

A THRACIAN PARADIGM OR A LOCAL THEORY?

By Alexander Moshev

I want to try and sum up what has transpired since 2015 in the field of research into the origin and early history of Bulgarians. Recently, there has been a strong revival in interest in the subject with numerous forums being organized in various cities. Dozens of books have been published, including by authors from the recent past such as Gavril Krastevich, Gancho Tsenov and Georgy Sotirov. Apparently, the audience interested in alternative approaches and points of view is growing.

At the same time, I have also noticed an intensification of discussions in social media where hate speech is becoming the norm and openly xenophobic and racist comments multiply by the day. The discussion is becoming increasingly more ideologically charged. Of course, this is taking place against a backdrop of a brutal polarization of the media (electronic and print) environment and a spike in fake news as part of the hybrid strategies of certain political and military centers. To be abundantly clear, I am categorically against the use of pseudohistorical and pseudo archaeological arguments in support of racist, chauvinistic and other extreme and anti-human ideologies and practices. I find it extremely dangerous to normalize or justify such tendencies. I have no tolerance for the back-alley tone in which supposedly scientific discussions are being conducted nor do I have a taste for the personal attacks and threats that usually accompany such. And how does the academic community react to all this? So far rather apathetically. The few appearances by university professors in the media did not delineate clear-cut parameters for dialogue and, more importantly, did not announce an intention to effect a serious change in the historiographical framework of the problem.

Can this give us any reasons to believe that there is nothing new in the field? Only to some degree, because there are new trends. Social media has made it easier for people with shared interest to connect and even build online groups. Combined with fast and virtually unlimited access to sources and publications, this has led to narrower specialization of discussions, which in some cases brings positive results. For example, some little-known sources gain popularity, new interpretations are offered, and archaeological finds become the subject of very detailed discussions.

One effect, which could be even more important, in my opinion, is that for the first time representatives of the academic community turned their gaze to the Autochthonic theory of the origin of Bulgarians, which is one of the leading alternative theories on the subject. When I say that, I refer to two particular instances, an article by Ivo Strahilov entitled „Thracians Strike Back:

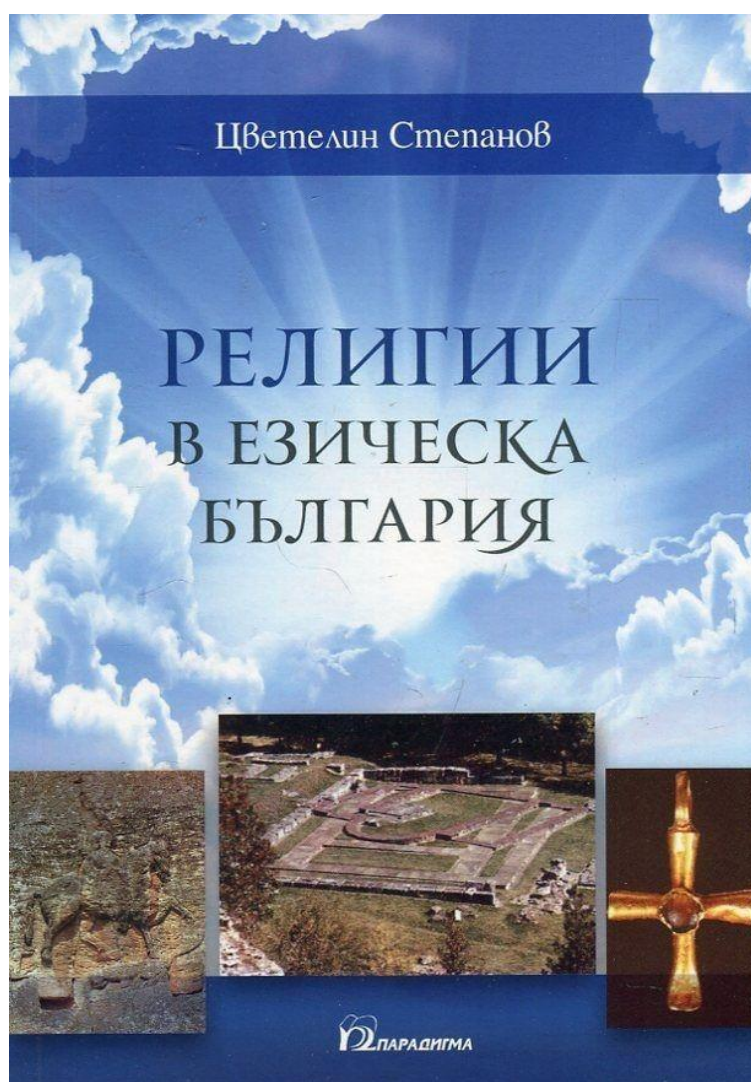
Ancient Heritage and Participation Culture“ (*„Траките отвърщат на удара: антично наследство и култура на участието“*) and Tsvetelin Stepanov's book „Religions of Pagan Bulgaria“ (*„Религии в Езическа България“* (Sofia, 2017). These two cases, albeit similar on the surface, actually differ greatly in many

respects. Let's take a closer look at them. Although Ivo Strahilov's research is very detailed and voluminous, it does not delve into the Thracian theory per se but rather focuses on its supporters, i.e. the amateur historians that do these types of research. To quote the author himself: „*The article offers a glimpse on the endeavors of modernday amateur historians regarding the Thracian heritage in Bulgaria. It presents the laymen editions of the mast and the historical musings that focus on the greatness of the Thracians. The analysis is built around the understanding that to guarantee their own existence and standing, these communities of imaginers need to practice what they imagine.*“ Strahilov is not interested in having a real discussion of the matter. The subject of his study is how *dilettantes* practice their Thracian *imaginings*, i.e. how all these people *retrofit* and *reenact* the Thracian past. To put it in another way, his study is culturological and not historiographic. Strahilov does not even concern himself with venturing a definition as to what *Thracian* actually means and treats the term as if it is common knowledge.

