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BULGARIANS, SERBS, AND THE RUS IN THE CENTRAL BALKANS
IN BYZANTINE HISTORICAL NARRATIVES
(LATE 10TH – MID-13TH CENTURY):
THE VIEW FROM CONSTANTINOPLE*

This paper analyzes the information provided in the Byzantine historical narratives composed between the end of the 10th and mid-13th century on Bulgarians, Serbs and the Rus as these peoples permanently settled or just temporarily resided in the area of the Central Balkans. This paper attempts to show how the Byzantine historiography of the mentioned period presented the peoples in question.

Keywords: Bulgarians, Serbs, Rus, barbarians, Rhomaioi, historical narrative

Ethnography in Byzantium

Drawing on their millennium-long experience with various peoples and ethnographic models of classical antiquity, the Byzantines could have told us a lot about the different ethnic groups they encountered. They, however, said less than they knew. Late antique historiography had already shown that ethnographic reports were not intended to offer objective information on foreign peoples and instead served as a propaganda tool in the hands of their authors. Ethnography was meant to not only

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underscore or create the distinction between the Rhomaioi¹ and barbarians but also relativize it, using it as a tool for criticizing the imperial policy, sometimes obliquely and other times very openly.² Ethnographic writings also had a didactic role and served as entertainment for an audience that always loved a good story.³

The ethnographic information provided by Byzantine historians represents a subgenre of historiography. They usually report on the geography of barbarian ancestry, associate their rise and movements with the surrounding powers, and explain how their actions created the geostrategic reality that the Rhomaioi had to face. However, sometimes the sources offered a fabricated, usually negative, portrayal of peoples, “barbarians,” which could serve a range of literary aims. Yet, the reports on barbarians in each historical narrative were part of its overarching objective and were often written with the sole purpose of contextualizing it. There are many examples of Byzantine authors who said one thing in their imperial orations and something completely different in the chronicles they later wrote on the same events, contradicting themselves or even admitting they had previously lied.⁴ Therefore, every narrative should be seen as a stand-alone work, shaped by the will of its author whose motives for writing were a result of the specific historical moment in which she or he lived and worked.

Although already during the late Roman Empire, the newcomers that served Rome were considered Romans in the eyes of the law,⁵ historical narratives paint a different picture of foreigners, which modern historical scholarship sees as evidence that other peoples never ceased to be barbarians in Byzantine eyes.⁶ However, although the perception of others as barbarians has a continued presence in Byzantine historical writings, the barbarians within the Empire were seen differently than those beyond its borders. Yet, the barbarians that inhabited the Empire’s territory and those that were under its direct influence gradually changed in contact with the Byzantine civilization and its greatest gifts – Christianity and law.⁷ Given that the perception of other peoples changed depending on the nature of the source

¹ The Rhomaioi (Ῥωμαῖοι) were Roman subjects of the Eastern Roman emperor in Constantinople, *Chrysos*, *Romans and Foreigners*, 120. For a detailed critical discussion on Roman identity, with an exhaustive list of the relevant literature, see *Stouraitis*, *Roman Identity*, 175–220; *Kaldellis*, *Romanland*, 3–120.

² *Kaldellis*, *Ethnography*, vii–x, 1–25, 52. Niketas Choniates ironically reports that the Bulgarians said they would proclaim Isaac II Angelos their emperor because his actions had benefited the Bulgarians more than the Rhomaioi, *Chon.*, 436.89–437.3. For a similar example cf. *Chon.*, 532.14–20. On Choniates’ view of Rhomaioi and foreigners, especially Westerners, cf. *Hunger*, *Graeculus perfidus*; *Laiou*, *Foreigner and Stranger*, 78–81, 84.

³ On the Byzantines’ love of a good story cf. *Scott*, *Text and Context*, 251–262.

⁴ *Kaldellis*, *Ethnography*, 93, 98, 123.

⁵ *Gaudemet*, *L’étranger*, 84, 91.

⁶ *Kaldellis*, *Ethnography*, 118, 127, 131, 137.

⁷ *Stephenson*, *Byzantine Conceptions of Otherness*, 249.

discussing them,⁸ the question of whether foreigners could indeed become Rhomaioi must remain open for now. We do know, however, that the perception of barbarians in historical writings reflected the Empire's (friendly or hostile) relations with them, i.e., whether a given group of barbarians happened to be their ally or enemy at that particular moment.⁹ Similarly, we must bear in mind that the authors of historical narratives were well-educated intellectuals and that their works addressed a narrow circle of learned readers from the highest echelons of society.

Barbarians

Byzantine authors commonly called different barbarian peoples by the same collective name (βάρβαροι, ἔθνη, ἀλλόφυλοι, ἑτερόφυλοι, ἀλλόγλωσσοι), reflecting their arrogance toward anything foreign and their indiscriminately negative view of them as savage and uncouth.¹⁰ The very act of naming barbarians meant, above all, acknowledging their existence but also the beginning of their taming. The practice of using generic classical ethnonyms that could denote a range of different peoples made this easier.¹¹ For instance, some authors used the term Scythians for different peoples at different times (Avars, Khazars, Bulgars, Hungarians, Rus, Pechenegs, Kumans, Seljuks, Mongols, Ottomans, and even Slavs).¹² Leo the Deacon refers to Hungarians, Bulgarians, and Rus by the word Scythians.¹³ Michael Psellos twice calls the Pechenegs – Moesi, and the Uzes (Oghuz Turks) – Triballi.¹⁴ In this practice, new peoples inherited not just the names but also the characteristics of those that had lived before them in a certain territory or ruled it, from the Scythians of Herodotus onward. The most common ethnonyms were Scythians, Persians, and Celts, as well as Triballi and Illyrians, which referred to the population of the Empire's former Balkan provinces. On the other hand, onomastic classicism never quite pushed out contemporary names, not even in the works of authors who preferred their classical versions. Notably, there is a distinction between generic ethnonyms (Scythians, Huns, and Persians) used for different groups at the same time and classical ethnonyms

⁸ *Laiou*, *Foreigner and Stranger*, 84–85.

⁹ The most illustrative example is the shift in the portrayal of the Rus, who were first the Empire's allies because they were supposed to pacify Bulgaria (Scyl., 277, 286) and then became its fiercest enemies after they conquered Bulgaria, which the Byzantines saw as their territory, cf. *infra*.

¹⁰ For the term barbarian, which emerged in classical Athens in the 5th century BC, cf. *Hall*, *Inventing the Barbarian*. On foreigners in Byzantium cf. *Chrysos*, *Romans and Foreigners*, 119–136; *Laiou*, *Foreigner and Stranger*, 71–97; on “themselves” and “others” in Byzantium cf. *Smythe*, *Byzantine perceptions; Strangers to Themselves; Papadopoulou*, *Syllogikē tautotēta*.

¹¹ *Laiou*, *Foreigner and Stranger*, 74.

¹² ODB (*O. Pritsak*); *Kaldellis*, *Ethnography*, 113–116; *Zon.*, 527–529, 533, 534, 617–618, 631; *Manassis*, 313; *Cinnami Epitome*, 84, says that the Lechites (Poles) were a people of Scythian ancestry who lived west of the Huns.

¹³ *Leonis diaconi Historiae*, 18, 77, 105, 108, 117, 123, 171.

¹⁴ *Psellos*, *Chronographia*, 240, 260. Cf. *infra*.

used for specific *new* peoples (Hungarians as Paionians or Huns; Serbs as Triballi or Dalmatae; and Bulgarians as Moesi).¹⁵ All of these terms arguably served to highlight the cultural superiority and even the political dominance of the Rhomaioi over foreigners.¹⁶ Referring to the Balkan peoples as Dalmatae, Moesi, and so on, they sought to emulate the ethnic map of the early Roman Empire and its provinces. This legitimized the reincorporation of these areas into their borders and gave the Empire an illusion of continuity and constancy.¹⁷ That leads us to the question of whether the ethnonyms used by the Byzantines to denote certain peoples were, as some scholars suggest,¹⁸ solely Byzantine constructs or if they, at least to an extent, reflected the self-perception of those peoples. The latter seems to have been the case with the Bulgarians, who were aware of their Turkic descent.¹⁹

The term and notion of barbarians are some of the principal underpinnings of the account of the erudite Byzantine princess Anna Komnene, who introduces it at the beginning of the *Alexiad* when she says that her husband, the *kaisar* Nikephoros Bryennios, accompanied her brother on an expedition against the barbarians (κατ' ἄλλων μὲν βαρβάρων).²⁰ In her eyes, the term “barbarians” included the Turks but also Roussel de Bailleul, who was a Celt, and Tutush I, pillaging in Asia Minor, and Germans and the English (τῆς Θούλης νήσου βαρβάρους), all the barbarians that lived in Egypt and Libya and worshipped Mohammed in their mystic rituals, and, indeed, the Serbs.²¹ Other barbarians included Robert Guiscard and, especially, Bohemond, all Normans, all those that inhabited the area between the Adriatic Sea and Gibraltar, and, of course, the Latins.²² The barbarians’ opposite were the Hellenes (οὔτε βάρβαρος οὔτε Ἕλλην).²³

Byzantine authors stigmatized barbarians in stereotypical depictions of their appearance and character, which, depending on the circumstances, were more commonly negative than positive. The most illustrative example is the account of Anna Komnene. In her view, origin, appearance, character, and language are the things that make a barbarian. Barbarians are always cruel, full of rage and fury;²⁴ insolence and boorish behavior are to be expected from them;²⁵ they are usually treacherous and

¹⁵ *Kaldellis*, *Ethnography*, 109–110, 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁷ *Stephenson*, *Byzantine Conceptions of Otherness*, 254–256; *Kaldellis*, *Ethnography*, 112–113.

¹⁸ As *Curta* argues in the Slavic case, cf. *Curta*, *Making of the Slavs*, esp. 25–26, 344–346.

