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The Starting Point of Bulgaria in National Mythology

Every relatively complete mythology has developed a foundational story: a founding myth – of the world, of the clan, of the tribe, of the state.¹ Without an explanation of genesis, it is difficult to create a steady self-image. This element is compulsory, but its development does not necessarily coincide with the initial appearance of the mythological structure; it often appears at a later date and even repeatedly. At least before being definitively canonised in kind of Bible, the elements of every mythological structure are dynamic, and have different and often competing variations. As a rule, the emergence of a new idea, a new element, does not eliminate the existing variations, but even if not openly revising them, it inevitably restricts their meaning.

National mythology is transmitted through different kinds of texts which, even due to their genre, offer differing variations of the general narration. There is a constant bi-directional exchange between these texts. At the top of

¹ Cf. for example: Long, 1963; Kimball, 2008; Leeming & Leeming, 2009.

the hierarchical pyramid are academic studies; school text-books constitute the next layer, derived with certain delay from academic studies and deliberately simplifying the general picture; art offers more varied works (novels, poems, songs, opera, films, paintings, etc.); and the lower layer is folk-lore, in the widest sense of the term. When dealing with folk notions, special attention should be paid to the time of their recording and their hypothetical antique age. The mechanisms by which these layers impact the audience, their intensity and dynamics, form an interesting series of interconnected problems that deserves special analysis.

National mythology partly overlaps with what Joep Leersen (2006) terms “national thought”.² This has a “high” and “official” part and another “intimate” (Herzfeld, 1997), “unofficial” part, suppressed and forgotten, that interact in a complex manner.

There is a substantial shift in national mythology after the establishment of a nation-state, when the institutions that create, shape and sustain people’s notions become part of the state’s apparatus.

To understand the dynamics behind the different variations of the creation myth, a distinction must be made between two interrelated but separate elements – *ethnos / people / nation* on the one hand, and the *state* on the other. Both elements are variable, and both have their “beginnings” that do not coincide in time.

The beginning of the *people* fades into a distant and obscure past. Although seemingly more explicit, the question about the beginning of the state is however also complicated. Historiography does not always have access to a definitive date to mark the emergence of a state, as in the Bulgarian case the peace treaty with Byzantium in 681 AD. Moreover, there is no uniform event that marks the beginning – in some cases this is the conquest of a new territory, in others military victory or the establishment of an alliance, in others conversion to Christianity (or Islam or any other religion), in others some type of separatist movement (such as that associated with the Gaul Vercingétorix, in the first century BC),³ in yet others some act of parliament or international treaty, etc.

² “[B]y *national thought* I mean a way of seeing human society primary as consisting of discrete, different nations, each with an obvious right to exist and to command loyalty, each characterized and set apart unambiguously by its own separate identity and culture” (Leersen, 2006, p. 15).

³ With regard to France cf. for example: Burguière, 2003; Reynaert, 2010.

The topic of a starting point and the associated founder of the state has different interpretations and approaches. There are two paradigmatic types of founder that refer to different mythological structures. In some cases these are semi-legendary events and figures from prehistoric or poorly documented times; in others, more modern events are in focus, such as the establishment of a nation-state. Naturally, European states often have both types of founders simultaneously.

Illustrations of the clearer second type include Simón Bolívar (1783–1830), the founder of Venezuela and some other countries in the region (Columbia, Panama, Ecuador and Bolivia, the latter bearing his name); his is similar to the role of José de San Martín (1778–1850) in Peru and other Latin American countries, Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) in Germany, Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) in India, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) in Turkey, David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) in Israel, Jomo Kenyatta (1893–1978) in Kenya, and Habib Bourguiba (1903–2000) in Tunisia.⁴ In some cases, for example Israel (Sand, 2010), reference to these Founders does not eliminate the existence of other visions orientated towards more ancient times. Greece offers an example of this: the quoted Wikipedia article enumerates many Founders,⁵ all of them from the 19th and 20th centuries, although it is a well-known fact that there are other ideas about the Founders of Hellas / Byzantium / Greece (Liakos, 2008).

Closer to the Bulgarian case are some medieval rulers such as the semi-legendary founder of Russia, Rurik (9th century), the founder of Hungary, Árpád (9th century), Mieszko I of Poland (10th century), etc. The category also includes the founders of Serbia – the Unknown Archon from 7th century, Stefan Nemanja (12th century) and Porga of Croatia (7th century). This category could also be associated with the first king of the Franks, Clovis I (5th–6th century) and the later founder of Mongolia, Genghis Khan (12th–13th century). There

⁴ The examples are from Wikipedia article “List of national founders” (2014). It is worth noticing that the same article in Wikipedia has variations in other languages that are shorter; they are in fact abbreviated translations with their own accents.

⁵ Rigas Feraios (1757–1798), Adamantios Korais (1748–1833), Theophilos Kairis (1784–1853), Eugenios Voulgaris (1716–1806), Theodoros Kolokotronis (1770–1843), Georgios Karaiskakis (1780 or 1782–1827), Andreas Vokos Miaoulis (1768–1835), Yannis Makriyannis (1797–1864), Alexander Ypsilantis (1792–1828), Demetrios Ypsilantis (1793–1832), Count Ioannis Kapodistrias (1776–1831), Eleftherios Venizelos (1864–1936), Alexandros Papanastasiou (1876–1936), Georgios Papandreou (1888–1968), Konstantinos Karamanlis (1907–1998).

are naturally more ancient figures such as Cyrus the Great (6th century BC), presented as founder of Persia. This type of founder is characteristic for Eastern Europe. Generally speaking, these are states with interrupted or questionable continuity. Russia is more or less an exception, although its statehood is also interrupted by the Mongolian invasion in 12th century.

