

THE BYZANTINE ADMINISTRATION IN THE NORTHERN BALKANS AND TSAR SAMUIL

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In its administrative organization of the border on the rivers Sava and Danube, Byzantium followed certain principles that did not change significantly from the 6th to 11th century. One may therefore speak of continuity in the shaping of the provincial administration in the northern and central parts of the Balkans, i. e. in the area of the former northern parts of the prefecture of Illyricum. Looking at that area diachronically, the following chronological unities of the said continuity can be discerned:

- the epoch of Justinian I (527–565)
- the attempt of John Tzimiskes (969–976) to reoccupy the Balkan area
- the epoch of Byzantine-Bulgarian wars in the time of Samuil and his heirs, and, finally,
- administrative organization in the time of Basil II (976–1025).

In all of these periods, Byzantium tried to gain control over the northern parts of the Balkan Peninsula, basing its efforts upon established principles.

In the time of Justinian I, North Illyricum occupied a central place in the conception of the defense of the Balkans¹. This is reflected in the extensive and long-lasting works, either new or reparatory ones, on the fortification system, which were not reduced to mere construction and establishment of the *limes* as a boundary line, but were conducted, too, in the inner areas². These works were carried out in order to fortify the most important strategic points in the wider hinterland of the Danube frontier³. The system was based

¹ Љ. Максимовић. Северни Илирик у VI веку (L'Illyricum Septentrional au VIe siècle). – ЗРВИ 19 (1980), с. 38–39.

² Only Thrace had more fortified points than Illyricum, Максимовић. Илирик, с. 39, н. 109.

³ Ђ. Stričević. Uvod u ispitivanje unutrašnjosti romejskog limesa u Iliriku. – Limes u Jugoslaviji I. Beograd 1961, 177–179; Максимовић. Илирик, с. 38, н. 90; idem. Prokops Schrift *De aedificiis* als toponomastische Quelle, in: Byzantina Mediterranea. Festschrift für Johannes Koder zum 65. Geburtstag, edd. K. Belke-E. Kislinger-A. Külzer-M.A. Stassinopoulou. Wien – Köln – Weimar 2007, S. 407–416; М. Милинковић. Мрежа насеља и њихова структура на северу Илирика у 6. веку – археолошки подаци. – In: Византијски свет на Балкану II, изд. Б. Крсмановић, Љ. Максимовић, Р. Радић. Београд 2012, с. 299–311.

on fortified places, significant cities whose strategic positions enabled the establishment and maintenance of control over a wider area.

Several characteristics can be discerned in Justinian's concept of defense. First, it should be noted that the defensive policy was based on *defense-in-depth*⁴. It is known that the river Danube did not represent an unsurpassable obstacle, all the more because it would have been often frozen during the winter, so it could, *de facto*, often be treated as a land border⁵.

The fortified places were mostly a result of the policy of renewal. Iustiniana Prima belongs among the few cities whose emergence is connected to the reign of Justinian. That city was assigned a manifold role of military, administrative and church center in Illyricum, especially in North Illyricum, as is testified in Justinian's famous Novel XI, issued in April 535⁶. Already at that time Byzantium relied on the restoration and strengthening of the ecclesiastical organization in its efforts to establish and organize its own authority in the Balkans. This is confirmed by the fact that in the territories that had been very affected by the barbarian incursions, the mere survival of the Byzantine church organization was at stake⁷. This is also confirmed by the role that was allotted in the time of Justinian to Iustiniana Prima in Illyricum and by the fact that bishops were practically the heads, if not the only holders of power in certain areas.

The strengthening of the role of bishops in the imperial provinces can be dated to the period before Justinian,⁸ but it was during his reign that bishops, in addition to other authorities, gained the right to levy taxes. They were even held responsible for the defense of the cities and their environs⁹. In some threatened areas, bishops were entrusted with control over the entire life of the city¹⁰. This was, of course, a semiformal organization of provincial authority, because, in the absence of some other imperial officials, jurisdiction of the local representatives of power was widened – in this case, the competences of the church dignitaries. They symbolized the presence of the central authority, they took over the role of civil administrators and, when needed, of military officials. Later, during

⁴ Максимовић. Илирик, с. 39.

⁵ B. Krsmanović. The Byzantine Province in Change (On the Threshold Between the 10th and 11th Century). Belgrade – Athens 2008, 201 and n. 118.

