

B. A. Todorov

BYZANTINE MYTHS OF ORIGINS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

This paper draws attention to a recurrent phenomenon in the extant written evidence regarding the early medieval period of Southeastern Europe: the short narratives of one particular people's or another's ancient roots as presented in Byzantine documents. Such narratives can legitimately be referred to as «myths of origin» — *origines gentium* — even if they differ in important aspects from the myths of origin in local historiographies. While local *origines gentium* frequently go back to mythical heroes (like the Frankish ancestor Meroveus who was, in the words of the seventh-century historian Fredegar, begotten by a sea-monster) or try to establish connections with the sons of Noah, so as to find the people's true place in biblical history, the Byzantine narratives often reflect a rationalizing perspective. Their purpose is not to glorify a nation or legitimize its biblical roots, but to explain how it entered into the general framework of universal history, which Byzantines easily identified with their own. Yet, the way these narratives are constructed — focusing on a familial feud, or an incident, or referring to some fortuitous etymology — reflects similar concerns as those of the «local» myths: how to make particular events meaningful and how to use their possible meanings in order to elaborate distinct markers of identity and hierarchy¹.

Because of their significant place in the re-contextualization of culture, myths of origin have recently been submitted to critique by historians who more and more refuse to take them as objective reports of real events and prefer to explicate them, together with numerous textual and societal traditions, as later constructions. The methodological usefulness of myths of origins regarding earlier stages in a nation's history has been questioned, while scholars like P. Geary have addressed the even more general question whether we shall really establish a line of continuity between modern nations or ethnic groups and their supposed predecessors as presented in their myths of origin².

¹ I use inverted commas for local myths because it is difficult to establish whether a myth of origin has been produced within or without the polity whose roots it explains. An important article, among many, exposing the constructive functions of myths in structuring societies and polities is: *Geertz C. Politics Past, Politics Present: Some Notes on the Uses of Anthropology in Understanding the New States // Geertz C. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York, 1973. P. 327–341.*

² *Geary P. The Myth of Nations: the Medieval Origins of Europe. Princeton, 2002.*

Still, historians rely on myths of origin when addressing early ethnogenesis — especially so when these myths refer to events or whole periods about which alternative textual evidence is lacking or scarce. No matter how untrustworthy their content might be, the myths offer two important advantages: they give the subject of the research — the ethnic group — a clear point of beginning in time; and they suggest ways where to seek the roots of the cultural identity of this ethnic group. Until the recent ground-breaking work of several scholars, including F. Curta and his *The Making of the Slavs*, it was commonly disregarded that myths of origin actually do not explain ethnogenesis, but only substitute for an explanation and fill in a gap in the continuous narrative of a people's history.

Since the Byzantine myths of other peoples' origins were submitted to rationalization by Byzantine authors, they have been accepted widely as reliable sources of information. A most typical example regarding Southeastern Europe are chapters 29 through 36 of the widely cited «*De administrando imperio*» ascribed to Emperor Constantine VII (913–959) — those summarizing the early history of the Croats, Serbs and the smaller Slavic principalities along the Dalmatian coast. The source presents a sound chronological framework, since it claims that the Slavic groups took control of the western Balkans during the reign of Heraklios (614–641) which coincides with the territorial shrinking of Byzantium, the transfer of the imperial military contingents from Europe to Asia Minor, and most importantly, the period during which Slav presence south of the Danube may be perceived through the archeological and textual evidence. Furthermore, just as Constantine VII wrote, the Slavs' settlement in Dalmatia was in many ways intertwined with the complicated history of the Avar presence in, and domination over, the area during the same period³. The contradictions between chapter 30 and the rest offer something even more precious: the possibility to confront a Byzantine perspective to a local one, in this case Croatian. Thus, the document seems to inform us not only what happened in the early third of the seventh century, but how it was remembered by the Croats; consequently, it submits strong arguments in favor of Croatian historical continuity.