As a rule, every modern state celebrates a national day that usually marks some kind of beginning; rituals are performed, some religious, others secular but also following ecclesiastical patterns or applying their elements. There is also polarisation of the events that national days recall: some of these are ancient, others modern. National days are more often associated with events from the 19th, 20th and even 21st centuries.⁶ With the exception of Independence Day in the US (1776), and the French revolution and its outcomes,⁷ there are very few national days celebrating events from the 18th century.⁸ Some earlier events are recalled in Northern Ireland (12 July, Battle of the Boyne Day, 1690), and Minorca (next to Majorca, Spain) (17 January, when Alfonso III of Aragon took the island from the Muslims in 1287).

There are two different trends that are not necessary in conflict: one prioritises some kind of antiquity, while the other legitimises actual authority. The latter is probably more intense, or at least more openly manifested. This partially overlaps with the other, between ethnic identity and civic citizenship. Ancient events associated with national days include battles, migrations or Christianisation,⁹ while modern events include declarations of independence, the adoption of new constitution or the coronation of the current monarch.

⁶ Cf. "National Day," 2014. National days are associated with 21st century events in Lebanon (Resistance and Liberation Day from Israel 2000, but also independence from France in 1943), East Timor (2002), Montenegro (2006), Kosovo (2008), the Basque Country (2011), Libya (2011), and South Sudan (2011).

⁷ The Polish National Day could be associated with the repercussions of the French Revolution – 3 May, Constitution Day, 1791, and 11 November, Independence Day, independence from Austria-Hungary, Prussia, and Russia in 1918.

⁸ Australia celebrates the arrival of the First Fleet, marking the start of European settlement of Australia in 1788. In Catalonia (Spain), 11 September marks the day on which Catalonia lost its nominal independence and constitutions after the fall of Barcelona 1714.

⁹ Ireland and Northern Ireland celebrate 17 March (St. Patrick's Day, patron saint of Ireland, 4th-5th century). 12 July is also celebrated in Northern Ireland (Battle of the Boyne Day, 1690), a turning point in the history of the country marking the victory of the Protestant William of Orange.

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In Bulgaria as in other countries, the national day is not associated with an ancient Founder. The story of the Bulgarian national day, and the debates surrounding it, is an interesting and dynamic topic. The first feast bearing certain elements of a national day was celebrated even before the establishment of the new Bulgarian state: in the mid-19th century, the feast day of Saints Cyril and Methodius became not only an ecclesiastical and school feast, but something more akin to a proto-national day.¹⁰

3 March (19 February) became an important feast during the Russian occupation after 1878, marking the date on which the Preliminary Treaty of San Stefano was signed, but also the coronation of Tsar Alexander II the Liberator.¹¹

The official list of the feasts expanded gradually. Prince Alexander of Battenberg decreed Saint George's Day, an important Church feast, as a day of (military) glory. After relations with Russia were severed, 3 March was gradually pushed into the background in favour of feasts associated with the monarch (name-day, birthday) or with military victories and the army.

There were radical changes in the official calendar after the Second World War, which were extended in the following decades. The day of so-called Uprising or the Socialist Revolution or Liberation (9 September) became National Day. All feasts with perceived "monarchical" or "religious" overtones were eliminated; thus the day of the military glory (Saint George's Day) was first struck off the list and later partly restored as a "professional" holiday, Day of the Shepherd. Holidays with no national significance such as the "October Revolution", "International Workers' Day" (previously celebrated as a seasonal feast – "The Day of the Flowers", an official holiday since 1939) or "International Women's Day" were added instead. 3 March celebrations were later restored and the most popular day of Saints Cyril and Methodius also became "professional" as the "Bulgarian Education and Culture, and Slavonic Literacy Day".

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, 3 March became the official National Day, but this did not mark the end of the debate and some alternatives were proposed

¹⁰ After the adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1916, this feast is celebrated on 24 May according to the official calendar of the state, although the Church uses 11 May in its liturgical "Revised Julian Calendar".

¹¹ Alexander was named "Liberator" because of the emancipation of serfs in 1861. Bulgarians associate this name with the "Liberation of Bulgaria".

– 24 May, which also became a national holiday,¹² followed by 6 September marking the unification of the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia, and 22 September – the Declaration of Independence (1908).¹³ The official calendar is defined in the Bulgarian labour code (article 154, paragraph 1):

1 January – New Year;

3 March – Liberation Day, National Day;

1 May – Labour Day and International Workers’ Solidarity;

6 May – Saint George’s Day, Day of Courage and the Bulgarian Army;

24 May – Bulgarian Education and Culture, and Slavonic Literature Day;

6 September – Unification Day;

22 September – Independence Day;

1 November – Revival Leaders’ Day, day off for all educational institutions;

24 December – Christmas Eve, 25 and 26 December Christmas;

Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter, Easter Monday and Tuesday.

From the point of view of chronological beginnings the official calendar demonstrates some dynamics. In the pre-state period, Christianization and the Slavic alphabet rose to the fore to become an accent that remains current in the 21st century, but its importance in the calendar is altered. The date of the Treaty of San Stefano, marking the emergence of a new state, gained core significance immediately after the event and has since retained this position, except in the first two decades of communist rule when the emergence of a new kind of state was presented as the key landmark in Bulgarian history. Previously, this date even had curious place in the state coat of arms, emphasising its importance and presenting it as a “beginning”.¹⁴

The fall of communism failed to become an important landmark for a new beginning or renaissance. Post-1989, phrases such as “democratic period” and “new democratic history of Bulgaria” and corresponding rhetoric have their place in the political dictionary and in journalism, but do not create a strong

¹² Promulgated as an official feast by the Bulgarian parliament in 1990. Cf. “Ден на българската просвета и култура и на славянската писменост,” 2013.