¹⁹ *Nikolov*, *Perception of Bulgarian Past*, 170.

²⁰ *Alexiad*, 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11–13, 79, 84, 199, 252, 279.

²² *Ibid.*, 49, 297–298, 307, 311, 319, 392.

²³ *Ibid.*, 411.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 41, 44, 165, 320; cf. also *Scyl.*, 330, 349, 430.

²⁵ *Alexiad*, 44, 166–167; cf. also *Scyl.*, 288, 357.

incapable of keeping their oaths;²⁶ lying is in their nature;²⁷ their physical strength is extraordinary;²⁸ they always have barbaric intentions (τὸ ἐνθύμημα τοῦ βαρβάρου)²⁹ and have always hated the Rhomaioi.³⁰ The learned princess is particularly contemptuous of barbarians who had a chance to acquire the highest Hellenic education. For instance, John Italos, although a student of Psellos, could not comprehend the deep truths of philosophy (προσομιήσας ἐν ἀπαιδέντω ἦθει καὶ βαρβαρικῶ) with his dull barbarian mind and rejected his teacher's guiding hand, full of disrespect and barbarian stupidity (θράσους ὦν μεστὸς καὶ ἀπονοίας βαρβαρικῆς), and let his temperament be his master. Besides, John Italos was a large man with a big head and of a tall stature.³¹ At one point, Anna goes as far as to claim that the barbarians knew they were barbarians and quite naturally accepted their status.³² Constantine Manasses compared the Bulgarians with wild boars, and George Akropolites noted that the Bulgarian ruler Kaloyan partook in Scythian practices of a beastly nature, enjoyed killing the Rhomaioi, and had the skull of the Latin emperor Baldwin I made into a goblet.³³

Michael Psellos also offers an impressive and, through the lens of Constantinopolitan arrogance and snobbery,³⁴ negative portrayal of barbarians. He tells of a dirty barbarian (κάθαυμά τι βαρβαρικόν) who even surpassed the Rhomaioi in conceit. Although of unknown ancestry, most crude and insignificant (ἀγενέστατος καὶ φαυλότατος), as the emperor's servant, he managed to impose himself to dignitaries and become a member of the higher classes (εἰς τὴν κρείττονα τάξιν ἀριθμηθέν). Once he had drunk from the Roman source, he wanted to become a lord unto the noblest of men and even tried to kill the emperor – he, a mere slave bought for money (ὁ ἀργυρώνητος).³⁵

There are cases when a typified portrayal of barbarians elicited – or was meant to elicit – positive emotions. For instance, Niketas Choniates says that the captured Hungarians and Serbs in the triumphal procession of Manuel I in 1152 were of noble

²⁶ Alexiad, 219, 317, 318, 321; Acrop., 58, 60.

²⁷ Alexiad, 225.

²⁸ Ibid, 402, 411; cf. also Scyl. 290–291, 304.

²⁹ Alexiad, 44.

³⁰ Psellos, Chronographia, 144; Chon., 199.; Acrop., 107, 114, 152.

³¹ Alexiad, 162–163; *Laiou*, Foreigner and Stranger, 78.

³² Tzachas, the emir of Smyrna, asked for a written confirmation of a marital contract, which was the custom of the Rhomaioi and “us barbarians” (προβεβλήσθω μέσον ἡμῶν ἔγγραφος ἢ περὶ τούτου συμφωνία, ὡς ἔθος τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις καὶ ἡμῖν τοῖς βαρβάροις ἐστί), Alexiad, 225.

³³ Manassis, 318; Acrop., 21–24, 114.

³⁴ On snobbery in Byzantium cf. *Magdalino*, Byzantine snobbery, 58–78. On the perception of everything beyond Constantinople as foreign cf. *Idem*, Constantinople and the Outside World, 149–162.

³⁵ Psellos, Chronographia, 167–168. Although Psellos did not name him, we learn from other accounts that this was Romanos Boilas. John Zonaras similarly describes Borilos and Germanos, the servants of Nikephoros III Botaneiates, *Zon.* 571, 725–727.

lineage and worthy of admiration.³⁶ When a barbarian in the service of the Empire proved himself loyal to the Rhomaioi, Byzantine authors approvingly report that they had adopted the Roman upbringing and way of life. A notable example is John Ises, a member of the Persian race (Πέρσης μὲν τὸ γένος, τροφῆς δὲ καὶ διαίτης μεταλαχὼ Ῥωμαϊκῆς) in the Byzantine army during the siege of Zemun in 1165.³⁷

Another feature commonly used to describe barbarians was passionate love, an emotion rarely mentioned by Byzantine authors between spouses. It is emphasized only when discussing the Byzantine emperors' extramarital affairs with women who were not their wives.³⁸ George Akropolites reports that John II Asen passionately loved his second wife, Irene, daughter of Theodore Komnenos Doukas, ruler of Epirus, no less than Antony loved Cleopatra.³⁹

There was, Michael Attaleiates attests, another category – half-barbarians or *mixobarbaroi* (μιξοβάρβαρον).⁴⁰ It is unclear who the *mixobarbaroi* were, but they are known to have lived in the areas along the Danube (παρὰ τὸν Ἰστρον κατοικοῦν), in large cities whose residents were a multilingual crowd and provided (the Empire) many soldiers (ἐκ πάσης γλώσσης συνηγμένον ἔχουσαι πλῆθος καὶ ὀπλιτικὸν οὐ μικρὸν ἀποτρέφουσαι). In those cities, after having crossed the river, the Scythians (Pechenegs) introduced their way of life (τὸν σκυθικὸν ἐπιφέρουσι βίον).⁴¹ Anna Komnene also mentions the *mixobarbaroi* and, on several occasions, writes of the *mixobarbaros* Monastras, a distinguished and very experienced general under Alexios I Komnenos who spoke Turkish (τῆς τουρκικῆς εἰδήμων διαλέκτου).⁴² She also mentions Michael Stypiotes, a member of the higher social classes (τῆς ἀνώτερης τάξης), explaining that this was not his well-known namesake, the *mixobarbaros* (δὲ ἀκούων τις μὴ τὸν μιξοβάρβαρον νοεῖτω), whom this Stypiotes had bought as a slave (ἀργυρώντος γὰρ τούτου ἐκεῖνος δοῦλος γεγονώς) and later given to the emperor as a gift.⁴³ Anna Komnene reports that some of the *mixobarbaroi* spoke Greek (μιξοβάρβαροι ἑλληνίζοντες, ῥωμαΐζοντες) but also Scythian.⁴⁴ Finally, Anna mentions a *mixobarbaros* who defected to the emperor from the camp

³⁶ Chon., 93. In his oration glorifying the triumphs of Manuel I in 1172, Eustathios of Thessalonike also admires the grand *župan* Stefan Nemanja, Eustath. 217–218; VIINJ IV, 218–219.

³⁷ Cinnami Epitome, 238.

³⁸ Akropolites, History, 209, n. 10; Greg. I, 45. 4–47. 12; Garland, Sexual morality, 48 and n. 145.

³⁹ Acrop., 54–61. A similar case was Milutin's love for Simonis, Greg. I, 287.

⁴⁰ Attaliatea Historia, 151.

⁴¹ Ibid, 158.

⁴² Alexiad, 229, 230, 247, 287, 294–295, 327–329, 350, 354–355, 362, 435, 446; Skoulatos, Personages, 213–215. This Monastras could be Michael Monastras, the *protovestis* and *protovestiarios* known to us from several surviving seals from the late 11th and early 12th centuries, Jordanov, Byzantine Seals from Bulgaria, vol. 2, 270–271.

⁴³ Alexiad, 464.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 223, 228, 475. On the *mixobarbaroi* in Asia Minor after the Seljuk conquest cf. Vryonis, Decline, 176.

of the Seljuk sultan Kilij Arslan.⁴⁵ The *mixobarbaroi* also feature in the work of Nike-tas Choniates, who considered them inferior warriors to the Rhomaioi.⁴⁶ The term *mixobarbaroi* was used in classical antiquity to describe a person who was neither a Hellene nor a barbarian but had characteristics of both.⁴⁷ P. Stephenson believes that they were non-Rhomaioi “who lived within the empire’s frontiers as Christians, and were bound to the empire by treaties.” He also notes that their ethnicity would have been of lesser importance and believes that Byzantine historians resorted to an ancient Greek term to define the relationship between the central government and the local elites who wielded power at the lower Danube.⁴⁸ However, Anna Komnene’s *mixobarbaroi* seem to have been those who had accepted Roman customs, some of whom, like Monastras, even rose to high positions in the army. Hence, if they had become part of the system, they would have certainly had to adopt the Byzantine way of life, in which case it was their ancestry that made them *mixobarbaroi*.

The Byzantines did not always look favorably on mixed marriages unless there was a clear political advantage to be gained from such a union.⁴⁹ For instance, the assertiveness and resourcefulness of *parakoimomenos* Basil were explained by his mixed race (τὸ γένος ἔχων ἐπίμικτον), because his mother was a Scythian (ἐκ Σκυθίδος), and seen as negative characteristics.⁵⁰ In the 14th century, George Pachymeres mentioned the *gasmouloi*, born in marriages of Byzantine women with Latin men, who made good seafarers because they combined Roman prudence, which allowed them to prevail in battle, and Latin fervor and cunning.⁵¹

The language of the Rhomaioi and the language of the barbarians

The Byzantines’ belief in their civilizational superiority over the barbarians was apparent in many aspects of life. The chief distinction between the Rhomaioi and barbarians was culture, with language having a very prominent role as its indicator.⁵² The word barbarian (βάρβαρος) was originally onomatopoeic, a derivative of

⁴⁵ Alexiad, 476.

⁴⁶ Chon., 209.

⁴⁷ ODB, 1386 (A. Kazhdan).

⁴⁸ Stephenson, Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier, 109–110. Ahrweiler, Byzantine Concepts of Foreigner, 13, believed that the term had to do with cultural matters and described people born from mixed marriages.

