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THE BIRTH OF THE MYTH ABOUT THE BYZANTINE-BULGARIAN WAR OF 863

Abstract. The Byzantine-Bulgarian relationship from the mid-9th to the early 10th century has attracted the attention of historians for years. However, this topic is fraught with multiple myths and misconceptions. The Byzantine invasion of Bulgarian territories in 863 is one of these myths. This hypothesis became part of the master narrative of Bulgarian national historiography and significantly impacted the clarification of the actual motivation of all parties in the complex political process. However, an analysis of sources shows that the military raid under Basileus Michael III and Caesar Bardas into Bulgarian territory is nothing more than fiction. According to a new Byzantine propaganda policy, this narrative was created after the mid-10th century. This research observes how a simple interpolation becomes a historiographical hypothesis and the dominant historiographical narrative. Additionally, a new interpretation of the beginning of Bulgarian Christianization is proposed.

Keywords: Byzantine Empire, Khan Boris, Christianization of Bulgaria, Michael III, Bardas

It is widely believed that the Bulgarian Khan Boris Michael (852–889; †907) adopted Christianity under the pressure of the Byzantine troops commanded by Basileus Michael III (842–867) and Caesar Bardas while the Bulgarian population suffered from a famine. Some sources describe this military operation as bloodless and highly successful. Scholars supporting this view date the military raid to the period between the Byzantine victory over the Arabs at the Battle of Lalakaon (September 3rd, 863) and Boris's baptism. Therefore, the Byzantine-Bulgarian War, which could be dated 863, seems like a steppingstone to the beginning of Bulgarian Christianization. However, the analysis of the political situation and the sources' reports raises severe doubts about the historical reliability of this event.

The way how hypothesis transformed into a master historiographical concept

The idea that the Byzantine raid of 863 forced the Bulgarian Prince Boris to make such an important decision was not always dominant. On the contrary, the first generation of researchers cast reasonable doubts on the actual capabilities of the Byzantine government to achieve such a brilliant victory. It was noted that the rapid victory hypothesis contradicted the facts of the previous bitter confrontations, which had shown the Bulgarians to be formidable opponents to the Byzantines. Furthermore, the historians acknowledged that by the mid-9th the Bulgarian state became more powerful, and Boris held military and diplomatic initiatives during his reign¹. For these reasons, the historians initially focused on other possible motivations for the Bulgarian Prince's conversion².

However, at the same time, a version emerged that made historians reconsider the details of Bulgarian Christianization. S. Palauzov linked Boris's decision to adopt Christianity to the consequences of his unsuccessful foreign policy and political pressure from Constantinople, particularly the military campaign of Michael III, played a significant role³. His assumption gained popularity with the nationalist awakening processes among Bulgarian political elites towards the end of the 19th century. As a result, the idea of a harsh Byzantine-Bulgarian confrontation and the following struggle for the Bulgarian Church's autonomy corresponded to the Bulgarian historians' views in the late 19th and early 20th centuries⁴. Y. Trifonov, for example, initially believed that Boris voluntarily adopted Christianity⁵. Later, in 1927, he changed his mind and published a study supporting S. Palauzov's concept⁶.

However, the decisive contribution to the development and further dissemination of Palauzov's ideas was made by V. Zlatarski. The researcher explained the lack of Bulgarian resistance to the Byzantine invasion. In his opinion, Boris was

¹ К.И. Иречек, *История болгар*, Одесса 1878, р. 188; Е. ГОЛУБИНСКИЙ, *Краткий очерк истории православных церквей Болгарской, Сербской и Румынской или Молдо-Валаишской*, Москва 1871, р. 25; Д. ЦУХЛЕВ, *История на българската църква*, vol. I, София 1911, р. 257; М. СОКОЛОВ, *Из древней истории болгар*, Санкт-Петербург 1879, р. 252.

² Ю.И. ВЕНЕЛИН, *Критические исследования об истории Болгар. С прихода Болгар на Фракийский полуостров до 968 года, или покорения Болгарии Великим Князем Русским Святославом*, Москва 1849, р. 35–36; Е. ГОЛУБИНСКИЙ, *Краткий очерк истории...*, р. 25; П.И. ШАФАРИК, *Славянские древности*, vol. II, Москва 1847, р. 290; К.И. Иречек, *История болгар...*, р. 188.

³ Сп. ПАЛАУЗОВ, *Век болгарского царя Симеона*, Санкт-Петербург 1852, р. 21; the same opinion: А.Ф. ГИЛЬФЕРДИНГ, *1. История сербов и болгар. 2. Кирилл и Мефодий. 3. Обзор чешской истории*, vol. I, Санкт-Петербург 1868, р. 52.

⁴ М. ДРИНОВ, *Поглед върху произхождението на българския народ и началото на българската история*, [in:] *Съчинения на М.С. Дринова*, vol. I, София 1909, р. 4–6; about genesis of Bulgarian national historiography R. DASKALOV, *Historical Master Narratives and the Master Narrative of the Bulgarian Middle Ages*, SCer 10, 2020, р. 259–280.

⁵ Ю. ТРИФОНОВ, *Царуването на Бориса-Михаила*, София 1907, р. 26.

⁶ ИДЕМ, *Цар Борис-Михаил. Време, царуване и величие*, София 1927, р. 25.

deeply involved in the Frank-Moravian confrontation. As a result, the Byzantine attack caught the Bulgarian lands off guard, and Boris did not have enough time to move back his troops⁷. Also, V. Zlatarski identified another factor that contributed to the bloodless nature of the War of 863 – namely, the lack of a “real” character to the invasion. He suggested it was more like a demonstration of troops or a kind of military “show” designed to weaken the Frank-Bulgarian alliance⁸. Although such conclusions may seem speculative, they provided a more coherent framework to support S. Palauzov’s concept.

The impact of the new version on historians was profound and universal. The hypothesis gained many supporters and became part of the historical master narrative of the Bulgarian Middle Ages⁹. It formed the basis of the contemporary understanding of the development of the First Bulgarian Kingdom¹⁰. Some of V. Zlatarsky’s followers have gone even further and developed his idea, proposing the existence in the mid-9th century of various broad alliances or even political blocs. In their opinion, the first multilateral alliance united the King of Eastern Franks, Louis II, local rulers under his dependence, and the Bulgarian Khan Boris as an ally. The opposite political bloc included the Byzantine emperor, Michael III, his allies among the Serbian and Croatian rulers, Rastislav the Moravian, and occasionally Carloman, Louis II’s son¹¹. Although the hypothesis of political-military blocs was popular in the mid-20th century, it was an unsuccessful attempt at historical modernization. Most historians retained more traditional views and rejected the artificial historical scheme¹².

⁷ В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История на Българската държава през средните векове*, vol. I, pars 2, София 1927 (2007), p. 21–24.

⁸ В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История на Българската държава...*, p. 21.

⁹ R. DASKALOV, *Historical Master Narratives...*, p. 276–277.

¹⁰ Ф.М. РОССЕЙКИН, *Первое правление Фотия, патриарха Константинопольского*, Сергиев Посад 1915, p. 347; F. ŠIŠIĆ, *Povijest Hrvata. Pregled povijesti hrvatskoga naroda 1526*, Zagreb 1916; G. OSTROGORSKY, *Geschichte des Byzantinischen Staates*, München 1963, p. 192; P. PETROV, *La politique étrangère de la Bulgarie au milieu du IX siècle et la conversion des Bulgares*, BBg 2, 1966, p. 47; A.P. VLASTO, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom. An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs*, Cambridge 1970, p. 159; G. САНКОВА-РЕТКОВА, *Contribution au sujet de la conversion des Bulgares au christianisme*, BBg 4, 1973, p. 29; S. RUNCIMAN, *Byzantium and the Slavs*, [in:] *Byzantium. An Introduction to East Roman Civilization*, ed. N.H. BAYNES, H.St.L.B. MOSS, Oxford 1948, p. 347; D. OBOLENSKY, *The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe, 500–1453*, London 1971; J. HARRIS, *The Lost World of Byzantium*, New Haven 2016, p. 116.