There is a serious problem with that. The methods he uses create a risk of mixing phenomena of different quality and level. For example, the author uses as examples of Thracomania and Thracistics books and research by Chavdar Bonev and Asen Chilingirov on the one hand and works by Mila Salahi and Reneta Dzhunova, Stefan and Tsvetan Gaydarski etc., on the other. In other words, he puts on one and the same plain or at least in one and the same thematic circle established academics with the appropriate educational background and track record of application of scientific methodologies and influencers with considerable pretenses and less-than-clear standards to their work. It also begs the question why the author decided to put “Thracomaniacs” and reenactors in the same group. I believe the two groups are completely different phenomena and need to be studied separately. What seems to be the case here is that the author may be trying to impress his audience with the tremendous depth of his knowledge by offering a panoramic view of everyone that has shown interest in the early history of the Balkans without being a professional historian or archaeologist. Ultimately, Strahilov's fair and valuable observations, of which there are quite a few, are lost in the verbiage of scientific terminology and the pretentious tone of his analysis, which he uses deliberately to demonstrate how objectively and impartially he treats the subject matter. Let us read some more of Ivo Strahilov's conclusions: „*This is where the contradictory logic of the described processes becomes evident. On the one hand, the criticisms of the Thracianists are directed toward professional scientists who purportedly ignore them. On the other, however, their efforts to elevate the Thracian heritage are a reaction against the rise of ancient Bulgarian theories, which is a function of the democratization of the research field that in fact allowed for the emergence of modern Thracianism. In fact, ambivalence is very typical for the hybrid and heterogeneous Thracianist community, which is situated somewhere between reimagining and practicing the past. Featuring actors from different fields of dilettante and academic science, dilettante reenactments and spiritual movements, it, in its own way, brings to the fore questions that are important for our cultural heritage. In it, we see yet again a failure to consolidate a discrete community around the idea of heritage, illustrating the difficulty in identifying a legitimate vessel of knowledge along with an unclear positioning of the researcherpractitioner.*“

I would not want to comment terms such as *positioning*, but I believe that the *hybrid and heterogeneous Thracianist community* is hybrid and heterogeneous only

in the mind of the author. Disregarding anything else, the sheer fact that Strahilov even took the challenge to research the matter is evidence in itself that it has gained prominence and attracts interest. Something else, that we will not delve into too much, is that some of the *Thracianists* that were included in the study (and many more were not) have expressed positions that can be characterized as chauvinistic, racist or even religiously fanatic, which, I believe, should automatically exclude them from the circle of credible authors even if some of their works even if some of their works contain interesting information and interpretations.



The case of Tsvetelin Stepanov's book to me is completely different. Ts. Stepanov was the first academic that paid serious attention to the contemporary *Thracian paradigm*. What is more, his criticisms are factual and focus on the attitudes and ideas of the *Autochthonists* and does not look into their political motivations, *positioning or hybrid nature*. In light of that, it is important to analyze his arguments and objections in the same well-intentioned and constructive manner in which he lays out his criticisms. Well-argued opinions such as his identify the weaknesses in the *local (autochthonic)* hypothesis and help overcome some of its extreme and hard-to-defend presuppositions.

Tsvetelin Stepanov has dedicated an entire chapter of his book, entitled „*The (im)possible Thracian Paradigm*“, where he takes a detailed look into the autochthonic (local) hypothesis of the origin of *(Proto)Bulgarians*. The author fairly notes that such ideas are nothing new, but originate in the works of Yurii Venelin, G. S. Rakovski, Tsani Ginchev and Gancho Tsenov. Here, Tsvetelin Stepanov also lists some of the contemporary proponents of this idea including Asen Chilingirov, Stoyan Nikolov, Yordan Tabov and Emil Zhivkov.

Ts. Stepanov admits that a number of phenomena in contemporary Bulgarian culture such as kukery games, nestinar and rusalka games are Thracian heritage. However, the author argues that this fact does not mean that *(Proto)Bulgarians* from the 7th – 9th century were Thracians. He instead believes that certain elements of the Thracian heritage *took on a life of their own* in Old Bulgarian medieval culture and that accelerated after Bulgaria expanded south of Stara Planina in the second half of the 9th century.

I find this explanation to be rather weak. Firstly, the abovementioned cultural phenomena that are typical of Bulgarian folklore do not come even close to encapsulating all of the Thracian (paleo Balkan) heritage that has become part of it. We should also include here the traditions related to the celebration of St. George's Day and Midsummer, Martenitsi, Survachka, Lazaring, certain Christmas traditions and rituals and so on.¹ What would be left of Bulgarian folklore if these traditions were somehow extricated? The answer is, it will be bereft of its most crucial features, i.e. of everything that makes it Bulgarian at least according to the most common notions. Consider the geographical distribution of some of the most typical customs attributed to the indigenous proto Balkan heritage. Kukeri are found throughout Bulgaria, and so are Koledari, martenitsi, survachki and so on. How could *small, isolated pockets* of indigenous people (already considerably *Hellenized and Romanized* and therefore having lost some of their ethno cultural identity) manage to not only transfer to the newly arriving people these customs and rituals but instill them almost everywhere in the country? This, roughly speaking, would be like if isolated groups of Native Americans in North America somehow managed to impose their culture of waves after waves of European immigrants. Alternatively, we would have to assume that Goths, Bulgarians, Avars and Slavs voluntarily gave up their customs to embrace the more prestigious and attractive customs of the Thracians?! Something is missing from the overall picture or has remained unexplained.