¹³ According to the official calendar, 6 September is a “non-working day”, and 22 September is a “national holiday and non-working day”.

¹⁴ With some minor variations, the full date (“9 IX 1944”) is present in several versions of the state coat of arms from 1948 to 1971, when the inscription was edited to “681 – 1944”. The entire inscription was removed under the 1991 constitution, and the current variation of the state coat of arms (without dates) was approved by the Bulgarian parliament in 1997.

notion for a “(new) beginning”. The events of 1989 do have a significant mythical drive, but this takes a different direction. Among various mythical structures presenting the events from the perspective of different social groups, the myth of perfidiousness and the enemy, about divided brothers or the removal of the King, etc., do indeed have a place, but do not refer to a “beginning”.

It would be implausible to trace or highlight celebrations of other more ancient events in the official calendar. Some important anniversaries such as Millennium Jubilees (1929) or celebrations marking 1,300 years of Bulgaria (1981) were significant for the political plans of the government and the general disposition of the public.

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In the Bulgarian context, earlier variations of the founding myth are focused on the *people*, on Bulgarians, and it is only later that there is a shift to the *state*. The alternating significance of these two notions is worth scrutinising. Focusing on the latter, I will limit myself to recalling the permanent debate about the components of the first, about their proportions and significance – Slaves, (Proto) Bulgarians, Thracians, and ancient Iranians. It worth mentioning that the ‘substrate’ in which the most power was invested, including mighty foreign forces – the Slavs, in fact still misses the typical mythical narration with well-known and generally accepted figures and key events in the distant past. Thracians and Iranians – historically the most ancient, but introduced last in national mythology – are an interesting topic that deserves analysis in the context of 20th- and even 21st-century political trends.

In defining the people and the people’s continuity over the centuries, an issue that appears simple at first glance conceals a wealth of problems. If the Thracians are substrate, whose legacy belongs to us when they became “Bulgarians”? If (Orthodox) Christianity is a key element of Bulgarian identity, then pre-Christian (pagan) history presents a problem (not only in the Bulgarian context). The same goes for Catholics and Protestants, not to mention Muslims.

This is a Gordian knot that cannot easily be cut – when defining “Bulgarian” and its starting point did began, is there any succession between older and modern ideas? Scholars have noted the relative scarcity of medieval Bulgarian historic texts. The series of the Bulgarian khans, the so called *Nominalia of the Bulgarian*

*Khans (Именникът на българските ханове, 7th-8th century)*¹⁵ is the main, if not the only preserved text dealing with such issues. It starts with Avitohol (Attila the Hun?) and represents a more or less dynastic idea for the community (headed by the Dulo clan). The ideas of the other ‘substrates’ have not been preserved or reconstructed, and therefore are not part of Bulgarian national mythology.

In Christian times there have been several ideas about the beginning of the Bulgarians; these emerged consecutively and in a sense competed with each other. The notions of ancient pagan origin (Avitohol) rescinded and lay dormant. New ideas took shape gradually and were not definitively manifested in any important or well-distributed texts. However, the adoption of Christianity and Slavic alphabet, the deeds of Saints Cyril and Methodius and their disciples, drew the image of a beginning. The most representative text is *An Account of Letters (О писменехъ, 9th century)* by Chernorizets Hrabar (Monk Hrabar):

“The Slavs at first had no books, but, being pagans, they read and divined by means of lines and notches. [...] Then, God who loves man and who takes care of everything and does not leave mankind senseless but leads all to reason and salvation, took mercy upon the Slavic race and sent it St. Constantine the Philosopher, called Cyril... He devised for them 38 letters [...] if asking the Slavonic first-year pupils: ‘Who created your alphabet and translated the books?’, all pupils would answer: ‘St. Constantine the Philosopher, called Cyril. He invented our alphabet and translated the books together with his brother Methodius’. And if you asked: ‘When did that happen?’, they would answer that it was during the reign of the Greek King Mikhail, the Bulgarian prince Boris, the Moravian Prince Rostislav, the Prince Kozel of Blatnol, in the year 6363 from the creating of the world” (Fine Jr., 1991)¹⁶.

Two things are worthy of note here. The text speaks of “Slavs”, the Bulgarian Prince was almost in the same plane as the Moravian and the prince of Balaton principality, and the chronological mark was “the reign of the Greek King Mikhail”. Slaves had their pagan prehistory, although the only thing noted was that “they read and divined by means of lines and notches”. The important starting point had to do not simply with “Constantine the Philosopher, called

¹⁵ We know the text from 16th century transcripts, published by Russian scholar Alexander Popov in 1861. The quotations here follow the text in: Божилов (1983, p. 39).

¹⁶ “An Account of Letters” (*О писменехъ*) was written in the late 9th century. First published in 1824 by K. F. Kalaydovich, it became more widely known in the 20th century when it became key part of Bulgarian national mythology.

Cyril” but with “his mission inspired by God who loves man and who takes care of everything” – the highest possible approval.

Side by side with the canonical, there are also apocryphal Christian narrations about the genesis of Bulgarians. These are relatively small in number, and probably the most extensive of them was the *Apocryphal Bulgarian Chronicle* (*Български апокрифен летопис*) from the 11th century, which also associated Bulgarians directly with God:

“And then I heard a voice, saying something else unto me: ‘Isaiah, My beloved Prophet, go west of the uppermost lands of Rome, separate the third part of the Cumans, called Bulgarians, and populate the land of Karvouna, which was abandoned by the Romans and the Hellenes’. Then I, brethren, by the will of God came to the left side of Rome and separated the third part of the Cumans, and I led them, showing the way by a reed. And I brought them to the river called Zathiousa and another one called Ereousa. And then there were three large rivers. And I populated the land of Karvouna, called Bulgarian land; it has been abandoned by the Hellenes a hundred and thirty years ago. And I populated it with many people from the Danube to the sea, and made one of them king; his name was king Slav. And this king by the way populated provinces and cities. These people have been pagans for a good while. And this king built one hundred hills in the Bulgarian land; therefore he was called ‘the king of the hundred hills’. And there was abundance of everything in those years. And there were one hundred hills in his kingdom, and he was the first king of the Bulgarian land and reigned for one hundred and nineteen years and died.