The same has been the case with the rather similar account of the Serbs' origins in the same work. Recently, in his English-language overview of Serbian history, Sima Ćirković explicitly refused to treat the Serbs as «protagonists of the historical events» and instead chose to study them as a social group created and maintained by history — in other words, unlike previous scholarship, Ćirković questioned the axiomatic understanding of Serbian historical continuity. And yet, for the purposes of his own narrative the beginning of Serbian history remains the moment the Serbs settled on Roman soil under Emperor Heraklios, as told in «*De administrando imperio*». Ćirković admits that the dynastic continuity between the Serbian ruler who established himself in the western Balkans in the earlier seventh century and the rulers of «Baptized Serbia» of the mid-ninth century is supported only by a «Serbian tradition»⁴, yet this makes Constantine VII's account even more valuable in its asserting Serbian continuity: through it we supposedly catch a glimpse of the historical memory of the early medieval Serbs and this historical memory cannot but become an important ethnicity-building factor. Thus, even a scholar who deliberately lays aside nationalist presumptions about ethnic continuity over history continues to treat a myth of origin included in «*De administrando imperio*» as a reliable source testifying that the Serbs had constituted a clearly identifiable ethnic group since a very early point in time — the reign of Heraklios.

³ See: Curta F. *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages 500–1250*. Cambridge, 2006. P. 96–110.

⁴ Ćirković S. *The Serbs*. Malden, Mass., 2004. P. xii, 11–12, 14.

Can we really interpret myths of origins found throughout Byzantine works as the reflection, even if distorted, of «original», «local» or «national» myths of origin? Do they express the concerns of the various peoples and polities or do they reflect the way Byzantine imperial power looked upon them and substantiated its actions regarding them? Why would be Byzantines interested in creating trustworthy accounts of the origins of others instead of molding them into shapes serving their own agendas? If chapter 32 of «De administrando imperio» truly reflects a collective memory of medieval Serbs going as far as the reign of Heraklios, what are we to make out of the rest of the chapter?

When Constantine VII identifies the ethnonym «Serbs» (Σέρβλοι) with the Latin «servi» (*serfs*), or with «servula» — the pig-skin footgear of Balkan peasants (modern Bulgarian — «цървули»), or finally with the peasants wearing these «servula» whom he calls τζεβουλιανοί, are we to take this as reflection of the same Serbian collective memory⁵? Obviously not. Trying to extrapolate the conflicting perspectives within a particular text — deconstructing it, that is — is a legitimate, yet tricky task. And before looking for the «original» perspective which Byzantine authors, like Constantine VII, distorted for their purposes, we might want to look for an interpretative scheme explaining how such myths of origin functioned within the Byzantine historical and political discourse proper.

The interpretative scheme I suggest consists of three logically connected points. First, myths of origin of foreign polities in Byzantine sources were not stable and were re-arranged whenever the historical situation necessitated it. Second, this was due to the fact that such myths were constructed in order to conceptualize the empire's relations with such foreign polities and to organize its diplomacy regarding them. Third, in order to support Byzantine diplomacy, myths were arranged in ways proving the rights of Byzantine emperors over cities, territories, tribute paid by foreign rulers, etc. For the purposes of this paper, I discuss primarily the case of the Bulgars / Bulgarians and confront it to that of the Serbs in «De administrando imperio»⁶.

When did the Bulgars settle south of the Danube and where did they come from? The question seems to have been answered once for all due to the relatively extensive and concurrent accounts in both the early ninth-century «Chronographia» of Theophanes the Confessor (d. 814) and the «Breviarum» (composed before 775) of Patriarch Nikephoros I (d. 829). The two authors dated the Bulgars' crossing of the Danube to the reign of Constantine IV (668–685) and associated it with a poorly managed campaign which the emperor had led north of the river's delta⁷. This was not questioned by later authors of universal histories like John Zonaras who repeats the stance in his twelfth-century «Epitomae historiarum»⁸. Both Nikephoros and Theophanes identified the leader of the Bulgars Asparukh (Ασπαρούχ, in Greek) as one of the five sons of Kubrat (Κοβράτος, in Greek), ruler of the Old Great Bulgaria (ἡ παλαιά Βουλγαρία ἡ μεγάλη, as Theophanes puts it)

⁵ *Constantine Porphyrogenitus. De Administrando imperio* / Greek text ed. by Gy. Moravcsik; Engl. transl. by R. J. H. Jenkins. Washington, 1967. P. 152.

