

Bulgarian Origin Legends

Daniel Ziemann*

This contribution examines the origin legend of the First Bulgarian Empire, one of the most important early medieval polities in Southeast Europe, which existed between 681 and 1018. The legend seeks to explain the settlement of the Bulgars south of the Danube at the end of the seventh century. It recounts the story of a ruler named Kubrat, who lived in the region north of the Black Sea, and his five (in some versions three) sons. Despite his wish that they remain united after his death, the sons part ways and lead their respective groups to different regions. One of them is said to have founded the Bulgarian polity, while the son who remains is subdued by the Khazars. In contrast to many other origin legends of the period, this narrative is often treated as reflecting historical events, with both Kubrat's polity and the subsequent division of his sons frequently taken at face value.

The paper analyses different versions of the story as transmitted by authors such as Theophanes Confessor, Patriarch Nikephoros, and Michael the Syrian, among others. These versions differ in their dating of the events, the number of sons, and the routes taken during the migration. The paper also explores possible connections between these accounts. Notably, the motifs employed – such as the division of brothers and the geographical setting – appear frequently in other contexts, where they are associated with different periods, peoples, and events.

The paper argues that, rather than using the narrative to reconstruct historical events, it is more productive to reverse the perspective and interpret the story as an attempt to condense complex processes of migration and political transformation into a familiar and coherent narrative. In this sense, the legend can be understood as an explanatory framework designed to account for the appearance of similarly named groups, the Bulgars, across different regions of the Mediterranean and Eastern European world.

Keywords: Bulgars, Bulgarians, early medieval historiography, ethnogenesis, origin myths, Kubrat, Theophanes Confessor, Patriarch Nikephoros, Michael the Syrian, Asparuch

Introduction

The Bulgarian origin legends offer a fascinating glimpse into the early medieval narratives, as their historical accuracy is rarely questioned. While these accounts share common narrative structures typical of many origin stories, most scholars are convinced that the tales of Bulgaria's prehistory reflect actual historical events to a considerable extent.

* Correspondence details: Daniel Ziemann, Associate Professor, Department of Historical Studies, CEU Vienna, ZiemannD@ceu.edu.

This article is part of the thematic section *Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Comparison*, guest editor: Reinier Langelaar. To read all related articles, please access https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no24_2026.

In Bulgaria, as in many other nations, medieval history plays a pivotal role in shaping modern national identity. Theories about Bulgaria's origins abound, and these discussions extend far beyond academic circles.¹ The widely known accounts of Bulgarian origins thus play a vital role in shaping the nation's identity. Key figures from early Bulgarian history are omnipresent, appearing in the names of towns, streets, and even as brand names for products such as food and beverages.

The present contribution will first offer a brief overview of the history of the Bulgarians during the early Middle Ages, followed by an examination of the relevant origin stories and their transmission through various sources. I will also consider comparable origin stories from other sources of the same period and conclude with some thoughts for further discussion.

Bulgars and Bulgarians – The Historical Setting

Who exactly were the Bulgars, or Bulgarians, in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages? In English-language scholarship, »Bulgars« typically refers to the pagan period and a group from the steppe regions of Central Asia, or possibly the Pamir and Hindukush, depending on the theory one subscribes to, assuming this was indeed their place of origin.² This group is thought to have spoken a Turkic language, perhaps with Iranian or other influences.³ These »Bulgars« are seen as the driving force behind the establishment of the First Bulgarian Empire in the region between the Danube and the Balkan Mountains in 680/681. Distinct from the Slavic groups who populated much of the Balkans, the Bulgars are considered the founders of this early state.⁴

»Bulgarians«, on the other hand, refers to the people of the Bulgarian Empire after the adoption of Christianity in 864/865.⁵ The distinction between Slavs and Bulgars became less significant after the ninth century. By the end of that century, despite a certain continuity of the Proto-Bulgarian language in official titles and other sources, it can be assumed that the majority of the population spoke a Slavic language, known in its written form – primarily from theological and liturgical contexts – as Old Church Slavonic or Old Bulgarian, which was initially written in Glagolitic and later predominantly in Cyrillic script.⁶ The historical sources themselves do not distinguish between »Bulgars« and »Bulgarians«. In Greek, the

1 Voynikov, *Ancient Bulgarians*; for the theory of an autochthonous origin: Tzenoff, *Abstammung der Bulgaren*.

2 For the English term »Bulgars«, other languages have different terms, like, e.g., »Protobulgaren« in German or »prabǎlgari« in Bulgarian. Beševliev, *Protobulgarische Periode*; Božilov and Dimitrov, *Protobulgarica*; Dimitrov, *Prabǎlgarite*; Vážarova, *Slavjani i prabǎlgari*; Vasil Zlatarski used the term »Hun-Bulgarians«: Zlatarski, *Istoriya I*, 1.

3 Todorov-Bemberski, *Prabǎlgarski ezik*; Lakova, *Za prabǎlgarite*; Deleva-Granberg, *Ezikovijat stroj*; Pritsak, *Bulgarische Fürstenliste*; for a different approach, see Dobrev, *Ezikāt na Asparuchovite*; Dobrev, *Prabǎlgarite*.

4 Rašev *et al.*, *Bǎlgarska nacionalna istorija tom 3*; Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht*, 161-179; Božilov and Gjuzev, *Istoriya na srednovekovna Bǎlgarija*, 85-103; Angelov *et al.*: *Istoriya na Bǎlgarija 2*, 97-108; Zlatarski, *Istoriya I*, 1, 123-151; Rašev, *Bǎlgarskata ezičeska kultura*.

5 Concerning the adoption of Christianity: Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht*, 356-396.

6 For further literature on the Cyrillic and Glagolitic script, see: von Erdmann, *Die glagolitische Sprache*; Ilčev, *Glagolica*; Dobrev, *Kirilica*.

term *Βούλγαροι* is used both for the groups that emerged at the end of the fifth century and for the inhabitants of the Bulgarian Empire in the tenth century.

This paper focuses on the origin stories of the First Bulgarian Empire, which was established in 681.⁷ The subsequent centuries were characterised by a turbulent relationship with the Byzantine Empire, marked by frequent military conflicts, yet also by intense cultural exchange. By the early ninth century, the town of Pliska, near modern-day Shoumen in Northeastern Bulgaria, likely became one of the key residences – possibly even the primary residence – of the Bulgarian khan.⁸ The early ninth century saw significant territorial expansion into Byzantine lands. In the mid-ninth century, Bulgaria underwent Christianisation. The early tenth century is characterised by the so-called Golden Age of Tsar Symeon, which refers to both military expansion as well as the cultural achievements of the so-called Preslav School.⁹ The town of Preslav, on the Golyama Kamchiya River, became the administrative and political centre of Bulgaria.¹⁰ However, in 969, Northern Bulgaria was first overrun by the Kievan Rus and then, in 971, by the Byzantines.¹¹ Under Tsar Samuil, Bulgaria regained strength, this time with a new centre in what is now Northern Macedonia, Northern Greece, and Southwestern Bulgaria. However, after a prolonged period of warfare, the Byzantine emperor Basil II finally conquered the remaining parts of Bulgaria in 1018, incorporating them into the Byzantine Empire.¹² Bulgaria's resurgence came at the end of the twelfth century, centred around the future capital of Veliko Tŕrnovo, located near the northern slopes of the Balkan Mountains. This »Second Bulgarian Empire« lasted until the late fourteenth century and identified itself as the continuation of the First Bulgarian Empire.¹³

The Origin Story: Old Great Bulgaria

Now, let us turn to the origin legends themselves. Two key texts are central in this context: the *Chronicle* of Theophanes the Confessor and the *History* by Patriarch Nikephoros, both written in the early 9th century.¹⁴ These accounts present similar stories, likely drawn from a common source. Both recount political events concerning the Byzantine Empire, one of which involves a military conflict with invaders from north of the Danube, referred to as

7 Zlatarski, *Istorija* 1,1, 123-151; Angelov, *Obrazuvane*, 190-214; Angelov *et al.*, *Istorija na Bŕlgarija* 2, 95-106; Beševliev, *Protobulgarische Periode*, 173-190; Božilov and Gjuzeev, *Istorija na srednovekovna Bŕlgarija*, 85-103; Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht*, 161-179; zum Jahr: Gregorio and Kresten, *Εφέτος* – »In diesem Jahr«.