And thereafter another king arose in the Bulgarian land, a child, carried in a basket for three years, and king Ispor was he hight; [he] took over the Bulgarian Kingdom. And this king built large cities: the city of Durostorum on the Danube; and he built an enormous prezid [from Lat. praesidium: fortification] from the Danube to the sea; he also founded the city of Pliska. And this king killed a great many Ishmaelites. And this king populated the entire land of Karvouna, where the Ethiopians had been earlier. And Ispor begot a child and Izot he hight. King Ispor reigned over the Bulgarian land for one hundred and seventy two years and then was killed by the Ishmaelites on the Danube. And after the death of Ispor, the king of the Bulgarians, the Cumans were named Bulgarians, and earlier [under] king Ispor they were pagans and true infidels, and lived in infamy; and they had always been enemies of the Greek Kingdom for a good while” (Tapkova-Zaimova & Miltenova, 2011, p. 291–292).

The divine mission of St. Cyril is missing here, and this obviously presents Bulgarians, their genealogy and their beginning in a different perspective. The chronological mark is also different – “the land... abandoned by the Hellenes a hundred and thirty years ago”, instead of “the reign of the Greek King Mikhail”. Moreover, some kind of connection with pagan notions could be

traced in the *Apocryphal Bulgarian Chronicle*. Scholars and readers are convinced that Asparuh (Isperih, Esperih) “that came to this side of the Danube” (from *Nominalia of the Bulgarian Khans*) is in fact King Ispor (from the *Apocryphal Bulgarian Chronicle*). That said, how many contemporaries of the latter text and people from subsequent generations know both figures from these texts to associate them? It is difficult to claim that the communities defined in the *Nominalia of the Bulgarian Khans* and the *Apocryphal Bulgarian Chronicle* fully overlapped with the Christian kingdom of Boris, Simeon and their successors, even less so that they shared a common “beginning”. In the first case the starting point was associated with Avitohol, in the second with the Prophet Isaiah, and in the third with Saints Cyril and Methodius.

The texts mentioned here are only representative samples and do not cover all relevant ideas from their times. Perhaps there were other texts – preserved or lost – bearing another variations or even completely different notions about the genesis of Bulgarians. If so, they will only confirm the hypothesis that in Middle Ages and later there were several different ideas about the begging of the Bulgarians, and that these ideas were at odds with each other and not synchronous.

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It is generally accepted that Bulgarian nationalism began to take shape in the middle of the 18th century, and that its most representative early manifestation was the *Slavonic-Bulgarian History* (*История славяноболгарская*, 1762) by Paisius of Hilendar. This was then expanded further in the 19th century and continued to develop thereafter. The focus was initially on the *people*, on Bulgarians, presented as Christians and Slavs.¹⁷ The focus on the *state* (that did not abolish the interest in the *people*) emerged later. A partial (and perhaps ambiguous) explanation could start from the fact that Bulgarian nationalism was born before the Bulgarian state. (And on the contrary, during the pagan period the state, meaning the dynasty, was important, not the problematic unity of its subjects.) It is as if the nascent nationalism, constructing / re-constructing memory for a Bulgarian state followed by a desire for its recovery, needed

¹⁷ Even the so-called “Hun theory”, introduced by Gavril Krastevich in his *History of the Bulgarians* (vol. 1, 1872) was in fact Slavic, since the author presented the Huns as Slavs (Аретов, 2000).

a narration about the genesis of the *people*. This narration had to be put in an authoritative framework. In Paisius' time this was, first and foremost, Biblical history. The next framework that was imposed, then and in later periods, was Slavdom, followed by "enlightened Europe", and probably by some others. Noticeably, all of these frameworks were coined outside Bulgarian space.

The authors of early histories placed the Bulgarians in the framework of the Bible, and thus the beginning of Bulgarian times went back to the age of Noah's sons. This pattern, repeating well-known mediaeval notions, was widespread in Europe. The second accent in early histories was again connected with the deeds of Saints Cyril and Methodius. This was probably the real beginning, since previous events form the prehistory. Moreover, if the idea of the Biblical genesis of Bulgarians falls into the background, the importance of Christianization, and especially the implementation of the Slavic alphabet, are still fully alive. This notion was not directly attacked by next generations; on the contrary, it was constantly elaborated as a defence against perfidious foreigners who were trying to abduct 'our alphabet' and other treasures.¹⁸

Associating the beginning of a nation with Christianization is a common pattern seen in other countries such as Ireland, France, etc. It has one further advantage: such events hardly ever have a specific date, but nevertheless they have their place in the Church calendar. In the Bulgarian case the date celebrated is almost universally accepted – 24 May.¹⁹

Aside from the fact that it emerged relatively late, the notion of the beginning of the Bulgarian state was not particularly critical even in the context of interest in the state itself. The state was defined not by its beginning but by its most glorious acts (for example its greatest territorial expansions) – the Kingdom of Simeon I (893–927) and Ivan Asen II (1218–1241). Among the pagan rulers, Khan Krum became prominent as Lawgiver and Great Warrior, a figure slightly different to and even competing with the Founder). One new starting-point was added after liberation, associated with one ephemeral structure that remained

¹⁸ In all probability, Vasil Aprilov started this debate with his pamphlet *Bulgarian bookmen or to which Slavic tribe the Cyrillic alphabet belongs* (Априлов, 1841). One recent manifestation of this trend was the toughening of official Bulgarian policy towards the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) in 2012.

