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Byzantine-Hungarian Relations in 1162–1167 and the Deposition of Serbian Grand Župan Desa*

The two main sources for the history of Byzantine relations with Hungary and Serbia in the 12th century, John Kinnamos and Niketas Choniates, give two different accounts of the end of the rule of grand župan Desa, and on his quarrel with Emperor Manuel Komnenos (1143–1180). Desa was one in a series of rulers in Serbia at the time, and Kinnamos mentions him for the last time in the context of his account of Byzantine-Hungarian affairs in 1163.¹ The chapter ends with the information that Emperor Manuel put Desa in the prison of the imperial palace at Constantinople. Choniates refers to Desa only once in his text and, according to the internal relative chronology of the narrated events, this was in 1165 when the Emperor forgave him his infidelity and allowed him to return to power.² This paper aims to explore the apparent contradiction between the sources, and to offer a correct chronology and explanation of the events in the wider context of Byzantine-Hungarian relations in the years of 1162–1167, closely connected to the rise of Stefan Nemanja and his family as rulers in Serbia.³

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¹ MEINEKE, A. (ed.), *Ioannis Cinnami epitome*. Bonnae 1836. 212–215.

² VAN DIETEN, I. A. (ed.): *Nicetae Choniatae historia*. Berolini 1975. 136.

³ On the Byzantine-Hungarian relations in the epoch see МАКК, F., *The Arpads and the Comneni. Political Relations between Hungary and Byzantium in the 12th Century*. Budapest 1989. 79–106; STEPHENSON, P., Manuel I Comnenus, the Hungarian Crown and the “feudal subjection” of Hungary, 1162–1167. *Byzantinoslavica* 57 (1996) 33–59; STEPHENSON, P., *Byzantium’s Balkan Recovery. A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204*. Cambridge 2000. 247–261. See also: MAGDALINO, P., *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*. Cambridge 1993. 78–83. On the rise of Stefan Nemanja and his brothers see КАЛИЋ, Ј., Јован Кинам. Никита Хонијат. *Византијски извори за историју народа Југославије*, т. IV. Београд 1971. 144–148; КАЛИЋ, Ј., Српски велики жупани у борби са Византијом. *Историја српског народа*, т. I. Београд 1981. 208–209; ПИРИВАТРИЋ, С., Манојло Комнин, ‘царски сан’ и ‘самодржци српског престола’. *Зборник радова византолошког института* 48 (2011) 89–118.

Chronology of the deposition of grand župan Desa

Firstly, we will explore the problem of the chronology of the fall of grand župan Desa. A speech made by the rhetorician Michael of Anchialos, composed in the course of the Byzantine-Hungarian wars and dedicated to the Emperor Manuel Komnenos, contains some enlightening data regarding the point at issue.⁴ The speech, it seems, was delivered shortly before the feast of the Epiphany in 1166, and it refers to events of the recent past, of 1164 and 1165. The rhetorician used one of the traditional tools of Byzantine court rhetoric, and attributes ethnic names derived from older Roman history to contemporary enemies of the Roman i.e. Byzantine Emperor. One of the important motives for this kind of archaism was the legitimization of the Emperor's conquest of old Roman provinces which had been named after barbarian peoples.⁵ So, the rhetorician used certain old ethnic names in the singular to denote contemporary peoples and their rulers: in his parlance 'the Dacian' (ὁ Δάξ) was the grand župan of Serbia and 'the Peonian' (ὁ Παίων) was the king of Hungary.⁶ A part of the speech is related to a Dacian as the ruler of Serbia, and his defection from the realm of the Roman i.e. Byzantine Emperor and subjugation to the Peonian, the ruler of Hungary, which ended after the intervention of the Roman Emperor and the new subjugation of the Dacian who, from then onwards, became an ally of the Emperor during his Hungarian campaigns. One very significant passage from the speech suggests that an important political change occurred in Serbia: the great Emperor entrusted authority to a new ruler, who was accepted there. Moreover, Michael of Anchialos adds that this was a precondition for the success of the campaign against the Paionians.⁷ There has been some confusion regarding the identification of the mentioned but unnamed person. It may be concluded that the deposed individual was certainly Desa, while the new ruler must have been Tihomir, the elder brother of Stefan Nemanja. Stefan Nemanja himself must be excluded as a possibility, since it is known that he came to power by usurpation and was

⁴ BROWNING, R. (ed.): *A New Source in Byzantine-Hungarian Relations in the Twelfth Century. Balkan Studies* 2/2 (1961) 173–214 (= Michael of Anchialos). For the date see MARK (n. 3) 101–103; MAGDALINO (n. 3) 81.