8 Concerning Pliska: Georgiev, *Pliska*; Aladžov, *Archeologiĉeska karta*; Dimitrov and Rašev, *Pliska*; Donĉeva-Petkova, *Pliska i nejnata istorija*, for earlier residences: Rašev, *Bŕlgarskata eziĉeska kultura*.

9 Božilov, *Car Simeon Veliki*; for the Preslav School, see the journal »Preslavska knižovna škola« and Graševa and Slavova, *Preslavsko knižovno središte*.

10 Totev, *Veliki Preslav*; Milo *et al.*, *Into the Tsar's residence*.

11 Zlatarski, *Istorija* I,2, 587-632; Angelov *et al.*, *Istorija na Bŕlgarija* 2, 390-397; Božilov and Gjuzeev, *Istorija na srednovekovna Bŕlgarija*, 297-300.

12 Pirivatriĉ, *Samuilovata dŕrŕava*; Sŕbotinov, *Bŕlgarija pri car Samuil*.

13 Madgearu, *The Asanids*; Božilov, *Familijata na Asenevci*; Zlatarski, *Istorija* 3.

14 *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. de Boor; transl. Mango and Scott; Nikephoros, *Short History*, ed. and transl. Mango, for general information about the authors, see the respective introduction.

»Bulgars« in Theophanes' chronicle. The event is recorded under the year 6171 from the creation of the world according to the Alexandrian era, corresponding to 678/679 CE. However, scholars generally agree that Theophanes' dating for this period is inaccurate, and the correct year should be 680/681. The account of the Bulgars follows a brief note on the death of Mauias, »caliph of the Saracenes«, succeeded by his son Izid.¹⁵ Mu'āwiya (661-680), the fifth caliph and founder of the Umayyad dynasty, is the historical figure mentioned here.¹⁶

The passage then proceeds as follows:

»In this year, too, the people¹⁷ of the Bulgars assailed Thrace. It is now necessary to relate the ancient history of the Ounnogoundour Bulgars and Kotragoi.«¹⁸ The wording suggests a break in the narrative, possibly indicating the use of a new or different source. The common source of Theophanes and Nikephoros appears to have considered this material compatible with the existing account and incorporated it into the narrative. This new passage starts with a geographic description of the Maiotis, now known as the Sea of Azov:

On the northern, that is the far side of the Euxine Sea, is the so-called Maeotid Lake, into which flows a huge river called Atel, which comes down from the Ocean through the land of the Sarmatians. The Atel is joined by the river Tanais, which also rises from the Iberian Gates that are in the mountains Caucasus. From the confluence of the Tanais and the Atel (it is above the aforementioned Maeotid Lake that the Atel splits off) flows the river called Kouphis which discharges into the far end of the Pontic Sea near Nekropela, by the promontory called Ram's Head. From the aforesaid lake is a stretch of sea like a river which joins the Euxine through the land of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, in which river are caught the so-called *mourzoulin* and similar fish. Now on the eastern side of the lake that lies above, in the direction of Phanagouria and of the Jews that live there, march a great many tribes; whereas, starting from the same lake in the direction of the river called Kouphis (where the Bulgarian fish *xyston* is caught), is the old Great Bulgaria and the so-called Kotragoi who are of the same stock as the Bulgars.¹⁹

This detailed geographical description is unexpected, given that it adds little to the military narrative that follows. It seems that the insertion from the respective source was taken over without abridging or cutting it.

Of particular interest is the mention of Jews in Phanagouria. The Khazars, one of the rare political entities in which Judaism appears to have spread through missionary efforts, probably possessed a notable Jewish element. This observation, however, offers no firm basis for dating the account, even though the Khazar conversion is usually placed before the ninth century.²⁰

15 *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, 356; transl. Mango and Scott, 497.

16 PmbZ 5185 (<https://www.degruyterbrill.com/database/pmbz/entry/PMBZ16364/html>).

17 The translation by Cyril Mango (*Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, transl. Mango and Scott, 497) has »tribe«, but in this case, the Greek term *ἔθνος* is more appropriately translated as »people«.

18 *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, 356; the translation is from: *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, transl. Mango and Scott, 497.

19 *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, 356-357; transl. Mango and Scott, 497-498.

20 Dunlop, *Jewish Khazars*; Stampfer, Did the Khazars convert.

The narrative then moves on to the well-known passage concerning Old Great Bulgaria under Khan Kubrat:

In the days of Constantine, who dwelt in the West, Krobatos, the chieftain of the aforesaid Bulgaria and of the Kotragoi, died leaving five sons, on whom he enjoined not to depart under any circumstances from their common life that they might prevail in every way and not be enslaved by another tribe. A short time after his demise, however, his five sons fell out and parted company, each with the host that was subject to him. The eldest son, called Batbaian, observed his father's command and has remained until this day in his ancestral land. His younger brother, called Kotragos, crossed the river Tanais and dwelt opposite his eldest brother. The fourth and fifth went over the river Istros, that is the Danube: the former became subject of the Chagan of the Avars in Avar Pannonia and remained there with his army, whereas the latter reached the Pentapolis, which is near Ravenna, and accepted allegiance to the Christian Empire. Coming after them, the third brother, called Asparouch, crossed the Danapris and Danastris (rivers that are farther north than the Danube) and, on reaching the Oglos, settled between the former and the latter, since he judged that place to be secure and impregnable on both sides: on the near side it is marshy, while on the far side it is encircled by the rivers. It just provided ample security from enemies to this tribe that had been weakened by its division. When they had thus divided into five parts and been reduced to a paltry estate, the great nation of the Chazars issued forth from the depths of Berzilia, that is from the First Sarmatia, and conquered all the country beyond the sea as far as the Sea of Pontos; and they subjugated the eldest brother Batbaian, chieftain of the First Bulgaria, from whom they exact tribute to this day.²¹

The narrative then returns to the events of 680/681, describing how Emperor Constantine IV's army was defeated by the Bulgars. Suffering from gout, the emperor withdrew to Mesembria to undergo therapeutic treatment in the baths there. Rumours that he had fled, however, spread among his troops, causing panic and prompting many of them to flee. When the Bulgars realised what was happening, they pursued the retreating soldiers, killing and wounding most of them. Constantine was forced to sue for peace, agreeing to pay an annual tribute to the Bulgars.

Patriarch Nikephoros offers a similar account of these events. To better understand Theophanes' version, we can compare it with Nikephoros' narrative:

It is now time to speak of the dominion of the Huns (as they are called) and the Bulgarians and their affairs. In the area of the Maeotic lake, by the river Kophis, lies Great Bulgaria (as it was called in olden times) and [here lived] the so-called Kotragoi, who are also of the same stock [as the Bulgarians]. In the days of Constantine who died in the West, a certain man by the name Krobatos became master of these tribes. On his death he left five sons, upon whom he enjoined not to part company under any circumstances, so that their dominion might be preserved thanks to their mutual friendship. But they took little account of the paternal injunction and a short time thereafter they divided, each one of them taking his own share of their people. The eldest son, called Baianos, in accordance with his father's command, has remained until this day in his ancestral land. The second, called Kotragos, crossed the river Tanais and dwelled opposite the first; the fourth went over to the river

21 *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, 357; transl. Mango and Scott, 498.