¹⁹ As a matter of fact, the Orthodox Church celebrates 11 May as the day of St. Cyril and Methodius, but the secular feast follows the new (Gregorian) calendar. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church also celebrates 14 February as the Assumption of Cyril and 6 April as the Assumption of Methodius.

merely a project and dream – Bulgaria according to the Treaty of San Stefano, which existed more or less on paper from 3 March until 13 June 1878.

The narration about King Simeon and his reign was developed earliest and was definitively marked as a beginning. Spiridon Palauzov (1818–1872), often considered Bulgaria’s first professional historian (together with Marin Drinov) and as a “Russian historian of Bulgarian origin” made the main contribution. In 1852 he wrote in Russian:

“Болгарское государство, остванное в Мисии выходцами из Великой Скиѣи, имѣло свою блестящую эпоху, продолжавшуюся, к сожалѣннiю, не болѣе полустолѣтiя. Принятiе Христiанства при Борисѣ, распространѣнiе предѣлов государства и развитие славяно-болгарской письменности при царѣ Симеонѣ, – вот важнѣйшiя событiя, по которым Болгаре становятся в ряд с другими народами новой Европы в первыя времена их христiанской образованности” (Палаузов, 1852, p. I).²⁰

The reigns of Boris and especially of Simeon are perceived as a “Golden Age” (S. Palauzov), as a special age, even as a beginning. The grand scale of the jubilee celebrations in 1922 pays testament to this trend.²¹ The term “Golden Age” has a curious trajectory: enjoying immense popularity in the last decade before the Second World War, “official” historiography then detected ideologically suspicious meaning, but later vindicated it and even promoted the notion of a “Second Golden Age” (the reign of Ivan Asen II); some image-makers associated the term with the then-current communist ruler and especially with his daughter.

The quest for the Founder began in the time of Paisius. However, the specific figure took shape with some difficulties and relatively late. The name Asparuh (Isparih, Esperih) “that came to this side of the Danube... His clan Dulo and his year *vereni alem*” was mentioned in the *Nominalia of the Bulgarian Khans*. This text was published in 1866 and the first historians were

²⁰ “The Bulgarian Kingdom, established in Moesia by migrants from Great Scythia, experienced a golden age that regrettably lasted no more than half a century. The adoption of Christianity under Boris, the expansion of state borders and the development of Slav-Bulgarian literacy during King Simeon’s reign – these were the most important events that placed Bulgaria among the other peoples in the new Europe at the beginning of their Christian education” (the translation is mine – N.A.).

²¹ Three jubilees overlapped at that time: the Millennium jubilee of the Age of Simeon, fifty years from the Liberation and 10 years from the accession of King Boris III. See more in: Димитров (2012, p. 232–242).

unaware of it, resulting in their failure to use the name that became popular later. In Paisius' manuscript, the function of Founder was conferred on Batoya Silni (the Mighty). He was preceded and succeeded by other heroic kings – “first King was Vukich (Вукич)” (Паисий Хилендарски, 1963, p. 71) followed by his brother Dragich (Драгич), after whom came Boris.

The situation of the *Short History of Bulgarians (История во кратце о болгарском народе словенском)* by monk Spyridon (Спиридон Иеросхимонах, 1992) is similar. He introduced even more unusual names – “Kings Illyrian and Bulgarian” from the time before Alexander the Great, who undoubtedly recall folklore characters and rites: ‘Kolade, the third Illyrian king’ (the name was variation of the word ‘Christmas’), ‘Lila or Lado, the sixth Bulgarian king’, ‘Peruna or Peperuda [‘Butterfly’], Bulgarian king’ (this were both names of ancient Slav gods in folk-lore rites) (Спиридон Иеросхимонах, 1992, p. 12–13).

For a long time, the figure of Asparuh and his Treaty with Byzantium in 681 AD, an event that clearly marked a beginning, were not actually the focus of Bulgarian historical narration, and were not surround with the aura of Founder and Foundation. (The date was inscribed in the state coat of arms in 1971. Before 1948, when “9 September 1944” appeared, there were no dates in the coat of arms.)

In a chapter of his history notably entitled “Krum and Omurtag”, Konstantin Jireček, a Czech historian and important political figure in Bulgaria in the late 19th century, used the term “founder” but did not put any stress on it: “Исперих (у гърците Аспарух), основателът на българската държава, князувал – според сведенията от списъка на князете – всичко 61 година (приблизително от 640–700)” (Иречек, 1929, p. 98).²²

The event itself was presented in the previous chapter (“The arrival of the Bulgarians”), but the year and the Treaty were not mentioned: “Преди всичко българите изтикали племето северани от местността пред Береваския проход в Балкана по-нататък на изток и разположили тук своята главна квартира; Преслав, днес Ески-Стамбул при Шумен, станал столица на техните князе” (Иречек, 1929, p. 88–89).²³

²² “Isperih (in Greek Asparuh), the founder of the Bulgarian state, was a prince, according to the data from the list of the princes, for 61 years (approximately from c. 640 to c. 700 AD)” (the translation is mine – N.A.).

²³ “First of all Bulgarians pushed out the tribe of the Severers from Beregovski pass in the Balkan Mountains in the East and set up their main camp; Preslav, nowadays Eski-Stambul near Shumen, became the capital of their princes” (the translation is mine – N.A.).