⁶ I make use of the two existing forms of the ethnonym in English — Bulgar and Bulgarian — to emphasize the difference between the original Bulgars who were an ethnic group clearly distinct from the Slavs and the later medieval and modern Bulgarians who were and are Slavic-speakers. I certainly cannot determine even an approximate date for the «assimilation» of the non-Slavic Bulgars into the Slavic Bulgarians, but for the sake of simplicity, I use «Bulgars» when referring to events before the Christianization of Bulgaria in the mid-860s and «Bulgarians» when speaking of later events.

⁷ The more precise dating of the event to 680 comes from its mention in the protocols of the sixth ecumenical council. See: *Mansi D. Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*. Florence, 1758–1798. Vol. XI. Col. 617. (Repr.: Paris, 1901–1927).

⁸ *Ioannis Zonarae. Epitomae historiarum libri XVIII* / Ed. T. Büttner-Wobst. T. 3. Bonn, 1897. P. 226–227.

and / or of the Onogundurs (Οὐνογουνδοῦροι, with many spelling variations)⁹. The same Kubrat appeared earlier in the «Breviarium» as the ruler of the Onogundurs who shook off the authority of the Qagan of the Avars (during the reign of Heraklios I)¹⁰, and he was with some certainty the rich Patrikios Kouvratos whose treasures, including rings with monograms, were buried at Malo Pershchepyne, close to the northern limits of the steppe zone in Ukraine.

The two Byzantine chroniclers (or their common source)¹¹ related the same story of Kubrat asking his five sons to stick together, so as to be powerful against their enemies, and of his sons neglecting his advice, dividing the people and being overrun by the Khazars. Such a legend appears to be local and to reflect a sense of identity between Danubian Bulgaria, Volga Bulgaria, the Bulgars under Khazar rule (probably identical with the «Black Bulgaria» which Constantine VII mentioned)¹² and the smaller groups identified as Bulgars which moved through Central Europe and ended in the area of Ravenna, in Italy, and Macedonia, in the Balkans. Independent Bulgarian sources — the «Namelist of the Bulgar Rulers» (dating plausibly from the tenth century, but preserved only in much later copies of the Russian chronicle known as «Ellinskii i rimskii letopisets»)¹³ and the so-called «Bulgarian Apocryphal Chronicle» (dating most probably from the twelfth century, but preserved in a single sixteenth-century manuscript)¹⁴ — confirm the perceived continuity between Danubian Bulgaria and an earlier state tradition (the dynasty of Dulo, according to the «Name-list...») or the nomadic past of the Bulgars (said to have been part of the Cumans in the «Apocryphal Chronicle»). Yet, even if the idea of continuity between Kubrat's and Asparoukh's Bulgaria originated among the Bulgars themselves, what we have is a Byzantine redaction of the myth — conformed to the purposes of the two authors whose works we have access to. Much space in Nikephoros's «Breviarum» was dedicated to Constantine V's multiple campaigns against the Bulgars over the 750s and 760s, while Theophanes was writing his history during the terrible confrontations of Nikephoros I (802–811) and his immediate successors with the powerful Bulgar ruler Krum (802–814). Both authors found useful a myth of origin that associated the Bulgars with the powerful nomadic polities of the steppe zone — such a myth both substantiated the insurmountable differences between Ῥωμαῖοι and Bulgars and explained why the Bulgars remained a formidable opponent. Over time, however, in relation to the changing conjuncture in Southeastern Europe, the myth of Bulgarian origin as available in Byzantine works changed dramatically as well.