Istros and settled in Pannonia, which is now under the Avars, becoming an ally of the local nation. The fifth established himself in the Pentapolis of Ravenna and became tributary to the Romans. The remaining third brother, called Asparuch, crossed the rivers Danapris and Danastris and settled near the Istros, where he found a suitable place for habitation (called Onglos in their language), which happened to be difficult [of access] and impregnable by the foe: for it is secure in the front because it is impassable and marshy, while at the back it is fenced by inaccessible cliffs. When this nation had thus divided and scattered, the tribe of the Chazars, [issuing] from the interior of the country called Bersilia, where they had lived next to the Sarmatians, invaded with complete impunity all the places that are beyond the Euxine Sea. Among others, they subjected Baianos to paying tribute to them.²²

Nikephoros' account, like Theophanes', shifts back to the events of 680/681 and details the failed campaign of Emperor Constantine IV. From both accounts, it becomes clear that there are two distinct layers: the events of 680/681 and the legend of Khan Kubrat and his five sons. The year 681 is traditionally celebrated as the founding date of the First Bulgarian Empire, an anniversary commemorated with numerous events, conferences, publications, and monuments, notably in 1981.²³ The year is also confirmed by a note about a war »in Bulgaria« in the acts of the council in Constantinople in 681.²⁴

Parallel Sources

Let us begin by examining certain inconsistencies in the Bulgar origin story. They appear concerning key figures such as Khan Kubrat. Patriarch Nikephoros refers to Kubrat in an earlier section of his chronicle, where he mentions a figure named Koubratos during the reign of Emperor Heraclius:

At about the same time, Koubratos, the nephew of Organas and lord of the Onogundurs, rose up against the Chagan of the Avars, and after abusing the army he had from the latter, drove them out of his land. He sent an embassy to Herakleios and concluded a peace treaty which they observed until the end of their lives. [Heraclius] sent him gifts and honored him with the title of patrician.²⁵

The mention of the Onogundurs strongly suggests this passage refers to the same Kubrat. However, the geographical reference poses a problem. In the accounts of Theophanes and Nikephoros, Kubrat's realm is placed near the Maeotian Lake (the Sea of Azov), a region where Avar control in the mid-seventh century seems improbable.²⁶

Theophanes and Nikephoros are not the only sources concerning Kubrat. The Armenian geographer Anania Širakac'i, writing in the 7th century (though the dating of his work is debated), also provides valuable information. His text survives in manuscripts dating from as

22 Nikephoros, *Short History*, transl. Mango, [87-90].

23 Bužaški *et al* (eds.), *Bălgarija 1300. Institucii i dāržavna tradicija* 1-3.

24 ACO ser. II, vol. 2 (ed. Riedinger), pars 2, 694, line 24-27; Gregorio and Kresten, Εφέτος – »In diesem Jahr« Ziemann, Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht, 162, fn. 752; for the council: Ohme, *Das 6. Ökumenische Konzil*.

25 Nikephoros, *Short History*, transl. Mango, [70-71].

26 Pohl, *Avars*, 323-324.

late as the 12th century. Within his geographic description of Sarmatia, Širakac'i states that the Bulgarians were named after rivers: Kup'i-Bulgar, Duč'i-Bulgar, Olchontor-Blkar, and Č'dar-Bolkar. He also mentions Kubrat, as known from Nikephoros and Theophanes:

To the north are the Turks and the Bulgars, named after rivers: Kup'i Bulgars, Duč'i Bulgars, Olxntor Bulgars, and Č'dar Bulgars, whose names are unknown to Ptolemy. The son of Kubrat fled from the Hippic mountains.²⁷

Additionally, another passage speaks of the island of Peukê at the mouth of the Danube:

On this island lives Asparuk, son of Kubrat, a fugitive from the Khazars, from the mountains of the Bulgars, who expelled the Avar nation and settled there.²⁸

The parallels between Theophanes and the Armenian geography are clear. Both sources blend history with geography, emphasising rivers, mentioning Asparuch as Kubrat's son, and referencing the Khazar conquest. Notably, Asparuch only appears in Anania Širakac'i and in the story about Kubrat's five sons in Theophanes and Nikephoros. His name is absent from accounts of Emperor Constantine IV's campaigns against the Bulgars.²⁹

Concerning chronology, Theophanes and Nikephoros situate these events in the reign of Emperor Constans II (641-668). As has already been noted, Anania's work is usually dated to the seventh century. Kubrat is also mentioned in the »Bulgarian Princes' List«.³⁰

The story is also mentioned by Syriac sources, such as Michael the Syrian (12th century):

A cette époque, trois frères [sortirent] de la Scythie intérieure, conduisant avec eux trente mille Scythes, et firent route pendant 60 jours, depuis les défilés du mont Imaeon. Ils firent route en hiver, afin de trouver de l'eau, et parvinrent jusqu'au fleuve Tanaïs, qui sort du lac Maeotis et se perd dans la mer du Pont. Lorsqu'ils arrivèrent aux frontières des Romains, l'un d'entre eux, appelé Bulgarios, prit dix mille hommes et se sépara de ses frères. Il franchit le fleuve Tanaïs dans la direction du Danube, qui lui aussi se perd dans la mer du Pont; et il fit demander à Maurici[us] de lui donner un pays pour s'y fixer et devenir les auxiliaires des Romains. L'empereur lui donna la Mœsie supérieure et inférieure, et la Dacie: pays florissants que le peuple des Avars avait dévastés depuis l'époque d'Anastas[ius]. Ils habitèrent là, et furent une garde pour les Romains. Ils furent appelés par ceux-ci : Bulgares. Les deux autres frères scythes vinrent dans le pays d'Alân qu'on appelle Bersâlia, dont les villes avaient été bâties par les Romains, qui sont Qâspia, qu'on nomme Porte des Tourayê'. Les Bulgarayê et les Pougourayê, leurs habitants, se firent un jour chrétiens. Quand un peuple étranger régna sur ce pays, ils furent appelés Khazarayê, du nom du frère aîné qui se nommait Khazarig. Ce peuple devint puissant et prit de l'expansion.³¹

27 Anania Širakac'i, trans. Hewsén, 55.

28 Anania Širakac'i, trans. Hewsén, 48; Zlatarski, *Istorija I*, 1, 103-105; Beševliev, *Protobulgarische Periode*, 146; Marquart, *Chronologie*, 88-89; Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht*, 150-152.

29 For Asparuch see PmbZ 654/corr. (Asparuch – Ἀσπαρούχ); Petrov, *Chan Asparuch*.

30 Mikkola, *Chronologie*, 1-15; Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica II*, 352-354; Imennik, ed. Bogdanov.

31 Michel le Syrien, vol 2/X, XXI, trans. Chabot, 363; Altheim and Stiehl, *Michael der Syrer*; for Michael the Syrian see Weltecke, *Description of the Times*.

Bar Hebraeus, a Syrian bishop (* 1226 - d. 1286), recounts a very similar story, likely sourced from the same source as Michael the Syrian:

At this time there went forth from Inner Scythia three brothers with thirty thousand Scythians. And they came a journey of two months in the time of winter, for the discovery of water, that is to say [water] from the fords of Mount Amôn; and they arrived at the river Țânîs (Dônâ?), which goeth out from the lake of Mianțîs and mingleth in the Sea of Pôntôs. And when they arrived at the frontier of the Rhômâyê, one of them whose name was Bûlgârîs took ten ships and crossed the river Țânîs and pitched his camp between the rivers Țânîs and Dûnbîr (Don and Dnieper?), which also mingles (i.e. flows into) the Sea of Pôntôs. And he sent to Mauricius [asking] him to give him land to dwell in, and [said that] he would become an ally of the Rhômâyê. And Mauricius gave him Upper and Lower Mysia, and they dwelt there, and they became a guard (i.e. a buffer garrison) for the Rhômâyê. Now, though they were Scythians the Rhômâyê call them ›Bulgarians‹. Then these two other brothers came to the country of 'Âlân, which is Bar Sâliâ, that is to say to the towns of the Caspian, which the Bulgarians and the Pangurians call the ›Gate of the Turks‹; they were once Christians and are now called ›Kazârâyê‹ after the name of the eldest brother.³²

