The wake behind the mission of Cyril and Methodios: Byzantine echoes in the Chronicle of the Priest of Diokleia

Dr Angeliki Papageorgiou
Department of Slavic Studies/National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

The Chronicle of the Priest of Diokleia is a controversial text of late fourteenth/early fifteenth century date, composed in two versions by a representative of the clergy in order to serve the political plans of his patron. It refers to the history of the Slavs, with particular emphasis on the Croats, from the end of the fifth to the middle of the twelfth century. Its author, Rüdiger, of possible Czech descent, belonged to the monastic order of the Cistercians. We do not know the year of his birth, but between the years 1295 and 1298 he lived in Split and belonged to the staff of the city’s Archbishopric. In 1299 he moved to Bar (Antibari), where he was elected archbishop. In 1301 he was forced to flee, after the city had been captured by the Serb ruler Stefan Milutin. He died in 1305 in Zwettl Abbey, Lower Austria.¹

During his stay in Split, Rüdiger was attached to one of the most powerful men of the time, Croat nobleman Pavle Subić\(^2\). The latter commissioned Rüdiger to write the Chronicle. Its basic purpose was to serve the political ambitions of Subić, who wished for the creation of a Croatian kingdom in the region. Rüdiger’s aim was, first of all, to show that his patron descended from the Nemanjić royal dynasty of Serbia, in order to facilitate Subić’s realization of his ambitious plans, and, second, to prove the continuous and extensive presence of the Croats in Slavic lands, again with the aim of serving the Croatian ruler’s plans.

Rüdiger himself had at his disposal a vast array of sources, ranging from Czech and Polish chronicles to works of theology, Byzantine and Latin chronicles, legal and diplomatic documents, material which he used to construct his Chronicle. Indeed, we ought to talk of fabrication, because the work was not simply militant, as we would say in modern terms, but an artificial construction, to which false clues were added, in the guise of legends, genealogies were often distorted and events were invented, with the sole purpose of using the Chronicle as propaganda to justify the plans of Subić. Individuals such as Svetopelek\(^3\) and Pavlimir Belo\(^4\) or events

---

\(^2\) Pavle Subić (1245-1312) belonged to the illustrious Croatian family Subić, which acquired power during the thirteenth century, enjoying the support of the Hungarian crown. Pavle Subić is considered the most powerful Croatian nobleman of the late thirteenth/early fourteenth century. In 1273 he was named ban of Croatia, a title which he held until his death. In 1292 Charles I of Hungary gave him command of the regions between the rivers Gvozd and Neretva. In 1299 Pavle conquered Bosnia and started styling himself as «dominus Bosniae», while since 1305 he added to his title the term totius, i.e. of all Bosnia (totius Bosniae dominus). Despite the fact that he was under the dominion of the Hungarian crown, Pavle Subić acted almost independently and struck his own coins. He died in May 1312. On Pavle Subić see indicatively J. V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, Ann Arbor 1987, pp. 206-210, 258, 276.


\(^4\) On this issue see T. Živković, “The legend of Pavlimir Belo”, in idem (ed.), *Forging Unity, The South Slavs between East and West: 550-1150*, Belgrade 2008, 205-227. See also V. Ćorović, *Historija Bosne*, Beograd 1940, here pp. 146-147, who also does not consider Pavlimir Belo to be an historical person, and Lj. Kovačević, “Nekolika pitanja o Stefanu Nemanji; prilog kritički izvora za srpsku istoriju XII veka” (=Some questions regarding Stefan Nemanja, the contribution of the source
such as the synod in the plain of Dalma\textsuperscript{5} had been fabricated with the sole purpose of serving the aforementioned aims.

The Chronicle begins with a reference to the Byzantine emperor Anastasius and ends with a mention to Manuel I Komnenos.\textsuperscript{6} Opening and closing with those two emperors is not surprising, since Byzantium played a seminal role in the region during the period in question, sometimes as an actual overlord and others as a nominal one.

However, despite Byzantium’s indisputable role, references by the Priest of Diokleia to that role, the Byzantines in general and their emperors in particular range from scarce to nonexistent. Often he does not name the emperors, while other times he confuses individuals and events. Generally speaking, the image of Byzantium that transpires from the sporadic references to it is not that of a dominant player in the region’s history. Thus, the aim of this paper is to highlight the way in which the Priest of Diokleia uses Byzantium and the Byzantines to further the aims of his writing. More specifically, we will analyze the episode of the Christianization of the Slavs by Constantine-Cyril and the image of the Byzantines in general as presented in the Chronicle.