⁶ Corpus Iuris Civilis, vol. III: Novellae. Ed. R. Schoell, N. XI, Berolini 1895, p. 94.

⁷ Максимовић. Илирик, с. 28.

⁸ During the reign of Emperor Anastasius, in the early 6th century, the task of procuring and distributing grain in the cities was transferred to the archbishop and a body comprised of local landowners and officials, Corpus Iuris Civilis, vol. II: Cod. Iust. I, 4, 17. Ed. P. Krüger, Berolini 1895, p. 41. It was a decision which limited the competences of the city curias, see Максимовић. Илирик, с. 41–42.

⁹ Corpus Iuris Civilis, vol. III: Novellae. Ed. R. Schoell, N. CXXVIII, с. 4, p. 638; с. 16, p. 641–642; с. 17, p. 642–643; с. 23, p. 645; с. 24, p. 645–646. Corpus Iuris Civilis, vol. II: Cod. Iust. I, 4, 17. Ed. P. Krüger, I, 4, 21, 31, p. 41, 46. Максимовић. Илирик, с. 42, н. 125.

¹⁰ For more details, see: Максимовић. Илирик, с. 42, н. 126, 126a.

peacetime, Byzantium relied much on a developed, strong church organization, which was, thanks to the authority it enjoyed among the people, a guarantor of the successful integration of certain areas in the administrative system of the Empire. This task would also be fulfilled by the archbishopric of Ohrid¹¹.

On the other hand, a reliance on military organization was the main characteristic of Tzimiskes' reoccupation of the Balkans in 971/2. It was, however, territorially limited to the northeastern areas of the former Bulgarian State and did not last long, because of the renewal of the Bulgarian empire under Samuil¹². Available sources, numerous seals above all, show that Tzimiskes' military organization was based on the already existent fortified cities and on the insufficient number of military garrisons that were under the command of *strategos*. A very ambitious displacement of the highest provincial military commanders, dukes and *katepano*, in the area of Thessaloniki, Adrianople and the lower Danube region (Western Mesopotamia or Balkan Mesopotamia), and probably in the area of Ras,¹³ was an indication of the future, more aggressive politics of the Empire towards the interior of the Peninsula.¹⁴

Considering the role of the army and church in the Byzantine provincial administration in the Balkans, one should once again take into consideration a fact already pointed out by N. Oikonomides¹⁵. Namely, in the so-called Preslav collection of seals published by I. Jordanov,¹⁶ no information can be found on the civil officials in this area in the time of the so-called first reoccupation of the Balkans. This indicates that Tzimiskes' administration in the Balkans, in the areas of the First Bulgarian Empire, was of a strong military character. Since it was of short duration, it prevents us from drawing far-reaching conclusions and keeps the question of the role that church organization played in Tzimiskes' administration open for discussion.

¹¹ An overview of the history of the Archbishopric of Ohrid and a detailed assessment of the results of the research carried out up to now has been given by: G. Prinzing. Die autokephale byzantinische Kirchenprovinz Bulgarien/Ohrid. Wie unabhängig waren ihre Erzbischöfe?. – In: Proceedings of the 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Volume I: Plenary Papers. Sofia 2011, 389–413.

¹² In the period 976–986, Byzantium lost most areas in Bulgaria which had been conquered by Tzimiskes during the war with the Russians.

¹³ The Byzantine military organization in the region of Ras is illustrated by the seal of the *protospatharios* John, *katepano* of Ras, Catalogue of the Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art, 1, eds. J. Nesbitt – N. Oikonomides. Washington, D. C. 1991, 33.1; however, the reading of the toponym of Ras has been challenged by: W. Seibt, BZ 84/85 (1991/2) S. 549 (33.1); BZ 92/2 (1999) S. 765.

¹⁴ On the characteristics of the first Byzantine reoccupation of the Balkans, see Krsmanović. The Byzantine Province pp. 132–145, 177–180.

¹⁵ N. Oikonomides. À propos de la première occupation byzantine de la Bulgarie (971–ca 986). – In: Ευψυχία, Mélanges offerts à Hélène Ahrweiler II. Paris 1998, p. 588.

¹⁶ И. Йорданов. Печатите на стратегията в Преслав (971–1088). София 1993.