The verbal tradition, customs, rituals, characteristic items of clothing are transmitted only person to person. As far as I am aware, no other means of cultural transference have been documented in the time periods preceding the Modern Age. Therefore, it should be safe to assume that the share of the indigenous (Thracian) population between the 5th and the 7th century did not shrink as rapidly as many historians and Archaeologists would have us believe.²

Tsvetelin Stepanov explains including by using the *well-known* argument that most Thracian cultural and religious phenomena have, in fact, Indo-Iranian roots. Apparently, an attempt is being made to blur the boundaries between *Thracian* and *(Old)Bulgarian* based on their shared Indo-

¹ For a more detailed look into the matter, see **Fol, Al.** Тракийското наследство в българската култура – Исторически преглед, 1981, book 3–4, p. 213–217; **Teodorov, E.** Древнотракийско наследство в българския фолклор. Sofia, 1999; **Serafimov, P.** Древната традиция в българските обичаи, празници и бит. – www.istorkonf-varna.com/Dokladi/Text/.../Серафимов_ДРЕВНАТА_ТРАДИЦИЯ.d...; **Lozanova, B.** Марта (Мартеница). – http://www.thracians.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=411&Itemid=106, etc.

² Nikolay Kolev believes the following items of Bulgarian material and spiritual cultuire are Thracian heritage:

- *I, II and IV types of ploughs,*
 - *The use of threshing boards,*
 - *Cultivating grape vines and making wine,*
 - *Migratory livestock raising,*
 - *Wearing leather shoes and capes by herdsmen,*
 - *The pottery wheel;*
 - *Features of the identity of St. George are borrowed from the Thracian Heros;*
 - *Strong parallels between samodivi and Thracian nymphs,*
 - *Rusalki festivities trace their origin from the Grecco-Thracian and Roman holidays of the rose (rosalia);*
 - *Kukeri games trace their origin from the festivities dedicated to Dionysus;*
 - *Some authors also believe nestinarstvo is also Thracian heritage.*
 - *The Midsummer festivity is also believed to be Thracian heritage,*
 - *Animal sacrifices when breaking ground for new bridge or house builds,*
 - *Animal sacrifices to prolong the lives of elderly people (pomana), etc.*
- (**Kolev, N.** Българска етнография, Sofia, 1987, p. 59).

European past. Well, isn't this precisely the main tenet of the *local* theory? In this case, what Ts Stepanov does is support the Autochthonic thesis.

In the following paragraphs Tsvetelin Stepanov focuses on methodologic issues and the so called 181ulgarian181181n takes center stage in his presentation. Archaisation, which is something I have discussed in detail earlier, was a widely used approach in Byzantine literature. Byzantine authors had the tendency to demonstrate their expertise and classical training by using geographical names and ethnonyms from antiquity and the early middle ages to refer to newlyemerged peoples and states. For example, Bulgarians were, on multiple occasions, referred to as *Huns*, *Scythians*, *Goths*, *Moesians* and even *Myrmidons*. I have discussed the Moesian name already, but I will reiterate here that, according to some authors, it was used purposefully by Byzantine authors in order to replace the names Bulgarians and Bulgaria. Let us assume this was the case. If so, were these archaic names chosen and used at random? I have already touched upon this but I would like to bring the matter up again, albeit briefly, because it is of crucial importance. If we accept and assert with conviction that there was no difference between medieval Bulgarians and Moesians from antiquity, we can and up in the trap of archaisms and purposeful 181ulgarian181181n, just as Tsvetelin Stepanov warns. On the other hand, if we acknowledge the possibility that there was continuity in the cultural and ethno cultural model of Moesians and Bulgarians, i.e. if these terms are ethnonyms referring to populations sharing sets of similar cultural traits such as language, some manifestations of material culture, customs and so on, then the

pieces fit or at least we see a possibility for a logical explanation of the *peculiar stubbornness* with which Byzantine authors referred to Bulgarians as Moesians.



GOTHIC ARTIFACTS FOUND IN CRIMEA, 5th – 6th CENTURY

Further on, the author makes a generalization about recently published *Autochthonic* books and his focus falls on authors from the 17th and 18th century such as Mavro Orbini and Paisius of Hilendar, instead of talking about sources from late antiquity and early middle ages. Because I am one of the aforementioned *Autochthonic authors*, I feel obliged to shed some more light onto this topic. In my book „**BOLGAR: тайните на нашия произход**“ („*Secrets of our origin*“) there is a chapter entitled Ancestral Homeland, where I tried to summarize some of the historiographic approaches towards identifying the mythical motherland of Bulgarians, starting off with Mavro Orbini and finishing my presentation with the historians from the early 20th century. I was very careful and deliberate to point out that my presentation was a historiographic analysis and that I was in no way using the aforementioned authors and works as my primary sources, although they undoubtedly contain valuable information. For this reason, I do not agree with Tsvetelin Stepanov's conclusion, especially having provided a plethora of original source materials in the other chapters, some of which in their original language.

Later on, Ts Stepanov attempts to synthesize the situation in Lower Moesia between the 1st and

3rd century AD. For this purpose, he takes the word of the distinguished Thracologist Dimitar Popov, who rejects the idea of total Byzantification of the population in this region. According to Popov, although the population in the cities was of mixed origin, the indigenous people – Thracians, were *densely concentrated in the fields, river valleys, mountain hollows and remote settlements up in the hills*. Furthermore, Dimitar Popov believes that the Hellenization trend *is also difficult to prove*. In general, according to Popov, Thracians preserved their ethno cultural communities even though cities had become melting pots.