⁵ KALDELLIS, A.: *Ethnography after Antiquity. Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature*. Philadelphia 2013. 112–113.

⁶ DARKÓ, E.: Die auf die Ungarn bezüglichen Volksnamen bei den Byzantiner. *Byzantische Zeitschrift* 21 (1912) 472–487; 484–485; MORAVCSIK, GY.: Die archaisierenden Namen der Ungarn in Byzanz. *Byzantische Zeitschrift* 30 (1929–1930) 247–253; 248–249.

⁷ Mich. Anch. 201.

only recognized by Manuel Komnenos as the ruler subsequently, most probably not until the autumn of 1168.⁸ The date of the performance of the speech and the internal chronology of the events described in it suggests that Desa has been deposed before the mid of 1165 approximately (before the emperor left Sofia and arrived at the Danube in June), which should be the moment of the installation of Tihomir as the ruler of Serbia too. Could this be helpful to resolve the problem of the apparent contradiction of the data on the destiny of Desa in the works of Kinnamos and Choniates?

The historical context of the fall of Desa

We should reconsider some important aspects of the wider historical context at the time when the rule of Desa as grand župan of Serbia ended. Actually, little is known about the period of Desa's rule over Serbia, either about the internal politics of the state, or about its place in the highly complex relations between Hungary and Byzantium in the mid twelfth century. I will not summarize here what the sources have to tell us, or what conclusions have been derived upon them.⁹ Rather, I would like to stress the general observation that an exploration of the rhythm of events and changes in Byzantine-Hungarian relations at the time is of crucial importance if we are to gain a better appreciation of how they were or could have been connected to events in Serbia. One event where a clear connection does seem to exist is the case of the fall of Desa.

A new period in Byzantine-Hungarian relations started after the death of the Hungarian king Geza II, in May 1162, when the question of who was to succeed him became moot.¹⁰ The throne was inherited by Geza's son, Stephen III, supported by a majority of the nobles. His adversaries were the brothers of the late king, Ladislaus and Stephen (the future Stephen IV), supported by

⁸ BROWNING (п. 4) 179; ФЕРЈАНЧИЋ, Б.: Михаило Анхијалски. *Византијски извори за историју народа Југославије*, т. IV. Београд 1971. 204–205 п. 20; BLANGEZ-MALAMUT E. – SACOUROS M.: L' image des Serbes dans la rethorique byzantine de la seconde moitié du XIIe siècle. *Byzantium. Identity, Image, Influence. XIX International Congress of Byzantine Studies*. Copenhagen 18–24 August 1996, Major Papers, ed. K. FLEDELIUS, Copenhagen 1996, 97–122, 110–111; FINE JR., J. V. A.: *The Late Medieval Balkans: a Critical Survey from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest*. Ann Arbor, Michigan 1987. 3; ПИРИВАТРИЋ С.: Прилог хронологији почетка Немањине власти. *Зборник радова византолошког института* 29–30 (1991) 125–136: 131–132; STEPHENSON *Byzantium's Balkan Recovery* (п. 3) 267.

⁹ КАЛИЋ СРПСКИ велики жупани (п. 3) 206–208; ЖИВКОВИЋ, Т.: Портрети српских владара (IX – XII). Београд 2006. 141–152.