¹¹ А.П. КАЖДАН, Г.Г. ЛИТАВРИН, *Очерки истории Византии и южных славян*, Москва 1958, p. 156; P. PETROV, *La politique étrangère de...*, p. 44; В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Княз Борис Първи*, София 1969, p. 66; П. АНГЕЛОВ, *Средновековна България и нейните съседи*, София 2017, p. 112. Й. АНДРЕЕВ, И. ЛАЗАРОВ, Пл. ПАВЛОВ, *Кой кой е в Средновековна България*, София 1999, p. 43.

¹² F. DVORNIK was somewhat cautious about the influence of the international situation on the decision to be baptized by Boris: F. DVORNIK, *The Slavs. Their Early History and Civilization*, Boston 1956, p. 86; G. Litavrin, in turn, changed his attitude on this issue in his later works: Г.Г. ЛИТАВРИН, *Введение христианства в Болгарии (IX – нач. X)*, [in:] *Принятие христианства народами Центральной*

It should be admitted that S. Palauzov, V. Zlatarski, and the researchers who supported their concept undoubtedly used relied on the sources' information in their conclusions but selectively and sometimes without the necessary critical analysis. In this case, it was the basis for numerous contradictions and ambiguities. Obviously, such a situation requires a systematic review of the texts that dealt with the details of Boris's baptism.

Back to the sources

The main challenge facing every researcher of the issue is fulfilling a quest the historians have been on for almost two centuries: explaining why the sources paid little attention to Bulgarian Christianization details. It would seem that there was an apparent triumphant victory for Byzantine diplomacy, Church, and ideology, but historiography still cannot definitively determine the place and time of Boris's baptism.

It can be assumed that Latin sources might have considered these events peripheral and didn't pay much attention to them. Besides, the dawn of Bulgarian medieval historiography falls on a later period. However, the Christianization of Bulgaria was so closely linked to the processes of imperial foreign policy that one could expect much more details and emotions from Byzantine authors.

Moreover, chroniclers' first attempts to focus on Boris's conversion came after a long time. As a result, their interpretations were shaped by their ideological preferences and the rapidly changing international landscape. In any case, their narratives need to be re-examined with great care¹³.

The Byzantine texts contain four main narratives of the motivation for Boris's baptism. The first one was dedicated to the famine among Bulgarians, which led Boris to make a great decision. At first sight, there is no doubt that the famine could be a real cause for the severe decision. Almost every Byzantine author who described the beginning of the Bulgarian mass conversion mentioned this factor. Since the Byzantine sources lacked detail about the disaster, researchers tried to find evidence in European chronicles. Due to famine often striking European kingdoms of the 9th century, the task was not too complicated¹⁴. However, it should

и Юго-Восточной Европы и крещение Руси, Москва 1988, p. 44; M. EGGERS, Ch.R. BOWLUS, 863/864 – eine 'internationale Konfrontation in Südosteuropa', SF 59–60, 2000–2001, p. 14.

¹³ A more or less detailed analysis of the narratives of Bulgarian baptism: A.B. ANGELOV, *Conversion and Empire: Byzantine Missionaries, Foreign Rulers, and Christian Narratives (ca. 300–900)* (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2011); A brief analysis: I. DUJČEV, *Légendes byzantines sur la conversion des Bulgares*, SFFBU 10, 1961, p. 7–17. Unfortunately, there is very little attention to the War of 863 here.

¹⁴ Famine in Europe of 860, 861, 862, 868: *Annales Alamannici*, Hannover 1826 [= MGH.SS, 1]; *Annales Altahenses maiores*, Hannover 1868 [= MGH.SS, 20]; *Annales Sangallenses maiores*, Hannover 1826 [= MGH.SS, 1]; *Annales Quedlinburgenses*, Hannover 1839 [= MGH.SS, 3]. This evidence may be hardly used as proof of the Bulgarian famine of 863.

not be forgotten that the mention of the “famine” first appeared in the Life of Patriarch Ignatius. Such hagiographic texts are complex historical sources usually created with specific intentions. Therefore, Nicetas the Paphlagonian (late 9th – early 10th) could use one of the rhetorical tricks popular among St. Lives’ authors. They often used the terms “famine” and “blindness” or “sickness” to describe a pagan society in the period before Christianization¹⁵. It is noteworthy that Patriarch Photius did not mention the “famine” issue and later chroniclers omitted the details typical of this dramatic topic. Finally, even assuming the reports about the famine of 863 are valid, it is not easy to establish a causal link between this cataclysm and the impetus for mass conversion.

Another popular legend among Byzantine authors tells that a certain monk named Methodius, at the request of Boris, painted hunting lodge walls depicting various scenes of the Last Judgment¹⁶. The unknown author of this narrative reported that it was the emotional effect experienced by the Bulgarian Khan after viewing the painting that pushed him to be baptized. Undoubtedly, this legend was created and subsequently used by chroniclers for rhetorical purposes. It is unlikely that Boris could have decided to order such a painting before his baptism. Furthermore, the image’s emotional impact could have been understood by people already converted Christians. Interestingly, some Byzantine authors excluded this story from their chronicles, probably intending not to overload the main narrative¹⁷.

The third story has reached us in two versions: a brief and an expanded one. The most comprehensive version can be found in the chronicle of Theophanes Continuatus. Despite some scholars considering this narrative legendary, its details prove otherwise¹⁸. According to the expanded version, there was an extended correspondence between Empress Theodora (842–856), the mother of the young Byzantine Emperor Michael III, and Bulgarian Khan Boris. According to the text, repeated in later compilations, several stages of negotiations between Boris and Theodora can be identified.

¹⁵ *Vita Ignatii*, [in:] PG, vol. CV, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris 1864 (cetera: *Vita Ignatii*), col. 525.

¹⁶ THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, *Chronographia*, 4.12, ed. I. БЕККЕР, Berlin 1838 (cetera: THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS), p. 162.

¹⁷ Nevertheless, this legend became quite popular among Slavonic hagiographers, who added new details: I. DUJČEV, *Légendes byzantines...*, p. 7–17; The value of this legend for understanding the methods of missionary activity: С. ИВАНОВ, *Византийское миссионерство: можно ли сделать из «варвара» христианина?*, Москва 2003, p. 164–165.

¹⁸ В.Н. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *Известия за българите в хрониката на Симеон Метафраст и Логотет*, [in:] *Избрани произведения*, vol. I, ed. П. ПЕТРОВ, София 1972, p. 427; I. Dujčev also claimed this narrative is more legendary than authentic. Unfortunately, he did not explain his conclusion. I. DUJČEV, *Légendes byzantines...*, p. 7; the same opinion: D. ZIEMANN, *Von Wandervolk zur Großmacht. Die Entstehung Bulgariens im frühen Mittelalter (7.–9. Jh.)*, Cologne–Weimar–Vienna 2007 [= KHA, 43], p. 358.

In her first letter, Theodora used the legendary response of the Amazon queen to the threats of Alexander the Great¹⁹. It was an obvious hint at the desire to discuss the possibility of a dynastic alliance. Boris became interested in this possibility, and both sides exchanged trusted representatives for further negotiations. Such a dynastic alliance could only be Christian from both sides, which led the Bulgarian Khan to consider the variant of his baptism. Moreover, he possibly even took the initial steps toward it. Based on Theophanes Continuatus' text, the negotiations progressed quite successfully and were approaching the final stage. This narrative deserves independent research, which is beyond the aims of this article. However, it should be noted that these negotiations became a turning point in the Byzantine-Bulgarian relationship for at least several decades.