Existing sources contain no explicit testimonies as to the status of the Bulgarian church following 971¹⁷. Leaving behind the discussions that deal with this problem, we would like to point out that it seems that the Bulgarian church, which had the rank of patriarchate in the time of Roman I Lakapenos, had not been successfully integrated into the Byzantine church organization after the dethronement of the patriarch Damian in 971. Regardless of the fact whether it was reduced to the rank of an archbishopric subordinate to the Patriarchate of Constantinople or was able to preserve its autocephalous status, the Bulgarian church did not become a stronghold of Tzimiskes' administration in the northeastern parts of the Balkans. Byzantine power was more nominal than real during his reign: on the one hand, the lack of military power, as in the time of Justinian, did not provide a consolidation of the situation nor did it provide the defense of the conquered area; on the other hand, the weakness of Tzimiskes' Balkan frontier was due to the lack of the fortifications. The tendency of the Bulgarian ecclesiastical circles to preserve the independence of their church (which is, among other things, attested to by the relocation of the throne of the Bulgarian patriarch from Dorostol to the West) prevented the Byzantine Empire from cooperating with local populations through the church organization. Tzimiskes' administration did not outlive his reign in general, but some of the solutions developed under his reign, although partially modified, found their place in Basil's conception of provincial administration in that part of the Empire.

The final occupation of the Balkans (1018/1019), which meant the establishment of the northern border on the Danube for a longer period of time,¹⁸ undoubtedly put forth new challenges in the organization of the provincial administration. However, it seems that the epoch of Basil II did not bring true innovations: Basil's administration had, in certain ways, united Byzantine and Bulgarian administrative practices, which enables the analysis of the continuity of Byzantine authority in the northern and central parts of the Peninsula from different perspectives.

Principally, it can be said that there was an undisputed continuity as far as military organization is concerned. In this domain of the provincial administration there are almost no significant differences between Justinian's, Bulgarian and the later Byzantine epoch. The main reason for this lies in the geographical configuration of the Balkan area, which, irrespective of the period in question, meant that fortified settlements of various types served as strongholds of provincial military organization. In other words,

¹⁷ For more details, see: С. Пириватрич. Самуиловата държава. Обхват и характер. София 2000, с. 188–199.

¹⁸ The development of Byzantine military organization has recently been discussed in: A. Madgearu. *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube, 10th–12th Centuries*. Leiden – Boston 2013.

political power in the northern and central areas of the Balkans could have been established and maintained only by the occupation of fortified places, strategically located, from which one could control the surrounding areas and local roads. The sources that provide us with testimony of the Byzantine-Bulgarian conflicts during more than four decades of the existence of Samuil's state – the Chronicle of John Skylitzes in the first place – clearly show that Basil's renewal of the Byzantine authority in the Balkans *de facto* led to the assumption of Samuil's military organization¹⁹. The establishment of new *strategides*, territorially limited to a fortified settlement and the surrounding area, mostly meant the replacement of the Bulgarian garrison with a Byzantine one. The new authority on the local level was represented by *strategos*, whose power did not differentiate much from those formerly possessed by its Bulgarian predecessor (in the Byzantine sources denoted as *fylax*, *archon*, *toparches*, *kraton*, etc.)²⁰.

When the war ended, after 1018/1019, the merging of *strategides* led to the creation of new military units, with flexible boundaries, which were commanded by dukes/*katepano*, provincial military officials of the highest rank. Thus, Basil restored and introduced those solutions in the military administration in the Balkans which had already existed in the time of Tzimiskes. However, it is more important to underscore that Basil, in his attempt to secure Byzantine power in the Balkans for a longer period of time, revived the *defense-in-depth* principle in his administration. The arrangement of the command centers of the highest rank under the duke/*katepano* shows that during his reign, as in the time of Justinian, the defense of the Balkans was not focused on the Danube limes but on the areas in the interior of the Peninsula. Along with Thessaloniki and Adrianople, which were already under the command of a duke/*katepano* in the time of Tzimiskes, Basil established the district of Bulgaria. Although the initial borders of Basil's Bulgaria can be discussed (whether or not Bulgaria, for some time at least after 1018, comprised the area of the future Paradunavon), the withdrawal of the defense centers in the interior can be seen from the fact that the residence of duke/*katepano* of Bulgaria was related to the city of Skopje²¹.