⁴⁹ This was the case with the marriage of Maria Lekapene, the first Byzantine princess to marry a foreigner, Tsar Peter of Bulgaria (Shepard, Marriage too far, 121–149), which Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos later found reprehensible (De Administrando Imperio, 72–74).

⁵⁰ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 46–47, 94. Although Kathryn Ringrose’s claim that this could merely be a pejorative topos does make sense, her comment that there are indications that his mother was of Scythian descent is unclear (Ringrose, Perfect Servant, 131). A. Kazhdan and A. Cutler allowed that she might have been of Slavic ancestry, ODB 270 (A. Kazhdan, A. Cutler). On the other hand, John Skylitzes reports that Empress Theophano called him a Scythian and barbarian (Σκύθην καὶ βάρβαρον ἀποκαλέσασα), Scyl., 282, 285.

⁵¹ Pach. I, 253, 277; II, 401, 539. Cf. ODB, 823 (M. Bartusis).

⁵² Laiou, Foreigner and Stranger, 74–76, 77–79; Koder, Sprache, 5–37.

the Indo-European root *baba/bal-bal/bar-bar* meaning unclear and indistinct. In the Greek language, it originally described a person whose speech was unintelligible, a non-Greek, but the meaning of the term frequently changed.⁵³ The Byzantines often highlighted language as an insurmountable distinction between them and barbarians, juxtaposing their language, the perfect communication tool, with barbarian babbling. In the Battle of Dorostolon (971), the Byzantines charged against the Rus with a battle cry (καὶ βοή τις ἀθρόα παρὰ Ῥωμαίων ἤρθη), whereas the Rus merely yelled to create noise (οἶον ἐνθουσιῶντες καὶ βρυχώμενοι).⁵⁴ Similarly, John Kinnamos reports that, during the siege of Zemun in 1165, the barbarians on the walls of the city filled the air with shouts and unintelligible bellows.⁵⁵ Describing the Crusaders, Anna Komnene likened their language to unpronounceable barbarian sounds.⁵⁶ She says that John Italos' accent was what would be expected from the Latin youth that had extensively studied but failed to completely master the Greek language (τὰ Ἑλλήνων), adding that he would sometimes butcher his syllables. His imperfect pronunciation and sound-skipping had been noted by most, and the educated accused him of vulgarity.⁵⁷ Without mentioning their names, Constantine Manasses claims that Borilos and Germanos, servants of Nikephoros III Botaneiates, spoke like barbarians, not in the least correctly: they were thrice slaves in the ancestry of their grandfathers and fathers (βαρβαρίζοντων τὴν φωνὴν μηδ' ὀρθορρημονούντων... οἷς ἦν τὸ γένος τρίδουλον, καὶ πάπποι καὶ πατέρες), thrice barbarians and barbarians in their souls and minds, who babbled the crude Scythian language (σκυθογλώσσους λαλιάς).⁵⁸ For Niketas Choniates, foreigners in the service of Manuel I and Andronikos I Komnenos lacked education and a knowledge of Greek (ἀπὸ γενῶν ἑτερογλώττων ὑποβαρβαρίζουσιν... παιδείας ἀπάσης ἔστερημένοις καὶ φωνῆς Ἑλληνίδος...)⁵⁹ Others, like Michael Glykas, seemed to have more sympathy for barbarians who spoke Greek. Unlike Psellos, who shows him in a very unflattering light,⁶⁰ Glykas says that Romanos Boilas used the language elegantly (ἀστείος γὰρ περὶ τὴν γλώτταν ὤν).⁶¹

Interestingly, John Skylitzes reports a few Slavonic words in his description of how John Vladislav's men fled before the Roman army, shouting, "Run, the emperor" (βεζεῖτε, ὁ Τζέσαρ), obviously a Slavonic phrase transcribed into the Greek script.⁶² Michael Attaleiates also shows that the Slavonic language penetrated Greek

⁵³ Srpska enciklopedija, 98 (*D. Dželebdžić, S. Pirivatrić*).

⁵⁴ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 141; *McGrath*, Battles of Dorostolon, 156.

⁵⁵ Cinnami Epitome, 241.

⁵⁶ Alexiad, 315.

⁵⁷ Alexiad, 162–165.

⁵⁸ Manassis, 356–357.

⁵⁹ Chon., 204–205, 322.

⁶⁰ See above.

⁶¹ Glycae Annales, 597. See *Antonov*, Oshte vednūzh za Roman Voil, 264–271.

⁶² Scyl., 356; VIINJ III, 123 n. 152.

when he refers to the members of the Varangian Guard by the Slavonic word for Germans, *Nemci* (τῶν Νεμίτζων λεγομένων).⁶³ Some Byzantines knew a barbarian language, like the priest captured in the clashes between the Rhomaiοi, Bulgarians, and Vlachs in 1195, who begged John Asen for mercy in the language of the Vlachs (τῶν Βλάχων διαλέκτου). Likewise, some barbarians knew Greek, such as Dobromir Chrysos, who, during his wedding banquet, first mumbled something in his barbarian language (ὑποβαρβαρίσας) and then angrily spoke to his Greek bride in her native Greek (Ἑλληνίδι φωνῆ).⁶⁴

The invincibility of the Rhomaiοi's weapon against barbarians

Leo the Deacon devoted almost one-fifth⁶⁵ of his narrative to the triumphant campaign of the Rhomaiοi against the Rus during the reign of John Tzimiskes, providing a detailed account of the Byzantine victory and conquest of Bulgaria in 971 as part of the imperial propaganda aimed at glorifying these triumphs.⁶⁶ In this campaign, which began almost as a crusade, the brave yet relatively few Rhomaiοi defeated, like Goliath, the terrifying and numerous barbarians.⁶⁷ While the attack of the Rus was guided by fury and savagery (τῇ συντρόφῳ θηριωδίᾳ καὶ τῷ θυμῷ στρατηγούμενοι), the Rhomaiοi were led by experience and technical knowledge (μετ' ἐμπειρίας καὶ τεχνικῆς ἐπιστήμης αὐτοῖς ἀντεπήρσαν).⁶⁸ Leo tells us that aid also came from the heavens: the Rhomaiοi were spearheaded by a rider on a white horse believed to have been St. Theodore Stratelates.⁶⁹ This divine intervention had been necessary because the victory of the Rhomaiοi against the barbarians had to show, besides the superiority of their weapons, the righteousness of the war against the Rus and the moral victory over the Empire's enemies.⁷⁰ Michael Psellos extols the invincibility of Greek fire during the Rus fleet's attack on Constantinople in 1043.⁷¹ The Serbian grand *župan* Vukan was so afraid of Byzantine military might that he,

⁶³ Attaleiates, *History*, 268. *Skok*, *Etimologijski rječnik*, 516–517; *Fasmer*, *Ètimologičeskii slovar'*, 62.

⁶⁴ Chon., 468, 508.

⁶⁵ Leonis diaconi *Historiae*, 126–159.

⁶⁶ Almost a century later, John Skylitzes offered a different version of the same event. The reason for their conflicting accounts seems to be that they used the same source but interpreted it differently, reflecting the different purposes of their respective works, *McGrath*, *Battles of Dorostolon*, 152–164; *Kaldellis*, *Original Source*, 1–18.

⁶⁷ Leonis diaconi *Historiae*, 103–111, 129, 140–141, 153–154, 155, 157.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 141; *McGrath*, *Battles of Dorostolon*, 156.

⁶⁹ Leonis diaconi *Historiae*, 154. This legend was based on an earlier version in which the Dioskouroi come to the aid of Romans against the Latins, led by the last Roman king, Tarquinius Superbus, in the Battle of Lake Regillus; it was taken from Dionysios of Halikarnassos, *Kaldellis*, *Original Source*, 4–7.

⁷⁰ *McGrath*, *Battles of Dorostolon*, 161–163. Scyl., 285, 299, 308, believes that the storm that suddenly began during the battle was also a divine intervention (λέγεται δὲ καὶ θειοτέρας τότε τυχεῖν τοὺς Ῥωμαίους ἐπικουρίας); *McGrath*, *Battles of Dorostolon*, 160 n. 32. Cf. *infra*.

⁷¹ Psellos, *Chronographia*, 144–147.

not bearing to look at their battle lines, well-known formation, and the strength of their army, agreed to peace terms with the Empire; John Kinnamos notes that the Huns realized they should fight against the invincible, i.e., the Rhomaioi.⁷² Nike-tas Choniates reports that, on the eve of their battle with the Hungarians in 1167, Andronikos Kontostephanos told his troops that they, as Rhomaioi, were superior to the barbarians in eloquence and education but also in battle command and war strategy.⁷³ Nikephoros Gregoras claims that the Bulgarian *tsar* Michael II Asen took such fright when Theodore II Laskaris launched a campaign against him that his heart began beating in his chest because he did not have an army capable of standing up to an imperial force so heavily and splendidly armed.⁷⁴

The Byzantines were always depicted as superior to barbarians in military might and strategy, regardless of whether such a portrayal reflected reality or not.