In the late tenth century, Leo the Deacon wrote a precious historical account of the reigns of emperors Nikephoros Phokas (963–969) and John Tzimiskes (969–976). The sixth book of Leo's «History» deals with Tzimiskes's successful campaign against the Kievan Prince Sviatoslav (d. 971) who had invaded the Balkans during the last year of Nikephoros II's reign, and the resulting

⁹ *Nicephori patriarchae Constantinopolitani. Breviarium historicum* / Ed. with Engl. transl. C. Mango. Washington, 1990. P. 86–88; *Theophanis. Chronographia* / Ed. C. de Boor. Vol. I. Leipzig, 1883. P. 357–358.

¹⁰ *Nicephori patriarchae Constantinopolitani. Breviarium historicum*. P. 70.

¹¹ See: *Златарски В. Н. История на българската държава през средните векове*. Т. I. Ч. I. София, 1918. С. 97, бел. 1.

¹² DAI. 12.

¹³ Parallel edition of the texts of all three remaining copies in: *Стоянов С. Към четенето и тълкуването на някои места от Именника на българските ханове* // *Език и култура*. 1971. Кн. 4. С. 24–26.

¹⁴ Text in: *Тънкова-Заимова В., Милтенова А. Историко-апокалиптичната книжина във Византия и средновековна България*. София, 1996. С. 195–198. — The work is usually dated by scholars to the eleventh century. My grounds to suggest a later date are simple: the «Apocryphal Chronicle» identifies the Bulgars with the Cumans which would not make much sense in the eleventh century when the Cumans were still unknown in the Bulgarian lands, but should correspond to their domination over the left bank of the Lower Danube in the twelfth century.

Byzantine conquest of Bulgaria. Leo the Deacon had to explain why the Byzantine army invaded the Bulgarian lands after decades of peaceful coexistence since the death of Symeon I of Bulgaria (893–927). In order to do so, he wanted to convince the reader that the Bulgarian lands (which he consistently called Moesia [Μυσία], just as the Bulgarians — Moesians) had rightfully belonged to the Ῥωμαῖοι. Therefore, he provided not one but two, mutually exclusive, versions of the story of their settlement. The first more or less repeated the account of Nikephoros and Theophanes and dated the Bulgar settlement south of the Danube to the reign of Constantine IV. Instead of speaking of the Old Great Bulgaria, however, Leo preferred to call the Bulgars «colonists» (ἀποίκιοι) of the Khazars, the Κοτράγιοι and the Χουνάβοιοι who took their name from their leader Boulgaros¹⁵. The second version is even more dismissive — Leo the Deacon associated the settlement of the Bulgars south of the Danube with the Bulgar ruler Tervel's military support for Justinian II's coming back to the throne in 705. Contrary to Nikephoros and Theophanes (and to the epigraphic evidence in modern northeastern Bulgaria), Leo claimed that the Bulgars had still lived along the Azov Sea at the time¹⁶. Thus, they had not conquered their land, but had been «invited» to it in just the same way Serbs and Croats were allegedly «invited» to settle on Roman territory under Heraklios. Leo the Deacon composed his history based on personal observations, oral accounts by contemporaries and possibly contemporary documents. Even if his stories eventually referred to what Theophanes and Nikephoros had written, he did not use the two chroniclers' accounts, but reported versions which might have belonged to Byzantine «common knowledge». It is quite plausible that this «common knowledge» had been manipulated for the purposes of Tzimiskes's propaganda — the emperor had to convince his soldiers to follow him north of the Balkan Range (Nikephoros Phokas had been reluctant to do so just three years earlier)¹⁷ and therefore emphasized that the Bulgarian lands were historically Roman; furthermore, Tzimiskes had to claim his imperial rights over Bulgaria in his diplomatic correspondence with Sviatoslav¹⁸.

