavraki Aristarchi came from a prominent Phanariot family closely related to the Church. He used to be Grand Logothete of the Patriarchate of Constantinople for almost half a century, from 1866 to 1923. As a long-term servant, he had access to and the opportunity to use many church documents for his research [Кръстанов, Т. 1999, с.167–168, 184–186]. It can be assumed that, in compiling the list, in addition to the study of Bishop Antim of Velegrad, he referred to a transcript of the papal letter found in the archives of the Patriarchate. After the conquest of Preslav and the fall of Eastern Bulgaria under Byzantine rule, Leonis Diaconis [Leonis Diaconi. *Hidistoriae*, – ГИБИ, V, 1964. с. 274] reported that Emperor John Tzimiskes had returned to Constantinople with “big trophies” including the crown and the purple garments of the Bulgarian king, as well as the icon of the Holy Virgin. It is quite logical that the state archives of the Bulgarian Empire fell into the hands of the emperor.

The second issue is about the personality of Sergii. It is already assumed that he was the first higher cleric of Slavic descent who was chosen and appointed by Knyaz Boris [Събев, Т. 1987, с. 240]. All we know about him is his ethnicity and the fact that he was a eunuch.

Keeping in mind the negative attitude of Pope John VIII towards the activities of Sergii and Georgi, it is relevant to pay some attention to the procedure for electing senior church officials at that time in the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The choice and ordination of high clergymen was a complicated process that required a strict procedure. It was based on the Apostolic rules and canons of several ecumenical councils. These rules were an integral part of a number of texts of Byzantine clerical and civil law between the 6th and 14th centuries.

First of all, this is the Synagogue of John Scholasticus. It is the first attempt to systematize rules of a religious and secular nature. While he was a priest in Antioch, he compiled a collection of rules of 50 titles, which grouped the decisions of church councils and the rules of the Holy Fathers. After 556, when he became Patriarch of Constantinople, he created a new compendium structured in 87 volumes and based on the Novels of Justinian I. The two digests were combined by an unknown writer, and so they formed the First Nomocanon [Бобчев, С. 1910, с. 123]. In the following centuries, there have been several revisions: Nomocanon of 14 titles written in the first half of the 8th century, and the so-called Photian Nomocanon, edited in the 9th century. The difference between the latter and the previous ones is that the canons of the Trullo Council (691/692) were added to it [Бобчев, С. 1910, с. 124]. Since the second half of the 12th century, the edition with the comments by the prominent canon writer Theodore Balsamon has been available too [Нарбеков, В. А. 1899].

In addition, the election of prelates was based on the Basilikii, the Procheiron Nomos, the Epanagoge of Emperor Basil I the Macedonian, and the Novels of Leo VI the Wise [Соколов, И. И. 1915–1916, с. 195–196]. After the conversion to Christianity, the Nomocanon of 50 titles of John Scholasticus, translated by St. Methodius, became widespread and used in Bulgaria [Цибранска-Костова, М. 2014, с. 677].

As we pointed out above, the 85 Apostolic rules underlie the selection of bishops and are present in all versions of the Nomocanon. They set out the necessary requirements for the personality, the way, and the conditions that had to be met when choosing a bishop¹ [Правила на Светата

¹ A phototype edition of КНИГА ПРАВИЛЪ СВАТЫХЪ АПОСТОЛШЪ, СВАТЫХЪ СОБОРШЪ ВЪСЛАЕНСКИХЪ И ПОМЪТНЫХЪ, И СВАТЫХЪ ОТЕЦЪ has been used. Moscow, 1893. pp. 14–15. The translation from Church Slavonic has been provided according to [Правила на Светата православна

православна църква]. The most important quality was spiritual purity, and some physical disabilities were allowed.

There is a special chapter comprising a list of the physical disabilities. This is Chapter 14 of Title 1, which gives an answer to the question in which cases a eunuch or a person with some other type of disability can become a bishop or clergyman. The reasoning is based on Apostolic rules 21, 22, 77 and 78, and on Rule 1 from the Council of Nicaea [Нарбеков, В. А. 1899, с. 70–74]. The texts on which Chapter 14 is set are as follows:

Apostolic rule 21: “A eunuch, who has become one of human violence or was deprived of his male organs by a time of violence or was born in this way, let him become a bishop, if he is worthy.”