Against the backdrop of this, Tsvetelin Stepanov's assertion that *therefore it is not the practices of the past are what created the (Old)Bulgarian state*, sounds strange. If Dimitar Popov is right in saying that the large population of Lower Moesia, otherwise known as Thracians, was indigenous, what grounds could there be for us not to acknowledge that precisely this population was not the leading ethnic and ethno cultural component of the Bulgarian state established in the 7th century on the Danube River?

Let us take a look at Ts Stepanov's other arguments. He claims that authors subscribing to the autochthonic theory disregard *fundamental scientific paradigms* and research conducted by *internationally recognized scholars such as* Peter Heather, Herwig Wolfram and Walter Goffart. Mr Ts. Stepanov uses an interesting example in this respect. He quotes my interpretation of the views of Chavdar Bonev and Petar Georgiev and, quite emotionally, asks the question: *In fact, it is logical to ask ourselves, if these people [Thracco-Getae, which return to the south of the Danube – note by A.M.] had „significantly changed ethno cultural characteristics“ how could be dare call them Thracco-Getae (?!)*. Such a question could be answered like this: myself and the aforementioned authors are in no way the first to attempt (such an unheard-of audacity!) to identify the *newcomers* as *Thracco-Getae*. The author from the late antiquity Theophylact Simocatta (550/585–636/640) writes the following with great conviction: „*Sclavos sive getas hoc enim 182ulgari antiquatis apelati sunt – Slavs or also Getae, because that was the name used to refer to them since ancient times.*“¹ Here, I could instantly get the objection that this is just another case of Byzantine *archaization*. Indeed, that is what looks to be the case – Simocattae, who in many instances demonstrates in his book *History* his intimate knowledge of classical antiquity, uses the name *Getae* instead of the new name, *Slavs (Sklaviniai)*. There is, however, a key difference: the chronicler does not replace the new name, *Slavs*, with the old name, *Getae*. He elaborates in two instances in his work that *Getae* was the ancient name used to refer to the *Slavs (Sklaviniai)*. For me, this fact is enough to justify an attempt to trace the origin of the *Sklaviniai* back to the Balkans, despite having to go a long way back in time.²

A bit further down in his work, Tsvetelin Stepanov writes: „*Thus, Thracian speaking (whatever this should mean in the 1st and 2nd century) tribes fleeing in the direction of the Bosporan Kingdom were only one of the many components that made up the population of this kingdom, i.e. they were part of a new environment that was heterogeneous in terms of language, organization and ethnicity.*“ There is

¹ **Theophylacti Simocattae.** *Historiae*, Liber VII, 2, 5, p. 247.

² Valentin Pletniiov believes that in early 6th century AD Byzantine authors often wrote about raids by *Getae* and *Scythians*, by which they meant *Slavs* and *Antes*. The author, however, does not offer an explanation as to why the

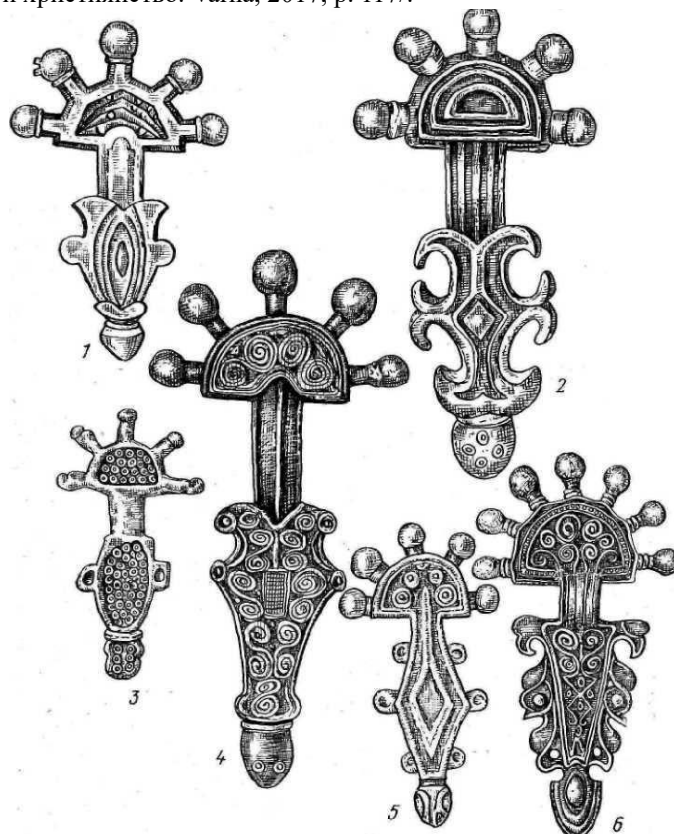
not too much to argue with here. Indeed, the Bosporan Kingdom was a zone of intense contact and symbiosis between different ethnic groups and cultures. Yet, there is something quite crucial which Tsvetelin Stepanov neglects to mention for whatever reason. Thracians are by far not *just* one of the ethnic groups that inhabited the lands of the Bosporan Kingdom and the adjacent regions. In the 5th century BC, the Bosporan Kingdom came under the rule of the Spartocid dynasty, who were of Thracian origin.³ At almost the same time, their neighboring nation of the Royal Scythians also came under the rule of a dynasty that was friendly to the Thracians. The good will amongst these people lasted for centuries and were maintained by one of the later dynasties, the Tiberian-Julian dynasty which was established by King Aspurgus (1st century BC – 1st century AD), an ally of the Romans who married the Thracian princess Gepaepyris.⁴ Many of his descendants have typically Thracian names such as Cotys, Rhescuprois and Rhoemetalces, including the last known king of the Bosporan Kingdom, Tiberius-Julius Rhescuporis VI (303–342). These facts indicate that to the north of the Black Sea Thracian *refugees* were relatively welcome in the lands of Thracian rulers or at least rulers who respected Thracian statehood traditions. This could have been one of the more important factors that allowed them to survive as an ethnic and cultural group. Later, the descendants of this population (the sons and daughters of Thracians, Scythians, Sarmatians, Goths, Antes, Huns and so on) probably took part in the creation of Asparuh's Bulgaria on the Balkan peninsula. Another part probably contributed to the formation of the so called Chernyakhov Archaeological Culture⁵, representatives of which were also involved in the process which eventually led to the establishment of Kubrat's and probably Asparuh's Bulgaria.

