



Byzantines, Jews, and
Latins in Medieval
Bulgaria: Others,
within and outside
the Commonwealth

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Византийцы, иудеи
и латиняне
в средневековой Болгарии:
Другие внутри
и вне сообщества

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Professor Peter Angelov, the renowned medievalist from Sofia University “St. Clement of Ohrid,” has published a new book, *Foreign Peoples as Viewed by a Medieval Bulgarian*, following the path laid out in his previous works on images of Bulgaria and Bulgarians in Byzantium and on medieval Bulgarian diplomacy [ANGELOV 1999; IDEM 2011]. His new research uncovers unexplored perspectives provided by an imagological approach to the study of the Bulgarian mind during the Middle Ages, and he raises new questions about the rare written, iconographical, and folklore evidence that originated in both domestic and foreign sources. Angelov chooses as his subjects those who differ from Bulgarians by faith (for example, Judaists and Catholics) and by the polities to which they belonged (for example, Byzantines or Westerners, who, in medieval Bulgaria, were called Franks or Latins). Depending on the circumstances, members of each of these groups might be considered by the medieval Bulgarian state and society as insiders or outsiders. Proving that this situation to some extent was rooted in the regional specifics of Bulgaria, Angelov quotes the evidence of writings by Demetrios Chomatenos, archbishop of Bulgaria (1216–1236), which state that the territory of his diocese, with its see in Ohrid, “from ancient times was allowed to be inhabited by peoples of other faiths and by different pagans, namely Jews, Armenians, Ishmaelites, Hagarians, etc.” (p. 8).

This diversity was further widened by international trade and pilgrimage, through the hiring of mercenaries, and by dynastic marriages. Big cities such as Philippopolis, Varna, Nessebar, Tarnovo, and Bdin were the primary places where the Bulgarian population could receive direct impressions from communication with foreign people or, at least, from observing them.

The religious differences alone definitely did not create barriers between Bulgarians and foreigners, and their contacts with Orthodox Greeks or Serbs were not without acute controversies, either. In general the structure of such mutually cognitive dissonances was multilevel and quite complicated—Bulgarians in the early 13th century stressed their commonalities with Latins as being mutually hated by the Greeks (p. 57), and from the Jewish point of view, Bulgarians did not seem as cruel and merciless to their compatriots as did the Greeks and Latins (pp. 130–131). Being aware of their common origins with Jews from the Abrahamic tradition and acknowledging Latins as Christians, Bulgarians called the former ungodly and faithless, and the latter—“heretics” and the “half-faithful” (pp. 190–191).

The author’s method combines a traditional paradigm of positivist historiography with approaches from cultural anthropology, semiotics, and philological hermeneutics, responding both to the research tasks and to the wide variety of literary and oral sources that differ by origin, contents, time of creation, and character. As he concludes, “in general, the images of foreign peoples in medieval Bulgaria resulted from a complicated transformation of real facts, specifically distorted by social ideas, religious beliefs, and political orientations . . .” (p. 206). To structure these images, Angelov divides their creation and interpretation into two levels: the reality, based upon the experience of mutual cohabitation and communication, and the stereotypes, based on the literary and folk origins shared by medieval Bulgarians and sometimes inherited from Antiquity (p. 75). Connecting those levels with everyday life and ideology in different periods of medieval Bulgarian history, he concludes that the images at both levels were formed by “intellectual and administrative elites” (p. 206) and thus cannot be used to characterize “the specifics of the mentality and the system of values” of different strata of medieval Bulgarian society (p. 75).