At this point we ought to mention that, despite the fact that researchers have been concerned with the issue of “the image of the other” over the past years and notwithstanding the countless studies that have been written on the image the Byzantines had for “the others”\textsuperscript{7}, as far as the image the “others” had for the


\textsuperscript{6} Papageorgiou, \textit{Ιερέας}, pp. 24 and 79-80.

Byzantines very little has been published and that has been concerned mainly with the image of the Latins for Byzantium\(^8\). There is no relative work pertaining to the way the Byzantines were perceived by the Slavs. This undoubtedly has to do with the rarity of Slavic written sources that refer to Byzantium to a smaller or greater degree. Therefore, we are essentially forced to rely solely on the text of the Chronicle if we want to interpret the image we draw from the Priest of Diokleia regarding Byzantium and the Byzantines. Besides, this is exactly what interests us at this specific point: the way Byzantium was perceived by the author and not by the Slavs in general.

Already in the first chapter, right after the introduction, the Priest of Diokleia begins with the following phrase: *Regnante in urbe Constantinopolitana imperatore Anastasio, qui se et alios multos Eutychiana haeresi maculaverat*\(^9\). This constitutes the first eponymous reference to a Byzantine emperor in the text. However, the author uses the above mention more as a chronological starting point than anything

---


else, since he does not link Anastasius directly to the individuals and the area in which his Chronicle is to take place. The clearly negative judgment he expresses for the emperor («he had stained himself and others with the heresy of Eutyches») is not connected to the appearance of the Goths, who he himself sees as the ancestors of the Slavs, Anastasius’ name — as also happens with the other individuals mentioned, Pope Gelasius, bishop Germanus of Capua, Sabinus of Canosa and Saint Benedict — is merely used as a starting point for the Chronicle.

Nevertheless, the introduction of Byzantium through the mention of a heretical emperor as a temporal milestone cannot be accidental. At the time the Chronicle was composed, the throne of Constantinople was held by Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1328). Despite the trouble he was facing in the northwest part of his empire — and the fact that in the region where the Chronicle was compiled Byzantium was not in a position to reclaim lost territories —, in 1298 Andronikos had concluded a marriage alliance with the Serb ruler Stefan Uroš II Milutin, Subić’s main

---

10 Papageorgiou, Ἠσπιας, pp. 24-25. It is interesting that the author’s views, i.e. the Croats’ Gothic ancestry, have been supported much later by the Croats themselves. Already in 1848, Croatian aristocrats, fanatical supporters of the Habsburg regime, promoted this theory. A century later, in 1941, Ustaše leader Ante Pavelić argued in front of German officials that the Croats were not South Slavs, but Eastern Goths; therefore, they were related to the Germans. The latter used the Gothic theory to approach the Bosnian Muslims, regarded as Croats by the Ustaše. On this question see indicatively F. Curta, “The Making of the Slavs. Between Ethnogenesis, Invention and Migration”, Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana 2 (2008) 155-172, here pp. 168-170 where he refers to confusion between Croats and Goths in medieval sources. See also O. Karatay, In Search of the Lost Tribe. The Origins and Making of the Croatian Nation, Čorum 2003, mainly pp. 16-17, N. Malcolm, Bosnia, A Short History, New York 1994, p. 5, S.K. Pavlowitch, Hitler’s New Disorder. The Second World War in Yugoslavia, New York 2008, pp. 24-25, 137.


13 On Saint Sabinus see for instance A. Paulicelli, San Sabino nella storia di Canosa, Bari 1967. See also Papageorgiou, Ἠσπιας, pp. 222.


opponent in the area. Therefore, the reference to a heretical emperor, Anastasius, was meant to weaken Byzantium’s image and, consequently, any claims the empire might have in the region. This constitutes one of the primary aims of the whole Chronicle; it is within this framework and from this viewpoint that Byzantium is dealt with throughout the text.

Among the vast array of emperors that remain nameless we ought to mention one who is used in the fabrication of the legend of the Synod of Dalma. We are referring to Michael III (842-867), the emperor who organized the mission of Cyril and Methodios in Moravia. According to the Priest of Diokleia, Pope Stephen (V) and Emperor Michael III sent, at the request of Svetopeleki, the former a vicarius and the latter two imperial officials, to contribute to the demarcation of the limits of the region of Dalmatia.