The Slavs

The ethnonym Slavs, rendered as Σκλαβενοί or Σθλαβενοί, appears in Byzantine and Latin sources from the 6th century onward.⁷⁵ The ethnogenesis, settlement, and early history of the Slavs in the Balkans are complex matters that earlier and ongoing research has tried to unravel.⁷⁶ Intriguingly, the term Slavs disappeared in Byzantine historical accounts after the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos as far as the period of the late 10th to the mid-13th century is concerned, and did not resurface until the Komnenian era, and then only in a handful of instances. It was replaced by specific ethnonyms describing the peoples that had formed their states in the Balkans (Bulgarians/Moesi, Serbs/Dalmatae/Triballi/Diokleians, Croats). Thus, after Porphyrogenetos, Byzantine historians speak of the Bulgarian land, Serbian land, and others, depending on the people that inhabited a given territory.⁷⁷ Recounting the events that preceded the rebellion of Georgi Voyteh, Nikephoros Bryennios reports that the Slavic people (τοῦ τε Σθλαβίνων ἔθνους τῆς δουλείας Ῥωμαίων ἀφηνιάσαντος) shook off the Roman yoke, destroying and pillaging the territory of Bulgaria. The cities of Skopje, Niš, and Sirmium were ravaged, and the lands by the Sava and the towns of Paristrion up to Vidin were heavily damaged. Then the rebelling Croats (Χωροβάτοι) and Diokleians (Διοκλείς) wreaked havoc in all of Illyricum. Michael VII appointed Nikephoros Bryennios the Elder the *dux*

⁷² Alexiad, 279; Cinnami Epitome, 114.

⁷³ Chon., 155; *Laiou*, Foreigner and Stranger, 79.

⁷⁴ Greg. I, 56. 9–23.

⁷⁵ ODB 1916–1918 (O. Pritsak).

⁷⁶ The literature on this subject is extensive; suffice it to mention *Sedov*, Sloveni; *Lukin*, Slaviane. For the most recent theories that reject the existence of Slavs as seen and well-established in previous scholarship, cf. *Curta*, Making of the Slavs; *Idem*, Slavs.

⁷⁷ *Stouraitis*, Lands of the Rhomaioi, 45–63.

of all Bulgaria (δοῦκα τῆς τῶν Βουλγάρων πάσης χώρας) to pacify the Slavic people that dominated the region (τὸ Σθλαβίνων ἔθνος). Once he came to Bulgaria, the Slavs were so terrified that he restored them to the Roman yoke. But, as the Croats and Diokleians were wreaking havoc in Illyricum, Bryennios defeated them, too.⁷⁸ Nikephoros Bryennios correctly uses the term Slavs to describe the population that inhabited the territory of the theme of Bulgaria. These people were, no doubt, Serbs and Bulgarians.⁷⁹ Anna Komnene reports that the Scythians Borilos and Germanos, probably Bulgarians, were of Slavic origin (Σθλαβογενῶν). In her eyes, they were at once Scythians, Slavs, and slaves (δοῦλοι), and for Nikephoros Bryennios, Scythians or Moesi.⁸⁰ Interestingly, unlike earlier and later chroniclers, both Anna Komnene and Bryennios saw the Bulgarians as a Slavic people. Although George Akropolites says that the Bulgarians were related to the Scythians, his account of the Bulgarian magnate Slav (ὁ Σθλάβος) can be seen as a testimony to their Slavic identity.⁸¹ Finally, Niketas Choniates reports that, in 1171–1173, the Venetians brought a mighty army to Chios, including many allied ships procured from the land of the Slavs, no doubt from Dalmatian cities.⁸²

So, the Slavs resurfaced in Komnenian-era sources as an ethnonym used to describe a larger ethnic group or an individual. This umbrella term would have certainly included the Serbs, Bulgarians, and Croats. In that period, the Rus did not appear under this name, at least not in Byzantine historical writings.

* * *

The Bulgarians, Serbs, and Rus, peoples that today identify as Slavs, had close contacts with the Byzantine Empire. Their relations with Byzantium, however, were different and primarily depended on whether they had settled in a territory controlled by the Empire (Bulgarians and Serbs) or lived outside of its borders (the Rus). Consequently, the Byzantine elite's view of them varied, with the geographic-historical evolution of the states they had formed being a contributing factor. This is apparent in the Byzantine understanding of the territories these peoples inhabited and in the terms they used to describe the Empire's relationships with them (subjects, slaves, allies, and others). And yet, all of them were and continued to be barbarians, regardless of whether the argumentation prevailed that these peoples were part of the Christian community of states headed, as Constantinople saw it, by the Byzantine *basileus*.

⁷⁸ Bryennios, 209. 22–211.5, 213.15–215.2.

⁷⁹ On this cf. *Komatina*, Srbi, 55–83.

⁸⁰ Alexiad, 51, 55, 60; Bryennios, 283. 1–2.

⁸¹ Acrop., 39. This was despot Alexios Slav ('Sclavo', 'Esclas', 'Esclave', in western sources), a relative of the Bulgarian tsar Boril (1207–1218), Akropolites, History, 174, n. 8; Actes de Vatopedi, I, 124–128; *Bozhilov*, *Familiata na Asenevci*, 95–98.

⁸² Chon., 173. 90–91; VIINJ IV, 149 n. 146. Choniates also mentions a certain Slav Barinos (Σθλάβου τινὸς Βαρηνού), who was supposed to help Peter of Brasciaeux capture the city of Pegae, Chon., 641.

Bulgarians

The Slavic identity of the Bulgarians is a highly complex question. Scholars generally agree that the Bulgarians (Bulgars) were a Turkic tribe that, in the 7th century, settled in the territory between the Danube and the Balkan mountain range and was largely Slavicized and Byzantinized by the time of Tsar Simeon.⁸³ The Byzantines were aware of composite characteristics of nations or peoples in the medieval period.⁸⁴ For Leo the Deacon, the Bulgarians were Scythians in origin but also Moesi because they inhabited the ancient Roman province of Moesia, which had always belonged to Romans or the Rhomaioi (Ῥωμαίοις προσήκουσαν) as it had of old (ἀνέκαθεν) been a part of Macedonia (ἀπόμοιραν τελοῦσαν Μακεδονίας).⁸⁵ They colonized the Kutrigurs, Khazars, and Kumans (Κοτράγων, Χαζάρων τε καὶ Χουμάνων ὄντας)⁸⁶ and took this land in the time of Constantine IV Pogonatos, naming it Bulgaria (Βουλγαρίαν) after their leader.⁸⁷ Generally speaking, most Byzantine historians from the late 10th to the mid-13th century referred to the Bulgarians as Scythians, Bulgarians and/or Moesi.⁸⁸ Niketas Choniates calls them Moesi, Bulgarians, and Vlachs.⁸⁹ However, given that he sometimes distinguishes the Bulgarians from the Vlachs and sometimes refers to the Bulgarians as Moesi, it is unclear which ethnic group he has in mind when using all these ethnonyms.⁹⁰ Interestingly, he reports that John Asen and his barbarians wanted to bring the

⁸³ This is another matter that has produced extensive literature; suffice it to list *Gjuzelev*, Protobulgarians; *Istoriia na Bŭlgariia*; *Zlatarski*, *Istoriia na bŭlgarskata dŭrzhava*; *Papadopoulou*, *Oi oroi Mysia*, 257–281.

⁸⁴ On the perception of Bulgarians in Byzantine sources, see *Angelov*, *Bŭlgariia i Bŭlgarite*.

⁸⁵ Leonis diaconi *Historiae*, 61, 103–104. Michael Attaleiates notes that the real name of the Moesi is Bulgarians (ἰδικὴ προσγορία τὸ τῶν Βουλγάρων καθέστηκεν ὄνομα), *Attaliatae Historia*, 8. On the complexity of the term Macedonia, which Byzantine authors usually reserve for the theme of Macedonia, cf. *Koder*, *Macedonians*, 12–28; *Tarnanidis*, *Macedonians*, 29–49; *Smythe*, *Macedonians*, 69–78.

⁸⁶ On the ethnonyms Χουμάνοι and Χουνάβοι cf. *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 153 n. 83.

⁸⁷ Leonis diaconi *Historiae*, 103. In the 14th century, Nikephoros Gregoras claims that the Bulgarians, previously called Scythians, were named after the Bulgas River and, during the Iconoclasm, crossed the Danube, spreading to both provinces of Moesia, *Greg. I*, 27. For the perception of the term Bulgaria in the works of earlier Byzantine authors, see *Komatina*, *Pojam Bugarske*, 41–56.

⁸⁸ *Attaliatae Historia*, 8, 24, 66, 68, 177, 178, 180; *Skyl.* 288, 289, 295, 298, 300, 344, 349, 359410, 414 etc; *Zon.* 495, 513, 523, 529, 548 etc; *Psellos*, *Chronographia* 70–77; *Alexiad.* 28, 69, 210, 242, 244, 383; *Manassis*, 316, 317, 319; *Glycae Annales*, 389–390, 574, 576–577, 579, 582, 589; *Acrop.* 19–22, 33, 41–43, 53, 58 etc; *Pach. I*, 59, 191, 209, 243, 247, 279, 301, 303, 311; *II*, 393, 403; *Greg. I*, 14, 15, 16, 26, 27, 28, 29, 55, 56, 60, 61, 99, 116.

⁸⁹ Anna Komnene uses the term Vlachs (Vlachoi) for the nomadic population of Bulgaria, *Alexiad.* 154, 242, 286, 287; *Gyoni*, *Le nom de "Vlahoi"*, 241–252.

⁹⁰ *Chon.*, 368, 371, 373, 374, 394, 397, 398, 399, 428, 429, 434, 435, 436, 437, 446, 447, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 487, 499, 502, 504, 506, 509, 522, 613, 614, 618, 619, 621, 623, 624, 627, 629, 629, 634, 635, 636, 645, 646, 649. The role of Vlachs in the rebellion of the brothers Peter and Asen, their origin, and the character of the Second Bulgarian Empire have been discussed at length; see *Bozhilov*, *Familiia ta na Asenevci*, 12, n. 19. Another notable contribution is *Wolff*, *Second Bulgarian Empire*, 167–206, which does not offer a precise enough reading of Choniates' statement on the use of the ethnonyms denoting Bulgarians, n. 39 and 41, 183–184.