The fourth narrative related to the reasons for Boris's baptism is the most interesting for our topic. It describes a military campaign led by the Byzantine Emperor Michael III and Caesar Bardas against the Bulgars, forcing Khan Boris to adopt Christianity.

This narrative first appears in the sources of the late 10th to early 11th centuries, and there are serious grounds to consider that it was made up at the same time with an ideological purpose to diminish the activity of Khan Boris in the process of Bulgarian Christianization and to distort the real motives of the parties involved.

The first thing that stands out is many Byzantine authors did not mention this story. For example, the Patriarch Photius (858–867; 877–886) was a crucial figure in the Bardas's political team and participated in most negotiations. Despite this, he did not mention such successful military incursion, which supposedly was led by Bardas. Delivering his tenth homily to the Basileus Michael and Caesar Bardas in early 864, the Patriarch had a golden opportunity to emphasize the remarkable triumph. However, Photius chose instead to confine himself to obscure remarks about “reconciliation” with “other foreigners”²⁰. Moreover, the Patriarch later commented in his Encyclical to the Eastern Patriarchs (867) that Bulgarians' conversion was “unexpected”²¹.

¹⁹ THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, 4.12, p. 162.

²⁰ PHOTIUS, *Homilies*, 10, [in:] PG, vol. CII, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris 1857, col. 563–573 (Λαβὼν ὑποσπόνδους ἄλλους καὶ ταπεινώσας ὑψηλὸν καὶ γαῦρον καὶ ἀλλόφυλλον φρόνημα, ὡς ἐπὶ τὴν κραταῖάν χεῖρα τοῦ Θεοῦ εὐσεβοφρόνως ἀναφέρων πάντα τὰ σοι καθορθούμενα). After glorifying the basileus for victories and trophies, presumably over the Arabs, Photius also speaks of the reconciliation of Michael III with “other foreigners” who “tamed their pride and arrogance”. He hinted at the Bulgarians, but there is no allusion in the homily about the baptism of Prince Boris. The patriarch was unaware of the significant event or did not want to discuss it. One way or another, “reconciliation” is mentioned beyond the process of baptism, which somewhat contradicts the central hypothesis of V. Zlatarsky and other authors that the last was the main goal of the military campaign of 863: В.В. ВАСИЛИК, *Десятая гомилия патриарха Фотия*, SSBP 1–2, 2009, p. 185–194; R.J.H. JENKINS, C. MANGO, *The Date and Significance of the Tenth Homily of Photius*, DOP 9–10, 1955–1956; R.J.H. JENKINS, *Studies on Byzantine History of the 9th and 10th Centuries*, London 1970.

²¹ In Photius's opinion, the baptism of the Bulgarians took place “contrary to expectations” (παράδοξων). PHOTIUS, *Επιστολαί*, 4, ed. J.N. BALETTA, New York 1978 (cetera: PHOTIUS, *Επιστολαί*), p. 168;

It can be assumed that Photius had a particular attitude toward the Christianization of Bulgaria, and he did not want to discuss this topic in detail. However, Photius's ideological adversary Nicetas the Paphlagonian also underscored a proactive Bulgarian strategy (potentially involving political coercion) regarding Christianization. In his brief note dedicated to Bulgarian conversion, he wrote: *Bulgarians, then guided by God's providence, being violently oppressed by famine and also enticed by gifts from the emperor, laying down their weapons, approached holy baptism*²². Notably, two political rivals, who were well-informed about the circumstances surrounding Prince Boris's baptism, did not mention the Byzantine invasion. Unfortunately, Photius and Nicetas the Paphlagonian, only briefly mentioned the baptism of the Bulgarians. The nature of their texts did not involve historical reflections on this matter. In any case, their texts lack enthusiastic emotions regarding this event.

During the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (945–959), some Byzantine chroniclers attempted to assess the issue of Bulgarian Christianization conceptually. For instance, two authors, known in historiography as Genesius and Theophanes Continuatus, provided distinct approaches to address this challenge. Theophanes Continuatus used a conventional method typical of his era, presenting various widespread accounts of Boris's baptism and allowing the reader to choose the most plausible one. In this regard, the author integrated all known stories associated with Boris's baptism into his narrative, aiming to unite them logically. The chronicler started his narration with the diplomatic correspondence between Boris and Empress Theodora. He gave numerous details about the subsequent negotiations, including the exchange of trusted individuals who could represent the interests of both parties. The chronicler also noted that Boris's sister, who had previously been captured by the Byzantines, began instructing the Bulgarian prince in the basics of Christianity. The legend of the painting by Methodius and the famine that impelled the Khan to make the decisive decision were not overlooked²³. Intriguingly, within the same passage, he incorporated information about the uprising of the Bulgarian nobility, which occurred much later. This multi-step narrative by Theophanes Continuatus reaches its apex when Theodora hands over the Zagora region to Boris's rule, thereby linking the official Bulgarian

S. Ivanov argues that the event became improbable for the Byzantines (“unexpected” or “unlikely”). However, the difference in translation between terms of “improbable” and “contrary to expectation” is significant: S. IVANOV, *Religious Missions*, [in:] *The Cambridge history of the Byzantine Empire c. 500–1492*, ed. J. SHEPARD, Cambridge 2008, p. 318.

²² According to the text, the Bulgarians ceased threatening with weapons and accepted Christianity after getting the “emperor's gifts”. Unfortunately, the author's report did not specify what a sort of “gifts” Bulgarians received: *Vita Ignatii*, col. 525. Καὶ Βούλγαροι δὲ τότε προνοίας Θεοῦ, βιαίῳ κατατακέντες λιμῷ, ἅμα δὲ καὶ τοῖς δώροις τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος θεληθέντες, τὰ ὄπλα καταθέμενοι, τῷ ἁγίῳ προσήσαν βαπτίσματι.

²³ THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, 4.12, p. 162.

baptism process with her reign²⁴. Among the diverse accounts used by Theophanes Continuatus to describe Boris's conversion, there was no mention of the War in 863. There can only be one explanation for this omission: the author was unaware of this narrative.

In addition to the complex version of Boris's baptism, Theophanes Continuatus devoted substantial attention to the Arab-Byzantine wars of that period. This information is valuable because it's widely believed that Emperor Michael III's raid on Bulgaria could have only occurred after the victory of the Byzantine general Petronas over the Arabs at Lalakaon in 863. The chronicler recorded that in approximately for 861 campaign Michael III deployed 40,000 soldiers from Thrace and Macedonia against the Arabs, a move possible only if the emperor felt secure against a Bulgarian attack. Moreover, Theophanes Continuatus firmly believed that the Bulgarian contingent actively contributed to the Byzantine victory over Amr's troops in the 862–863 military campaign. Additionally, Theophanes Continuatus mentioned that this collaboration became standard practice following the "reconciliation". Therefore, according to Theophanes Continuatus, in approximately 860–861, a truce had been established between the Bulgarians and the Byzantines, and they had even allied.