It is the wish of the author to show that the boundaries of Dalmatia were determined by the two great powers of the time, i.e. the Pope and the Byzantine emperor. For this purpose he actually uses an emperor that is known to the Priest’s readership, thanks to his participation in the Christianization of the Slavs, in order to attach even greater importance to his argument, i.e. the independent disposition of the region. Generally speaking, in this particular chapter the Priest uses the story of the Christianization of the Moravians, adapting it to the needs of his own narrative. His aim is to prove that Dalmatia was under the suzerainty of neither the Pope nor Byzantium, and that the only role they undertook and their only contribution were...
limited to delineating the borders, because they had the necessary background for this specific arrangement.

Nevertheless, even through this elaborate and definitely artificial narrative, the author lets Byzantium’s influence in the region become apparent, as well as the fact that he recognizes the significance of Byzantine law, which the Priest of Diokleia thought was essential in organizing the administration of Dalmatia\textsuperscript{20}. Thus, despite his efforts to undermine Byzantine domination and any possible imperial aspirations in the region, the Priest is forced, albeit indirectly, to admit that the foundations of its administration were Byzantine.

This indirect admission essentially serves the aims of his narrative. What this means practically is that in his effort to construct the Chronicle — for the reasons that have already been mentioned — he has to be as convincing as possible. Thus, he does try to play down Byzantium’s role, but the latter’s complete deletion would not render the work of the Priest of Diokleia convincing, since even at the time of the composition of the Chronicle the Byzantines continues to be active in the region, while Byzantium’s influence is apparent in administration and culture. The aim of the Priest is to show that Constantinople was not entitled to claim the lands in question, an aim that is best served if the author sporadically refers to the presence, even the influence of the Byzantines.

Within this framework, the Priest of Diokleia also deals — to a smaller or greater extend — with other individuals of Byzantine descent. One of them is Constantine-Cyril, one of the two missionaries among the Slavs\textsuperscript{21}. The Priest feels

\textsuperscript{20} See Papageorgiou, Ιερέας, ch. 9, p. 31 (Tunc rex dei sapientia plenus, sano utens consilio, misit sapientes ac nobiles viros legatos ad venerabilem et apostolicum virum, papam Stephanum, et ad imperatorem Constantinopolitanae urbis Michaelem, rogans et petens, quatenus antiqua privilegia, quibus termini et fines provinciarum ac regionum, seu terrarum scripti continebantur, mittere cum virtis sapientissimis dignarentur.) and p. 33 (Relecta sunt et in eadem synodo antiqua privilegia, iam latina quam greeca, misa ab apostolico et ab imperatore, audientibus cunctis populis de divisione provinciarum ac regionum seu terrarum, sicuti ab antiquis imperatoribus scripta et ordinata fuerunt.).

the need to incorporate in his narrative elements from the life and work of Constantine-Cyril, implying that it was the latter that Christianized all the Slavs, including the Croats and Serbs. 22

The Priest’s information regarding Constantine-Cyril is limited and largely misleading. Apart from the basic core referring to his origins from Thessaloniki, the rest of the narrative is full of inaccuracies. To begin with, the author claims that Cyril’s mission to the Khazars was successful and that the latter converted to Christianity, which is incorrect. 23 The statement that the Bulgarians were