¹⁹ John Skylitzes (Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum, Rec. I. Thurn (CFHB Vol. 5). Berolini et Novi Eboraci 1973) mentions 50–60 towns and forts which had a certain military significance in the war of 976–1018/1019. Some of them were continually controlled by Byzantium, but most belonged to the Bulgarians for a shorter or longer period of time. From a military angle, the history of conflicts with Samuel and his successors has been analyzed in: P. M. Srässle. Krieg und Kriegführung in Byzanz. Die Kriege Kaiser Basileios' II. gegen die Bulgarien (976–1019). Köln 2006.

²⁰ Б. Крсмановић. О односу управне и црквене организације на подручју Охридске архиепископије. – In: Византијски свет на Балкану I, изд. Б. Крсмановић, Љ. Максимовић, Р. Радић. Београд 2012, с. 18–23.

²¹ The sources do not attest to the establishment of command centers under the duke/*katepano* in the region of the Danube frontier in the period immediately after the end of

In Basil's administration in the Balkans, the most important place was reserved for the church organization. In this domain, he insisted on the preservation of continuity with Bulgarian ecclesiastical matters, mainly from Samuil's time, but also with those from the time of the Emperor Peter. Samuil's epoch created a territorial discontinuity with the previous Bulgarian military-administrative and church organization, because the focus of the Bulgarian state was moved from the northeast of the Balkans to Southwestern Macedonia. The capital was not in Preslav, but in Prespa and Ohrid subsequently, and the church seat ended up, after the transfer of the Bulgarian patriarchal throne from Dorostol, in Ohrid²². By the establishment of the autocephalous archbishopric, which was independent of the patriarch in Constantinople but subordinated to the emperor, Basil, in fact, sanctioned the existing organization of the church. Even though the Bulgarian patriarch was degraded to the rank of an archbishop, Samuil's church was in fact acknowledged by Byzantium: with Basil's *sigillia* Ohrid was confirmed as the center of the new archbishopric, and the dioceses which once belonged to the autocephalous Bulgarian church remained within the borders of the church of Ohrid. In addition, through his *sigillia*, Basil legalized the expansion of the church organization at the expense of the Byzantine one, as it was happening in the time of Samuel, so that some of the dioceses, which before Samuil belonged to the metropolitanates of Dyrrachion (Glavinitza/Glavinica, Tzernikos/Černik, Horaia?), Thessaloniki (Servia, Berroia, Petron, Vardariotai), Naupaktos (Ioannina, Drynupolis, Bothrotos/Butrint, Chimaira/Chimara, Kozile) and Larisa (Stagoi), were acknowledged as parts of the archbishopric of Ohrid²³.

Relying on the church organization of a conquered country, Basil gained

the war 1018/1019. Hence, it is unknown what rank the commander of Sirmium held – duke or *strategos*. The rank of the commander of the region which would later be termed Paradunavon is also unknown. According to Madgearu. Byzantine Military Organization, pp. 59–88, the sources reveal that the rank of the commander of Dristra/Dorostolon (the center of the future Paradunavon) changed: during the time of John I Tzimiskes, both *strategos* and the *katepano* of Theodoroupolis/or Dristra/Dorostolon have been recorded (see the seals of the imperial *protospatharios* Sisinius, *katepano* of Theodoroupolis, Йорданов. Печатите, nos. 228–231; idem. Corpus of Byzantine Seals from Bulgaria, I: Byzantine Seals with Geographical Names. Sofia 2003, 33.1); toward the end of the war in the Balkans, the rank of *strategos* has been noted (Ioannes Skylitzes. Synopsis Historiarum, p. 356: Tzotzikios); the office of *katepano* was renewed in the 1040s.

²² The transfer of the seat of the head of the Bulgarian church is discussed in detail in the second *sigilion* of Basil II, H. Gelzer. Ungedruckte und wenig bekannte Bistümerverzeichnisse der orientalischen Kirche. – BZ 2 (1893) S. 44–45; cf. Пириватрич. Самуиловата държава, с. 193–195.