Unlike Theophanes and Nikephoros, Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus assign these events – if they indeed refer to the same ones, namely the settlement of the Bulgars who later established the First Bulgarian Empire in the regions south of the Danube – to the reign of Emperor Maurice (582-602), thus more than half a century earlier. Most scholars accept the chronology given by Theophanes and Nikephoros and accordingly date the settlement of the these Bulgars to the late seventh century.³³ Franz Altheim and Ruth Stiehl, however, have argued for taking Michael the Syrian's version more seriously.³⁴ Central to this position is the question of the source from which Michael the Syrian derived the passage and whether it may be closer to the events than the tradition represented by Theophanes and Nikephoros. Giving greater weight to this version, by contrast, could lead to an earlier dating of the settlement of the (Danubian) Bulgars, placing it around the turn from the sixth to the seventh century. The question also arises whether the accounts of Nikephoros and Theophanes rely on earlier sources that may be related to Michael the Syrian and other Syriac traditions, and whether elements of these accounts were incorporated into their narrative of the five brothers. It is also conceivable that the different versions refer to different events, although the motif of the brothers suggests that they concern the same episode.

Among other sources, Michael the Syrian made use of the Chronicle of John of Ephesus (c. 507-588). Of John's *Ecclesiastical History*, only the third part – covering events up to 588 – has survived; the first two parts must be reconstructed from fragments and from later authors who drew upon John, such as Michael the Syrian himself or the *Chronicle of 1234*.³⁵ Even

32 The translation has been taken from Bar Hebraeus, transl. Budge, 84; on Bar Hebraeus see the introduction in Bar Hebraeus, *Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, trans. Wilmshurst, VII-XVI.

33 Zlatarski, *Izvestieto*, 51; Beševliev, *Protobulgarische Periode*, 188-190.

34 Altheim and Stiehl, *Michael der Syrer*, 105-106.

35 Johannes Ephesius, *Historiae*, trans. Brooks; van Ginkel, John of Ephesus; Hilken, *The Anonymous Syriac Chronicle*.

within the surviving third part, the final chapters of the sixth book (chapters 38-49) are lost and can only be reconstructed on the basis of abbreviated and reworked passages preserved in Michael the Syrian's chronicle.³⁶ This raises the question of whether the passage concerning the three brothers might have belonged to these lost final chapters of John of Ephesus' sixth book, perhaps even to its concluding chapter (49). According to the surviving table of contents, this chapter dealt with »laying waste of the city of Anchialus and concerning the warm baths there«.³⁷ Significantly, the passage in Michael the Syrian immediately preceding the account of the three Bulgar brothers is generally regarded as deriving from John of Ephesus and describes how the Avar khagan discovered the garments of Anastasia, the wife of Emperor Tiberius, in the recently conquered city of Anchialos on the Black Sea coast.³⁸ This episode is usually considered one of the final excerpts taken from John of Ephesus. The question, therefore, is whether the subsequent passage – reporting the settlement of Bulgars in Moesia during the reign of Emperor Maurice – might likewise originate from John of Ephesus. If so, this would have far-reaching consequences. Given John's chronological proximity to the events he describes, such an attribution would imply that Emperor Maurice had already permitted the Bulgars to settle in Moesia roughly a century earlier than the chronology presented by Theophanes and Nikephoros. In that case, the version transmitted by Theophanes and Nikephoros would represent a later reworking of the tradition, substantially postdating the Bulgar settlement. The implications would be considerable, as this would require a fundamental reassessment of early Bulgar history; however, such a view is not supported by other sources and has not been adopted by the majority of scholars.

There are, however, also strong arguments against giving priority to the versions of Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus. There is no clear evidence that the passage in question derives from John of Ephesus, nor are there parallel sources that would support a Bulgar settlement as early as the late sixth century.

What does appear clear, by contrast, is that the motif of the three brothers – expanded to five in Theophanes and Nikephoros, who nevertheless name only three of them – points to a common source, or at least to a shared pool of narrative traditions. The Eastern sources underlying Theophanes' chronicle have already been discussed extensively in scholarship. The chronicle as a whole seems to have been composed on the basis of an »Eastern« source, probably compiled in one of the Palestinian monasteries. Theophilus of Edessa (ca. 695-785) has often been suggested as a possible author of such a chronicle, which may have served as one of Theophanes' sources.³⁹ Theophanes' chronicle itself has been identified as the work of George the Synkellos, who originated in the East, then under the control of the Arab Caliphate.⁴⁰ It is therefore quite plausible to assume that such a work could have served as the common source

36 van Ginkel, John of Ephesus, 240.

37 Altheim and Stiehl, Michael der Syrer, 106; Altheim, Geschichte der Hunnen 2, 29-30; Iohannis Johannes Ephesius, *Historiae*, trans. Brooks, XIV.

38 Michel de Syrien, vol 2/X, XXI, trans. Chabot, 362-363.

39 Brooks, The Sources of Theophanes; Pigulevskaja, Theophanes' Chronographia; Conrad, Theophanes and the Arabic; *Theophanis Chronographia*, transl. Mango and Scott, XLIII-XCI; Brandes, Der frühe Islam, 321-327.

40 Mango, Who wrote the Chronicle; Brandes, Der frühe Islam, 330-334.

for the story of the three – or five – brothers transmitted by Theophanes and Nikephoros on the one hand, and by Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus on the other. The question that remains, however, is whether this source – possibly Theophilus of Edessa – situated the events in the reign of Emperor Maurice (582-602) or that of Constantine IV (668-685).

Even if this source dated the events to an earlier period, it remains entirely possible that the later chronology more accurately reflects historical realities, particularly in the absence of independent evidence supporting an earlier dating. What is crucial, therefore, is to acknowledge the precarious ground on which reconstructions based on these narrative traditions ultimately rest.

Another issue concerns the historicity of these narratives. As already noted, the story is usually understood as referring to historical events; nevertheless, a number of inconsistencies remain. One of these relates to the location of Kubrat's realm. As described by Theophanes and Nikephoros, his territory lay in the region of the Maiotis (the Sea of Azov), an area that was certainly not part of the Avar khaganate. In this light, the claim that Kubrat freed himself from Avar rule sits uneasily with the geographical framework of the narrative.⁴¹ Further questions are raised by the richly furnished grave discovered at Malaja Pereščepina (Mala Pereščepina), which included a ring bearing a monogram interpreted by Joachim Werner as *Chobratou patrikiou*, indicating the conferral of the high dignity of *patrikios* by a Byzantine emperor.⁴² If this reading – challenged by some scholars⁴³ – is accepted, it would corroborate Nikephoros' first mention of Kubrat as being on good terms with the Byzantine emperor. If the burial can indeed be identified as that of Kubrat, however, its location poses a further problem: it lies at a considerable distance from the Maiotis, the presumed core area of Kubrat's realm, as well as from the Avar khaganate from which he is said to have liberated himself.