In contrast to Theophanes Continuatus, another Byzantine author, Genesisius, took a slightly different approach in describing Boris's baptism. Genesisius omitted numerous specific details from other versions to construct a more rhetorical yet coherent narrative. For example, he did not include the legend of the painting of Methodius and significantly condensed the account of Boris's and Theodora's negotiations. Although he mentioned the involvement of contingents from Thrace and Macedonia in the 861 campaigns, he left out many details of the decisive battle at Lalakaon in 863. Thus, Genesisius appeared to downplay the evidence of Byzantine-Bulgarian rapprochement, which likely contradicted his version of Boris's baptism. He highlighted that the victories of Byzantine armies over the Arabs compelled the Bulgarian Khan to abandon his hostile intentions and start seeking a peace agreement. Moreover, Genesisius did not fail to mention the

²⁴ Pseudo-Symeon pointed out that the baptism of the Bulgarians took place in the fourth year of the reign of Michael, that is, according to his chronology, in 855: PSEUDO-SYMEON, *Chronographia*, ed. I. BEKKER, Bonn 1838 [= *CSHB*] (cetera: PSEUDO-SYMEON), p. 665; PSEUDO-SYMEONIS, *Chronographia*, praef., trans. et comm. G. SANKOVA-PETKOVA, Serdicae 1964, p. 169–182; PSEUDO-SYMEONIS, *Chronographia*, [in:] *FGHB*, vol. V, Sofia 1964, p. 174; also Chernorizets Hrabar noted the time of the Slavic alphabet creation in 6363 or 855 AD: *Черноризец Храбр О писъменах*, [in:] Б. ФЛОЯ, *Сказания о начале славянской письменности*, Москва 1981, p. 131; T. Wasilewski posited that Chernorizets Hrabar's indication pertained not to the year of the origin of writing, but rather to the year of Prince Boris's baptism, which the author possessed greater knowledge of: T. WASILEWSKI, *Bizancjum i Słowianie w IX wieku. Studia z dziejów stosunków politycznych i kulturalnych*, Warszawa 1972, p. 108; Theophylact of Ohrid mentioned that Boris was a teenager (child) (ὁ παῖς) when he made the decision to be baptized: THEOPHYLACTUS BULGARUS, [in:] *PG*, vol. CXXVI, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris 1864 (cetera: THEOPHYLACTUS BULGARUS), col. 197.

famine²⁵. Thus, despite his effort to emphasize the influence of the Byzantine general Petronas's victory on the initiation of the Bulgarian Christianization process, Genesius acknowledged the Bulgarian pressure in the negotiations but did not mention Michael III's raid in 863.

Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae	Georgius Monachus Continuatus	Pseudo-Symeon
<p>ἐκστρατεύσας δὲ Μιχαὴλ ἄμα Βάρδα Καίσαρι κίνησιν ποιεῖ κατὰ Μιχαὴλ ἄρχοντος Βουλγαρίας διὰ τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης, μαθὼν τὸ τῶν Βουλγάρων ἔθνος λιμῶ τήκεσθαι. οἱ δὲ Βούλγαροι τοῦτο μαθόντες ὡς ἤχῳ βροντῆς ὑπεκλίθησαν, καὶ πρὸ τῶν ἀγώνων καὶ τῆς μάχης περὶ τῆς νίκης ἀπέγνωσαν, καὶ Χριστιανοὶ γενέσθαι καὶ ὑποτάττεσθαι τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ Ῥωμαίοις ἠτήσαντο. ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς τὸν ἄρχοντα αὐτὸν βαπτίσας καὶ δεξάμενος ἐπιτέθεικεν αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα, τοὺς δὲ μεγιστάνους αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ πόλει εἰσαγαγὼν ἐβάπτισεν πάντας</p>	<p>Ἐκστρατεύσας δὲ Μιχαὴλ ἄμα Βάρδα Καίσαρι, κίνησιν ποιεῖ κατὰ Μιχαὴλ ἄρχοντος Βουλγαρίας διὰ τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης, μαθὼν τὸ τῶν Βουλγάρων ἔθνος λιμῶ τήκεσθαι. Οἱ δὲ Βούλγαροι τοῦτο μαθόντες ὡς ἤχῳ βροντῆς ὑπεκλίθησαν, καὶ πρὸ τῶν ἀγώνων καὶ τῆς μάχης περὶ τῆς νίκης ἀπέγνωσαν (καὶ Χριστιανοὶ γενέσθαι καὶ ὑποτάττεσθαι τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ Ῥωμαίοις ἠτήσαντο). Ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς τὸν μὲν ἄρχοντα αὐτῶν βαπτίσας καὶ δεξάμενος ἐπέθηκεν αὐτῷ τὸ αὐτοῦ ὄνομα. τοὺς δὲ μεγιστάνους αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ πόλει ἀγαγὼν ἐβάπτισεν αὐτοὺς, ἔκτοτε γενομένης εἰρήνης βαθείας</p>	<p>Τῷ δ' αὐτοῦ ἔτει ἐκστρατεύει Μιχαὴλ ἄμα Καίσαρι διὰ τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης κατὰ Γόβορι ἄρχοντι Βουλγάρων. τοῦτο μαθόντες οἱ Βούλγαροι, ἄμα δὲ καὶ λιμῶ τηκόμενοι, ὡς ἤχῳ βροντῆς ὑπεκλίθησαν καὶ πρὸ τῶν ἀγώνων καὶ τῆς μάχης περὶ τὴν νίκην κατέγνωσαν, Χριστιανοὶ τε γενέσθαι καὶ ὑποτάσσεσθαι τῷ βασιλεῖ Ῥωμαίων ἠτήσαντο. ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς τούτους ἐν τῇ πόλει ἀγαγὼν ἐβάπτισεν πάντας καὶ τὸν ἄρχοντα αὐτῶν Μιχαὴλ ἐπωνόμασεν</p>

The earliest known references to the Byzantine-Bulgarian War of 863 date back to the second half of the 10th century. The chronicles of Symeon Logothetes, Georgius Monachus (Amartolos) Continuatus, and the extensive compilation of Pseudo-Symeon all contain nearly identical passages describing this event. According to these texts, Basileus Michael III and Caesar Bardas led troops by land and water in a joint attack against the famine-stricken Bulgarians. The subsequent lines state that the Bulgarians surrendered without resistance, and later their nobles visited Constantinople to be baptized. Finally, Basileus personally became Boris's godfather. And it established a "deep peace"²⁶. The authorship and the details of the compilation of the Chronicle of Simeon Logothete still raise questions among

²⁵ *Iosephi Genesii Regum libri quattuor*, IV, 16, rec. A. LESMUELLER-WERNER, H. THURN, Berolini 1978 [= *CFHB*, 14] (ed. C. LACHMANN, Bonn 1834); or GENESIOS, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*, 4.16, trans. A. KALDELLIS, Canberra 1998 [= *BAus*, 11] (cetera: GENESIOS).

²⁶ *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon*, 238.25, rec. S. WAHLGREN, Berolini 2006 [= *CFHB*, 44.1] (cetera: SYMEON LOGOTHETES), p. 243; *Хроника Симеона Магистра и Логофета*, vol. I, ed. А.Ю. Виноградова, Москва 2014; GEORGIUS MONACHUS CONTINUATUS, 110, 1049, 20, [in:] THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, ed I. BEKKER, Bonn 1838 [= *CSHB*], p. 733; PSEUDO-SYMEON, p. 665 (ГИБИ, vol. V, p. 174).

researchers.²⁷ Most of them acknowledge that the author of the chronicle was Symeon Metaphrastes, whose political activity is linked with the reigns of two Byzantine Emperors, John Tzimiskes (969–976) and Basil II (976–1025). As a highly educated and influential official, he held a prominent position at the court. Symeon was deeply involved in diplomatic activities amid the rising tensions between the Byzantine Empire and the Bulgarians. Besides, along with his team of assistants, he played a significant role in shaping the ideological policies of the government.