In later periods, Byzantine views of the early history of the Bulgarians developed much further. According to Demetrios Chomatenos, archbishop of Ohrid in the early 13th century, the Bulgarians had never come from anywhere — they were the autochthonous population. He used this argument in his disputes with Patriarch Germanos II of Nicaea, over the controversial imperial coronation of Theodore Doukas Komnenos which he himself had performed in Thessaloniki, in 1227. Chomatenos defended his right to do so with his theory of the ecclesiastical supremacy of his archiepiscopal see (which he identified with the late antique Prima Iustiniana). Chomatenos considered Prima Iustiniana third in rank among all churches, next to Rome and Constantinople, because:

The great and famous among the emperors Justinian [...], when arranging the higher and lower ranks and deciding that the Holy Pope of the Elder Rome shall be first among all hierarchs, and then, next to him, the most blessed [Patriarch] of Constantinople, named right after him the archiepiscopal throne of Bulgaria, which he calls as well Iustiniana, because he himself came from this people and because, through the sweat of both citizens and army, he added the surrounding Bulgarian area to the Roman lands¹⁹.

¹⁵ *Leonis Diaconi Caloensis. Historiae. Libri X* / Ed. C. B. Hase. Bonn, 1828. P. 103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* P. 103–104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* P. 62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* P. 103.

¹⁹ *Demetrii Chomateni. Ponemata Diaphora* / Ed. G. Prinzing. Berlin, 2002. P. 376–377. Nr 114: ὁ ἐν βασιλεύσει μέγας καὶ περιβόητος Ἰουστινιανὸς [...] τῶν πρεσβυτάτων καὶ μεγάλων ἱεραρχῶν τὰς προεδρίας καὶ ὑφεδρίας ὑποτυπῶν καὶ πρῶτον εἶναι πάντων τῶν ἱερέων εἰπὼν τὸν ἀγιώτατον πάντων πρεσβυτέρας Ῥώμης, ἔπειτα δεύτερον μετ' αὐτὸν τὸν Κωνσταντινουπόλεως, μετὰ τοῦτον εὐθὺς τοῦ ἀρχιεπισκοπικοῦ θρόνου τῆς Βουλγαρίας μέμνηται, ὃν καὶ Ἰουστινιανὴν ὀνομάζει, ὅτι τε ἐκεῖθεν τὸ γένος εἴλκε καὶ ὅτι μόχθοις ἰδίοις καὶ ἰδρώσι στρατηγικοῖς τὴν Βουλγαρικὴν ταύτην περὶχωρον τοῖς ὄροις τῆς Ῥωμαϊδοῦ προσηρμωσεν.

Since the dignity of his church, which was the historical successor of the ninth- and tenth-century Bulgarian diocese, depended on its imaginary antiquity, Chomatenos had to ignore the late arrival of the Bulgars in the region and even turned Emperor Justinian (527–565) into one of them.

This theory did not enjoy popularity — in the short term, because of Theodore Doukas's capture by the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Asen II (1218–1241) in 1230 which made the patriarchal claims of the archbishops of Ohrid useless; in the long term, because over the centuries the diocese of the Archbishopric of Ohrid reverted to the liturgy in Church Slavic (it had never been completely replaced by the liturgy in Greek) and Slavic-speaking clergy naturally, even if wrongly, identified its traditions with the Second Bulgarian Empire centered on Turnovo. This can be seen in the short historical overview of the Christian churches as contained in seventeenth-century addenda to an older Serbian copy of the «Kormčaja kniga», now preserved in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, in Vienna:

The holders of authority in many places were appointed in Constantinople [... including among] the Bulgarians and the Serbs [...]. The Bulgarians, even if they were not subjected to the authority of the Greek Empire, still had adopted the Christian piety from them. And these [the metropolitans ordained in Constantinople] were many, until one day, we do not know in what way, [the Greeks] began to give away the episcopal dignity without any care [...] sending from Constantinople to the Bulgarians and other countries metropolitans for the sake of gain [...] When the good tsar saw the injustices committed by them, he was filled with desire to behave like a true emperor and to have ordained, by his own bishops, a patriarch in the city of Turnovo²⁰.

During the Ottoman period, the eparchies of the Bulgarian lands identified with the Second Bulgarian Empire, even if strictly speaking they were submitted to either the patriarch of Constantinople or the archbishop of Ohrid. Chomatenos' vision of the past of his diocese did not develop into a stable tradition and later generations could not make the difference between the Bulgarian kingdom/empire in Turnovo and the Bulgarian church in Ohrid.