Another source on Kubrat is John of Nikiu, bishop of the Egyptian town of Nikiu, who compiled a Coptic chronicle that survives in an Ethiopian translation of an Arabic version.⁴⁴ According to John of Nikiu, Kubrat was the nephew of a certain Organa,⁴⁵ was baptised as a child, and grew up at the court of Constantinople. Later, he enjoyed friendly relations with Emperor Heraklios (610-641).⁴⁶ Although the Ethiopian version presents the names as *Quetrādes* and *Kuernāka* rather than Kubrat and Organa, it is plausible to identify these figures with the historical Kubrat and Organa.⁴⁷ As Walter Pohl has observed, the surviving evidence allows for different reconstructions. One may adopt a »maximalist« Kubrat, merging all available sources into a single figure, or a »minimalist« version, positing a ruler who likely grew up in Constantinople, maintained good relations with Byzantium, and controlled a territory somewhere north of the Black Sea.⁴⁸

41 Pohl, Avars, 323-324; Ziemann, vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht, 146.

42 Werner, Der Grabfund; Bálint, Zur Identifizierung; *idem*, Nochmals über die Identifizierung.

43 Haussig, Einige Bemerkungen.

44 Carile, Giovanni di Nikiu; Booth, Shades of Blues; Beševliev, Zur Chronik.

45 PmbZ #5663 (Organas)

46 John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, chap. 120, ed. and trans. Zotenberg, 580; trans. Charles.

47 Marquart, Altbulgarische Ausdrücke, 7, fn. 5.; Pohl, Avars, 322.

48 Pohl, Avars, 321-322.

Who, then, of the five sons, who – except for the eldest, Batbayan – departed for different regions? As mentioned before, the second son, Kotragos, is said to have crossed the Tanais (probably the Don); the third, Asparuch, crossed the Danube; the fourth submitted to the Avars, and the fifth moved to Italy. Notably, in the versions of Theophanes and Nikephoros, only three of the five sons are named, suggesting that an earlier version of the story may have only featured three sons. This aligns more closely with the Syrian and Armenian traditions, implying that the additional two sons were later interpolations to update or expand the narrative.⁴⁹

Indeed, historical context lends plausibility to the story with the five sons. There was a substantial Bulgar presence within the Avar khaganate, including Bulgars competing for the position of khagan.⁵⁰ We also know of Bulgar leaders such as Kuber⁵¹ and Mauros,⁵² who fled the Avar khaganate with mixed groups of Bulgars and Christian captives previously deported to the Avar heartland. These leaders attempted to seize Thessaloniki, and Mauros, for a time, enjoyed Byzantine recognition as *hypatos*, *patrikios*, and *archon*.⁵³

The same historical context can be offered for the fifth son, who is said to have moved to Italy. A prominent example is the Bulgar leader Alzeco⁵⁴ mentioned by Paulus Diaconus. He is called *Vulgarum Dux* and reportedly offered his services, along with his army, to the Lombard king Grimoald (662-671). Grimoald, however, sent him to his son Romuald in Benevento, instructing him to grant Alzeco and his people land. Romuald complied, assigning them several settlements, including *Sepinum*, *Bovianum*, and *Isernum*. From that time onward, however, Alzeco was not permitted to bear the title of *dux* and was instead required to call himself *gastaldus*.⁵⁵

It remains unclear whether this Alzeco is identical with a certain Bulgar named Alcicus mentioned by Fredegar. According to Fredegar, in the ninth year of King Dagobert's reign (631/632), fierce fighting broke out as an Avar and a Bulgar contended for succession. After the defeat of the Bulgars, approximately 90,000 people were expelled from the Avar Empire and fled to the Frankish kingdom, seeking King Dagobert's permission to settle. Dagobert allowed them to winter in Bavaria, but subsequently orchestrated a massacre. Only 700 families survived and under the leadership of a certain Alcicus fled to the *marca Vinedorum*, where they spent several years under the rule of Walluc, a *dux* of the Wends.⁵⁶

Whether Alzeco and Alcicus are the same person or not, what matters here is that we have clear evidence of Bulgars being present both within the Avar khaganate and in Lombard Italy. This raises two possibilities when connecting this information to the story of Kubrat's five sons. One option is to read the narrative as reflecting historical events, identifying Kuber

49 Ziemann, *Zwischen Geschichte und Mythos*.

50 Pohl, *Avars*, 318-319; Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht*, 103-141.

51 *PmbZ* #4165.

52 *PmbZ* #4911.

53 Pohl, *Avars*, 326-335; Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht*, 136-141; the main source is the *Miracles de saint Demetrius*, I, ed. Lemerle, 227-234.

54 *PmbZ* # 203/corr.

55 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 5,29, ed. Waitz, 96-97; Pohl, *Avars*, 319-321; Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht*, 131-134.

56 Fredegar, *Chronicon IV*, ed. Krusch, 72, 157; Pohl, *Avars*, 319-320; Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht*, 131-132.

and Alzeco with the unnamed sons of Kubrat. The other is to interpret the addition of the sons who moved to the Avars and Italy as a later interpolation into a story that originally featured only three sons. Most scholars have followed the first option, completing the triad of Batbayan, Kotragos, and Asparuch with Kuber and Alzeco. I have previously argued in favour of the second option.⁵⁷ While it is certainly possible – and perhaps even likely – that such stories are rooted in real historical events, they undoubtedly condense and simplify complex processes. In my view, it is plausible that this is precisely what occurred in the narrative of Kubrat's sons. We may therefore turn to a brief discussion of the literary motifs and the preferred geographical settings that could support this interpretation.

The Literary Motif

Parallel sources offer limited help in resolving the question of historicity. The story bears some resemblance to a passage in Joseph Genesios – the conventional name for the otherwise anonymous Greek author of a tenth-century chronicle. Genesios' chronicle, composed between 945 and 959, continues the work of Theophanes.⁵⁸ He mentions a leader called *Bulgarios*, who led his people to Moesia:

The ruler of the Bulgarians, a people descended from both Avars and Khazars who took their name from some lord named Bulgaros, had received from the Romans the land around Dorystolon and Mysia in which to dwell.⁵⁹

The motif of migrating brothers, however, is by no means unique to the Bulgar narrative. Herodotus (4.6), for example, employs it to explain the origins of the Scythians, tracing four tribes to the sons of Targitaus:

The Scythians say that their nation is the youngest in all the world, and that it came into being on this wise. There appeared in this country, being then desert, a man whose name was Targitaus. His parents, they say – for my part, I do not believe the tale, but it is told – were Zeus and a daughter of the river Borysthenes. Such (it is said) was Targitaus' lineage; and he had three sons, Lipoxais, Arpoxais, and Colaxais, youngest of the three. In the time of their rule (so the story goes) there fell down from the sky into Scythia certain implements, all of gold, namely, a plough, a yoke, a sword, and a flask. The eldest of them, seeing this, came near with intent to take them; but the gold began to burn as he came, and he ceased from his essay; then the second approached, and the gold did again as before; when these two had been driven away by the burning of the gold, last came the youngest brother, and the burning was quenched at his approach; so he took the gold to his own house. At this his elder brothers saw how matters stood and made over the whole royal power to the youngest.⁶⁰

Apart from the motif of the three sons, the mention of the Borysthenes (Βορυσθένης), the Dnieper River, as the grandfather of Targitaus, demonstrates a blend of geography and legend

57 Ziemann, *Zwischen Geschichte und Mythos*.

58 Josephi Genesii Libri quattuor, ed. Lesmüller-Werner and Thurn, IX-XVI.

59 Josephi Genesii Libri quattuor, ed. Lesmüller-Werner and Thurn, 61; transl. Kaldellis, 77.

60 Herodotus, *Historiae*, vol. 1, ed. Rosén, 355-356; transl. Godley, vol 2, book IV, 5, 202-205; Tomaschek, Borysthenes

reminiscent of the account in Theophanes and Nikephoros. A similar narrative appears in Constantine Porphyrogenetos' *De Administrando Imperio*, where he recounts a tale of the Croats: five brothers (Klukas⁶¹, Lobelos⁶², Kosentzes⁶³, Muchlo⁶⁴, and Chrobatos⁶⁵) and two sisters (Touga⁶⁶ and Bouga⁶⁷) migrate to Dalmatia and subdue the Avars:

But the Croats at that time were dwelling beyond Bavaria, where the Belocroats are now. From them split off a family of five brothers, Kloukas and Lobelos and Kosentzis and Mouchlo and Chrobatos, and two sisters, Touga and Bouga, who came with their folk to Dalmatia and found the Avars in possession of that land. After they had fought one another for some years, the Croats prevailed and killed some of the Avars and the remainder they compelled to be subject to them.⁶⁸

This pivotal passage for early Croatian history has, unsurprisingly, attracted considerable scholarly attention. Most studies focus on the extent to which the narrative reflects condensed historical events, and on the geographical location of the »Belocroats« or White Croats.⁶⁹ Yet, the recurrence of these literary motifs also raises important questions about the historical reliability of such accounts. Do they preserve genuine events, or do they primarily reflect a convenient and familiar narrative framework used to explain the emergence of new peoples? And, if the latter, are there at least some elements that might plausibly be traced back to historical reality?