¹⁰ МАКК (п. 3) 79f; STEPHENSON Manuel I Comnenus (п. 3) 33–59; STEPHENSON *Byzantium's Balkan Recovery* (п. 3) 247f.

the Byzantine Emperor Manuel Komnenos. Ladislaus became king with the aid of the Emperor in July 1162, but a new crisis erupted when he died some months later, in January 1163. Ladislaus' brother became the new king Stephen IV, but he was strongly opposed by the supporters of Stephen III. After the battle of Székesfehérvár in July 1163 the Byzantine candidate Stephen IV lost power and Stephen III was restored to the throne, with the decisive help of the king of Bohemia. After this Manuel Komnenos changed his policy towards the pretenders to the Hungarian throne. The Emperor's new protegee was Bela, the younger brother of Stephen III, who, with the consent of his brother the king, was betrothed to the Emperor's daughter Maria and gained the newly invented Byzantine court title of despot at the end of 1163.¹¹ Bela was expected to rule over a duchy that had been promised to him by his father, comprising of territories in Dalmatia and Pannonia, but his brother denied him these rights, which triggered a new Byzantine-Hungarian conflict in 1164. Manuel Komnenos ceased to support Stephen IV as a pretender to the throne for some time, but he did not stop supporting him as the backbone of his policy in Hungary. The area where Stephen IV was most active was the territory of Syrmium, where not only he, but the Emperor as well had many supporters due to the fact that the inhabitants were predominantly Greek Orthodox Christians. There is no need to give a detailed account on the adventures of Stephen IV during the following period. He once more became the Byzantine Emperor's candidate to replace Stephen III during the Byzantine-Hungarian wars over the lands that belonged to Bela's patrimony in 1165, and it remained so until his death in Zemun (Zemlin) in April 1165, when he was poisoned by supporters of Stephen III.¹²

At the time when king Geza II died (May 31, 1162), the ruler of Serbia was grand župan Uroš II. During that same year he was succeeded by his younger brother Beloš, invested by the Byzantine Emperor, who did not remain long in power – as we learn from Kinnamos – and who was finally succeeded by Desa, the youngest of the brothers.¹³ They were all uncles of the late king and his brothers, since their sister Jelena (Helen) was married to Bela the Blind, the father of Geza II, Stephen IV and Ladislaus II, before Bela became the king of Hungary. Among them it was Beloš who played a very important role in Hungary in the

¹¹ FARKAS, Z. On the Betrothal of Bela-Alexius. *Acta Antiqua Hungarica* 44 (2004) 365–373.

¹² ΕΦΘΥΜΙΑΔΙΣ, S.: Niketas Choniates and Ioannis Kinnamos: the Poisoning of Stephen IV of Hungary (13 April, 1165), *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 101 (2008) 21–28.

¹³ КАЛИЋ Српски велики жупани (п. 3) 207; КАЛИЋ, Ј.: Бан Белош. *ЗРВИ* 36 (1997) 63–81; ЖИВКОВИЋ (п. 9) 133–153.

middle of the 12th century. He held the position of *comes palatinus* in Hungary and exercised great influence over its foreign policy. As it seems, he returned to Serbia only in 1157. After his brief reign in Serbia he became a supporter of Stephen IV and is mentioned, together with other witnesses of the document, using his title of ban in the only charter of the king, dating from 1163, at the time when Beloš's brother Desa was already occupying the position of grand župan.¹⁴ The political changes in Hungary most probably influenced changes in the sequence of the Serbian rulers, and it seems important to note that Beloš was a supporter of the Byzantine candidate Stephen IV, while his successor Desa, at least after the defeat of Stephen IV at Székesfehérvár in July 1163, opted for Stephen III.

According to Kinnamos, when Manuel Komnenos summoned Desa to join him in the campaign against Stephen III, Desa delayed to obey, continually postponing his arrival. When the emperor arrived at his military camp in the vicinity of Niš (Naisus), in the summer of 1163, Desa perceived the danger that hung over him and arrived there with his troops. He demonstrated his loyalty to Stephen III publicly, addressing him openly as his "lord" (...κύριον αὐτῶν διαφανῶν ὀνομάσας) in the presence of witnesses who reported the case to the Emperor. Desa is reported as having negotiated with the Germans a matrimonial alliance through a German princess who he would eventually have married. The Emperor criticized Desa for not rendering back to him the territory of Dendra, which had considerable local importance, something he was obliged to do as an imperial vassal. Manuel finally summoned Desa to the vassal court and sat in judgement over him as his lord. Kinnamos says: "Learning this (sc. that Desa had called the Hungarian king his lord), the Emperor decided not to hesitate, and summoned him to trial; when he was convicted, since accusers and accomplices stood face to face and displayed the man's faithlessness, he (sc. the Emperor) then kept him securely, without dishonor... dispatching him to Byzantion a little later, he made him prisoner in the palace". Afterwards the historian goes back to his central figure, the Emperor, and narrates on how Manuel went from Niš to the Danube and Belgrade, to give further support to Stephen IV.¹⁵ The relations of Manuel Komnenos with Desa must, to a significant degree, have been determined by the political and family connections that the latter had with the royal family of Hungary.