³ See **Baumer, C.** The History of Central Asia: The Age of the Steppe Warriors. New York, 2012, p. 241.

⁴ **Rostovtsev, M.** South Russia in the Prehistoric and Classical Period – The American Historical Review, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1921, pp. 203-224; **Kiryakov, A.** Летоисчислението в „Именника на българските князе”. Боспорски и тракомакедонски династии. **Online:** <http://www.istor-konf-varna.com/текстови-доклади-2014/>.

⁵ See **Magomedov, B. V.** Этнические компоненты Черняховской культуры. – Stratum plus, 4, 2000, p. 322-330; **Yartsev, S. V.** К проблеме появления черняховских погребений с западной ориентацией. – Научные ведомости БелГУ. Сер. История. Политология. Экономика. Информатика 1(172), 29, 2014, p. 28-35.

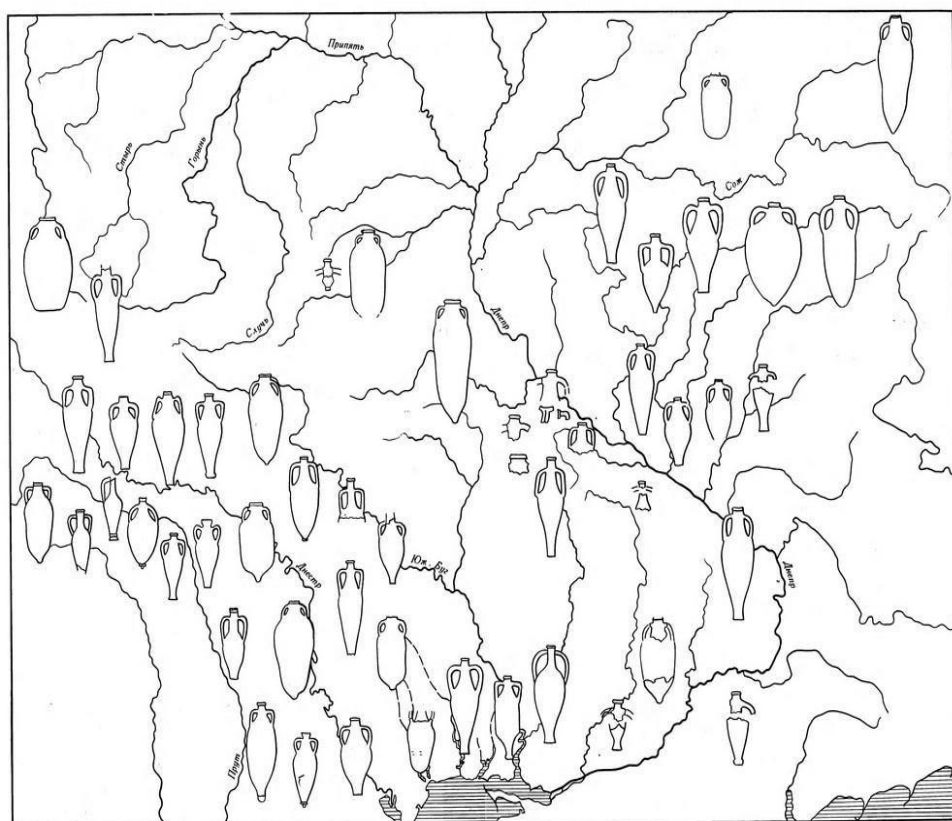
name Getae was used in these particular cases /**Pletnirov, V.** Втора Мизия и Скития през IV – VII в. Варварски нашествия и християнство. Varna, 2017, p. 117/.



Knotted fibulas: 1 – Suchava-Shipot; 2 – Tsarichin Grad; 3 – Morești; 4 – Martinovka; 5 – SărataMonteoru; 6 – Kladovo.

Here I should make an important clarification. Thracians themselves, or Getae-Dacians, i.e. the Balkan settlers north of the Danube and the lands of present-day Moldova and Ukraine, were by no means a homogenous group. What we call Thracians today (*Derrones, Getae, Moesians, Odrysians, Bessae, Triballi, Carpi and so on*) were not a unitary ethnic group with shared sense of belonging by early 1st century AD. Rather, they were a mix of similar ethnic groups incorporating also foreign people such as Romans, migrants from the Middle East, Celts, Illyrians, Hellenes, Pelasgians, Carians, Cimmerians, Scythians and many other people with a diverse pantheon of gods and cults including Orphism, cult of the Heros, different eastern cults and so on. In the words of Dimitar Angelov: „*In conclusion, we can argue that Thracians from the preRoman period were in contact with a number of different ethnic groups which left their imprints on Thracian material and spiritual culture. Greeks played an especially crucial part in this because Thracians had lasting commercial, political and cultural contact with them across a vast territory. At the same time, the exposure of Thracians to other ethnic groups (Cimmerians, Greeks, Celts and Scythians, to name a few) made them the subject of certain*

assimilation processes. However, this does not mean that these processes triggered substantial changes in the core of the Thracian ethnos during the period in question. In general, at that time Thracians had retained their ethnic characteristics, language, customs, way of life and traditions despite their contact with other ethnic groups and the influences they were subjected to in various spheres of their material and spiritual culture. This is the general conclusion that emerges based on studying the vast material related to the history and the fate of Thracian tribes before they were conquered by the Romans.”⁶