In any case, these parallels suggest that the narrative of migrating or competing brothers fits within a widespread literary motif, one that extends beyond the Bulgar context and into the broader historiographical and mythological traditions of antiquity and the early medieval world.

The Geographic Setting – The Maeotis

Theophanes and Nikephoros, as well as the Syrian versions of the story, place Old Great Bulgaria in the region of the Maeotian Lake. Curiously, this is the only instance in which the Maeotis is associated with the Bulgars, as most other references locate them elsewhere. Why, then, was this particular region chosen?

The Maeotis had long served as a traditional point of origin in earlier sources. Jordanes, drawing on Priscus, names it as the starting point for the Huns. While hunting a doe, Hun hunters supposedly reached the opposite bank of the Maeotis in Scythia. Enthused by the

61 PmbZ # 3662.

62 PmbZ # 4609.

63 PmbZ # 4064.

64 PmbZ # 5187.

65 PmbZ # 1147.

66 PmbZ # 8532.

67 PmbZ # 1046.

68 Constantine Porphyrogenitus, DAI, vol. I, ed. Moravcsik, trans. Jenkins, 142-143, l. 65; vol. II, trans. Jenkins, 116-117; Pohl, Avars, 312-313.

69 From the abundant literature, I will mention only a few of the more recent works: Borri, White Croatia; Živkovic, Izvor Konstantina; Džino, Local knowledge.

land, they reported back to their people, who soon set out and conquered it.⁷⁰ Procopius similarly identifies the Maeotis as the homeland of the Kutrigurs and Utigurs. According to him, these peoples crossed the Maeotis during a hunt, expelled the Goths, and divided the territory between them. A ruler with two sons – Utigur and Kutrigur – is mentioned; upon his death, the sons divided authority and their peoples accordingly. The Kutrigurs remained in the area, while the Utigurs, after spotting a doe during a hunt, crossed the water between the Maeotis and the Black Sea, attacking or driving out the Goths on the opposite shore before returning to their homeland.⁷¹ Agathias, successor to Procopius, reports that the Huns once inhabited the region east of the Maeotis and north of the Don, along with other peoples who settled at the edge of the Imaion (Himaion) Mountains in Asia. These populations were formerly referred to as Scythians or Huns.⁷²

This recurring use of Maeotis as the point of origin for nomadic peoples suggests the existence of a longstanding literary tradition.⁷³ Since Kubrat and his realm – according to all sources other than the story of the five sons – were likely not located near the Maeotis but rather closer to the Avars, further to the west, it seems plausible that the geographical setting was chosen precisely because many other origin stories located their protagonists there. The use of such widespread narrative patterns does not in itself undermine a source's historical value; rather, it necessitates a careful analysis of the various literary elements it contains in order to render it historically fruitful. The versions of the story found in Theophanes and Nikephoros present a familiar narrative pattern that very likely reflects historical events related to the names involved; yet, the story itself represents a highly condensed, modified, and distorted version of what may have actually occurred in the region.

Conclusion

Most scholars have relied on later sources to reconstruct the early history of the Bulgarians, even though these sources rarely preserve a coherent or internally consistent narrative. Rather, they tend to rework earlier traditions, incorporating elements that reflect contemporary political and cultural realities. The blending of literary motifs with historical references has produced simplified and familiar narratives, resulting in the early history of the First Bulgarian Empire being far less straightforward than is often assumed. A more nuanced understanding therefore requires a comparative approach that pays close attention to the specific contexts in which these narratives were produced.

This does not mean that such stories are useless for the reconstruction of historical events – quite the contrary. While they are shaped by widely shared literary patterns, they also reveal how the past was perceived, interpreted, and transmitted within learned milieus. All written sources for this period are literary texts that employ the conventions and techniques of literacy to convey their content. This does not diminish their value as historical evidence, but it

70 Iordanis Romana et Getica, XXIV, 123-127, ed. Mommsen, 89.

71 Prokop, *De bellis libri*, vol. V-VIII, VIII, 5, 1-13, ed. Haury and Wirth, 503-505.

72 Agathias, *Histories*, V, 11, 2-3, ed. Keydell, 176-177.

73 Marquart, *Streifzüge*, 529-530.

does require historians to analyse them from a literary as well as a historical perspective in order to assess their evidentiary weight.

Narratives of this kind serve multiple functions and pursue various aims; they were not composed to meet the expectations of modern historians of the early medieval world. Reading them as straightforward eyewitness reports risks obscuring the complexity of early medieval historiography. Instead, they demand careful interpretation and contextualisation. Such an approach will rarely yield unequivocal statements about past events, but rather degrees of probability and historically plausible scenarios.

At the same time, as the case of Bulgarian history illustrates, these texts possess their own histories of reception, repetition, and interpretation. They have become integral to processes of identity formation, particularly in the context of the modern nation state, where they serve to assert a shared past and to emphasise continuity with the medieval period. The texts discussed here have thus accumulated layers of meaning through successive readings and scholarly interpretations. Historians inevitably approach them through this dense interpretative framework, shaped by the work of earlier scholarship and its conclusions. This can make it more difficult to recover their original contexts, as well as to define both their limitations and their horizons within their own time.

Our very classification of these narratives as »origin stories« already situates them within a particular analytical framework that may not always do justice to their original function. Yet, we are equally compelled to read them from within our own conceptual worlds in order to make them intelligible and meaningful. Whatever the original reasons for which the story of Kubrat's sons was composed, transmitted, or reworked, we unavoidably read it as a story addressed to us. Whether it can open a window onto past events depends less on the nature of the information it conveys than on our ability to use it to construct careful, plausible, and critically grounded historical arguments.

References

Abbreviations

CFHB Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae

MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica

Primary Sources

- Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum, 2/2: Concilium universale Constantinopolitanum III/1-3, ed. Rudolf Riedinger (Berlin 1990/1992/1995).
- Agathias, *Histories*, ed. Rudolf Keydell, *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum libri V*, CFHB 2 (Berlin 1967).
- Anania Širakac'i, transl. Robert H. Hewsen, *The Geography of Ananias of Širak (Ašxarhac'uyc'). The Long and the Short Recensions. Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Wiesbaden 1992).
- Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography*, trans. Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, vol. I (reprint), (Amsterdam, 1976).
- Bar Hebraeus, *The Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, trans. David Wilmshurst, *Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 40* (Piscataway, 2016).
- Constantine Porphyrogenitus *De administrando imperio* (DAI) Vol. I: Greek text, ed. Gyula Moravcsik, trans. Romilly James Heald Jenkins, CFHB 1 (Washington D.C., 1967).
- Constantine Porphyrogenitus *De administrando imperio* Vol. II: Commentary, ed. Romilly James Heald Jenkins (London 1962).
- Fredegar, *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii scholastici libri IV cum continuationibus*, ed. Bruno Krusch, *Fredegarii et aliorum chronica. Vitae sanctorum*, MGH Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum 2 (Hannover 1888) 1-214.
- Herodotus, *Historiae* Vol. 1, ed. Haiim B. Rosén, *Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Latinorum Teubneriana* (Leipzig 1987); English translation: Alfred Denis Godley, *Herodotus*, 4 vols, vol. II, books III and IV (Cambridge, MA, 1963).
- Imennik na bălgarskite chanove. Kritično izdanie s komentar i objasnitelni beležki, ed. Ivan Bogdanov (Sofia 1981).
- Iordanis Romana et Getica, ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH Auctores antiquissimi 5/1 (Berlin 1882).
- Iosephi Genesii Regum Libri quattuor, ed. Anni Lesmüller-Werner and Ioannes Thurn (CFHB Ser. Berol. 14) (Berlin 1978); English translation: Anthony Kaldellis, *Genesios on the Reigns of the Emperors* (Canberra, 1998).
- Johannes, Ephesius, *Historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*, ed. Ernest W. Brooks, CSCO 106, *Scriptores Syri* 55 (Louvain 1936).
- John of Nikiu, *Chronicle = Chronique de Jean, évêque de Nikiou, Texte éthiopien*, ed. and trans. Hermann Zotenberg, *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque nationale XXIV*1 (Paris 1883) 120-608; English translation: Robert H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Coptic Bishop of Nikiu Being a History of Egypt Before and During the Arab Conquest* (reprint), (Amsterdam, 1980).
- Michel le Syrien, ed. and trans. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche I-IV* (reprint), (Brussels, 1963).
- Miracles de saint Demetrius, ed. Paul Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de saint Demetrius et la pénétration des Slaves dans les Balkans I: le texte, II: commentaire* (Paris 1979/1981).