The narrative resembles a classic interpolation, lacking any textual connection to the preceding or subsequent passages. Furthermore, the text is placed before an account of Petronas's victory over the Arabs, which contradicts the chronological and logical sequence. Some researchers believe that Symeon Logothete took the story of Michael III's anti-Bulgarian raid from a source that wasn't used by other compilers²⁸. Considering the significance of this raid for the subsequent political events, it seems incredible that this information remained hidden until Symeon's compilation. It appears more likely that Metaphrastes fabricated this story, assembling the text from different excerpts of the chronicle. The narrative's style is entirely consistent with the overall style of the chronicle. For example, the text is stylistically quite close to another excerpt from the same chronicle dedicated to one of the anti-Bulgarian raids of Basileus Constantine V (741–775). The text was relatively brief: *He (Constantine V) set out on a campaign against the Bulgars with a land army and a fleet (πεζῆ τε καὶ πλωί), and, driving them into retreat, entered the City (Constantinople) dressed in battle armor and leading the captured Bulgars in triumph*²⁹. This passage was easily adaptable as it did not name personalities or toponyms.

Symeon Logothetes' chronicle	
186.20 Ἐστράτευσε δὲ κατὰ Βουλγάρων πεζῆ τε καὶ πλωί , καὶ τούτους τροπώσαμενος εἰσῆλθεν ἐν τῇ πόλει, καθωπλισμένους τοῖς πολεμικοῖς ὄπλοις, θριαμβεύων δεδεμένους τοὺς Βουλγάρους.	238.15 ἐκστρατεύσας δὲ Μιχαὴλ ἄμα Βάρδα Καίσαρι κίνησιν ποιεῖ κατὰ Μιχαὴλ ἄρχοντος Βουλγαρίας διὰ τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης , ... ἐν τῇ πόλει εἰσαγαγὼν ἐβάπτισεν πάντας

²⁷ The complexity of the Chronicle of Symeon Logothetes as a historical source is discussed in many publications: A.Π. ΚΑΖΔΑΝ, *Χρονικὰ Σιμεὼνα Λογοφῆτα*, ΒΒ 15 (40), 1959, p. 125–143; W. TREADGOLD, *The Middle Byzantine Historians*, New York, 2013, p. 197–224; A. ΜΑΡΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, *Sur Les Deux Versions De La Chronographie De Symeon Logothete*, ΒΖ 76.2, 1983, p. 279–284; St. WAHLGREN, *Symeon the Logothete and Theophanes Continuatus*, *JÖB* 69, 2019, p. 323–334.

²⁸ W. TREADGOLD, *The Middle Byzantine Historians...*, p. 210.

²⁹ SYMEON LOGOTHEDES, 186.20.

The substitution of the phrase “by land and sea” (διά τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης) with “on foot and by ship” (πεζῆ τε καὶ πλωί) was no coincidence. Most likely, Metaphrastes was well acquainted with the chronicle of George the Monk (? – 870)³⁰. In his descriptions of military campaigns against the Bulgars George used both versions of the phrase. However, it appears Symeon sought to avoid a literal copy of George the Monk’s text by alternating between the similar expressions “πεζῆ τε καὶ πλωί” and “διά τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης”³¹.

Georgius Monachus	Symeon Logothetes
<p>944.16 Ἐστράτευσε δὲ κατὰ Βουλγάρων πεζῆ τε καὶ πλωί, (ἐξοπλίσας ἐκ τῶν θεμάτων) χελάνδια χίλια ἑξακόσια,</p> <p>945.32 Ὁ δὲ τύραννος καὶ ἀλάστωρ, ἐξεληθὼν μετὰ ταῦτα πάλιν κατὰ Βουλγάρων πλωί τε καὶ πεζῆ, ἐπὶ Ἀγελῶν ἀπέστειλεν. Ἀνέμου δὲ βιαίου πνεύσαντος, τὰ πλοῖα συνετρίβη. Τοῦτο μαθόντες οἱ Βούλγαροι πόλεμον πρὸς αὐτὸν συνάπτουσι.</p>	<p>186.20 Ἐστράτευσε δὲ κατὰ Βουλγάρων πεζῆ τε καὶ πλωί, καὶ τούτους τροπώσαμενος εἰσήλθεν ἐν τῇ πόλει, καθωπλισμένος τοῖς πολεμικοῖς ὅπλοις, θριαμβεύων δεδεμένους τοὺς Βουλγάρους.</p>
<p>912.2 Τῶν δὲ Ἀράβων ὀπλιζομένων κατὰ Ῥωμανίας διά τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης, ἀπηγγέλη τῷ βασιλεῖ κατὰ τῆς πόλεως τούτου παραγίνεσθαι.</p>	<p>238.15 ἐκστρατεύσας δὲ Μιχαὴλ ἅμα Βάρδα Καίσαρι κίνησιν ποιεῖ κατὰ Μιχαὴλ ἄρχοντος Βουλγαρίας διά τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης,... ἐν τῇ πόλει εἰσαγαγὼν ἐβάπτισεν πάντας</p> <p>268.5 Συμεὼν δὲ τὴν κατ’ αὐτοῦ κίνησιν διά τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης ἰδὼν ἐν φρουρᾷ κατακλείει τὸν κοιᾶστωρα ὡς ἐπὶ δόλω ἐλθόντα.</p>

It could be supposed that Symeon took the last phrase of the narrative, “it was established a deep peace”, also from the Chronicle of George the Monk. In similar words, the author described the establishment of peace between Empress Irene and Harun al-Rashid, the son of Caliph Mahdi (775–785)³².

³⁰ W. Treadgold stated that Symeon did not know George’s chronicle: W. TREADGOLD, *The Middle Byzantine Historians...*, p. 115.

³¹ The phrase διά τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης is quite popular in Byzantine sources, but few authors used διά τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης and πεζῆ τε καὶ πλωί in the same chronicle. *Georgii Monachi chronicon*, ed. C. DE BOOR, Stuttgartiae 1904 [= BSGR] (cetera: GEORGIUS) p. 944.16, 912, 2; καὶ στρατεύματα πλείστα διά τε γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης; NIKEPHOROS, PATRIARCH OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Short History / Nicephori Patriarchae Constantinopolitani Breviarium historicum*, 43, 10, ed. C. MANGO, Washington DC 1990 [= CFHB, 13; DOT, 10].

³² GEORGIUS, p. 767, 15.

Georgius Monachus	Symeon Logothetes
767.15 καὶ δὴ βαθείας εἰρήνης γενομένης, ἐξήλθεν ὁ βασιλεὺς...	238.20 ἔκτοτε γινομένης εἰρήνης βαθείας τὸν ἄμερ πάλιν ἐξελθόντα κατὰ Ῥωμανίας,

In this case Metaphrastes used the same technique, slightly modifying the text. According to Michael Psellos (1017–1096), he was very good at adjusting the form of expressions, not changing their sense³³.

The aim of Symeon Metaphrastes was clear. The revised narrative of Boris's baptism could be a crucial propaganda element in the Byzantine government's preparations for another campaign against the Bulgarians³⁴. This context likely led the author to develop Genesis's account of the Bulgarians' conversion, manipulating historical facts. Symeon had all the necessary means to carry out such manipulation, which fundamentally altered the concept of Bulgaria's Christianization. He had the motivation and possibly even the task assigned by the emperor. In addition, Metaphrastes had the skills, essential resources, and extensive authority required to accomplish such a non-trivial mission.

The narrative created by Symeon Metaphrastes had relatively limited popularity among later chroniclers. It was only repeated in copies of chronicles or compilations where the chronicle of Simeon Logothetes was a significant part. This was likely due to numerous chronological and logical inconsistencies in the chronicle.

For instance, one of the authors of the Pseudo-Symeon chronicle placed the Byzantine-Bulgarian conflict in the 850s, possibly attempting to reconcile this data full version of the narrative about Boris-Theodora negotiations³⁵.