The expanded narration about Asparuh in the first volume of the *History of the Bulgarian State in the Middle Ages* by Vasil Zlatarski (Златарски, 1970, p. 176–209), published in 1918, was close to the later vision of these events. The act of foundation is mentioned, but the date of the Treaty was not established.

The creation of the state was not in the focus even in 1960s:

“Дошли в непосредствено съседство с Византийската империя, прабългарите начело с Аспарух започнали да навлизат в нейната територия и да я опустошават. За да се справи с новия си враг, тогавашният византийски император Константин IV Погонат предприел през 680 г. поход, който завършил с пълен неуспех. [...]”

Победителите прабългари начело с Аспарух влезли в споразумение с местната славянска аристокрация, която възглавявала съюза на седемте славянски племена. Били предприети мерки за организиране на общата българо-славянска държава, която сега се създавала и за отбиване на нови удари от страна на Византия и на други врагове.

[...] Византийският император Константин IV Погонат се видял принуден през 861 г. да сключи мир с прабългарите, като се задължил да им плаща годишен данък. С това новата държава била фактически призната” (Косев, Христов, & Ангелов, 1962, p. 18).²⁴

More detailed was the presentation of Vasil Gyuzelev in one next short (in fact more extended) history. There was real narration here, following Byzantine sources – the Emperor advanced, the Protobulgarians retreated to Onglosa, but the Emperor, who was suffering from great pain in his legs, was forced to sail with five ships and his entourage to Mesembria (now the city of Nesebar) for treatment. This caused “fear” among his army; part of it ran away in panic:

“Прабългарите напуснали своите укрепления и се нахвърлили срещу разколебания противник. Част от византийците „станали храна на техните мечове”, мнозина били наранени и пленени, а само малцина се отървали чрез бягство. [...]”

²⁴ “Arriving in the close vicinity of the Byzantine Empire, the Protobulgarians led by Asparuh started to invade its territory and to ravage it. In order to overcome the new enemy, the Byzantine Emperor, at that time Constantine IV Pogonatos, started a military campaign in 680 AD that that ended in complete failure. [...] The victorious Protobulgarians, led by Asparuh, came to an agreement with local Slav aristocracy that headed the Union of the Seven Slavic Tribes. Measures were taken to organise the common Bulgarian-Slavic state that was in process of creation, and to repulse fresh attacks from Byzantium and other enemies. [...] Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV Pogonatos felt forced to sign peace with Protobulgarians in 681 AD, and to oblige himself to pay a yearly tribute. Through this, the new state was in fact recognised” (the translation is mine – N.A.). The author of this chapter was D. Angelov.

Погромът на византийците в битката при Онглоса и настаняването на прабългарите в Балканския североизток като непосредствени съседни на славянските племена възвестили раждането на българската държава. Хан Аспарух сключил съюз със славянските князе [...]” (*Кратка история на България*, 1982, р. 41).²⁵

The full-scale highlighting of the figure of Asparuh as Founder was connected with the celebrations surrounding 1,300 years of the Bulgarian state in 1981. (Only fifty years on from its millennium celebrations, Bulgaria was marking 1,300 years.) The same year saw the release of the film “Khan Aszparuh” (1981, dir. Ludmil Staykov, English edited version entitled “681 AD: The Glory of Khan”, 1984) based on the not so popular at that time teenager’s novel “Predicted by Pagane” (1980) by Vera Mutafchieva. This was the turning point in the official ideology (mythology) – the state, not the rebels against some foreign and despised state, came to the fore; Christianity still remained in the background.

According to their chronology, ideas about the beginning during the Christian era are orientated towards different ages – Noah and his sons from the Old Testament, the Prophet Isaiah, Khan Kubrat’s Old Great Bulgaria and some older state structures, Avitohol, Asparuh, Christianisation and Simeon’s Golden Age, the Liberation and the establishment of the Third Kingdom. The emergence of these ideas and the emphasis placed on them do not follow historical chronology. There is naturally a constant trend to create one narrative from all or at least most of these stories.

Expansion is typical for any nationalism, as for any ideological (and not only ideological) structure. The idea of a beginning is fairly fluid and variable. Even with just one variation (one *grand narrative*) there are certain dynamics. In reality the main possible trends are twofold – a pulling forward to the times of the speaker and his/her group, and a pushing backward in search of more ancient (i.e. more prestigious) roots.

All later ideas about genesis and beginning are orientated to these two landmarks – Christianisation and Asparuh’s state. Khan Kubrat’s Old Great

²⁵ “The Protobulgarians went out from their fortifications and came down on the hesitant enemy. Some of the Byzantines became “fodder for their swords”, many were injured or captured and only few managed to flee. [...] The defeat of the Byzantines at the battle of Onglosa and the settling of the Protobulgarians in the North-East of the Balkans as the immediate neighbours of the Slav tribes heralded the birth of the Bulgarian state. Khan Asparuh formed an alliance with the Slav princes [...]” (the translation is mine – N.A.). The year 681 AD is not mentioned here either.

Bulgaria and earlier state structures already belong to different adaptations of national mythology, but are not yet part of its canonical (should I say ‘liturgical’) variation.

The push backward towards more ancient state structures reaches as far as Khan Kubrat and even further. The developments in narration about earlier Great Bulgarias (Даскалов, 2011)²⁶ that that emerged before the mid-20th century, and expanded in its last decades and at the beginning of 21st century, result indirectly in some degradation of the importance assigned to the undisputable and not unproblematic figure of Asparuh.

The quest for other ancient relations continues. The most extensive is the association with the Thracians that has led to the birth of separate academic field – “Thracology”. Attempts to appropriate the heritage of Alexander the Great (4th century BC) and of other figures from Hellene and Byzantine history emerged earlier but were less systematic and without ‘scientific’ argumentation.