ANCIENT AMPHORA FOUND IN AREAS ASSOCIATED WITH THE CHERNYAKHOV CULTURE

Generally speaking, Dimitar Angelov is correct, although the term *assimilation processes* which he uses is not completely justified because the processes of ethno cultural give and take and symbiosis spread far beyond the simple assimilation of one ethnic group by another, which is widely believed to have been the case. The actual processes involved are typically much more complex and ambivalent. What is important, however, is that Angelov acknowledges the relative heterogeneity of Thracians as an ethnic group and that, for me, is one of the keys to understanding the subsequent ethnic and cultural evolution on the Balkans. The linguistically, culturally and religiously diverse components of these Medieval Balkan ethnic groups, including the Bulgarian ethnic group, were most likely the result, in part, of

⁶ Angelov, D. *Образуване на българската народност*. София, Изд. „Наука и изкуство“, 1971, p. 73.

the heterogeneous basis, i.e. the ethnic fundament that the ancient indigenous population was as it determined the characteristic features of the medieval Balkan population.

Let us return to the arguments offered by Tsvetelin Stepanov. To illustrate the complexity of the ethno genetic processes at the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, he uses a long quotation from Miracles of Saint Demetrius of Thessaloniki, which, apparently, is intended to convince the reader that the Byzantine descendants returning alongside Kuber, intermixed with ethnic groups from the lands north of the Danube, were, in fact, a qualitatively new phenomenon in the ethnic history of the Balkans. For whatever reason, Ts Stepanov neglects to dwell on several inflexion points in the text. Quote: „*He [Kuber – note by A. M.], having learned from some who were close to him that these people yearned to see the cities of their fathers, began to ponder... They, having settled there, expressed a wish to return to their home towns, mainly because they had retained their righteous faith...*“

The operative words in this text, for me, are *cities of their fathers*, *home towns* and *righteous faith*. It is precisely these words that shed light on the mechanisms through which people living north of the banks of the Danube *returned* to their Balkan homeland. Despite six decades having gone by, the descendants of the Byzantines who were forcefully taken north remembered the homelands of their ancestors, wanted to return and, more importantly, retained their *righteous faith*(!). This is precisely what I meant when years ago I wrote that the Thracco-Getae population returned to the Balkans with *changed (somewhat) ethno cultural characteristics*. In the text of the „Miracles“ this is referred to as intermixing with *Bulgarians, Avars and other tribes*, which spawned *a different, new people*. Yes, this new people held on to the memory of the homeland and therefore was not entirely *new* and *different*. As regards the status, which was granted to this population within the Empire, probably it was determined on a case-by-case basis. I would like to emphasize that *the migrations* north and south of the Danube were not uncommon and isolated events. On the contrary, they were an almost continuous process. Limes were never an unsurmountable barrier but rather a sieve through which larger or smaller groups of people did pass. The Danube played a similar role even before the Balkans came under Roman rule.⁷ I will skip forward several pages of theories by Tsvetelin Stepanov and will focus on several of his critical notes on the argumentation of the *local* hypothesis. The author comes back to the loose grasp of the theoretical achievements of science demonstrated by Autochthonists and their *theoretical definitions*. Stepanov points to the association of the cults of the wolf, dog, deer/doe and horse with Thracian heritage. These are more likely general typologies characteristic of many ancient peoples.

Of course, such a claim is correct in and of itself. However, there is something important here that needs to be emphasized. In old Balkan cultures the wolf/dog and the doe/deer have special meaning and place, as corroborated by plenty of evidence.⁸ Knowing this, why should we look for parallels with remote cultures and

⁷ For more information on the migrations, see the theoretical musings of **Petko Atanasov**. Вярa и мяра или Българско тайнство. Sofia 2014, p. 46–74.

⁸ See for example **Marazov, Iv**. Вълчата маска у траките. – In Годишник на Департамент „Антропология“ – НБУ, Sofia, 2012. http://ebox.nbu.bg/ant14/view_lesson.php?id=1.

regions when here and in the whole of Southeastern Europe there are relics and clear evidence of the existence of the cults of the aforementioned animals. In my opinion, scientific logic dictates that when there are more than one plausible explanations of a particular phenomenon, the more direct and the simpler one should take precedence. Anything else would be an obvious transgression against the basics of scientific research and would be indicative of attempts to fit the facts to suit the thesis rather than to look for a thesis that fits the facts.

Let's move forward in our analysis of Tsvetelin Stepanov's work. He complains that authors such as Stoyan Nikolov tend to accuse members of the university community of scientists of purposefully ignoring the role of the Thracian ethnos in the formation of the Bulgarian state in the 7th century AD. He disagrees with this assertion and points out that in the 1970s and 80s a number of scholars such as Dimitar Angelov, Evgeniy Teodorov, Alexander Fol, Velizar Velkov and others started to actively discuss the importance of the indigenous population for the formation of the culture of Medieval Bulgaria and some of them even talked about the Thracians as the third *building block* in the construction of the Bulgarian ethnos. Some Bulgarian ethnographers and ethnologists (e.g. Ivanichka Georgieva and Rachko Popov) have long ago demonstrated and explained numerous phenomena from the so-called Bulgarian folklore (also referred to as *lower*) culture through a Thracian *prism*. In their number, Tsvetelin Stepanov also includes authors from the earlier generation like Gavril Katsarov, Boris Diakovich and Ivan Koev, who all pointed their research in the same direction. Ts Stepanov's decision is justified. The authors listed by him, and many others, have contributed immensely in the process of determining the role of the indigenous factor for the formation of the Bulgarian ethnos. Their achievements have been discussed on many

occasions and, I believe, they have been given their due credit by the following generation of scholars.