---

22 On the life and work of Constantine-Cyril in the Chronicle see Papageorgiou, Ιερέας, ch. 8-9, pp. 29-31 (Post mortem vero quatuor iniquorum regum, natus est ex eorum progenie quidam Svetimirus, qui accepto regno destitit christianos persequi. Temporibus huius floruit, ut rosa, ex civitate Thessalonica quidam philosophus Constantinus nomine, filius cuiusdam Leonis patricii, vir per omnia sanctissimus atque in divinis scripturis profundissime a pueritia edoctus. Hic vir sanctus, a spiritu sancto admonitus, exiens de civitate sua Thessalonica, venit in Casariam provinciam ibique cum pluribus philosophis disputans diebus plurimis, convicit eos suaeque doctrina et praedicatione convertit totam Casariam provinciam ad fidem Jesu Christi et baptizati sunt omnes in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Post haec convertit totam gentem Bulgarinorum et similiter diebus plurimis, convicit eos suaeque doctrina et praedicatione convertit totam Casariam provinciam ad fidem Jesu Christi et baptizati sunt omnes in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. (IX) Inter haec mortuos est rex Svetimirus et accepit regnum [filius] eius Svetopeleko nomine. Regnante vero rege Svetopeleko misit papa Stephanus litteras ad venerabilem virum Constantinum doctorem, vocans eum ad se. Audierat enim de eo, quod sua praedicatione convertit innumerabilem gentem et ob hanc causam desiderabat eum videre. Itaque Constantinus, vir sanctissimus, ordinavit presbyteros, et litteram lingua sclavonica componens, commutavit evangelium Christi atque Psalterium, et omnes divinos libros veteris et novi testamenti de graeca littera in sclavonicam, nec non et missam eis ordinans more Graecorum, confirmavit eos in fide Christi et valedicens omnibus, quos ad fidem Christi converterat, secundum apostolicum dictum Romam pergere festinabat. Dum autem pergeret transiens per regnum regis Svetopeleko honorifice ab eo susceptus est. Tunc vir dei Constantinus, cui nomen postea Kyrrillas a papa Stephano impositum est, quando consecravit eum monacum, caepit praedicare regi evangelium Christi et fidelium sanctae trinitatis. Ad cujus praedicationem rex Svetopeleko credidit Christo et baptizati sunt cum regnum suo et effectus est orthodoxus et verus sanctae trinitatis cultor. Aliquantis post haec diebus immoratus cum rege vir beatissimus confirmavit eum in fide atque doctrina Christi et valedicens omnibus christicolis, Romam profectus est.).

23 See Papageorgiou, Ιερέας, ch. 8, p. 30 (Hic vir sanctus, a spiritu sancto admonitus, exiens de civitate sua Thessalonica, venit in Casariam provinciam ibique cum pluribus philosophis disputans diebus plurimis, convicit eos suaeque doctrina et praedicatione convertit totam Casariam provinciam ad fidem Jesu Christi et baptizati sunt omnes in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti). On Cyril’s mission to Khazaria see Vita Constantini, L.E. Havlik (ed.), Magna Moraviae Fontes Historici, v. 2,
Christianized by Cyril is also spurious\textsuperscript{24}. Furthermore, the Priest confuses the individuals who led the way in the Christianization of Great Moravia. Thus, instead of Rastislav he mentions Svatopluk (the \textit{Sphendoplokos} of Byzantine sources) and instead of Pope Nicolas I he refers to Stephen V\textsuperscript{25}. Naturally, Byzantium is totally absent from the activity of Constantine-Cyril.

Cyril himself is portrayed in a most favorable light as \textit{vir per omnia sanctissimus atque in divinis scripturis profundissime a pueritia edoctus}\textsuperscript{26}, the man who gave the Slavs the alphabet and their first liturgical books, as well the one who cemented their Christian faith\textsuperscript{27}. No one can question the role played by Cyril and Methodios in the Christianization of the Slavs, particularly their contribution to the creation of a written Slavic culture.

Therefore, the question is why does the Priest of Diokleia find it necessary to exaggerate the activities of Cyril and how is it possible to confuse the main protagonists of the events. The answer to the aforementioned question is relatively

---


\textsuperscript{25} See Papageorgiou, \textit{Iepiças}, ch. 9, pp. 30-31 (\textit{Inter haec mortuus est rex Svetimirus et accepit regnum [filius] eius Svetopelek nomine. Regnante vero rege Svetopeleko misit papa Stephanus litteras ad venerabilem virum Constantinum doctorem, vocans eum ad se. Audierat enim de eo, quod sua praedicatione convertit innumerabilem gentem et ob hanc causam desiderabat eum videre. Itaque Constantinus, vir sanctissimus, ordinavit presbyteros, et litteram lingua sclavonica componens, commutavit evangelium Christi atque Psalterium, et omnes divinos libros veteris et novi testamenti de graeca littera in sclavonicam, nec non et missam eis ordinans more Graecorum, confirmavit eos in fide Christi et valedicens omnibus, quos ad fidem Christi converterat, secundum apostolicum dictum Romam pergere festinabat. Dum autem pergeret transiens per regnum regis Svetopelek honorifice ab eo susceptus est. Tunc vir dei Constantinus, cui nomen postea Kyrillus a papa Stephano impositionis est, quando consecravit eum monacum, caepit praedicare regi evangelium Christi et fideam sanctae trinitatis. Ad culus praedicationem rex Svetopelek credidit Christo et baptizatus est cum omni regno suo et effectus est orthodoxus et verus sanctae trinitatis cultor. Aliquantis post haec diebus immoratus cum rege vir beatissimus confirmavit eum in fide atque doctrina Christi et valediciens omnibus christicolis, Romam profectus est.)