¹⁴ МАКК (п. 3) 83–84; КАЛИБЪ (п. 13) 78.

¹⁵ Cinn. *epit.* 214; the translated passage: *Deeds of John and Manuel Komnenos by John Kinnamos*. transl. CH. M. BRAND. New York 1976. 162.

Despite the fact that Desa repeatedly sided (and was supported by) Hungarian kings at certain stages in the Byzantine-Hungarian conflicts (for example in 1153–1155) and again in 1163, he was considered an important person for Byzantine interests in the region, and the Emperor hesitated to remove him from power in Serbia, or exclude him while the conflict was still running on.¹⁶ We should take into account the specific, in essence indeterminate value of certain expressions that Byzantine writers often used to refer at face value to the fact that something happened, “a short time afterwards”. To put it another way, the comment made by Kinnamos that the Emperor send Desa to Constantinople “a little later” (ὀλίγω δ’ ὕστερον) should not be understood as necessarily relating to the same year. Following this path of inquiry, we may conclude that by using this expression the writer actually meant that Desa was deposed sometime after the trial, which, from Kinnamos’ point of view, could be an undetermined reference to the decisive year of 1165. When Stephen III took Syrmium in early 1165, Manuel Komnenos started the preparations to regain his suzerainty over the province, but in the meantime his candidate Stephen IV was murdered in Zemun in April of that year. For Manuel this was a suitable context in which to take another action and after some deliberation to stop relying on the pro-Hungarian branch of the ruling family in Serbia by deposing his faithless vassal Desa and installing a new grand župan, Desa’s cousin Tihomir, in his stead. Afterwards, in the summer of 1165, he took over Syrmium, with the assistance of the vassal troops sent from Serbia, while in the meantime his generals conquered Dalmatia, Croatia and Bosnia. The Byzantine emperor could have considered his war with Stephen III as victoriously ended. The next step was the designation of his protege Bela Alexios as the heir of the emperor.¹⁷

Choniates puts his story about Desa in a sequence different from that offered by Kinnamos, immediately after his account on how Stephen IV was poisoned in Zemun in 1165 and how the Romans won Syrmium. According to Choniates, Desa arrived at Manuel’s camp to forestall a possible campaign by the Emperor in Serbia. As the historian says: “barely escaping being taken prisoner, he was allowed to return home after being bound with frightful

¹⁶ For the role of Desa in the conflict of 1153–1155 and his coalition with Andronikos Komnenos, the later emperor, s. ПИРИВАТРИЋ, С.: Одметник Теодора Продрома. Из историје византијско-угарско-српских односа у XII веку. *Трећа југословенска конференција византолога*. Београд – Крушевац 2002. 327–334; ЖИВКОВИЋ (n. 9) 141–152.

¹⁷ МАКК (n. 3) 91–95; STEPHENSON Manuel I Comnenus (n. 3) 52–55; STEPHENSON *Byzantium’s Balkan Recovery* (n. 3) 253–256.