Moesi and Bulgarians under one ruler, as it had been before.⁹¹ Thus, he distinguishes two historically Bulgarian areas and seems to understand Moesia as the territory north of the Balkan mountain range and Bulgaria as the southern or southwestern one.⁹² Throughout the discussed period, historical narratives reveal a dichotomy in the usage of ethnonyms describing Bulgarians, which, besides serving to support Byzantine political aspirations, also suggests their double identity of a proto-Bulgarian-Turkic tribe Slavicized after it came to the Balkans. This is particularly apparent in the reports of Niketas Choniates, who claims that in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, the Bulgarians and Vlachs still clung to some non-Christian customs.⁹³

In the eyes of historians from the discussed period, the territory inhabited by Bulgarians had always belonged to Romans (Rhomaioi), and the Rus' conquest of Bulgaria was seen as a hostile act, although the Byzantine recognition of the Bulgarian imperial title after 946 effectively meant that they recognized the existence of the Bulgarian state.⁹⁴ Similarly, Byzantine historians are inconsistent in their usage of the title of Bulgarian rulers: Leo the Deacon calls Boris the emperor of the Moesi only after John Tzimiskes, having taken control of Bulgaria, divested him of his imperial insignia at the imperial palace.⁹⁵ That is especially apparent after Tzimiskes' conquest and formal dissolution of the Bulgarian Empire in 971. Consequently, the Byzantines perceived the uprising of the Kometopouloi and Samuel's ascent to the imperial throne as an act of defection.⁹⁶ The pacification of Bulgaria after the conquest of Samuel's state, once it was incorporated into the Byzantine Empire's administrative system, involved getting the local Bulgarian elite to switch sides and local generals to surrender their fortresses and cities, for which they were compensated by being granted a court title (and perhaps something else).⁹⁷ Skylitzes emphasizes how important the conquest of Bulgaria was for Basil II in his account of the events during the reign of Romanos III Argyros, noting that he had to manage the most pressing situations in the East before he returned to his constant concern – subjugating the Bulgarian race (τὸ τῶν Βουλγάρων ὑποτάξει γένος).⁹⁸ Besides, the integration of

⁹¹ Chon. 374.

⁹² On the borders of Bulgaria, see *Komatina*, Pojam Bugarske, 41–56.

⁹³ Chon., 371–372, 533.

⁹⁴ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 103–104; Attaliatae Historia, 24–35; Scyl., 255, 297. On the recognition of the Bulgarian imperial title, cf. Livre de cérémonies III, II, 48.99–108; *Pirivatrić*, Some Notes, 40–48; *Komatina*, Konstantin Porfirogenit, 96–98. However, Byzantine historians between the late 10th and mid-13th centuries are inconsistent in their use of the titles of the Bulgarian rulers, Leonis diaconi Historiae, 61, 158; Zon., 548–549, 558–559, 560, 564–566.

⁹⁵ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 61, 158.

⁹⁶ Scyl., 256, 328–330; Zon., 495. On the Byzantine perception of Samuel's imperial title, cf. *Pirivatrić*, Samuilova država, 133–144.

⁹⁷ Scyl., 342–346, 357–360, 362–365, 372, 412–413. On the integration of the Bulgarian elite into the Empire's administrative system, see *Pirivatrić*, Samuilova država, 128–129; *Kanev*, Emperor Basil II, 455–473; *Dudek*, Elity bulgarskie, 43–71; *Krsmanović*, Bulgarian Elite.

⁹⁸ Scyl., 378.

the local populations involved including Bulgarians in the Byzantine army⁹⁹ and arranging political marriages, both dynastic ones and those between members of the local and the Byzantine elites.¹⁰⁰ Political marriages were a tried-and-tested tool of Byzantine diplomacy and could be arranged out of various motives. The Byzantines expected that their princesses would help them establish their political and cultural influence in the lands where they were sent. On the other hand, for the “barbarians” that wed them, Byzantine wives added to their authority as rulers in their native lands. After Samuel’s realm was destroyed and its territory restructured into themes and thereby incorporated into the Byzantine administrative system, historical accounts saw Bulgaria as a territory subjugated to the Empire, viewing the rebellions of the local population in the 11th and 12th centuries as acts of defection.¹⁰¹ Niketas Choniates describes the formation of the so-called Second Bulgarian Empire (1185) as a revolt (ἀποστασίαν).¹⁰² Thus, post-971, Bulgarians were seen as Byzantine subjects, and their territory as part of the Empire until the 13th century. The works of Akropolites suggest that, by the 13th century, the Byzantines no longer claimed to have historical rights to Bulgaria and instead used various arguments to justify conquering parts of its territory.¹⁰³

Bulgarians were portrayed approvingly, as Christians and the Empire’s allies, only when the Rus took control of Bulgaria. Believing it would be unreasonable to wage a war concurrently against the Bulgarians and the Rus and that it would be prudent to get at least one of those ethnic groups to support his cause, Emperor Nikephoros II sent a delegation to the Moesi because they were of the same faith (ὁμοθρήσκους).¹⁰⁴ However, the fact that the Bulgarians were Christians proved a helpful diplomatic means only occasionally because the relations between the Byzantines and the Bulgarians depended on the Empire’s political, military, and economic interests at a given moment.¹⁰⁵ For the historians of the discussed period, Bulgarians were barbarians, enemies, wretched and despicable Scythians, the most pathetic and abhorrent Moesi, arrogant and ruthless, and their ruler Peter was a skin-gobbler dressed in animal skin and descended from three generations of slaves.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ Attaliatae Historia, 66, 68, 228.

¹⁰⁰ Bryennios, 77, 219; Chon. 473, 487, 507–509, 535; Acrop., 41–43, 48–51, 64, 152; Greg. I, 29–30, 61, 99. Pach. I, 59; II, 191, 441–443.

¹⁰¹ Scyl., 409, 412; Zon., 599. Michael Psellos notes that the Bulgarians shook of the yoke of Roman rule and took the freedom of independence for themselves, Psellos, Chronographia, 70–71.

¹⁰² Chon., 368–369.

¹⁰³ Acrop., 76–77, 107–109.

¹⁰⁴ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 79–80, 136, 136. George Akropolites seems to speak of Bulgarians as Christians with a dose of sympathy when he recounts how he attended a special feast organized, as per the Bulgarian custom, by the Bulgarian tsar Constantine I Tikh to mark the Baptism of Christ, Acrop., 175–176.

¹⁰⁵ Kaldellis, Ethnography, 131.

¹⁰⁶ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 61–63, 171–173, 175; Attaliatae Historia, 177–180; Zon., 548–549, 558–559, 560, 564–566; Manassis, 318; Chon., 371, 430; Acrop., 21–24, 114.

Although Bulgaria was Christianized and largely Byzantinized by the mid-10th century, the process of Byzantinization continued in the following centuries through incorporating the territory of Bulgaria into the Empire's administrative system, integrating the local elite into the framework of the Byzantine military and administrative apparatus, and inter-marriage at the highest dynastic level and in the lower classes.

Serbs

The Slavic origin of the Serbs has never been questioned. According to the surviving sources, they settled in the 7th century in the Balkan Peninsula, where they started to form their early states. The Christianization of Serbs, having begun already in the 7th century, is believed to have been complete by the middle of the 9th century.¹⁰⁷ In the narratives from the discussed period, the Serbs usually appear as Serbs, Triballi, Dalmatae, or Diokleians.¹⁰⁸ John Zonaras is the only chronicler to describe Stefan Vojislav as a Scythian (Σκύθης ἀνὴρ, Βοϊσθλάβος ὀνομαζόμενος).¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere, the same author mentions the Croats, whom some call Serbs (τὸ τῶν Χροβάτων ἔθνος, οὗς δὴ καὶ Σέρβους τινὲς καλοῦσι).¹¹⁰ For every one of these authors, the listed ethnonyms, although undoubtedly describing the Serbian ethnic group, do not always denote the same territories inhabited by the Serbs. Byzantine historical accounts written between the late 10th and mid-13th century do not always make it clear which territory this was. It has been established that John Skylitzes uses the term Triballia for Diokleia and Serbia for the hinterlands of Diokleia, i.e., the Serb-populated territory in the Balkan interior.¹¹¹ Unlike him, John Zonaras says that Stefan Vojislav raided the peoples who lived in the mountains and were subjugated to the Rhomaiοι – the Triballi, Serbs, and their kinsmen (Τριβαλλοὺς τε καὶ Σέρβους καὶ ὅσοι τούτοις ὁμογενεῖς).¹¹² Anna Komnene also suggests that Dalmatia

¹⁰⁷ On the early history of the Serbs, cf. *Komatina*, Vizantijska crkvena politika, 261–266; *Idem*, Konstantin Porfirogenit; *Bubalo*, Srpska zemlja, 15–44; ODB 1871–1876 (*J. Stanojevich Allen*, *A. Kazhdan*, *S. Ćirković*, *R. Browning*); *Blangez-Malamut*, *Cacouros*, *Limage des Serbes*, 97–122; *Ćirković*, *Between Kingdom and Empire*, 110–120.

¹⁰⁸ Scyl., 424, 475; Bryennios, 209–211, 215; Alexiad, 53, 130, 225, 226, 252–253, 265, 266, 280, 369, 383; Glycae Annales, 594; Cinnami Epitome, 12, 101–103, 104, 105, 107, 108, 109, 113, 203–204, 212, 213, 236, 249.2.19, 271.18–19, 271, 286, 287, 299; Chon., 16, 90, 92, 100, 136, 434, 531, 532, 608; Acrop., 9, 142, 145, 146; Pach. I, 209, 271; II, 401; Greg. I, 116. After his report that, in 1165, the Byzantines captured Dalmatia, i.e., the geographical region that was part of the so-called duchy of the Hungarian prince Béla Alexios, John Kinnamos no longer uses the term Dalmatae for the Serbs, probably to avoid confusing his readers. Cinnami Epitome, 248–249; VIINJ IV, 87–89. Therefore, the claim that Kinnamos always calls the Serbs Dalmatae is incorrect, VIINJ IV, 86 n. 236. Interestingly, Theodore Prodromos and Michael of Tesalonike refer to the Serbs as Dacians, VIINJ IV, 177, 186, *Radošević*, *Les allophyloi*, 89–102.