Apostolic rule 22: “He who has castrated himself shall not be accepted into the clergy because he is suicidal and an enemy of what God has created.”

Apostolic rule 77: “Without an eye or with some disability in feet but still worth to be a bishop, let him be, because it is not the disability that defiles him, but the immorality.”

Apostolic rule 78: “Deaf and blind should not become a bishop because this would be an obstacle in his duty.”² [Правила..., pass.].

Rule 1 from the Council of Nicaea: “He who, during the course of an illness, has been deprived of his reproductive organs by doctors or has been castrated by barbarians can stay in the clergy. However, if he was healthy but has castrated himself, even though he has been a member of the clergy, may he be excluded and furthermore may none similar be accepted in the clergy. As it is obvious, it is about people who have castrated themselves on purpose, while the people who were castrated by barbarians or by their masters are accepted in the clergy, as long as they are recognized as worthy in other respects”³ [Правила..., pass.].

Also related to these requirements is Rule 8 of the Council of Constantinople, which was held in the Church of the Holy Apostles in 861. The rule itself is about clergymen who have castrated themselves or have done this to other people. They were to be punished severely because the act itself was an affront to the Lord and “evil thinking against what God has created”⁴ [Канони на църквата, pass.]. The punishment for this included overthrowing the priest and excommunicating the laymen. There were also sanctions for the castration of a free man, which was considered a crime against men and God. In his commentary of Chapter 14 of the Nomocanon, Theodore Balsamon refers to the civil law of the Empire, which prohibited the castration of free men. The penalties provided for this crime were confiscation of property, castration, and even death. Castration was allowed only for “barbarians” (ones that were not subjects of the emperor) [Нарбеков, В. А. 1899, с. 70–71]. This clarification was made in the 12th century and was based on Novel 142, chapters I and II of Justinian I [S. P. Scott, 1932, pp. 161–162], which was not canceled until the very end of the Empire. The same definition for body completeness is present in the Syntagma of Matthew Baltasar [Алфавитная синтагма, 1892, с. 175, 227] in the 14th century.

From the letter of Pope John VIII, it is evident that Sergii was a Slav and a eunuch, but, regardless of this fact, he was consecrated a bishop of the Belgrade Bishopric. His ethnicity was not

църква, Апостолски постановления. Правила на светите апостоли]. <http://www.pravoslavieto.com/books/pravila/apostolski_pravila.htm>, 19 Mar. 2019.

² КНИГА ПРЯВИЛЪ СВАТЫХЪ АПОСТОЛШЪ, СВАТЫХЪ СОБОРШЕЪ ВСЕЛЕНСКИХЪ И ПОМЪТНЫХЪ, И СВАТЫХЪ ОТЕЦЪ. Moscow, 1893. pp. 14–15. The translation from Church Slavonic has been provided according to [Правила на Светата православна църква. Апостолски постановления. Правила на светите апостоли]. <http://www.pravoslavieto.com/books/pravila/apostolski_pravila.htm>, 19 Mar. 2019.

Sokolov I. I. Избирането на епископи във Византия 9–14 век; Правила на Светата православна църква. Апостолски постановления. Правила на светите апостоли.

³ КНИГА ПРЯВИЛЪ СВАТЫХЪ..., с. 31.

⁴ Canon Orders of the Holy Orthodox Church. Canon Orders from the Local Councils. <<https://sites.google.com/site/canonsoebg/home/kanoni-na-sv-apostoli/kanoni-ot-vselenskite-sbori/kanoni-ot-pomestnite-sbori/konstantinopol-861>>, 19 Mar. 2019.

an obstacle to his consecration but an advantage in Knyaz Boris's struggle to ensure an independent local Church.

Based on the cited rules for the election of prelates, we can assume that Bishop Sergii was not castrated voluntarily, because this would be an obstacle to his professional career. At that time, it was common practice to castrate slaves during childhood, so as to avoid possible aggressive actions against their masters in the future. Eunuch slaves were usually captives or subject of trade [Удальцова, З. В. 1964, с. 13]. The Slavic origin of Bishop Sergii points to the fact that he was not born in slavery, because it was prohibited to castrate slave-born children. This prohibition dates back to the 6th century, and it was still valid in the 9th century. Furthermore, in Novel 142, Justinian I envisages the liberation of a slave who was castrated [Scott, S. P. 1932, pp. 161–162]. Therefore, we should accept that Sergii was probably a captive who was castrated, but this did not interfere with his spiritual career. **Apostolic rule 82** envisages: “*We don't let ordinance of slaves, unless there is an official permission of their masters, because the opposite leads to disturbance in the society. And if there is a slave who is worth to be consecrated, as is the case with our Onisim, and if his masters liberate him, so let this man be ordained into service*”⁵ [Правила на Светата православна църква].