Paradoxically, when such attempts are made by other nationalisms (especially Macedonian), the reactions are wide-ranging and bridge the entire spectrum between kind-hearted irony and indignation full of pathos, between everyday anecdotes and the official acts of state institutions. It is much harder to recognise the same traits in your own nationalism. In this case angry reactions are, as a rule, targeted not at gestures themselves but at their problematisation. In this context, the early Bulgarian reception of Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer’s famous studies in the mid-19th century (G. Rakovski, Iv. Seliminski, M. Drinov) is worth mentioning.²⁷ The appropriation of prestigious antiquity and reactions against similar foreign acts are not at all an issue limited purely to the Balkans – on the contrary, this is quite the norm for European nationalism (the most common instance concerns claims for the legacy of ancient Troy) and almost certainly extends beyond Europe.

Generally speaking, the evolution of Bulgarian national mythology and its ideas about the beginning follows this pattern: the first landmark was Christianisation (achieved by Prince Boris) and the deeds of Saints Cyril and

²⁶ Referring to Old Great Bulgaria, Black Bulgaria, Volga Bulgaria, etc., the author notes ironically: “Bulgarian state-building is proverbial. We, Bulgarians have created more states than any other European or Asian people. In Europe alone we have founded between three and five states” (Даскалов, 2011, p. 55) (the translation is mine – N.A.).

²⁷ G. Rakovski, I. Seliminski, M. Drinov and others referred to Fallmerayer’s theses. An extract from the introduction of *Geschichte der Halbinsel Morea* was published under the title *Повест за полуостровът Морей* (in: *Българска пчела*, 14 June 1863).

Methodius, followed by the Golden Age of King Simeon and King Ivan Asen II and Krums laws. After that came Khan Asparuh and the Slavo-Bulgarian state, with earlier events following.

These ideas are carried mostly by history texts. With some delay, the early manuscripts (Paisius, Spyridon) were followed by other types of texts – school textbooks, fiction, articles in newspapers, academic writing, etc. They failed to offer an alternative version of Bulgarian history. With school textbooks as an important exception, the question of the beginning was not particularly crucial: fiction and journalism prefer other, more recent events.

In 19th century literature we can attempt to find some ideas about the beginning associated with the non-official, ‘intimate’ variations of mythology, but this task is fairly risky and problematic for earlier periods.

A characteristic attempt at revising the dominant notions began with the emergence of the ideology of national revolution. On the one hand, Georgi Rakovski (and his followers) turned to deeper antiquity (the Indo-European roots of Bulgarian language). On the other hand, it was Rakovski who instigated the new mythical narration about recent times that began with *haiduks*, presented as champions of freedom. This narration, adopted by L. Karavelov and H. Botev, became dominant for rebellious émigrés. Although covering a much shorter period of time, the narration also drew lines of succession that led to the contemporary young rebels. It is obvious that such an idea was hardly consistent with the images of the past promoted by other opinion-makers at the time. More curious is that this narration was met with disagreement or with revisionist moods within the circles that had adopted Rakovski’s ideology. The revision took even more radical forms, rejecting not only the long line of succession covering the great figures from the independent Bulgarian Kingdom’s the glorious past, but even rejected earlier figures from the line of the rebels.

(Some) members of the revolutionary movement had a different interpretation for the medieval period, failed to show any interest in more ancient roots (Alexander the Great) and the foundation of the state, and silently pushed even Christianisation into the background. They preferred to emphasise other beginnings that were closer to their time, and to look forward.

The representative text for this revision was the well-known but sometimes misinterpreted article *The People. Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (*Народът вчера, днес и утре*), written by H. Botev in 1871:

“Метнете поглед върх историята на българското царство от Бориса дору до подпаданието му под турците, и ще видите, че всичкото историко-

политическо преминало на наша народ е било току-речи чисто византийско, и в него са живели само царе, боляри и духовни, а той сам всякога е бил отделен с дълбока обществена нравственост от разврата на правителството си, който разврат заедно с християнството се вмъкна в по-горнята част на народа” (Ботев, 1986, p. 17).²⁸

A new radical variation of this revision soon followed. It rejected not only the Middle Ages, but even the rebels’ succession, as constructed by Rakovski. The most extended version was proposed by Zahari Stoyanov. This was perhaps a clarification of the viewpoint of the Giurgiu revolutionary committee that had instigated the April uprising of 1876, and it was *Memoirs of the Bulgarian Uprisings* that introduced it to the public in 1880s and early 1890s, after the Liberation.

This revision tacitly covered the notion of the *people*. Z. Stoyanov was intent on restricting it, excluding some groups (shops, citizens of the town of Elena, people that were not part of the revolutionary movement, etc.) and finally the real people appeared to be the inhabitants of Upper Thracian Plain and Sredna Gora mountain, and then only those who had taken part in the uprising.

It should be remembered that these are memoirs, written and published after the events and reflecting the personal viewpoints of the author. There is no certainty that the ideas and opinions of the characters in the text actually reflect the ideas and opinions of the real men and women presented by the memoirist. What is certain is that a group of activists began to feel high self-esteem about their participation in history and subsequently emphasised this, even regarding it as a beginning. The group was active in the public sphere – writing memoirs, history books, taking part in state-building – and had mechanisms at its disposal to launch its own ideas. Manifestations of similar self-esteem appeared in the years following the Second World War. At other turning points in Bulgarian history similar phenomena could only be seen on a much smaller scale.