¹⁰⁹ Zon., 617–618.

¹¹⁰ Zon., 567, 713. On Byzantine rule in Croatia, cf. *Komatina*, On the question of Byzantine rule, 11–34.

¹¹¹ *Komatina*, Srbija i Duklja, 159–186.

¹¹² Zon., 617–618. Similarly, it is not entirely clear whom Anna Komnene has in mind when she, besides Bodin and the Dalmatae, mentions other governors of those territories (τούτο δὲ καὶ τῷ Βοδίνῳ καὶ τοῖς Δαλμάταις καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς ἀρχηγοῖς τῶν παρακειμένων χωρῶν), Alexiad, 130.

had a composite ethnic character,¹¹³ and for John Kinnamos, Borić (Βορίτζης) was the exarch of the Dalmatian land of Bosnia (ο Βόσθνης χώρας ἐξάρχων Δαλματικῆς).¹¹⁴ For Glykas, the Serbian lands were Diokleia and Rascia (Duklja and Raška).¹¹⁵ However, the terms “Serbs” and “Triballi” were clearly interchangeable.¹¹⁶ Of course, it is unreasonable to expect that Byzantine historians used this terminology with surgical precision. Anna Komnene also reports that there was a frontier between the land of the Serbs and the Byzantine Empire.¹¹⁷

The Serbs are believed to have been part of the Empire’s administrative system until 1034.¹¹⁸ Although Stefan Vojislav managed to achieve a degree of independence from the Empire in the territory he governed, some Serb-inhabited lands remained under Byzantine control. The status of local Serbian archons changed with Mihailo and Konstantin Bodin, who, as the Empire’s allies, received titles from Constantinople.¹¹⁹ Bodin bore the title of *protosebastos* and *exousiastes* of Diokleia and Serbia, showing that he must have been an ally of the Empire.¹²⁰

However, the allied relations between the Serbs and the Empire were always ambivalent because they were seen as unreliable allies who could at any moment fail to comply with their obligations, cross their borders, and raid the Byzantine territory. This model gradually evolved into a pattern: the Serbs would constantly rebel and defect only to surrender as soon as the Byzantine army drew close; they would then violate the treaties again and often flee to the mountains¹²¹ from the Byzantine troops. It would take two or three interventions from the emperor to get them to agree to peace terms. In Byzantine historical sources, at least as far as the Balkans are concerned, this model was reserved for the Serbs only.¹²² However, the account of John Kinnamos brings it to a new level. The Serbs were subjugated to the Rhomaioi because they defected (εις ἀποστασίαν ἰδόντες) during the reign of Michael I and

¹¹³ Alexiad, 265. The term Dalmatae obviously included Serbs in a broader geographical area. For the inhabitants of Dalmatia see *Džino*, From Justinian to Branimir, 164–165 with a longer list of literature.

¹¹⁴ Cinnami Epitome, 132.

¹¹⁵ Glycae Annales, 594, 614–615.

¹¹⁶ VIINJ III, 117 n. 132, 159 n. 255.

¹¹⁷ Alexiad, 252–253, 266. On the importance of the Empire’s political borders, cf. *Kaldellis*, Byzantine borders, 100–124. See *Komatina*, Srpsko-vizantijski odnosi, 9–20.

¹¹⁸ *Komatina*, Srbija i Duklja, 170–180.

¹¹⁹ Scyl., 475; Alexiad, 53.

¹²⁰ *Komatina*, Vizantijska titula, 61–76. *Komatina* argues that, when the agreement with Bodin was reached, the Serbian ruler was granted the rank of a king, *ibid.* 72.

¹²¹ Like in the Bulgarian case, Leonis diaconi Historiae, 31, 62–63, 104, 131, 171, Attaliatea Historiae, 8, Chon. 373, 428–429, 502, 513, the geographical layout is of particular importance in warfare against the Serbs; Skylitzes reports that the army headed by the eunuch George Probatos and sent against Stefan Vojislav by Michael IV the Paphlagonian encountered a very challenging, diffused and inaccessible terrain and was annihilated, with Probatos barely managing to get away, Scyl., 409.80–86. Anna Komnene also notes the problem with fighting against the Serbs in an inhospitable terrain, Alexiad, 258.

¹²² Alexiad, 135–136, 183, 252–253;

captured the fortress of Ras.¹²³ Manuel I, whom Kinnamos portrays as something of a superhero,¹²⁴ single-handedly appointed and deposed the grand *župans* of Ras, ending with Stefan Nemanja as the last of them.¹²⁵ This subordinate status is particularly striking in the description of Nemanja's ritual subjugation to Manuel I¹²⁶ and the participation of Serbs in the Byzantine army in the Battle of Myriokephalon in 1176, in which Kinnamos directly blames them for the Byzantine defeat.¹²⁷ Other novelties in the Balkan policy of the Komnenoi were taking prisoners and resettling the rebelling local population, primarily Serbs, to pacify the unruly region.¹²⁸ Nikeas Choniates, in particular, insists on the treacherous cooperation of the Serbs with the Hungarians, the Empire's principal enemies in the Balkans in the 12th century, but also their tendency to violate oaths.¹²⁹ The portrayal of Serbs as unreliable allies survived into the 13th century, when they were no longer subordinate to the Byzantines. For George Akropolites, they were a race that violated agreements and never showed gratitude to those who had been good to them but, like the Bulgarians, rejected and trampled the goblet of friendship for a petty gain.¹³⁰

In a letter to Pope Celestine III in 1191/2, Emperor Isaac II Angelos claimed that Béla III, his father-in-law, wanted to rule Serbia, which had of old belonged to the Byzantines and had never been ceded to anyone else.¹³¹ However, Serbia's position certainly changed during the reign of Isaac II, as attested by the fact that his niece Eudokia married Stefan Nemanjić, who received the title of *sebastokrator*, becoming the first foreigner to bear the second most prestigious Byzantine court title.¹³² Niketas Choniates mentions the marriage, emphasizing not only Eudokia's right to rule alongside her husband but also that they had offspring, which, at a moment when she was no longer the Serbian queen and the Empire had fallen apart, was particularly significant.¹³³ The marriage was a result of the centuries-old

¹²³ Cinnami Epitome, 12, 101–103, 104, 105, 107.

¹²⁴ Cinnami Epitome, 99–101, 108, 109–110, 192; *Chalandon*, *Les Comnènes*, 255.

¹²⁵ Cinnami Epitome, 112–113, 203–204, 212–214, 131; VIINJ IV, 56–59, 60–64.

¹²⁶ Cinnami Epitome, 287–24; 288; VIINJ IV, 101–104. *Vučetić*, *Ritual potčinjavanja*, 593–603 compares this act with similar or identical instances and associates it with the Western ritual of *deditio*. In Stefan Nemanja's case, the *deditio* ritual was followed by an *adventus*, a triumphal procession, and a traditional element of Byzantine rituals.

¹²⁷ Cinnami Epitome, 299.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 114; Chon., 16.

¹²⁹ Chon., 16, 90, 92, 136, 158–159; VIINJ IV, 139, 144–148. Cf. *Magdalino*, *Empire*, 79; *Kalić*, *Župan Uroš II*, 21–39; *Eadem*, *Župan Beloš*, 63–81

¹³⁰ Acrop., 145.

¹³¹ VIINJ IV, 250–251.

¹³² For different opinions on the chronology of the marriage, which some scholars date before and some after the Battle of Morava, and different views on when the battle took place, cf. *Pirivatrić*, *Brak Stefana Nemanjića i Evdokije Komnina*, 142–143 n. 7.

¹³³ Chon. 531, 608; VIINJ IV, 165.

Byzantine dynastic strategy¹³⁴ intended to make the Byzantine princess the bearer of patrimonial rights to the throne.¹³⁵ This might have been the reason why Choniates mentioned this marriage because Byzantine influence endured during the reigns of their sons, especially Radoslav.¹³⁶ However, Choniates fails to mention that Stefan Nemanjić bore the title of *sebastokrator*.¹³⁷ Given that both Kinnamos and Choniates emphasize Nemanja's defeats, this might be why Choniates chose not to mention Stefan's *sebastokrator* title, particularly because his marriage to Eudokia had ended by the time Choniates wrote about it.

Byzantine historical narratives also ignore the promotion of the Serbian Church to the rank of an archbishopric in 1219.¹³⁸ Like in the Bulgarian case, the Serbs' Christian identity is mentioned just once in historical accounts from the late 10th to the mid-13th centuries – in Anna Komnene's remark that "although Dalmatae, they were still Christians," intended to justify her father's decision to end the war with the Serbs because he thought civil war repugnant.¹³⁹

The Rus

The question of the Rus ethnic identity is no less complex. It is widely believed that the identity core of the early Rus' realm was shaped by Scandinavian settlers, who gradually merged with the indigenous Slavic and Finno-Ugric nomadic tribes. While 10th-century sources still distinguish between the Rus and the Slavs,¹⁴⁰ in later Byzantine usage, the term Rus came to describe those who spoke the Slavonic language.¹⁴¹ However, Byzantine narratives from the late 10th to the mid-13th centuries

¹³⁴ The surviving sphragistic material shows that, after she married Peter I of Bulgaria in 927, Maria Lekapene not only ruled alongside him but perhaps also had the status of senior emperor, *Shepard*, *Maria Lakapena*, 135–136, 141, 142 n. 63, 143–149. This practice continued in the following centuries, cf. Pach. I, 191, 247, 303; Greg. I, 61, 99.

¹³⁵ *Pirivatrić*, *Brak Stefana Nemanjića i Evdokije Komnine*, 149–151.

¹³⁶ *Maksimović*, „Vizantinizmi”, 139–147. For a general overview of Byzantine influence in Serbia, see also *Krsmanović – Maksimović*, *Vizantija u Srbiji*, 41–55.