The ordination of clergymen (monks, priests, bishops) amongst the slaves is not limited to Rule 82. Novel 123 of the Justinian Code also deals with the ordination of slaves as clergymen [S. P. Scott, 1932, pp. 85, 91, 99]. It became a source for three of the Novels of Emperor Leo VI [S. P. Scott, 1932, pp. 214–215]. According to its content, it is allowed for a slave to become a bishop (or a clergyman in general) with the permission of his master. If the master did not agree, then the man should become a slave again. And if the master did not try to get his slave back after a year since the latter's ordination, then the man could be considered free.

Therefore, the election of Sergii should be considered legal and in full agreement with the church rules and secular laws that were in force in the 9th century. This makes the possibility convincing that one of the first Bulgarian bishops of Slavic descent was a liberated slave who managed to ascend in the Church hierarchy.

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The second document related to the current study is the List of the Bulgarian Archbishops or the so-called Du Cange's list/catalogue. The manuscript was found and published by Charles du Fresne, sieur Du Cange, and it is available at the Parisian National Library (Cod. Gr. 880, fol. 407v – 408r). It is also popular under the name *ordo episcoporum*, or Du Cange's List of the Leaders of the Orthodox Churches. The original text is published in Ch. du Cange, FAMILIAE AUGUSTAE BYZANTINAE I, PARIS 1680, pp. 174–175. It consists of two pages and has been known to academics for more than two hundred years. So far, there are two copies of it that are known and studied: the Parisian and the Moscow ones. The first one to study and publish it in Bulgaria was Y. Ivanov. [Иванов, Й. 1970 с. 564–569; **Notitia Archiepiscopi Ioannes Comneni / List of Archbishop John Komnenos (Du Cange's List)** – ГИБИ, VII, 1968, p. 109–111; Дуйчев, И. 1985, с. 626–629; Тъпкова–Займова, В. 2000, с. 21–49; Бърлиева, С. 2000, с. 50–65; Божилов, И. 2011, с. 93–131]. The list was published in a Greek-language code and is part of *ordo episcoporum*, in which the prelates of Constantinople, Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and finally of Bulgaria are mentioned [Божилов, Ив. 2011, с. 94]. It is a detailed list of 16 heads of the Bulgarian Church, and there are short biographical notes to each of them. The last one in the list is John Komnenos who was an archbishop of Ohrid after 1143. The establishment of the list has been referred to the second half of the 12th century [Иванов, Й. 1970, с. 564].

From the Bulgarian part of the list, the inscription under number 15 is of interest: “*Mikhail called Maxim, a eunuch, ostiary (doorman) amongst the servants of the Patriarchy and a deacon of the Great Church*” [Иванов, Й. 1970, с. 567]. He took the archbishopric in 1120. Similar to

⁵ КНИГА ПРАВИЛА СВАТЪХЪ..., с. 26.

his predecessors, he originated from the Constantinople clergy and was appointed by the Emperor [Снегаров, И. 1924, с. 205; Цухлев, Д. 1905, с. 365]. Apart from his bishop's seal, there is no other data about him (Figs. 1–2). The name cannot serve as a reference point to identify his ethnicity. Most probably, one of the known names is his birth name and the other is the one given to him after his ordination. The rest of the text could be interpreted in a direction leading either to forced castration, or to possible slavery in the early years of Mikhail (or to both of them).