The first chapter, “Byzantines as seen by medieval Bulgarians,” brings together rich evidence from the times of pagan Bulgaria to the early years of Ottoman domination (this chronology is repeated in all three chapters of the book). Angelov proves that the Bulgarians shared with the Romans contradictory views which, paradoxically, combined *Graeca fides* (Greek fallacies) with their admiration of the remarkable Hellenic skills in literature, music, and arts. Those stereotypes, as Angelov assumes, could be inherited by barbarian peoples through their contacts with the late Roman Empire and later be transferred to the Bulgarians, who then further confirmed and strengthened them, on the one hand, by communicating with real Greeks and, on the other, by learning more from their widening acquaintance with Greek culture. With the adoption of Christianity from Constantinople and, especially, in the course of their acquaintance with the Cyrillo-Methodian heritage, the former pagans imagined themselves as God’s new flock, thus acquiring formal equality in Christ with the Greeks and Latins.

This leveling meanwhile allowed the Bulgarian prince (later czar) Symeon (893–927) seriously to make claims on the Imperial crown and thus power over the Byzantine West, thus affirming the priority of Bulgarians over Greeks in both political and cultural

spheres. The well-known comparison of the two alphabets—the new Slavonic letters invented by “Holy Constantine named Cyril [. . .] and Methodius, his brother” and the Greek alphabet made by “pagan Hellenes”—was made by the anonymous author of the “Treatise on Letters” written in the time of Symeon (p. 48). The situation, according to Angelov, did not change much in the reign of Peter (927–971), when the political relations between the two states were improved. On the one hand, Peter accepted the title “Czar of the Bulgarians” from the same Byzantine emperor, Romanos I Lecapenos (920–944), whom his father, Symeon, had accused of usurpation; however, on the other hand, this title underlined the Bulgarian political identity that was counterpoised to the “Empire of the Romans.”

Reintegration of the Bulgarian lands into the Byzantine Empire in 971–1018, begun by John Tsymisces (969–976) and vigorously completed by Basil II ‘the Bulgar-slayer’ (976–1025), was understood by Bulgarians as the establishment of “Greek slavery.” The emperor’s cognomen and the legend of the blinding of thousands of Bulgarian captives were integrated into Bulgarian historical memory, “thus engraving in the Bulgarians’ consciousness the image of cunning and merciless *Rhomaioi*” (p. 41). Angelov takes no notice of Paul Stephenson’s hypothesis of the late Byzantine origin of the “Legend of the Bulgar-Slayer,” which recently was persuasively criticized by Angel Nikolov [STEPHENSON 2003; NIKOLOV 2014].

Despite this, the section concerning the period from 1018 to 1186, when the Bulgarian lands were part of the Byzantine Empire, is the most detailed and well-founded in the chapter. While Basil II in his charters to the Archbishopric of Ohrid, which was established in the conquered Bulgarian lands, described the cohabitation of Bulgarians and *Rhomaioi* “under one yoke,” having in mind the typical Byzantine plough driven by two bulls, the Bulgarian negative attitude to Greeks resonated among the participants of the Third Crusade. Richard of London, one of the crusaders, stressed “the ancient and merciless hatred” (*antiquum illud et inexorabile odium*) [LATINSKI IZVORI 1965: 304] of Greeks to Latins. The same argument about hatred of the Greeks as a factor “uniting” Bulgarians and Latins was applied by the newly ordained head of the Bulgarian Church, Archbishop Basil, in his letter to Pope Innocent III, where he in fact asked him for autonomy from Constantinople [LATINSKI IZVORI 1965: 337]. A small paragraph discusses the distinction between the terms “Greek,” “Hellenos,” and “Rhomaioi” used by medieval Bulgarian writers. The first variant was generally used for Byzantines; the second for ancient pre-Christian inhabitants of Greece; and the third—the rarest of the three—was in limited use mostly for contemporary Byzantine clerics and noblemen. Another short excursus concerns the Ottoman period, and here the author seems to be making a departure from mainstream research and methodology. If the folk proverbs and sayings written down by Nayden Gerov in the 19th century could be regarded as the continuation of a long-time oral tradition, the relations between Greek and Bulgarian monks of the Holy Mountain in the 18th century could hardly reflect a continuous confrontation dating from the Middle Ages because these latter conflicts came about from newly arisen disputes on nationality, history writing, and language.