Yet, the connection between Ohrid and the Bulgarian past was still considered important in the fourteenth century. Nikephoros Gregoras explained in some detail the conflict between the Nicaean emperors and the Komnenoi in Epiros, during the thirteenth century. He paid due attention to the coronation of Theodore Doukas in Thessaloniki and partly reproduced Chomatenos's argumentation, seeking however Bulgarian origins along the Volga River:

I will now explain where this place carries the name Bulgaria from. There is a land lying across the Istros [Danube], much to the north, and a large river inundates this land; the inhabitants call it Volga; from which they took the name of Bulgarians, being originally Scythians. Much later, they migrate from there together with their children and women, at the same time when the evil of the iconomachia is pressing upon the pious; they cross the Istros and invade [the land] in huge numbers; and crossing to the two Moesias [...] they settle in Macedonia and Illyricum [...]. And that city [Prima Iustiniana] is chosen to be their future imperial residence, the one which Emperor Justinian elevated to the dignity of archbishopric and named, as we already mentioned, Prima [Πρώτῳ] Iustiniana. Since this was the name

²⁰ Cod. Vind. Slav. 21, 3v: От Константина же града по многим мѣстом правосъятелем поставляемим [...] българом же и сръблем [...] българи же аште и не подь областию бѣхоу царствія греческаго, нъ обаче от них благочестію бише приемници. и сия бѣхоу на мнозе, и убо некогда гречестіи власти не вѣм по коему образу [...] нетоужние власти епископства раздавааху [...] сиреч митрополити от константина града къ българом и къ инем странам послааюште на мъзде [...] видѣв же царь благии себе неправдуема от них изволи се ему яко царю сушту своими епископи патриарха в граде търнове поставити.

given to the whole people, the land took the name Bulgaria, and Prima Iustiniana became the metropolitan see of Bulgaria. But more recently Emperor Basil the Bulgar-Slayer, after many battles, finally managed to crush and enslave them; and he made [that part of the population] which was superfluous, move to the lands along the Istros, in [Lower] Moesia²¹.

Gregoras believed that the initial area of settlement of the Bulgarians was Macedonia and not Moesia, north of the Balkan Range. He knew enough about the population of the steppe zone, so as to identify Bulgarians and the Volga River, but ignored, deliberately or not, the very existence of the First Bulgarian Empire and its older centers of power.

The changes in the Byzantine views of the past of their neighbours may be explicable with the textual tradition, or lack of textual tradition, of particular historical works. Later authors might have simply been more ignorant than we would want it and reported old events inaccurately because they were inaccurately informed. Yet, the adoption of a particular perspective about a people's origins coincided with the language used by Byzantine emperors and officials on diplomatic level. According to Leo the Deacon, when Nikephoros Phokas wanted to create a crisis in the relations with Bulgaria, he offended their tsar as «leather-eater» (σκυτοτρόκτης) and he referred to the Bulgarians as a poor and polluted Scythian nation (ἔθνος Σκυθικὸν πενιχρὸν καὶ μιαρὸν)²². At the time of Leo's writing, the Bulgarians still kept some of their older traditions, especially in their dress, yet they had long adopted Christianity and belonged much more to the agricultural than to the steppe zone. Referring to their nomadic past was unjustified, yet it gave the emperor one more reason to pursue an aggressive policy regarding them. The preserved correspondence of Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos with Tsar Symeon contains similar hints. The patriarch reminded Symeon, who was claiming the imperial title, that the Bulgars had been slaves of the Avars²³. At the time Nicholas was writing this, the Bulgarian tsar had the military advantage over the empire and Nicholas used a polite, almost servile language. Yet, referring to the distant past, he substantiated his main point: Symeon was unfit to be called emperor because his origins were those of a slave.