oaths to mend his ways and never to act against the Emperor's wishes... Finally, despite what he had sworn and agreed to before the Emperor, the shifty barbarian wrapped the leopard skin... undisguisedly approving of the tragedian's words, (he) said: 'My tongue an oath did take but not my heart'.¹⁸ Here the Choniates' account on Desa stops. What is missing is any reference to what exactly happened to Desa. Choniates related the events according to priority, first on his conquest of Zemun, afterwards on how the emperor intended to pursue (μετελευσόμενος) Desa.¹⁹ His account differs significantly from the account of Kinnamos, at least at first glance, so one may be forgiven for assuming that it does not relate to the same events, although the common element to both stories is the infidelity of Desa.²⁰ We may only speculate as to what source of information Choniates had before him. The problem of Choniates' use of Kinammos has been explored on many occasions. It has been observed recently that exactly in the case of his account of Stephen IV's death in Zemun the account of Choniates owes a lot to Kinnamos, with a significant adaptation borrowed from the entirely different context of the letters.²¹ On the other hand, Choniates often depended on the rhetorical works of the epoch, namely on imperial panegyrics, the language and motifs of which are echoed in his historical accounts.²² Comparing the aforementioned speech of Michael of Anchialos with Choniates' account on Desa, only a weak connection between the two can be observed as regards the motif of the spiritual pain of the renegade – “πνεῦμα γάρ, φησι, κεκραγὸς ἐν στέρνοις καὶ ἐν ψυχῇ ἀκηδιώσῃ ἐγένετο” (Michael of Anchialos), “...τὴν ψυχὴν ἐμερίζετο πάθεισιν” (Choniates), as well as the motive of leopard as the personification of the enemy – “ἡ πάρδαλις τὸ ζῶον ἴταμον τὸ θηρίον καὶ βλοσυρὸν” (Michael of Anchialos), “καὶ ξυνέθετο κατανωτισάμενος τὴν συνήθη παρδαλεὴν ἑαυτῷ περιέθετο” (Choniates).²³ Although a definite

¹⁸ Nic. Chon. *hist.* 136; the translated passage: *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*. transl. H. J. MAGOULIAS. Detroit 1984. 77–78.

¹⁹ It seems that a connection of the events in a historical context determined their sequence in the narrative. Otherwise, the intention of the author was to organize his work “in a chronological and thematic structure under the guiding principles of time and order (χρόνος καὶ τάξις)”, see SIMPSON, A.: *Nicetas Choniates. A Historiographical Study*. Oxford 2013. 135.

²⁰ Similarities and differences in the two accounts has long ago been noted in modern historiography and provoked a lot of confusion, especially in the cases of historians who identified Desa with Stefan Nemanja, s. КАЛИНЬ (п. 3а) 62–63. n. 155; 138. n. 102; see also ЖИВКОВИЋ (п. 9) 149.

²¹ SIMPSON (п. 19) 215–224; 219.

²² MAGDALINO (п. 3) 443; 457–458. SIMPSON (п. 19) 229–242.

²³ Mich. Anch. 200,483–485; 198,394 sq; Nic. Chon. *hist.* 136.

answer to the question of Choniates' sources for the story of Desa's infidelity is not possible, it seems that in this case Choniates derived the material both from Kinnamos and Michael of Anchialos and made just an innovative variation on the motive of infidelity for the purpose of an indirect *Kaiserkritik*.²⁴ It was important for the writer to give an account of his moral profile as an unfaithful vassal and to contrast this to the image of the merciful and rather credulous Emperor. Choniates actually narrated only a part of events described by Kinnamos, namely, how the emperor forgave Desa for his infidelity in 1163. At the same time, the historian omitted the rest of the story, that is, the fall and imprisonment of the grand župan in 1165. The question why his account remained elliptic, without a note on how Desa was deposed etc., must also remain without a definite answer. One general observation regarding the presentation of the events in Byzantine-Serbian relations in this epoch could perhaps be helpful here. The primary or perhaps secondary purpose of the account of the Serbs was to build or reinforce the image of the Byzantine Emperor. The fact is that in many cases a detailed account on what exactly happened is missing.²⁵ It probably went without saying for a reader of Choniates that a person portrayed in such a manner as Desa should disappear from the scene with the subsequent act of the Emperor and that, in a record of imperial history, the miscreant's final destiny was not seen as important enough to be reported. On the other hand, it may be assumed that Choniates' evasion of any reference to the deposition of Desa, an act of great importance for a successful outcome of the war and for which Manuel Komnenos was especially praised by Michael of Anchialos, seems also to be one of the tools employed for his *Kaiserkritik*.

²⁴ For a portrait of Manuel Komnenos in Choniates' work and the aspects of his *Kaiserkritik* of the emperor see SIMPSON (n. 19) 148–153.

²⁵ KALIĆ J.: Idéologie imperiale et l'histoire des Serbes au XII siècle. *Actes du XV Congrès internationale d'études byzantines*, IV. Athènes 1980. 144–152.