There are, however, other authors whose ideas, without being extreme, go further in the direction of the *Thracian* origin. Here, I would like to mention, amongst others, the names of Atanas Milchev, Kiril Vlahov, Architect Sava Bobchev, Dimitar Krandzhalov, Vsevolod Nikolaev, Stamen Mihaylov and so on. All these Bulgarian academics and scientists had their own point of view and their own field of research, but all of them contributed to the building of a clearer picture of the role of the indigenous factor. Let us take Atanas Milchev as an example. He does not fit the stereotype of the dissident scientists, on the contrary. To this day he is being described in certain articles more as a conformist and as someone who did the communist party's bidding in the field of archaeology after 1944.⁹ I will refrain

Regarding the meaning behind the image of the deer, see **Georgieva, Iv.** Българска народна митология. Sofia, 1993, p. 48-52; **Boeva, Y.** Мъдростта на Великата майка. Sofia 2010, p. 124-156.

⁹ See **Dumanov, B.** Класовите основи на идеята за древнотракийския елемент в българската народност и опозицията на археолозите. – http://ebox.nbu.bg/anti/ne3/16%20Boyan_Dumanov%20+.pdf.

I would like to quote only a few lines dedicated to Atanas Milchev: „*Atanas Milchev, who had been working as a teacher in Dupnitsa prior to 1945, fit ideally Dimitrov's model of a class-cognizent young scientist whose „sound, working-man's origins” is ideally aligned with the new image of Bulgarian archaeology. In 1946 Milchev was sent to complete his post-graduate studies in Leningrad. After he did so successfully, he came back to Bulgaria and was the only scientist who*

from making any comments on the political views of Atanas Milchev nor will I discuss his administrative roles in the archaeological community. I would instead focus on just one fact. In 1986, at the Second International Congress on Bulgarian Studies in Sofia, A. Milchev presented a report Entitled „Material and Spiritual Culture in Bulgaria during the Early Middle Ages 6th – 10th Century“. In it, he said: „These data indicate unequivocally that upon their arrival on the Balkans, the Slavs and the Old Bulgarians found an indigenous Thracian population with highly developed culture, which has to be considered and which disproves the notion shared by certain scholars that Slavs and Old Bulgarians settled the Balkans as if it was an empty expanse. On the contrary, there was an indigenous Thracian population living here which had its own distinct culture and ethnic identity as an independent people.“¹² Obviously, the report supports a mild position in the spirit of compromise regarding the Thracian factor in the emergence of the Bulgarian ethnos. He does not insist this factor played a leading role but rather acknowledges that the Thracian population had not disappeared when the Slavs and the Old Bulgarians arrived on the Balkans. Even this mild position by measure of the modern *autochthonic* thesis still provokes the majority of historians and archaeologists to clap back.

Tsvetelin Stepanov, in particular, firmly believes that between the middle of the 6th century and the beginning of the 7th century, the Roman provinces on the Balkans (Moesia in particular) were practically depopulated as people moved toward the mountains or to the south of Stara Planina. This belief seems to be corroborated by archaeological evidence which indicates that urban centers had ceased to function during the time period in question *civilized* (urban) life existed only in several on the coast of the peninsula such as Thessaloniki. The theses of the late archaeologist Valentin Pletniiov are even more radical. He writes the following: „As Alexander Fol notes, Slavs were introduced to the name of the River Danube through the Goths and did not use the Dacian name Istros because they did not come into contact with the indigenous Thracian population in the plains irrespective of the fact that a large portion of them had been Romanized. Linguistic research supports most of the observations of archaeologists who have concluded that the population of the old Thracian-Roman settlements was either destroyed or migrated south of Hemus or at least to its foothills. There remained isolated pockets of the indigenous population

from which Slavs got the local toponyms.“¹⁰ Let us take a closer look at the paragraph written by Valentin Pletniiov because it distils the understanding of most leading Bulgarian archaeologists regarding the nature of the events that transpired on the Balkans during the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. To add weight to their conclusions, they also use linguistic arguments.

had intimate knowledge of the theoretical doctrines of Soviet archaeology. It was not an accident that he was tasked with writing the theoretical Marxist-Leninist part of Volume 1 of the „History of Bulgaria“ in 1954 and its edited version of 1961 as well as the first five chapters of „Христоматия по история на СССР“. ¹² Milchev, A. Материална и духовна култура в българските земи през ранното Средновековие VI-X в. – At the Second International Congress of Bulgarian Studies, report 6. Българските земи в Древността. България през Средновековието, Sofia 1987, p. 452.

¹⁰ Pletniiov, V, as cited above, page 233.