\textsuperscript{26} See Papageorgiou, \textit{Iepiças}, ch. 8, p. 30.

\textsuperscript{27} See Papageorgiou, \textit{Iepiças}, ch. 9, pp. 30-31.
easy, as long as we take into account the basic core of the Chronicle, which consists of a construction fabricated by Rüdiger in order to serve the aims of his patron. The narrative regarding the activity of Cyril is included in the same chapter where the legend of the Synod of Dalma is developed.

In order to make his text plausible and credible, the Priest seems to imply that the Christianization of the South Slavs was carried out by Cyril during the reign of Michael III28. In fact, when describing the convocation of the Synod, he has the aforementioned emperor send emissaries to organize its proceedings. So the Priest uses people and events already known to his readership, injecting them with fictitious events in order to make the Synod of Dalma appear plausible and in this way to uphold the independent and continuous presence of the Croats in those particular territories. Thus, he accomplishes a dual purpose. First of all, he sees to it that the South Slavs are directly connected to Cyril, relieving them from any other intermediary to their Christianization and in this way enveloping the process by which they entered the family of Christian nations with even more luster. Furthermore, by the use of the legend of the Synod of Dalma he highlights the Croatian domination over the lands of Dalmatia and averts the danger of any other claim. In conclusion, it may be claimed that the inaccurate information provided by the Priest of Diokleia with regard to the life and activities of Constantine-Cyril does not stem from the author’s ignorance, but serves the expediencies of his text.

To summarize: the image of Byzantium the Priest of Diokleia is trying to paint is that of an empire which is mostly absent from the region. The individuals portrayed in the text, starting with the emperors, are incapable of participating in

28 There is no concrete data regarding the exact time of the Christianization of the Croats and Serbs. A widespread view claims that it took place during the reign of Basil I (867-886), the successor of Michael III. The prevailing theory regarding the Christianization of the Serbs places it between the years 867-874. On the issue see G. Radojičić, “La date de la conversion des Serbes”, Byzantion 22 (1952) 250-256. With regard to the Christianization of the Croats, there is a view that it commenced with Methodios and was continued by his disciples, who founded the bishopric of Enona. On the issue see for instance M. de Vos, Histoire de la Yougoslavie, Paris 1955, mainly p. 21. At any rate, it is extremely interesting that the Priest of Diokleia conceals the contribution of Methodios to the Christianization of the Croats and prefers to highlight the work of Cyril, for which no corresponding evidence exists. Perhaps the author selected Cyril as the better known of the two brothers in order to attach greater prestige to the Christianization of the South Slavs.
military operations, as they issue orders from Constantinople and employ devious means (bribery, diplomacy etc.) in order to achieve their purposes. Byzantine officials, when not submitting to the Slavs’ military superiority, are in need of the latter’s aid to achieve victory, while the Byzantine army is composed of inept, cowardly soldiers unable to resist against Slavic bravery and military predominance. As has already been noted, this particular image has been shaped by the author so as to avert the danger of Byzantium returning to the region in question. Thus, the Priest of Diokleia is trying in every way possible to weaken and diminish the Byzantine Empire’s influence and presence throughout time, beginning with a reference to the heretical Emperor Anastasius in the fifth century and ending in the twelfth century.

However, the task undertaken by the author was extremely difficult. For that reason, despite the fact the reader’s first impression corresponds to the author’s aim, a careful analysis of the Chronicle reveals a different reality. Byzantium’s dominion over the region might not have been constant, nevertheless its suzerainty and influence were continuous, a fact that the Priest of Diokleia cannot conceal, despite his earnest effort to do so. Thus, infrequently and from time to time he implies, possibly unintentionally, that Byzantium one way or another exerted its influence in the Western Balkan regions.

29 For the way in which the Priest treats the Byzantines in general see Papageorgiou, Ieréas, pp. 370-414.