Inventing, re-inventing or re-contextualizing the past of their neighbors certainly helped Byzantine diplomacy which could look up to precedents whenever necessary. In this, it often surpassed the diplomacy of its opponents, since they had not established their own traditions of preserving memory of the past over long periods. Going back to the chapters about the Serbs, the Croats and the Dalmatian principalities in the «De administrando imperio», we may easily notice the connection between the detailed accounts of particular events from the past and the diplomatic disputes of the period. Constantine VII consistently explains the meaning of political acts in ways supporting

²¹ *Nicephori Gregorae. Byzantina Historia* / Ed. L. Schopen. Bonn, 1829. Vol. I. P. 26–27: «ὅθεν δὲ τὸ τῆς Βουλγαρίας ἐπώνυμον ὁ τόπος κεκλήρωται, δηλώσω ἔρχομαι. Χῶρος τις ἐστὶν ἐς τὰ ἐπέκεινά τε καὶ βορειότερα τοῦ Ἰστρου κείμενος, καὶ ποταμὸς ῥέων δι' αὐτοῦ οὐ μικρὸς· Βούλγαν αὐτὸν ὀνομάζουσιν οἱ ἐγγῶριοι· ἀφ' οὗ δὴ καὶ αὐτοὶ τὸ τῶν Βουλγάρων μετελήφεσαν ὄνομα, Σκύθα τὸ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὄντες. ὁγέ δ' ἐκεῖθεν οὗτοι μετανάσται γενόμενοι τέκνοις ἅμα κὶ γυναξίν, ὅποτε τὸ τῆς εἰκονομαχίας νόσημα κατὰ τῶν εὐσεβεούντων ἐπεχωρίαζε, διαπεραιοῦνται τὸν Ἰστρον, πλήθος ἀριθμὸν ὑπερβαῖνον· καὶ διαβάντις ἀμφὸς τὰ μετὰ τὸν Ἰστρον Μυσίας, καὶ πάντα λείαν Μυσῶν [...] ποιοῦντες τὰ ἐν ποσὶ, καθὰ πῦρ ἀκρις ἢ τις κεραυνὸς αἰθέριος, οἰκιοῦνται Μακεδονίαν μετὰ τῆς ἐπέκεινα Ἰλλυρίδος, ἀρεσθέντες τοῖς ἐκεῖσε καλοῖς. Καὶ βασιλεῖον ἐνδιαίτημα τούτοις εἶναι ἐς τὸ λοιπὸν νενόμισται αὕτη ἡ πόλις, ἣν ἀρχιεπισκοπὴν ὁ βασιλεὺς τετίμηκεν Ἰουστινιανὸς, καὶ πρᾶτην ὀνόμασεν, ὡς εἰρήκειμεν, Ἰουστινιανήν. εἴτα τῆς προσηγορίας τοῦ ἔθνους ἐκεῖσε διαδοθήσης, Βουλγαρία ὁ χῶρος μετωνομάσθη, καὶ μητρόπολις Βουλγαρίας ἡ πρώτη Ἰουστινιανή. Χρόνοις μέντοι ὕστερον ὁ βασιλεὺς Βασίλειος ὁ Βουλγαροκτόνος μετὰ πολλὰς τὰς μάχας τέλος ἐξέτριψε καὶ ἐδουλώσατο τούτους· καὶ τῆς μὲν χώρας τοὺς ἐναπολειφθέντας ἐξορίστους πεποίηκεν ἐν τῇ παρὰ τὸν Ἰστρον κάτω Μυσία...».

²² Leonis Diaconi *Historiae*. P. 61–62.

²³ *Nicholas I, Patriarch of Constantinople. Letters* / Ed. by R. Jenkins and L. Westerink. Washington, 1973. P. 70.

the Byzantine stand. This is particularly striking in the episode where Boris Michael, the Bulgarian ruler, is said to have suffered a terrible defeat by the Serbs and to have gone himself to ransom his son and twelve boyars from captivity. According to Constantine, he «besought» (ἐπιζητήσεν) the Serbian princes for escort to the border because he was afraid for his security.