¹³⁷ Stefan's *sebastokrator* title is mentioned in Serbian sources: Stefan Nemanja's Hilandar Charter of 1198/9, Stefan Nemanjić's Hilandar Charter of 1200/1202, and an inscription next to Stefan's portrait at Mileševa, *Ferjančić*, *Sevastokratori* 168.

¹³⁸ Chronologically, these events should have been reported by Niketas Choniates and George Akropolites. However, George Akropolites chose not to mention them, most likely because, at the time of writing, the negotiations about a marriage between the Serbian prince Milutin and the Byzantine princess Anna Palaiologina and, by extension, an alliance between Serbia and the Empire, had fallen through, *Pirivatrić*, *Postanak Srpskog kraljevstva*, 23, 28–29.

¹³⁹ Alexiad, 265–269, 279–28. *Stouraitis*, Byzantine war, 97, 107 notes that Anna Komnene saw the war between Christians (Byzantines and Crusaders) as a civil war, a view espoused by Byzantine historians until the second half of the 12th century.

¹⁴⁰ *De Administrando Imperio*, 56–62.

¹⁴¹ *Duczko*, *Viking Rus*, 115–137; *Howard-Johnston*, *De administrando imperio*, 320–330; ODB 1819–1822 (S. C. *Franklin*); *Franklin – Shepard*, *Emergence of Rus*, 4–5, 28–50, 71, 89; *Davidson*, *Viking Road*, 57–67; *Obolensky*, *Commonwealth*, 37, 43, 166, 180–181; *Vernadsky*, *Origins*, 198–201.

never associate the Rus with the Slavs.¹⁴² For those authors, they were always the Rus, Tauroscythians or Tauri (Taurians), Scyths or a Scythian people.¹⁴³ The ethnonyms Tauroscythians and Tauri no doubt emerged because the Byzantines believed them to be the inhabitants of the Tauric Peninsula (modern-day Crimea).¹⁴⁴

In historical narratives from the late 10th to the mid-13th centuries, reports on the Rus are scant and, when they do appear, rarely amount to more than side notes. The most interesting ones concern Sviatoslav's invasion of Bulgaria in the work of Leo the Deacon. Generally speaking, Leo the Deacon saw the Rus as a brutal, belligerent, and mighty people, immensely insolent and arrogant, guided by ferocity and passion, greedy and gluttonous, and prone to making promises and accepting bribes.¹⁴⁵ Leo's description of the Rus' pagan religion is the most original ethnographic account in Byzantine literature.¹⁴⁶ To portray them as gruesomely as possible, he described their burial rituals, which supposedly involved human sacrifice. To intensify and explain the brutality of this practice,¹⁴⁷ Leo associates it with the pagan practices of ancient Hellas and the greatest hero of the Hellenic world, Achilles, a person of Scythian descent who was callous, ruthless, and conceited.¹⁴⁸ In Leo's eyes, Sviatoslav was courageous but also impudent, boastful, cruel, barbarically mad, and hot-tempered.¹⁴⁹ However, once he was defeated, Sviatoslav showed political maturity with his efforts to save his men and in agreeing to peace terms with the Rhomaioi, which, among other things, renewed their trade treaties.¹⁵⁰ For Leo the Deacon, all

¹⁴² Still, Leo Marsicanus distinguishes between the Norsemen and the Rus elements of the Varangian Guard in his description of the detachments Basil II sent to his new *katepano* of Italy, Basil Mesardonites, to put down the rebellion of the Longobards in 1010, Leo of Ostia, II, 37, 237–238; *Theotokis*, Varangians, 61. That would suggest that Byzantine historians were aware of this distinction but, for some reason, found it irrelevant.

¹⁴³ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 63, 77, 103, 106–107, 109–111, 126, 129–141, 143–145, 147–157, 175; Scyl., 277, 282, 286–289, 295, 297–301, 305, 307, 310, 336, 355, 367, 389, 399, 430–433, 490; Zon., 404, 435–436, 476–477, 484, 513, 522–523, 527–535, 631–633; Attaliatae Historia, 16–17, 69 (?), 87, 195–196; Psellos, Chronographia, 9, 94, 144, 212, 217; Cinnami Epitome, 115, 199, 218, 232, 235–236, 242, 262; Manassis, 317; Glycae Annales, 553, 595; Acrop. 33, 127–129; Chon. 522–523, 532; Greg. III, 511–528.

¹⁴⁴ ODB, 2014–2015 (A. Kazhdan).

¹⁴⁵ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 126, 129, 131, 151–152, 140–141. John Skylitzes brings a similar report, Scyl., 306.

¹⁴⁶ *Kaldellis*, Ethnography, 76, 93.

¹⁴⁷ Leo the Deacon took this claim from Herodotus and Strabo but added contemporary material, History of Leo the Deacon, 193–194, n. 32–35; *Kaldellis*, Original source, 11.

¹⁴⁸ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 149–150; History of Leo the Deacon, 194, n. 39. It is possible that Attaleiates once called the ruler of the Rus the ruler of the Myrmidons (τῶν Μυρμιδόνων ἄρχοντι), Attaliatae Historia, 69; Attaleiates, History, 159 n. 150.

¹⁴⁹ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 63, 77, 105–106, 139. Leo describes the Bulgarian tsar Simeon in similar terms, saying that he swelled with the usual madness of the Scythians (ἀπόνοιάν τε τὴν Σκυθικὴν καὶ συνήθη ἐπαρθείς), Leonis diaconi Historiae, 123.

¹⁵⁰ Leonis diaconi Historiae, 155–156; *McGrath*, Battles of Dorostolon, 163. On the importance of trade ties for both sides, cf. ODB, 2111–2112 (A. Kazhdan); *Shepard*, Constantinople – gateway to the north, 243–260.

that the Rus were doing against the Empire's interests was a barbaric and hostile act, whereas the things that in any way restored their harmonious relations with the Rhomaioi were commendable. In this sense, the report on restoring trade relations is particularly interesting as, already in the 10th century, this would have been the Rus' strongest motive for entering the Byzantine political sphere.¹⁵¹ That is indirectly confirmed by Nikephoras Gregoras' later report that Rus was a populous land rich in silver and fur, the most important articles in the trade between the two sides.¹⁵²

Although the Rus' lands and their rulers were never under the Empire's direct control, Michael Psellos describes their raid of Constantinople in 1043 as a rebellion (τῆς τῶν Ῥώσων ἐπαναστάσεως).¹⁵³ In the 12th century, the Byzantine political influence on the Rus was limited to involvement in the conflicts between the Rus principalities, with the Empire also having a treaty with the rulers of Galicia.¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, Rus' princes took refuge in the Byzantine territory when threatened.¹⁵⁵

Many historians of the discussed period mention the Rus in the ranks of the Byzantine army,¹⁵⁶ most notably in the renowned Varangian Guard, which also included members of other peoples, such as Norsemen, Franks, and Anglo-Saxons.¹⁵⁷

Like in the Bulgarian case, in the backdrop of pressing political troubles, the Byzantines also established affine ties with the ruling family of Rus. In his clash with the rebel Bardas Phokas, Basil II enlisted them as his allies after he arranged a marriage between their ruler Vladimir and his sister.¹⁵⁸ This was a precedent in Byzantine foreign policy – no purple-born (porphyrogenita) princess had ever married a barbarian before. Byzantine historians seem to ignore the Christianization of Rus.¹⁵⁹ Some scholars have argued that the reason for this is that the Byzantines believed it had taken place in 867, as Patriarch Photios claimed in his letter to the eastern patriarchs.¹⁶⁰ However, the earliest conversion of the Rus, which took place during the reign of Basil I, had included only the subjects of Askold and Dir, the princes of Rus based in Kyiv. When they were defeated and killed by Oleg, a relative who held court

¹⁵¹ The principal motive that led the Rus princess Olga to convert to Christianity at the Constantinopolitan court is believed to have been an economic incentive, *Franklin – Shepard*, Emergence of Rus, 135–138.

¹⁵² Greg. III, 511.

¹⁵³ Psellos, *Chronographia*, 144.

¹⁵⁴ *Cinnami Epitome*, 115, 232–236; VIINJ IV, 42, нап. 89; *Chon.* 522–523.

¹⁵⁵ *Cinnami Epitome*, 236–237.

¹⁵⁶ *Scyl.*, 355; Psellos, *Chronographia*, 9, 217–218; *Attaliatae Historia*, 87.

¹⁵⁷ *Scyl.*, 367; *Bryennios*, 123, 217–219. On the Rus and their service in the Byzantine army and the Varangian Guard, *Theotokis*, *Varangians*, 57–73; *Idem*, *Rus, Varangian and Frankish mercenaries*, 125–156; *Blondal*, *Varangians*.

¹⁵⁸ *Scyl.*, 336.

¹⁵⁹ On the Christianization of the Rus, cf. *Franklin, Shepard*, *Emergence of Rus*, 151–169; *Vodoff*, *Naissance; Obolensky*, *Commonwealth*, 183–184, 188–203.

¹⁶⁰ *Photii epistolae*, 735–738; *Poppe*, *Political Background*, 201.

in the north, in Novgorod, the old faith was restored.¹⁶¹ Byzantine historians also omit the Rus' conquest of Kherson. John Kinnamos reports in the 12th century that a bishop was sent from Byzantium to Kyiv (Κίαιμα), the ecclesiastical center of the Tauroscythian land.¹⁶² Niketas Choniates recounts that the most Christian people of Rus (τὸ χριστιανικώτατον γένος οἱ Ῥῶς καὶ οἱ τούτων ἀρχικῶς), who shared the Byzantine faith (ἔθνει ὁμοπίστω), and their rulers (ἀρχικῶς προεδρεύοντες) saved Constantinople from the Kumans and Vlachs in 1199.¹⁶³

Generally speaking, the Rus only occasionally entered the purview of Byzantine historians of the discussed period. Except for Sviatoslav's invasion of Bulgaria and the raid of Constantinople in 1043, Byzantine chroniclers tend to report events that bear witness to trade, military, and cultural exchanges between the Empire and Rus. Kinnamos, Choniates, and Gregoras all attest to Constantinople's missionary, educational, and civilizing influence on the people of Rus.¹⁶⁴ The importance of Christianity and the Patriarchate of Constantinople did not begin to be emphasized before the 12th century, and then primarily for reasons of interior policy. The question of why earlier historical narratives fail to mention the Christianization of Rus and their Christian identity remains unresolved.