It is hardly possible for this type of radical revision to become part of the official *grand narrative*. The existing *grand narrative* is constructed in school

²⁸ “Cast a glance at the history of the Bulgarian kingdom from Boris to its falling into the hands of the Turks and you will see that all the bygone historical and political times of our people have been almost entirely Byzantine and that they were crammed with tsars, boyars and clerics, while the people were always separated by a deep social morality from the depravity of its rulers, a depravity that permeated the richer strata through Christianity” (Botev, 2010, p. 393–398). Translated by Zornitsa Dimova-Hristova. Originally published in *Дума на българските емигранти* (25 June 1871).

textbooks and primarily in the work of Ivan Vazov, which in a sense synchronised almost all previous variations of Bulgarian national mythology. His most popular works, imposed or at least disseminated by the institutions of education, literary criticism, the official calendar and its feasts, etc., are perceived as embodiment of everything Bulgarian, i.e. as a representative part of national mythology (Аретов, 2006). Despite the well-known misunderstanding between the National poet and the Revolutionaries (H. Botev, Z. Stoyanov), forming part not of the official narrative but rather of national intimacy, the main focus in Vazov's works was on the national revolution and New Bulgaria that the blind Yotso was observing. The Middle Ages were presented as time of decadence, as steps toward the precipice. In a sense, for Vazov both the Middle Ages and struggles for independence were something akin to pre-history, and the important new beginning is the "liberating" Russo-Turkish War (1877–78) and the Treaty of San Stefano. Thus there was still a subsurface tension covered by the general *grand narrative*.

This tension between the rebels and the state-builders (Kings, Popes and Patriarchs, to use Botev's words) would later persist. A curious example of this is the popular phrase "the most Bulgarian time", first used by the literary critic Ephrem Karanfilov in the late 20th century and referring to the April Uprising and Z. Stoyanov. It deserves interpretation in the context of the nationalism of its time. Concluding the observation on ideas about beginnings, this is just one more instance that supports the idea of the notion's fluid and dynamic nature.

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Początek czasu bułgarskiego w mitologii narodowej

Artykuł poświęcony jest dynamice funkcjonowania wyobrażeń na temat początków Bułgarii, budowanych w okresie wczesnego nacjonalizmu bułgarskiego (XVIII-XIX wiek). Badania ujawniają obecność różnych, skrycie ze sobą konkurujących tez. Od razu przy tym widać, że figura Założyciela utwierdziła się z trudnością i względnie późno, *de facto* – w XX wieku. Paisij Chilendarski i inni autorzy wczesnych historiografii umieszczają Bułgarów w kontekście historii biblijnej i w efekcie początek czasu bułgarskiego odsyła do synów Noego. Kolejne pokolenia jawnie nie podważają tej idei, ale początek czasu bułgarskiego wiążą z państwowością, a zwłaszcza z chrztem oraz dziełem Cyryla i Metodego. Spośród władców pogańskich na pierwszy plan wysuwa się chan Krum, który przedstawiany jest jako twórca prawa oraz wielki wojownik, ale nie wprost jako założyciel.

Charakterystyczne dla każdego nacjonalizmu, każdej struktury ideologicznej (ale nie tylko), jest to, że się rozszerza, w naszym przypadku – szuka swoich początków coraz bardziej wstecz w czasie. Proces ten można zaobserwować i w konstrukcjach nacjonalizmu bułgarskiego, ale z o wiele późniejszego okresu. W drugiej połowie XX wieku i na początku XXI wieku widać wyraźny zwrot ku czasom sprzed rządów założyciela chana Asparucha (VII w.), tj. kiedy powstawały inne bułgarskie organizmy państwowe (zob. P. Даскалов, *Чудният свят на прабългарите*, София 2011). Natomiast przed wyzwoleniem (1878) i powstaniem Księstwa Bułgarii można zaobserwować tendencję przeciwną. Przedstawiciele ruchu rewolucyjnego, a przynajmniej część z nich, odrzuca okres średniowiecza i kieruje swą uwagę ku innym początkom, o wiele bliższym w czasie, nawet pokrywającym się czasem aktualnym lub wręcz odnoszącym się do niedalekiej przyszłości. Wyobrażenie to – mniej lub bardziej nieoczekiwanie – zostało zaktualizowane przez często powtarzającą pod koniec XX wieku frazę „czas najbardziej bułgarski” (E. Karanfilow), odsyłającą do lat 70. XIX wieku.

Słowa kluczowe: nacjonalizm; mitologia narodowa; Założyciel; Chan Asparuch

The Starting Point of Bulgaria in National Mythology

This paper examines the dynamics of ideas on the beginnings of Bulgaria, such as were developed by early nationalism in the 18th and 19th centuries. Surveys show that there were different theses which competed tacitly. It is immediately noticeable that the figure of the Founder was imposed with difficulty and relatively late – in fact not until the 20th century. Paisius of Hilendar and the other authors of early histories presented Bulgarians in the context of Biblical history, and thus the beginning of Bulgarian time was associated with Noah and his sons. This idea was not openly attacked by successive generations, but they alternatively associated Bulgarian time and Bulgaria with the medieval kingdom, and especially with the baptism and deeds of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Among pre-Christian rulers, Khan emerges as significant, presented as Law-Maker and great Warrior, but not as Founder.

It is typical for the nationalism of any ideological (and not only ideological) structure to strive for extension – in this case to seek its starting point at an ever earlier date. This process can also be observed in the structures of Bulgarian nationalism: in the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries there was a clear focus on the time before the Founder Khan Asparukh (7th century), and scholars and journalists still take pleasure in finding older Bulgarian states. However, before the founding of the Principality of Bulgaria (1878), the opposite was true. (Some) representatives of the revolutionary movement in fact rejected the medieval period and preferred to focus on more recent periods, if not on their time itself and even on the immediate future. More or less unexpectedly, this idea was re-vitalised in the late 20th century with the catch-phrase “the most Bulgarian time” associated with the 1870s.

Keywords: nationalism; national mythology; Founder; Khan Asparukh

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