The second chapter employs the same structural and methodological pattern as the first and deals with the least explored and most complicated issue—the image of the Jew and the attitudes towards real Jews in medieval Bulgaria. Beginning the chapter with the hypothesis, interesting but unsupported by primary source material, that “the

authorities in Pliska had reasons to treat Jews as their specific allies in their struggle against strengthening Christian propaganda” (p. 91), Angelov places this hypothesis along with Alexey Shakhmatov’s idea about the popularity of Judaism among the pagan Bulgarian aristocracy; this is based upon the wide presence of the originally Judaic apocryphal texts in early Slavonic manuscripts in Bulgaria [SHAHMATOV 2003: 284–293]. In this way, an early “ideological alliance” (of course, this definition can be accepted only figuratively), in Angelov’s opinion, could take place.

The author carefully investigated various sources to draw a detailed and factual picture of the two-fold image of a Jew—imaginary and real—and to set it in complicated and changing contexts of pagan and early Christian Bulgaria, the Byzantine domination over the Bulgarian lands, the czardom of the Asenids, and early Ottoman Rumelia. At the same time, some aspects of this theme in this chapter might require more nuanced and detailed interpretation. For instance, the author pays insufficient attention to one of the questions addressed to Pope Nicholas I. This question (N 104) reports that “some Jew, unknown whether he was Christian or pagan, baptized (!) many people in our Motherland.” The pope advised Boris to “investigate” whether at the moment of baptism the Jew to which the question referred “was pagan or Christian” [LATINSKI IZVORI 1963: 122–123]. While “active Jewish propaganda” in early medieval Bulgaria can hardly be proved by the historical evidence, the conversion of the Balkan Jewish population to Christianity, referred to in this exchange, is more plausible. The above text mentions baptism, which definitely affirms the Christianity of the said Jew, who nevertheless was under suspicion of being in hidden confession with his original faith. A similar case is mentioned by John Exarch and is quoted by Angelov: “You, who are still tied to Judaism, though call yourself Christian . . .” (p. 104).

While the hypothesis on existing Jewish practices among the population of early medieval Bulgaria (supported also by referring to question 90 to Pope Nicholas I about methods of butchering; see pp. 95–96) does not look sufficiently well-founded, another of the author’s observations deals with the rich textual evidence of confessional prejudices against Jews in medieval Bulgarian Christian texts and images. Motives of anti-Judaism confessional polemics had been an integral part of the Cyrillo-Methodian heritage (together with respect expressed by the Holy Brothers to the Jewish sacred books) and thus were embedded into the foundation of the entire medieval Bulgarian literary tradition. However, the vast and deeply rooted apocryphal literature of Bulgaria (and its iconographical parallels) ascribed to Jews participation in the execution of Jesus, the continuing deceits practiced on Christians, etc. Of course the folklore image of a Jew constructed from both kinds of sources could hardly have much in common with the reality of medieval Bulgaria.

Probably the most obscure and disputed theme in the historiography is the Jewish presence and role in the Second Bulgarian Czardom. While source evidence shows a permanent presence of Jewish communities in Tarnovo and Bdin in the 13th–14th centuries, some narratives contain stories about Jewish hangmen in the service of the Bulgarian czars, their treason in the time of the Ottoman invasion, or their participation in the execution of Christian martyrs under the Turks. The last theme, as Angelov supposes, could have been provoked by the privileged position of the Judaic community in the early Ottoman Empire (p. 134). Another discussion point is the convening of an anti-Judaist church council in Tarnovo by Czar John Alexander

(1331–1371). The story could originate from the current political reality (the czar's marriage with the baptized Jewish woman Theodora) or from European-wide rumors about the Jewish role in the Black Death epidemic (pp. 125–126).