In the 10th–11th centuries, it was common practice for many parents to deliberately castrate their sons, which was done in order to provide them with a career. In certain cases, eunuchs were preferred servants for some positions kept specifically for them [Bury, J. B. 1911, pp. 121–129]. Ostiary was one of these positions, and it was known long before it became part of the Byzantine administrative (spiritual and civil) system. In Latin, the term 'ostiarius' means 'door guard', i.e. doorman or porter. It has been known since the time of the Roman Empire, and, habitually, it was usually occupied by eunuch slaves [Kazhdan, A. P. 1991, p. 1540]. This service was adopted by the Church after the 4th century. Rule 24 from the Council of Laodicea (364) places the ostiary among the lowest rank positions, such as subdeacons, readers, monks, etc. [Лебедев, А. П. 1905]. It was his duty to open and close the church doors, ensuring that no unbaptized persons enter inside during the Eucharist, to hold the Bishop's staff or the sceptre of the Emperor, or to help the deacons. Consequently, the position lost its clerical status and became only an administrative job. Besides being an ostiary, Mikhail was also a deacon in the patriarchal church of Hagia Sophia. There were no special social requirements as to who could be a deacon, while the ostiary (in the church or in the palace) was necessarily a eunuch [Kazhdan, A. P. 1991, p. 1540].

In accordance with the Church rules and laws, the bishop had to be at least 30 years old. If he was already in his thirties in 1120, he must have lived during the time of Emperor Alexios Komnenos (1081–1118). This time was known with the fact that the exterior policy and positions of Byzantium were stable, while the interior situation was not so good: devaluation of the currency's value, increased taxes, liabilities, etc. [Острогорский, Г. Г. 1998, с. 474–476]. Such crisis times worsened the situation of the population, leading to the so-called "debt slavery" [Сакъзов, И. 1925, с. 379]. It became widespread in the Empire, even in the Bulgarian lands. We can find evidence for this in a "private-law act of Bulgarian origin" from the 11th–12th centuries, which deals with the enslavement of a child from a poor family [Дуйчев, И. 1972, с. 209–215, с. 214]. This vicious practice was also described by Ioannis Cinnami [Ioannis Cinnami Historia, – ГИБИ, VII, 1968, с. 260–261 (translated by Str. Lishev and George Batakiev)]. Consequently, this practice was prohibited by Manuel I Komnenos, but Alexios I was the one who initiated the main changes. With his Novel from 1095 [Novella Alexii Comneni, – ГИБИ, VII, 1968, с. 95–101 (translated by Petar Tivchev)], he gave slaves the right to enter freely into an official marriage. By that time, they could marry only with the permission of their master. Legislative measures were taken to facilitate the procedure for exempting slaves with acquired status, i.e. slaves who were born free but have become enslaved for some reason, most often debts.

Bearing in mind all these considerations, we can conclude that Mikhail was a slave with an acquired status as a result of indebtedness, and that his origin was external to the Empire. These conclusions are additionally proved by the fact that the duty of the ostiary was preserved for eunuchs.

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Being a slave and a eunuch in Byzantium was not necessarily a synonym of being illiterate, dealing with hard physical labour, and being exploited. Many slaves had considerable education: teachers, civil servants, or church servants. Cases of military leaders, emperor's counsellors, monks,

bishops and saints who, for one reason or another, were castrated and some of them were slaves, are well known from the records⁶.

From the two sources examined in this study, it is clear that the Ecumenical Patriarchate was quite liberal towards both eunuchs and foreigners. The most important conditions were fidelity in Christ and soul purity, as prescribed in the Apostolic rules and reflected in the decisions of the ecumenical and local councils, as well as in all documents regulating the election of bishops. It was not crucial whether the bishop was of Slavic, Greek, Syrian, Armenian, or other descent. Physical disabilities, and even social status were also not an obstacle to a career in the Church if the Christian moral qualities and diligence were present. Thus, through the study of the two cases of eunuch clergymen, we bring to light the dynamic game between the ideal and the real model of existence of the medieval Church.



Figure 1. Obverse



Figure 2. Reverse. Inscription of five lines, decoration below. Border of dots. **τὸν Βουλγαρίας Μιχαήλ, Ἀγνή, σκέποις (Pure One, may you protect the (archbishop) of Bulgaria)**. Source: <<https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1955.1.5038/view>>.

⁶ See also **Guilland, R.** 1943, pp. 197–238; **Tougher, S.** 2008; **James, L.** 2009, pp. 31–50; **Rotman, Y.** 2009; **Prinzing, G.** 2012, pp. 92–102; **Prinzing, G.** 2016, pp. 176–181; **Magiorkinis, E. et al.**

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Съкращения / List of Abbreviations

ГИБИ – Greek sources for the Bulgarian history

ЛИБИ – Latin sources for the Bulgarian history