In later compilations by John Skylitzes and John Zonaras, the authors preferred to use the text of Theophanes Continuatus, ignoring the narrative about the Byzantine-Bulgarian War of 863³⁶. It is worth mentioning separately the version of

³³ MICHAEL PSELLOS, *Encomium in Metaphrastem Dominum Symeonem*, [in:] PG, vol. CXIV, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris 1864, col. 183–200; МИХАИЛ ПСЕЛЛ, *Похвальное слово Симеону Метафрасту*, [in:] *Воронежские епархиальные ведомости*, Воронеж 1869, p. 108.

³⁴ The identity of the individual who authored this version, whether Symeon Metaphrastes himself or one of his multiple assistants, remains ambiguous. Nonetheless, it is highly probable that the Byzantine emperor Basil II personally oversaw the modification of the narrative. Typically, he was the primary patron of Symeon Metaphrastes' ideological undertakings.

³⁵ PSEUDO-SYMEON, p. 665; ГИБИ, vol. V, p. 174; Subsequently, this gave rise to some historiographical ambiguity. For instance, a few Bulgarian scholars posited the existence of two analogous military campaigns in 855 and 863. In this case they used same narrative but from different sources Symeon Logothetes and Pseudo-Symeon chronicles: P. ПЕТРОВ, *La politique étrangère de...*, p. 43; В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Княз Борис...*, p. 66; И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на Средновековна България VII–XIV век*, vol. I, Пловдив 1999, p. 170; D. СНЕШМЕДЗИЕВ, *Knyaz Boris-Michael I: the Bulgarians' Conversion to Christianity*, BHR 33.1–2, 2005, p. 9.

³⁶ IOANNIS SCYLITZAE, *Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. I. THURN, Berolini–Novi Eboraci 1973 [= CFHB, 5]; GEORGIUS CEDRENIUS, *Compendium historiarum*, vol. I–II, ed., trans. I. БЕККЕР, Bonn 1838–1839

the baptism of Boris, which Theophylact of Ohrid (Bulgarian) briefly outlined. Out of all the main narratives, he only reported the “famine” among the Bulgarians and vaguely hinted at a Franco-Bulgarian conflict that allegedly preceded Bulgarian Christianization³⁷.

Based on the analysis, we can tentatively conclude that the credibility of sources regarding the Byzantine invasion of Bulgaria in 863 is highly questionable. Therefore, the prevailing understanding of Boris’s motivations for baptism is not convincing³⁸. Accordingly, the question arises what were the real motives for the beginning of Christianization? And what was the real attitude of the Empire government toward this process?

The diversity and volatility of the Byzantine elites

Regrettably, the prevailing historiographical conception simplifies Constantinople’s missionary policy, overlooking the internal and external political complexities³⁹. An analysis of information from various sources suggests that the Byzantine political elite was, at the very least, not keen on accelerating the Bulgarian Christianization process, despite the intention of Bulgarian Khan Boris⁴⁰. This

[= CSHB]; JOHN ZONARAS, *Epitome of Histories*, vol. I–III, ed., trans. M. PINDER, Th. BÜTTNER-WOBST, Bonn 1841–1897.

³⁷ Ῥωμαῖοι δέ, τό μηδέποτε παρά Βουλγάρων ἐλπισθέν αὐτοῖς τό περί τῆς εἰρήνης μήνυμα ἀσμένως δεξάμενοι, πάντα διά τάχους ἐτέλεσαν: THEOPHYLACTUS BULGARUS, col. 197; М.Й. ЛЕШКА, *Борис I-Михаил, владетелят на България в творчеството на Теофилакт, архиепископ Охридски*, [in:] *Българско средновековие. Общество, власт, история. Сборник в чест на проф. д-р Милияна Каймакова*, ed. Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, София 2013, p. 229–238.

³⁸ Some researchers have expressed cautious doubts about the accuracy of the evidence on the War of 863: Sh. TOUGHER, *After Iconoclasm (850–886)*, [in:] *The Cambridge History...*, p. 299; J. Haldon did not include this raid in his Byzantine wars list: J.F. HALDON, *Byzantium at War, AD 600–1453*, Oxford 2003; W. TREADGOLD, *The Middle Byzantine Historians...*, p. 113.

³⁹ F. DVORNIK, *The Slavs...*, p. 118; G. OSTROGORSKY, *Geschichte...*, p. 181; H. AHRWEILER, *L'idéologie politique de l'Empire byzantine*, Paris 1975, p. 37–40; D. OBOLENSKY, *The Byzantine...*, p. 83–84; L. SIMEONOVA, *Diplomacy of the Letter and the Cross. Photios, Bulgaria and the Papacy 860s–880s*, Amsterdam 1998, p. 78–79; L. OLSON, *The Conversion of the Visigoths and Bulgarians Compared*, [in:] *Religious Change, Conversion and Culture*, Sydney 1996, p. 31; T.E. GREGORY, *A History of Byzantium*, Maldon–Oxford–Carlton 2005, p. 216; D. ZIEMANN, *The Rebellion of the Nobles against the Baptism of Khan Boris (865–866)*, [in:] *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium*, vol. II, Berlin–New York 2007 [= *Mil.S.*, 5.2], p. 620; D.P. HUPCHICK, *The Bulgarian-Byzantine Wars for Early Medieval Balkan Hegemony. Silver-Lined Skulls and Blinded Armies*, Palgrave 2017, p. 135.

⁴⁰ Only a handful of historians have observed substantial disparities between the avowed proclamations of Byzantine authorities and their tangible missionary policy: С. ИВАНОВ, *Византийское миссионерство...*; V. Vachkova has posited a captivating hypothesis that the Byzantine regime may have favored having pagan barbarians rather than Christian ones as their neighbors close to their borders: V. VACHKOVA, *Danube Bulgaria and Khazaria as Parts of the Byzantine Oikoumene*, [in:] *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages. Avars, Bulgars, Khazars and Cumans*, ed. F. CURTA, R. KOVALEV, Leiden–Boston 2008 [= *ECEEMA*, 2], p. 339–362.

reluctance primarily stemmed from the political intricacies in Constantinople and the diverse interests of different political factions.

To start, it is worth noting that the baptism of a pagan ruler often represented just one component of a more complex political agreement. In many instances, a formal conversion could unlock numerous political opportunities previously inaccessible to princes, khans, mercenaries, and ambitious individuals on the political periphery. Thus, Byzantine elites were acutely aware of such events' political risks. The common notion among researchers that Christianizing the Bulgarians brought them into the Byzantine sphere, thereby reducing conflict risks, could be viewed as "retroactive history" from a long-term perspective. Every actor in the agreement had their intentions, but none had foreknowledge. Conversely, it could be argued that Boris's Christianization brought Constantinople within the ambit of Bulgarian ambitions, leading to significant political turbulence both in Constantinople and Pliska⁴¹.

A striking example of the influence of conflicting interests among different political factions in Constantinople on foreign policy is the history of Boris's relations with Emperor Michael III's family. As per Theophanes Continuatus, the mother of young Emperor Michael III sent a somewhat ambiguous letter to the Bulgarian Khan, initiating lengthy negotiations. The message's content and other evidence hint at the beginning of discussing a diplomatic marriage between the two parties. This was likely when Boris first showed interest in the possibility of his baptism. Theophanes Continuatus reports that the parties exchanged trusted individuals, and one of them, the sister of the Bulgarian Khan, began preparing him for baptism. It is plausible that Boris even secretly underwent preliminary baptismal procedures⁴². Empress Theodora's political maneuver can be explained by the complexity of the political situation in which she found herself; she was gradually losing her influence over her son, Michael, and by extension, the political elite in Constantinople.

On the other hand, Michael III's uncle and regent, Bardas, was getting more and more political influence, prompting his sister to seek additional political support. Another member of the regency council, logothete Theoktistos, who served as an advisor to Theodora and was practically the head of the government at that time, orchestrated the plan for the political deal between Theodora and Boris.