- Nikephoros. Patriarch of Constantinople, ed. and trans. Cyril Mango, *Short History. Text, Translation and Commentary* (Washington, DC 1990).
- Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. Georg Waitz, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum 48 (Hannover, 1878) (reprint 2005).
- Prokop, *De bellis libri V-VIII*, ed. Jacob Haury and Gerhard Wirth, *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, Vol. 2 (reprint), (Munich, 2001).
- Theophanis *Chronographia*, ed. Karl de Boor, 2 vols (Leipzig, 1883-1885), vol. I: *Textum Graecum continens* (reprint), (Hildesheim, 1963); English translation: Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813* (Oxford 1997).

Literature

- Aladžov, A., *Archeologičeska karta na Pliska* (Sofia, 2014).
- Altheim, Franz, *Geschichte der Hunnen*. Band 2. Die Hephthaliten in Iran (second edition), (Berlin, 1969).
- Altheim, Franz and Ruth Stiehl, Michael der Syrer über das erste Auftreten der Bulgaren und Chazaren, *Byzantion* 28 (1958) 105-118.
- Angelov, Dimităr S., *Obrazuvane na bălgarskata narodnost* (second edition), (Sofia, 1981).
- Angelov, Dimităr, Borislav Primov and Petăr Petrov (eds.), *Istorija na Bălgarija. Bd. 2: Părva bălgarska dăržava* (Sofia, 1981).
- Bálint, Csanád, Zur Identifizierung des Grabes von Kuvrat, *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* XXXVI (1984) 263-269.
- Bálint, Csanád, Nochmals über die Identifizierung des Grabes von Kuvrat, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* XLII (1988) 377-389.
- Beševliev, Veselin, *Die protobulgarische Periode in der bulgarischen Geschichte* (Amsterdam, 1981).
- Beševliev, Veselin I., Zur Chronik des Johannes von Nikiu CXX 46-49, *Byzantinobulgarica* 5 (1978) 229-236.
- Booth, Phil., Shades of blues and greens in the Chronicle of John of Nikiu, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 104 (2011) 555-601.
- Borri, Francesco, White Croatia and the arrival of the Croats: An interpretation of Constantine Porphyrogenitus on the oldest Dalmatian history, *Early Medieval Europe* 19 (2011) 204-231.
- Božilov, Ivan, *Familijata na Asenevci (1186-1460). Genealogija i prosopografija* (second reprinted edition), (Sofia, 1994).
- Božilov, Ivan, *Car Simeon Veliki (893-927). Zlatnijat vek na Srednovekovna Bălgarija* (Sofia, 1983).
- Božilov, Ivan and Christo Dimitrov, Protobulgarica – Zametki po istorii protobulgar do seredny IX v., *Byzantinobulgarica* 9 (1995) 7-61.
- Božilov, Ivan and Vasil Gjuzelev, *Istorija na srednovekovna Bălgarija, VII – XIV vek* (Sofia, 1999).
- Brandes, Wolfram, Der frühe Islam in der byzantinischen Historiographie. Anmerkungen zur Quellenproblematik der *Chronographia* des Theophanes, in: Andreas Goltz, Hartmut Leppin and Heinrich Schlang-Schöningen (eds.), *Jenseits der Grenzen. Beiträge zur spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Geschichtsschreibung*, Millennium Studies 25 (Berlin, 2009) 313-344.
- Brooks, Ernest W., The Sources of Theophanes and the Syriac Chroniclers, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 15 (1906) 578-587.

- Bužaški, Evlogi *et al* (eds.), *Bălgarija 1300. Institucii i dărzavna tradicija*, 1-3 (Sofia 1981-1983).
- Carile, Antonio, Giovanni di Nikiu, cronista bizantino-copto del VII secolo, *Felix Ravenna 121/122* (1981) 103-155; reprint: *Byzance, Hommage A.N. Stratos – Byzantium Tribute to Andrea N. Stratos* Vol. 1-2 (Athens, 1986) 353-398.
- Conrad, Lawrence I., Theophanes and the Arabic historical tradition: Some indication of intercultural transmission, *Byzantinische Forschungen* 15 (1990) 1-44.
- Deleva-Granberg, Antoaneta, Ezikovijat stroj na starobălgarskija ezik spored dannite na analiza na prabălgarskite zaemki v nego (fonetika, vokalna sistema), *Slavistični izsledvanija. Sbornik prosveten na XII meždunaroden kongres na slavistite* 7 (Sofia, 2005) 29-40.
- Dimitrov, Dimităr, *Prabălgarite po severnoto i zapadnoto černomore (kăm văprosa za tjachnoto prisăstvie i istorija v dnešnite ruski zemi i roljata im pri obrazuvaneto na bălgarskata dărzava)* (Varna, 1987).
- Dimitrov, Janko and Rašo Rašev, *Pliska. 100 godini archeologičeski razkopki* (Šumen, 1999).
- Dobrev, Ivan, Kirilica, in: Petăr Dinekov (ed.), *Kirilo-Methodievska enciklopedija* 2 (Sofia, 1995) 301-316.
- Dobrev, Petăr, *Prabălgarite. Proizchod, ezik, kultura* (Nov pročit) (Sofia, 1991).
- Dobrev, Petăr, *Ezikăt na Asparuchovite i Kuberovi bălgari* (Sofia, 1995).
- Dončeva-Petkova, Ljudmila, Pliska i nejnata istorija, in: Ljudmila Dončeva-Petkova and Joachim Henning (eds.), *Părvoprestolna Pliska. 100 godini archeologičeski proučvanija* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999) 7-17.
- Dunlop, Douglas M., *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton, 1954).
- Džino, Danijel, Local knowledge and wider contexts: Stones of the arrival of the Croats in *De Administrando Imperio* in the past and present, in: Danijel Džino and Kenneth R. Parry (eds.), *Byzantium, Its Neighbours and Its Cultures* (Brisbane, 2017) 89-104.
- von Erdmann, Elisabeth, Die glagolitische Sprache und Schrift (Glagoljica), in: Joachim Bahlcke, Stefan Rohdewald and Thomas Wünsch (eds.), *Religiöse Erinnerungsorte in Ostmitteleuropa. Konstitution und Konkurrenz im nationen- und epochenübergreifenden Zugriff* (Berlin, 2013) 241-250.
- Georgiev, Pavel, Za stolicata na Asparuchova Bălgarija, in: *Istoričeski Pregled* 58/ 5-6 (2003) 208-227.
- Georgiev, Pavel, Pliska – ezičeskoto središte na Bălgarija prez IX vek, in: Pavel Georgiev and Janko Dimitrov (eds.), *Pliska – Preslav tom 13. V pamet na professor Totju Totev* (1930-2015) (Sofia 2018) 21-79.
- Graševa, Liljana and Tatjana Slavova, Preslavsko knižovno središte, in: Kirilo-Methodievska enciklopedija 3 (Sofia, 2003) 312-327.
- Gregorio, Giuseppe de, Otto Kresten, Ἐφέτος – »In diesem Jahr«. Zur Datierung des Bulgarenfeldzugs des Kaisers Konstantínos IV. (Sommer/Herbst 680), *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* 43 (2006) 21-56.
- Haussig, Hans, Einige Bemerkungen zu der Arbeit von J. Werner über den Schatz von Malaja Pereščepina, *Materialia Turcica* 10 (1984) 1-30.
- Hilkens, Andy, *The Anonymous Syriac Chronicle of 1234 and its sources*, Bibliothèque de Byzantion 18 (Leuven, 2018).
- Ilčev, Petăr, Glagolica, in: *Kirilo-Methodievska enciklopedija* 1 (Sofia, 1985) 491-509.
- Lakova, Meri, *Za prabălgarite i tehnija ezik* (Sofia, 2012).
- Madgearu, Alexandru, *The Asanids. The Political and Military History of the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1280)* (Leiden, 2017).