* * *

Historical narratives written between the end of the 10th and the middle of the 13th century primarily portray the Bulgarians, Serbs, and Rus as barbarians. The territory of Bulgaria, incorporated into the Empire's administrative system in 1018, was seen as Byzantine until the end of the 12th century. The Serbian case was more complex. Byzantine authors first distinguished two geographic-political entities inhabited by Serbs, Diokleia and Serbia, whose dependence on Constantinople fluctuated over time. The Serbs were part of the Empire's administrative system until 1034 and then became its unreliable and rebellious allies who sometimes received lower-ranking titles from Constantinople. According to Kinnamos, the Byzantines subjugated them during the reign of Manuel I, and Byzantine influence among the Serbs was institutionalized under the Angeloi in the marriage of Stefan Nemanjić and the Byzantine princess Eudokia and Stefan's title of *sebastokrator*. Although Michael Psellos describes the Rus' raid of Constantinople in 1043 as a rebellion, the territory they inhabited was never under the Empire's direct control, nor was it ever seen as such. The Christian element – the most important indicator of Byzantinization – did not alter the perception of those peoples in the works of the authors of the discussed period. Except for a few remarks – the decision of Nikephoros II to side with the Bulgarians against the Rus because the former were Christians; Anna Komnene's

¹⁶¹ *Komatina*, Crkvena politika, 312–314.

¹⁶² Cinnami Epitome, 236.

¹⁶³ Chon. 522–523.

¹⁶⁴ Greg. III, 511. 16–517. 12; 517.12–528.11.

comment that the Dalmatae, although barbarians, were still Christians; references to the Rus as Christians in the works of Kinnamos, Choniates, and Gregoras – Byzantine authors who wrote in this period seem to attach little relevance to the Christianization of those peoples. Furthermore, they ignore very important events, such as the conversion of the Rus under Prince Vladimir or the establishment of the Serbian Archbishopric in 1219. They do mention marriages, a tried-and-tested tool of Byzantine diplomacy, both dynastic and lower-level, and assigning lower court titles. There is, however, a notable difference. Whereas members of the Bulgarian elite received titles as a way to non-violently pacify them after the fall of Samuel's state and incorporate this territory into the Empire's administrative apparatus, Serbian rulers were usually given titles to dissuade them from launching attacks against the Empire and ensure their alliance and support. Byzantine authors apparently saw references to the imperial title of Bulgarian rulers and granting prestigious court titles, such as that of *sebastokrator*, as a weakness of the Empire and thus chose not to mention them or did so inconsistently.

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БУГАРИ, СРБИ И РУСИ НА ЦЕНТРАЛНОМ БАЛКАНУ
У ВИЗАНТИЈСКИМ ИСТОРИЈСКИМ НАРАТИВИМА
(КРАЈ 10. – СРЕДИНА 13. ВЕКА): ПОГЛЕД ИЗ ЦАРИГРАДА

У раду се разматрају вести о Бугарима, Србима и Русима које доносе византијски историчари за период од краја 10. до половине 13. века, будући да су ови народи у поменутом периоду трајно насељавали или привремено боравили на простору централног Балкана. Посебна пажња усмерена је на начин на који је византијска историографија назначеног периода њих представљала, будући да су византијски писци често различите народе називали истим, збирним именом (βάρβαροι, ἔθνη, ἄλλόφυλοι, ἑτερόφυλοι, ἄλλόγλωσσοι). Употребом генеричких класичних етнонима, али и савремених имена за тзв. „нове народе” Ромеји су истицали своју културну супериорност, па чак и политичку надмоћ над странцима. Они су тако, називајући балканске народе Далматима, Мизима и сл., опонашали етничку мапу раног Римског царства, тачније његових провинција. Тиме су давали легитимитет поновном укључивању ових области у оквире својих граница, а то је истовремено Царству давало илузију континуитета и непроменљивости. Појам и концепт варвара развијао се у историјским наративима, па је чак створена и њихова типска представа. Посебно важну улогу у креирању разлике између Ромеја и варвара играо је језик, а Ромеји су увек били и војно и стратешки доминантни у односу на варваре, без обзира на то да ли је таква представа у појединим наративима одговарала стварности или не. Оваква представа „других” свакако је нашла свој одраз и у приказима Бугара, Срба и Руса.

Бугари, Срби и Руси, народи који се данас идентификују као Словени, били су у блиском контакту са Византијским царством. Њихов однос са Византијом, међутим, био је различит и зависио је најпре од тога да ли су се поменути народи населили на територију која је припадала Царству (Бугари и Срби) или су живели ван његових граница (Руси). Сходно томе се и поглед византијске интелектуалне елите на поменуте народе разликовао, на шта је утицао и сам географско-историјски развитак држава које су они формирали. То се осећа у византијском поимању територије на којој су ови народи живели, али и у терминима који се користе да би се означио однос који је Царство са њима успостављало (поданици, робови, савезници и томе слично).

Током читавог назначеног периода, бар када су у питању етноними који се користе за Бугаре, у историјским наративима је присутна дихотомија која несумњиво, осим тога што има за циљ да истакне византијске политичке

аспирације, сугерише њихов двоструки идентитет протобугарско-турског племена које је по доласку на Балкан словенизирано. Већина византијских историчара Бугаре назива Скитима, Бугарима и(ли) Мизима, а неки од њих, попут Никите Хонијата, чак разликују и две бугарске историјске области: Мизију, територију северно од планине Балкан, и Бугарску, простор јужно и југозападно од Мизије. Према схватањима историчара назначеног периода, територија коју насељавају Бугари одувек је припадала Ромејима. Бугари се, дакле, посматрају као поданици Царства све до 13. века, када се, ако је судити према наративу Георгија Акрополита, Ромеји више не позивају на своје историјско право над Бугарском, већ различитим аргументима покушавају да оправдају освајање делова њене територије. Чињеница да су Бугари били хришћани само повремено је била корисно дипломатско средство, будући да су односи између Ромеја и Бугара зависили од тренутних политичких, војних или економских интереса Царства. Иако је Бугарска била христјанизована и у великој мери византизирана већ до половине 10. века, процес византизације се наставља и у потоњим столећима, како кроз укључивање територије Бугарске у административни систем Царства, тако и кроз интегрисање локалне елите у оквире византијског војног и чиновничког апарата, али и кроз бракове како највишег династичког, тако и нижих рангова.

Срби се у наративима назначеног периода помињу као Срби, Трибали, Далмати и Диоклићани. Наведени етроними, иако се несумњиво односе на српски етнички корпус, не означавају, међутим, увек исте територије које насељавају Срби. Код Јована Скилице се у одређеном контексту термин Трибалија односи на Дукљу, а термин Србија на залеђе Дукље, о композитном карактеру Далмације сведоче историчари епохе Комнина, док су за Михаила Глику српске земље несумњиво и Дукља и Рашка. Срби су, сматра се, били део административног система Царства до 1034. године. Положај локалних српских архоната квалитативно се мења са дукљанским владарима Михаилом и Константином Бодином, који су савезници Царства и добијају титуле из Цариграда. Савезнички односи Срба са Царством су, међутим, увек амбивалентни, јер су они непоуздани савезници који су у сваком тренутку спремни да изиграју своје обавезе, пређу своје границе и пустоше ромејску територију. Представа о Србима као непоузданим савезницима жива је и током 13. века, када они више ни на који начин нису потчињени Ромејима. Положај Србије у односу на Византију променио се током владавине Исака II Анђела, о чему речито сведочи чињеница да је његова братаница Евдокија била удата за Стефана Немањића и имала је право да влада заједно са супругом, док је он сам добио титулу севастократора као први странац који је носио ово друго по значају византијско дворско достојанство. Ипак, византијски извори остају неми када је у питању додељивање севастократорске титуле, али и уздизање Српске цркве на ранг архиепископије 1219. године.

Византијски наративи с краја 10. и половине 13. века Русе ниједном не доводе у везу са Словенима. За њихове ауторе они су Руси, Тавроскити или Таври, Скити или скитски народ. Уопште узев, Руси само повремено улазе у видокруг византијских историчара поменутог периода. Ако се изузме Свјатослављев поход на Бугарску и руски напад на Цариград из 1043. године, византијски историчари пре свега бележе догађаје који сведоче о трговачкој, војној и културној размени између Царства и Руса. Значај хришћанске вере и Цариградске патријаршије наглашава се тек од 12. века, поглавито из унутрашње-политичких разлога. Остаје отворено питање зашто ранији византијски наративи не помињу покрштавање Руса нити Русе као хришћане. Оно што, међутим, византијски историчари назначеног периода доследно помињу, када су у питању и Бугари и Срби и Руси, јесу бракови, опробано средство византијске дипломатије, како они династичког, тако и они нижег ранга, као и додељивање нижих цариградских дворских титула. Ипак, и ту постоји разлика. Док су припадницима бугарске елите титуле додељиване као средство мирне пацификације после слома Самуилове државе, а у циљу њеног укључивања у административне оквире Царства, српским владарима титуле су додељиване најчешће како би се спречили њихови напади на Царство и обезбедила њихова савезничка подршка. Помињање царске титуле бугарских владара и додељивање највиших дворских титула, попут севастократорске, очигледно су и ови писци посматрали као слабост Царства, те их или уопште не помињу, или су у томе недоследни.