⁴¹ The popular statement that Symeon's strategy was just an exception or "apostasy" contradicts facts. V. STANKOVIĆ, *A Ninth Century Turnaround in Southeast Europe: Christianization of Bulgaria and Constantinople's Embracing of the Slavs*, [in:] *Laudator temporis acti. Studia in Memoriam Ioannis A. Božilov*, ed. I. BILIARSK, Sofia 2018, p. 256. The confrontation between the two states started when Boris was alive and active. It had been going on for decades; at that moment, none of the political groups could forecast how it must have been finished.

⁴² THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, 4.15.

Theoktistos, having experienced several military failures, was in search of allies⁴³. However, Bardas was likely aware of the Theodora's correspondence, and he convinced the emperor that his mother was preparing a dynastic marriage and plotting his abdication⁴⁴. He might have hinted to Michael III about the similar actions of Empress Irene (797–802)⁴⁵. This led the young Basileus to sanction the conspiracy, which Bardas organized and executed. As a result, on November 20, 855, Theoktistos was assassinated, and the co-conspirators ousted Theodora from power and eventually exiled her⁴⁶. The political situation in Constantinople could change rapidly, along with the official stance on the possibility of Boris's baptism.

But perhaps the most illustrative example of Byzantine politics' volatility is the history of the relationship between Khan Boris and Bardas. Just a few years after the assassination of Theoktistos, Bardas began facing similar problems that Theodora encountered towards the end of her reign. Although Bardas had virtually total control over the Empire's political processes following Theoktistos's murder, his position at court was far from stable. The ongoing church crisis, coupled with continual failures in battles against the Arabs, hindered Bardas from achieving his ambition of becoming a Caesar under the childless Emperor. As he gradually lost Michael III's favor, he desperately needed a significant military victory and sought allies abroad. Khan Boris of Bulgaria seemed a fitting candidate to help. However, aware of Boris's political ambitions, Bardas only sought his support as a last resort. The unsuccessful embassy to the Khazars and the sudden Rus attack likely prompted the Byzantine government to initiate (or agree to) negotiations with the Bulgarians⁴⁷. The parties likely reached a preliminary agreement (reconciliation) between 860–861. In the spring of 860, a Bulgarian embassy visited Constantinople⁴⁸. By 861, the Byzantine generals had managed to withdraw troops from Thrace and Macedonia, redirecting them to the east for military operations against the Arabs. Furthermore, Theophanes Continuatus reported that a Bulgarian contingent participated in the decisive Battle of Lalakaon (3rd September 863), led by Bardas's brother, Petronas, against the armies of Amr⁴⁹.

⁴³ А. ВАСИЛЬЕВ, *Византия и арабы. Политические отношения Византии и арабов за время Аморийской династии*, Санкт-Петербург 1900, p. 174.

⁴⁴ The fact that Theophanes Continuatus describes the correspondence between Theodora and Boris in some detail suggests that at least part of it became public knowledge.

⁴⁵ Analogous scenarios were not unprecedented in the annals of Byzantine history. For instance, Empress Irene (780–803) had engaged in comparable diplomatic talks, resulting in a conspiracy by the Constantinople aristocracy: THEOPHANES, *Chronographia*, AM 6294–6295, rec. C. DE BOOR, Lipsiae, 1883, p. 478–479.

⁴⁶ GENESIOS, 4.9.

⁴⁷ The goals and details of the mission of Cyril and Methodius require further revision, considering the Byzantine-Bulgarian relations. However, their mission to the Khazars can hardly be called successful.

⁴⁸ А. ВАСИЛЬЕВ, *Византия и арабы...*, p. 187.

⁴⁹ THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, 4.25, p. 181.

Through bilateral agreements, the Byzantine government simultaneously solved two problems: securing the Danube border and achieving victory over the Arab forces⁵⁰. Moreover, participants in this agreement received personal political benefits. For instance, Bardas was granted the title of Caesar, Petron ascended to fame as a general, the Bulgarians became allies of them, and Patriarch Photios received credit for baptizing the previously considered “barbaric and Christ-hating people”⁵¹. Such impressive results of the alliance raise the question of what Khan Boris and his entourage received per the agreement terms. To the Bulgarian nobility, Boris’s baptism, and acceptance of the ‘godson’ status to the Byzantine Emperor could only be perceived as a concession, not compensation, for such significant support. It’s plausible that Boris reverted to conditions previously discussed with Empress Theodora during negotiations. These conditions likely included the potential for a dynastic marriage with a member of the imperial family, and the follow acquisition of the title of Caesar, and thus the opportunity for further political prospects for the Khan and the nobility. In this scenario, the Bulgarian nobles might have supported the Khan’s innovations and even selectively embraced the new religion.

Some details of the agreement, particularly those pertaining to the situation in case of possible Michael III’s death, may have been privately discussed between Bardas and Boris. As a result, Boris and some of his nobility converted to Christianity between 864 and 865. Concurrently, Patriarch Photios wrote him a letter offering guidelines on governing a Christian state⁵².

The primary purpose of these examples is to illustrate that the Byzantine elites’ attitude towards Bulgarian Christianization largely depended on the short-term interests of various political actors. Under such circumstances, the tactics of a particular political group or clan could supersede the Empire’s long-term strategy. Moreover, the political preferences of a specific court faction could fluctuate depending on the situation’s dynamics. Thus, as many Byzantine authors have noted, by the early 860s, the situation in Constantinople had evolved such that the agreement with Khan Boris, which included his baptism, seemed more imposed on the Byzantine government than desired or planned.

⁵⁰ The similar aims Byzantines had in 927, having an agreement with the Symeon’s son, Peter: *Only the sons of Hagar mourn and shall mourn, who are bereft of heart at the mere echo of our concord: Ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν Βουλγάρων συμβάσει*, 18, [in:] I. Дујчев, *On the Treaty of 927 with the Bulgarians*, DOP 32, 1978, p. 254–288.

⁵¹ The legend of the wrestling competition between a Bulgarian and the future emperor Basil likely is related to the period after 860–861. The text of Theophanes Continuatus reports that the Bulgarians, referred to as “friends” (allies) of the Caesar (Bardas) (Βουλγαρίας φίλους), were in Constantinople “as usual” and felt quite comfortable and were actually arrogant: THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, 5.12; ΡΗΟΤΙΟΥΣ, *Επιστολαί*, 4.

⁵² ΡΗΟΤΙΟΥΣ, *Επιστολαί*, 1, p. 3–39.

The International Context Before Boris's Conversion

V. Zlatarski based his theory on the Byzantine-Bulgarian War of 863 on two main premises. First, he suggested that the political alliance between Bulgarian Khan Boris and King Louis II drove the Byzantine Emperor to act preventively. Second, he postulated that Bulgarian troops were drawn into the conflict between Louis II and Rastislav (846–870), leading to Boris's surrender without resistance. However, despite scholarly consensus, the degree of Boris's involvement in European conflicts appears exaggerated. At the onset of his reign, Boris pursued an aggressive foreign policy against the Franks, Croats, Serbs, and Byzantines, but these raids likely ceased before the mid-850s⁵³. Subsequently, Boris sought peaceful relations with most of his neighbors, maintaining political control over the situation. He signed a peace treaty with the Croats and possibly reached an agreement with one of the Serbian rulers, Mutimir (850–891), allowing him to influence the local political landscape for a prolonged period. Boris also adopted a neutral and cautious approach to the escalating conflict between King Louis II (843–876) and the Moravian ruler Rastislav. Despite formally supporting Louis II, no sources report any direct military clash between the Bulgarians and Moravians.