The Serbs who defeated him «offered him as counter gifts and tokens of friendship» (ἀντέδωκαν αὐτῷ χάριτι ξενίων) presents with both material and symbolic value which, in Constantine VII's words, the Bulgarians interpreted as «tribute» (πάκτος)²⁴. The description of this ceremony taking place at an unspecified moment during the reign of Boris Michael (thus, between 852 and 889) apparently came from a Bulgarian account which described the whole event as a proof that the Serbian princes showed obeisance to Boris by offering him gifts and escorting him as far as the border. In Constantinople care was taken the same ritualized event to be interpreted in diametrically opposite way — that the Bulgarians had actually been defeated and had lost captive practically all their high nobility²⁵.

Thus, the chapter on Serbian history is not simply a piece of information, but a document which the emperor could produce when negotiating with either Serbs or Bulgarians so as to deny the suzerainty that the latter claimed over the former. That this was a major concern for the imperial administration appears in one of the concluding paragraphs of chapter 32 saying explicitly: «That the *archon* of Serbia has been from the very beginning, that is since the reign of Emperor Heraklios, subjected as servant to the Roman emperor and has never been subjected to the *archon* of Bulgaria»²⁶. If we project the same perspective further back into the past, it becomes clear Constantine VII saw it fitting that the Serbs should have settled on imperial soil earlier than the Bulgars — this way they could never be their subjects.

Myths of origins, just as all meaningful historical episodes that the «De administrando imperio» contains, belonged to the discourse of Byzantine diplomacy and served the purpose of justifying imperial claims or counterclaims, depending on the concrete issue. Much more than what this paper can offer can be extracted from every single chapter in this widely cited, yet still insufficiently studied document. I hope to have pointed to the multiple possible appearances of myths of origin that readers can find in chronicles or diplomatic correspondence, or other pieces of textual evidence. It is safer to analyse such pieces more as evidence about Byzantine perspectives and priorities than as evidence about the collective memory of the empire's neighbors. And even when discussing such collective memory, it is helpful to evaluate to what extent the Byzantine versions of other peoples' origins contributed to the formation of the other peoples' view of their past.

²⁴ DAI. P. 154.

²⁵ The problem that medieval ritualized acts are in most, if not all, cases conveyed through texts which already reflect a particular interpretation of what really took place is the focus of: *Buc P. The Dangers of Ritual*. Princeton, 2001.

²⁶ DAI. P. 156: ὅτι ὁ ἄρχων Σερβλίας ἐξ ἀρχῆς, ἦγον ἀπὸ τῆς βασιλείας Ἡρακλείου τοῦ βασιλέως, δουλικῶς ἐστὶν ὑποτεταγμένος τῷ Ῥωμαίων βασιλεῖ, καὶ οὐδέποτε τῷ ἄρχοντι Βουλγαρίας καθυπετάγη.

Резюме

В статье анализируются изменения в византийской трактовке раннего прошлого болгар, содержащейся в хрониках Никифора и Феофана VIII–IX вв., «Истории» Льва Диакона конца X в., полемических работах Димитрия Хоматиана 1220-х гг., «Византийской истории» Никифора Григоры XIV в. «Происхождение народа» подвергалось с течением времени постоянному переоформлению сообразно тем целям, которые преследовались определенными текстами. Автор связывает такие изменения с потребностями византийской дипломатии. Императоры приписывали различным правителям различные титулы в зависимости от происхождения их народов и воображаемого исторического континуитета их отношений с империей. Компиляция середины X в., известная как «*De administrando imperio*», была инструментом для удовлетворения нужд византийской дипломатии. Она содержит этногенетические легенды разных народов, переоформленные византийцами в соответствии с современным статусом этих народов и в связи с существующей политической конъюнктурой. Главы 29–36, рассматривающие происхождение славянских политий на западе Балкан, надо интерпретировать, учитывая политическую конъюнктуру X в., включая очевидные болгарские претензии на сюзеренитет над сербами. Все это ставит под сомнение их полезность не только для датировки поселения сербов и хорватов на Балканах, но даже для концептуализации истории сербской и хорватской политий в период, предшествовавший появлению сведений о них в начале IX в. других источниках.