The third chapter, the last and largest in the book, is devoted to medieval Bulgarian images of Western Europeans. Giving a short glimpse of contacts between the Franks and ancient pagan Bulgars, Angelov states that the Christianization of Bulgaria (treated by him as an 'act,' not a 'process'—p. 144) was a "new and turning point" of Bulgarian interaction with the West. His further explanations mention the struggle between Rome and Constantinople for canonical domination over Bulgaria as one of the main factors strengthening anti-Latin tendencies in early Bulgarian medieval literature. In the sphere of direct interactions, the Third and Fourth Crusades represented important turning points, as did the Hungarian occupation of Bdin in 1365 (Angelov dates it 1364) and the Savoy raid on Bulgarian cities on the Black Sea in 1366 (pp. 148–156). Again, while the written tradition, both canonical and apocryphal, followed Greek anti-Latin invectives (mainly transferred into Bulgaria from the Archbishopric of Ohrid), the common image of Latins (sometimes called Romans and often subdivided into Franks and Allemands, Venetians and Genovese) was multifaceted, and included, together with references to their cruelty, greed, and wickedness, some positive features such as bravery, virtue, skills in construction, mining, government, etc.

In his summary, Angelov concludes that "the generalized images [of the aforementioned peoples] contained both real and invented features and played an undoubted role in the social practices of a medieval Bulgarian. Thanks to oral and literary traditions, as well as to real life contacts, the ethnically stereotyped images appeared to be extremely stable and remained untouched for a long time in the minds of the Bulgarians many centuries after the end of the Middle Ages" (p. 207). With some reservations mentioned above, this statement is well founded. Returning to the author's concept of the two-level (reality vs. stereotypes) structure of peoples' images in the medieval Bulgarian mind, it is worth mentioning that, in fact, Angelov's observations present a more complicated model of those images. First, although the images in the written and oral traditions are similar, they occupy different places and play specific roles within the context of the discourses to which they belong. For instance, the image of the Greeks, an indivisible part of the Bulgarian *imago mundi*, is highly malleable, depending on the given state of affairs between the Empire and Bulgaria. At the same time, Angelov's approach is adequate for the two images of the Jews, which clearly have very well expressed confessional roots for the "imaginary Jew" and reflect practices of political and everyday communication of Bulgarians with the Judaic population in the 14th century and later. Second, and Angelov notes this himself, the subject (that is, the Bulgarians themselves) of the reflections of these three groups (Byzantines, Jews, and Latins) are represented as a permanent community in a continuous dimension from pagan to Ottoman times. This abstraction is understandable in light of the state of the sources and the author's approach, but by the same token it makes generalizations from the the research conditional, because the Bulgarians of the 9th century and of the 13th century in fact were quite different communities connected more by the idea of continuity than by any actual continuity. Finally, along with the term "people" (народ) the author sometimes uses "ethnos" (етнос), although this does not seem appropriate as applied to the objects chosen for his investigation: the Byzantines, Jews, and Latins.

The impression of this book is, unfortunately, not entirely positive due to numerous misprints in the references in all ancient and modern languages (Greek is transliterated into the Latin alphabet) and the omission of all diacritical signs in German and French. Unfortunately these drawbacks can often be met with in other contemporary Bulgarian scholarly books on the Middle Ages. At the same time, Angelov's new monograph follows another, this time positive, tradition in Bulgarian publications in which both the research and the main sources are issued together; it also contains a valuable addendum—Bulgarian translations of the main narrative sources mentioned in the book. These include extracts from Cosmas Indicopleustes, Pseudo-Caesarius, Pseudo-Methodius of Pathara, Bulgarian texts from the 13th century and later: “A Useful Tale on Latins,” “Pandekh's Prophecy,” “Tale of Sybilla,” “Razoumnik-Ukaz,” “Passion of Zograph Martyrs,” and “The Life of St. Theodosius of Tarnovo” ascribed to Patriarch Kallistos.

In combination with the earlier books by Peter Angelov, the new one brings together valuable research on mutual relationships, stereotypes, and prejudices of medieval Bulgarians and their neighbors and cohabitants of different faiths and languages who lived around and among them.

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