One might speculate that negotiations with Theodora and Boris's political ambitions led the Bulgarian Khan to preserve his military forces, refraining from significant warfare until the 'reconciliation' with Byzantium in 860–861. In this case, the Bulgarian Khan remained a constant threat to Constantinople, preventing Byzantine commanders from focusing their forces on pressing issues on the eastern front. The Bulgarians' support for Louis II was limited by military demonstrations along the Moravian frontier in 863. Additionally, there is no evidence of any political or military agreement between Louis II and Boris. For instance, in 864, the ruler of the Eastern Franks still sought to establish lasting peace with

⁵³ Although dating Boris's Croatian and Serbian campaigns poses particular difficulties, a more precise timeline would place them in the 850s: CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS, *De administrando imperio*, ed. G. MORAVCSIK, trans. R.J.H. JENKINS, Washington 1993 [= *CFHB*, 1], p. 31–32; В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История на България...*, p. 9–11; Т. ŽIVKOVIĆ, *Sloveni i Romeji. Slavizacija na prostoru Srbije od VII do XI veka*, Beograd 2000, p. 100; N. KLAJČ, *Povijest Hrvata u ranom srednjem vijeku*, Zagreb 1975, p. 227–229; Д.Е. АЛИМОВ, *Этногенез хорватов формирование хорватской этнополитической общности в VII–IX вв.*, Санкт-Петербург 2016, p. 204; С. БИРКОВИЋ, *Срби у средњем веку*, Београд 1998, p. 16; An alternate, albeit later, the date is conceivable, but it would necessarily fall after the date of baptism: F. ŠIŠIĆ, *Povijest Hrvata...*, p. 106, 337; S. RUNCIMAN, *A History of the First Bulgarian Empire*, London 1930, p. 92, 110; Љ. МАКСИМОВИЋ, *О времени похода бугарского князя Бориса на Србију*, ЗФФ.Б 14.1, 1979, p. 69–76; М. БЛАГОЈЕВИЋ, *Немањини и Лазаревини и српска средњовековна државност*, Београд 2004, p. 7; F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1250*, Cambridge 2006 [= *СМТ*], p. 146; ПЛ. ПАВЛОВ, *Сърбите в политиката на княз Борис Михаил и цар Симеон Велики*, [in:] ИДЕМ, *Българското Средновековие. Познато и непознато*, Велико Търново 2008, p. 51.

the Bulgarians⁵⁴. This underscores the political distance between Bulgarian Khan Boris and Louis II. Therefore, it seems highly doubtful that the usually well-informed Byzantine government was excessively concerned about the relationship between the Franks and Bulgarians⁵⁵.

Finally, there are doubts about whether Michael III could have operated such a surprising attack. Historical sources do not provide precise details about the number of Bulgarian troops deployed to the Moravian border in 863 or whether Boris was present as a commander. Anyway, the Bulgarian people had considerable experience in countering unexpected Byzantine attacks. Therefore, it is indisputable that in 863, the Bulgarian military forces could have resisted a Byzantine invasion, regardless of any surprise element.

Thus, the purported Byzantine invasion of 863 and the subsequent Bulgarian surrender contradict the logic of the international context. Byzantine military plans were focused on the East, and Emperor Michael III was not overly anxious about the situation in Eastern Europe. Moreover, the Bulgarian Khan maintained sufficient military strength and political influence to exert pressure on the Byzantine government. Despite his lofty ambitions, Boris understood that the goal could only be achieved incrementally through diplomacy and with the support of at least some of the Byzantine elites. This understanding shaped his foreign policy actions. Boris maneuvered and waited until Bulgarian troops became necessary, perhaps even critical, to the Byzantine government. This situation arose in 860–861 when the Bulgarians likely allied with the Byzantines against the Arabs. Given these circumstances, a Byzantine invasion of 863 against their newfound allies seems illogical, difficult to justify, and highly unlikely.

Analyzing the political situation in the Byzantine Empire and beyond its borders leading up to Boris's baptism, compelling evidence suggests that the imperial government had no reason to conduct a military operation against the Bulgarians in 863. Moreover, available sources indicate that the Byzantine elites were concerned about the Byzantine-Bulgarian agreement, part of which was Boris's baptism. However, the interests of Bardas's political group caused restarting negotiations that initially began under Empress Theodora. The negotiations concluded, presumably in 860–861, with the signing of a peace agreement. Under the terms of this agreement, the Bulgarians became allies of the Byzantines. Khan Boris and

⁵⁴ Some historians try to explain Boris's weak support for Louis II through his military failures against the Serbians and Byzantines. In this case, the "magic circle" exists in the assumptions. On the one hand, Boris got the war and surrendered because of the close ties and support of the Franks. On the other hand, the weak support for Louis II because of the Byzantine invasion: M. EGGERS, Ch.R. BOWLUS, *863/864 – eine 'internationale...*, p. 14.

⁵⁵ In 866, Boris drastically shifted away from Constantinople towards Rome and the Franks church. However, this change did not compel the emperor to resort to military intervention.

some of his nobilities were baptized to fulfill the agreement's stipulations – likely involving a dynastic marriage and the integration of some Bulgarian elites into the Empire's ruling class. Since this agreement was negotiated under duress and posed substantial political risks to imperial stability, Byzantine authors wisely omitted the specifics of Boris's baptism until at least the mid-10th century. However, after nearly a century of often tense and protracted relations between Bulgarian rulers and Byzantine emperors, this historical reality no longer suited imperial ideologues, leading to a reinterpretation of past events.

The first version, which downplayed the Bulgarian role in the Christianization process, appears in the chronicle of Genesis. However, its author merely omitted some details and emphasized the points that were necessary to him. Later, during a period of deteriorating Byzantine-Bulgarian relations, Symeon Metaphrastes fabricated the story of Michael III's successful invasion of Bulgarian lands. This invasion according to his narrative led to Boris's capitulation and initiated the Christianization process. Given the appeal of his chronicle to numerous copyists and compilers, the replicated passages gave the illusion of plentiful evidence from a variety of sources. Consequently, the myth of the Byzantine-Bulgarian War of 863 was born. This narrative aligned with the ideological biases of Bulgarian historians at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, who posited that the War of 863 was the primary catalyst for Boris's conversion to Christianity. The narrative gained popularity and eventually became a part of the dominant narrative in the history of the Bulgarian Middle Ages.

Revisiting the prevailing historiographical interpretations and conducting a new analysis of the sources might help clarify the motivations of political actors during the process of Bulgaria's Christianization. It might also illuminate many obscure aspects of Bulgarian-Byzantine relations in the following decades.

Appendix 1

Byzantine authors about the motivation of Khan Boris to change his religion

Author	Year	Causes			
Photius	864–867	“Contrary to expectations”			
Nicetas the Paphlagonian	907 (?)	Famine	The emperor’s bribing Bulgarians		
Joseph Genesisius	945–959 (?)	Famine	The effect of the Byzantines triumph over Arabs	The Boris-Theodora negotiations (the short version)	
Theophanes Continuatus	945–959 (?)	Famine		The Boris-Theodora negotiations (the full version)	The Methodius painting impact
Symeon the Logothete / Leo Grammaticus / Theodosius of Melitene / Georgius Monachus Continuatus	After 963 (?)	Famine	The military expedition “by land and water”		
Pseudo-Symeon	After 978 (?)	Famine	The military expedition “by land and water”	The Boris-Theodora negotiations (the full version)	The Methodius painting impact
Ioannes Scyllitzes / Georgius Cedrenus	After 1057	Famine		The Boris-Theodora negotiations (the full version)	The Methodius painting impact
Theophylact of Ochrid	1081–1118	Famine	The Franco-Byzantine War’s consequences		
Joannes Zonaras	After 1118	Famine		The Boris-Theodora negotiations (the full version)	

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