- Mango, Cyril, Who wrote the Chronicle of Theophanes? *Zbornik radova Vizantoloskog Instituta* 18 (1978) 9-17; reprint in: *idem*, *Byzantium and its Image* No. XI (London, 1984) 9-17.
- Marquart, Josef, *Die Chronologie der alttürkischen Inschriften* (Leipzig, 1898).
- Marquart, Josef, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge. Ethnologische und historisch-topographische Studien zur Geschichte des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts (ca. 840-940)* (Leipzig, 1903).
- Marquart, Josef, Die altbulgarischen Ausdrücke in der Inschrift von Čatalar und der bulgarischen Fürstenliste, in: *Izvestija na Russkago Archeologičeskago Instituta v Konstantinopol* (IRAIK) 15 (1911) 1-30.
- Milo, Peter, Petăr Dimitrov, Mariya Manolova-Voykova, Tomáš Tencer, Beáta Milová and Michal Vágner, Into the Tsar's residence: geophysical survey of the early medieval Bulgarian capital of Veliki Preslav, *Antiquity* 97/391 (2023) 176-193.
- Mikkola, Jooseppi Julius, Die Chronologie der türkischen Donaubulgaren, *Journal de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 30/33 (1913-1918) 1-25.
- Moravcsik, Gyula, *Byzantinoturcica I: Die byzantinischen Quellen der Geschichte der Turkvölker, II: Sprachreste der Turkvölker in den byzantinischen Quellen*, BBA 10, 11 (Berlin 1958).
- Ohme, Heinz, *Das 6. Ökumenische Konzil von Konstantinopel (680/681): Eine engelgleiche Versammlung?* (Berlin, 2025).
- Petrov, Petăr, *Chan Asparuch. Osnovopoložnikăt na bălgarskata dăržava* (Sofia, 1994).
- Pigulevskaja Nina, Theophanes' Chronographia and the Syrian Chronicles, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 16 (1967) 55-60.
- Pirivatrić, Srđan, *Samuilovata dăržava. Obchvat i karakter* (Sofia, 1997), Bulgarian translation of the Serbian edition by *idem*, *Samuilova država. Obim i karakter* (Belgrade, 1997).
- Pohl, Walter, *The Avars. A Steppe Empire in Central Europe, 567-822* (Ithaca, NY, 2018).
- Pritsak, Omeljan, *Die bulgarische Fürstenliste und die Sprache der Protobulgaren* (Wiesbaden, 1955).
- PmbZ = Ralph-Johannes Lilie, Claudia Ludwig, Thomas Pratsch, Beate Zielke, *et al.* (eds.), *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit* (Berlin 1998-2002), accessed online on 15 May 2026: <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/database/pmbz/html>.
- Rašev, Rašo: *Bălgarskata ezičeska kultura VII – IX vek* (Sofia, 2008).
- Rašev, Rašo, Georgi Atanasov, Živko Vojnikov, Georgi Vladimorov, Nikolaj Chrisimov, *Bălgarska nacionalna istorija. Bd. 2: Drevnite Bălgari. Starata Velika Bălgarija i nejnite naslednici v iztočna Evropa prez srednovekovieto* (Veliko Tărnovo, 2013).
- Săbotinov, Anton: *Bălgarija pri car Samuil i negovite naslednici. 976 – 1018 g. Izvori i literatura (opit za obobštenie)* vol. 1 (Sofia, 2008).
- Stampfer, Shaul, Did the Khazars convert to Judaism?, *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, and Society* n.s. 19/3 (Spring/Summer 2013) 1-72.
- Tomaschek, Wilhelm, Borysthenes, in: *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* Bd. III/1 (1897) 736-739.
- Todorov-Bemberski, Christo, *Prabălgarski ezik. Osnovi na bălgarskata etnonimija* (Sofia, 2020).
- Totev, Totju, *Veliki Preslav* (Varna, 1993).
- Tzenoff, Gantscho, *Die Abstammung der Bulgaren und die Urheimat der Slaven. Eine historisch-philologische Untersuchung über die Geschichte der alten Thrakoillyrier, Skythen, Goten, Hunnen, Kelten u. a.* (Berlin, 1930).
- van Ginkel, Jan, *John of Ephesus: A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-Century Byzantium*. Unpublished PhD Thesis (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1995).
- Văzarova, Živka, *Slavjani i prabălgari (po dannii na nekropolite ot 6 – 11 v. na teritorijata na Bălgarija)* (Sofia, 1976).

- Voynikov, Živko, The ancient Bulgarians – who were they? A new look at the old question, *Bălgarija, bălgaritie i Evropa – mit, istorija, săvremie (Online)* 17/1 (2025) 9-47.
- Weltecke, Dorothea, *The “Description of the Times” by Mōr Michael the Great (1126-1199). A Study on its Historical and its Historiographical Context*. Translated by Anthony Runia, revised by Dorothea Weltecke and Thomas Palmer, *Eastern Christian Studies* 27 (Leuven, 2021).
- Werner, Joachim, *Der Grabfund von Malaja Pereščepina und Kuvrat, Kagan der Bulgaren* (München, 1984).
- Ziemann, Daniel, *Vom Wandervolk zur Großmacht. Die Entstehung Bulgariens im frühen Mittelalter (7.-9. Jh.)* (Köln, 2007).
- Ziemann, Daniel, Zwischen Geschichte und Mythos–Großbulgarien unter Khan Kubrat (7. Jh.), *Bulgaria Mediaevalis* 1 (2010) 17-49.
- Živkovic, Tibor D., Izvor Konstantina Porfirogeneta za najstariju povijest Hrvata i Srba (Sažetak), *Radovi. Zavod za Hrvatsku Povijest* 42 (2010) 117-131.
- Zlatarski, Vasil, *Istorija na bălgarskata dăržava prez srednite vekove, tom I Părvo bălgarsko carstvo. I, 1: Epoca na huno-bălgarskoto nadmoštie (679-852)* (Sofia, 1918).
- Zlatarski, Vasil, *Istorija na bălgarskata dăržava prez srednite vekove, tom I Părvo bălgarsko carstvo. I, 2: Ot slavjanizacijata na dăržavata do padaneto na părvoto carstvo (852-1018)* (Sofia, 1927).
- Zlatarski, Vasil, *Istorija na bălgarskata dăržava prez srednite vekove 3: Vtoroto Bălgarsko carstvo. Bălgarija pri Asenevci, 1187-1280* (reprint), (Sofia, 1994).
- Zlatarski, Vasil, Izvestieto na Michaila Sirijski za preselenieto na bălgarite *Izvestija na Bălgarskoto Istoričesko Družestvo* (IBID) 4 (1915) 37-52; reprint in: *idem, Izbrani proizvedenija* 1 (Sofia, 1970) 52-67.