²³ For more details, see: Крсмановић. О односу управне и црквене организације, с. 30–31.

the support of the members of Bulgarian social – spiritual and political – elite, exhausted by protracted warfare, in order to implement his measures. This consensus with the local population enabled Byzantium to integrate the Slavs in its administrative system for a longer period of time. The insistence on the continuity between Byzantine and Bulgarian epoch in respect to the associated dioceses, on the choice of the church center and on the name used to denote the archbishopric of Ohrid – “the archbishopric of Bulgaria” – did not, however, long outlive Basil’s reign. In the middle of the 11th century a new interpretation of the origin of the archbishopric of Ohrid emerged, which brought Basil’s “creation” in connection with Justiniana Prima. The neglect of the Bulgarian origin of the church of Ohrid followed the consolidation of the Byzantine authority in the territories of Samuel’s former state²⁴. Thus, the development of both aspects of Byzantine power – spiritual and military-administrative – on the Northern Balkans shows a sort of a mixture of traditional solutions and innovative actions. There were no strongly set rules, but a weak continuity followed by Byzantine potentates, albeit not always firmly and precisely, can be perceived through the centuries.

Византийската администрация в Северните Балкани и цар Самуил

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Статията е посветена на установените принципи, от които се ръководят византийците при уреждането на административната организация по границите на Империята по реките Сава и Дунав през периода между VI и XI в. Проследени са основните периоди на византийски контрол в тази зона – през епохата на Юстиниан I (527–565), опитът на Йоан I Цимисхи (969–976) да отвоюва зоната на Балканите, епохата на византийско-българските войни при Самуил и неговите наследници и административната организация при Василий II (976–1025).

Прави впечатление, че през първия период, на фона на интензивните варварски нашествия от север, се очертава ясна тенденция на местните епископи да бъдат делегирани редица права и отговорности, присъщи на локалната администрация – налагането и събирането на данъци, отбраната на градове и техните околности и пр. Така развитата и силна църковна организация, която се радвала на голям авторитет

²⁴ G. Prinzing. Entstehung und Rezeption der Justiniana Prima Theorie im Mittelalter. – BBg 5 (1978) S. 268–287; idem. Die autokephale byzantinische Kirchenprovinz Bulgarien/Ohrid, S. 396–397.

сред местното население, се превърнала в гарант за успешната интеграция на определени зони в административната структура на Империята.

През периода на реализираната от Йоан I Цимисхи реконкиста в североизточните земи на Българското царство Византия разчитала единствено на военната организация, свързана със съществуващите укрепени градове и не твърде многобройните гарнизони, командвани от стратежи. Църковните структури останали встрани от действията на военната администрация, което направило византийската власт над този регион повече или по-малко номинална.

Окончателното покоряване на Балканите (1018–1019) довело до нова реорганизация на провинциалното управление, при което Василий II по същество обединил византийските и българските административни практики. Установяването на нови стратегии, териториално ограничени до укрепени селища и техните околности, до голяма степен представлявало подмяна на местния български гарнизон с византийски. Новата власт по места била представлявана от *стратег*, чиято власт не се различавала съществено от тази на неговия български предшественик, назоваван във византийските извори *fylax*, *archon*, *toparches*, *kraton*, и т. н.

След края на войната сливането на стратегии довело до появата на нови военни единици с променливи граници, командвани от дукове/*катепано*, провинциални военни служители от най-висок ранг. По същество с това бил възстановен възприетият още през епохата на Юстиниан принцип на ешелонирана отбрана на Балканите, която се фокусирала не върху Дунавския лимес, а върху вътрешните зони на полуострова. Изтеглянето на отбранителните центрове към вътрешността личи по това, че резиденция на дука/*катепано* на България станал гр. Скопие.

Важно място във Василиевата администрация на Балканите заела църковната организация. Макар българският патриарх да бил понижен в автокефален архиепископ, подчинен на императора, Самуиловата църква фактически била призната от Византия, а границите на новоучредената Охридска архиепископия били разширени с редица епископии, които дотогава се намирили под юрисдикцията на митрополитите на Дирахион, Солун, Навпакт и Лариса. По този начин Василий II си спечелил подкрепата на българския духовен и политически елит и това разбирателство с местното население позволило на Византия да интегрира задълго славяните в своята административна система. В края на краищата около средата на XI в. консолидацията на византийската власт в земите на някогашната Самуилова държава довела до преосмисляне произхода на Българската архиепископия с център в Охрид в светлината на концепцията за приемственост с Юстиниана Прима.