The argument regarding the name of the Danube sounds entirely convincing but is in fact less categorical than it appears at first glance. Ivan Stamenov has conducted very detailed and in-depth research into this matter. I will present here his publication almost in its entirety so that the reader could be immersed in the logic of his argumentation:

„Countless toponyms and hydronyms in Bulgaria have remained unchanged for millennia. This is peculiar, especially if we were to believe the stubborn efforts of certain circles in the scientific which try to convince the audience that the indigenous population of our lands was almost entirely replaced during the so-called Great Migration and the supposed invasions of Goths, Gepids, Slavs, Huns, Bulgarians, Avars and whoever else. The Thracian origin of the names which we use to this day to refer to many rivers, mountains and settlements is not challenged in general. What makes the situation awkward and even funny is the arguments regarding the ethnicity of the tribe that “gave” us the modern name of the largest river flowing through Bulgarian lands – Danube. For many years it was accepted almost at face value that the word had old Germanic roots. This argument is based on a text in Dialogues by Caesarius of Nazianzus, which was most likely written in the 4th century AD “One of the four rivers that flow out from the heavenly spring, called Phison in our Scripture, is called Istrus by the Greeks, Danuvius by the Romans and Dunawis by the

Goths. “ Here, it says in plain text that the name Dunav, which many Slavic people use to refer to the river was “originally” used by “old Germans”. To my surprise, the latest edition of the Bulgarian Etymological Dictionary continues to accept the Gothic origin as possible just on the basis of its historical association with the Goths, although it is already looked at as less likely to be true. This hypothesis is countered by the argument that the word Dunav has Slavic etymology and is hard to explain it through a Germanic lens. Some examples: in Old Russian дѹнаѹ means stream; in Polish dialects dunaj means deep body of water with high banks.

Moreover, other rivers located in Slavonic nations such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Poland and Slovakia, and even Romania have similar names Dunajovice, Dunajice, Dunavets, Dunajec, Dunajec, Dunaychik, Dunavoto, etc. The linguist Vladimir Georgiev firmly believes that the name Danube is of Dacico-Moesian origin, i.e. Thracian. However, his argument laid out in the Bulgarian Etymological Dictionary, Vol. 1 is based on a reconstructed (imaginary) word

**Dōnavi(s). It is not necessary for the reader to traverse a number of countries in Eastern Europe or to “reconstruct” Dacico-Moesian words. It is sufficient for the reader, having seen the text by Caesarius of Nazianzus, in Vol. 1 of GIBI (Greek Sources of Bulgarian Historical Records), to just pick up the next volume. There, the reader will find detailed information courtesy of John the Lydian.*

“Constantine I, as was already mentioned, contrary to his best wishes, left Byzantium without Scythia and Moesia and the tribute received from them. The armies that guarded the north-facing banks of the Istrus, he deployed to Lower Asia for fear of usurpation. Here, I should think, is a good place to stop and make a brief note as to the name of the river, even if I digress for a little while. As we find, it is sometimes called Istrus and sometimes, Danube. We should explain. In the first book of his notes about Gaul, Caesar writes that the Rhine and Istrus rivers share a common origin in the Ret Mountains, which are part of the Celtic mountain range. They flow toward the sea without changing their names, neither one. Istrus, having left his brother Rhine to flow toward the setting sun, flowed east and retained its

name all the way to Pannonia, which the Hellenes called Peonia so it would sound better and less barbaric, and to Sirmium, which once was a prosperous Byzantine city but now belonged to the Gepids. And when Istrus swerved toward

*Thrace, it lost its former name amongst the natives [the Roman and Celtic Danu(b/v)ius] and became Dunav. Thracians named it so because, around the mountains to the north, where Thracian winds blow, the air is almost always heavy and moist due to the moisture that rises from below. For this reason, they think it makes rains. In their mother tongue they call it the cloud carrying Dunav. Incidentally, Constantine lost Scythia and Moesia and the tribute that came from there, as I already said.” Can John the Lydian be trusted? This author, who lived between 490 and 565 AD was born in Lydian Philadelphia, as his moniker suggests. He was not Thracian but lived and worked amongst Thracians. He held various important posts during the reign of Emperor Anastasius I Dicorus and then served the Thracian ruler Iustinianus I. This is the most important sentence on the topic: “Thracians named it so [Dunav] because, around the mountains to the north, where Thracian winds blow, the air is almost always heavy and moist due to the moisture that rises from below. For this reason they think it makes rains.” Now compare this to a sentence from the Bulgarian Etymological Dictionary dedicated to the word Danube: “Deriv.: Dunavski, Dunavets = north wind (Totleben, Plevensko, Koprivets, Belensko, Radanovo, Tarnovsko, Targovishte) and Dunalia in folklore songs.” John the Lydian definitely knew what he was talking about. This is further corroborated by his correct descriptions of Thracians of the 5th and 6th century. Caesarius of Nazianzus was competent on this topic as well. Yes, the name Danube is of Gothic origin. Simply because Gothic is another word for Getae and/or Thracian.¹⁴ It is difficult to add anything of substance that Ivan Stamenov did not already mention. If we set aside the matter of using the terms Goths and Getae interchangeably and his view of the origins and ethnic makeup of the Goths, the record of John the Lydian, especially with respect to the notes from the dictionary regarding the north wind, it makes a lot of sense that the name Dunav is local, proto-Balkan. Therefore, the *Sklaviniai* and the Bulgarians, whoever they may be and wherever they may have come, did come into contact with representatives of the indigenous (Thracian, Moesian and Getae) population who mentioned this name to them, unless it was already familiar to them.*

Let us not take a closer look at the matter of the isolated *pockets of indigenous people*, which supposedly survived only so as they could teach the *newcomers* the local toponyms.¹⁵ The process of these people moving from the Moesian plain to the foothills of Stara Planina and present-day Southern Bulgaria is difficult to corroborate based on archaeological evidence. Still, there is research that can at least serve as a starting point. The archaeologist and historian Venelin Barakov is the author of one such study regarding the area around the town of Tryavna and the central parts of the Stara Planina mountain range.¹⁶ Here are some of his conclusions: „*The turbulent times that came at the end of the 1st BC and lingered by the mid-point of the 1st century AD related to the Romans conquering the Thracian tribes led to the temples being less actively used. A new bloom in their activity would come in the 2nd and 3rd century. The central parts of Stara Planina was far from the borders between the empire and barbarian world. The peaceful life in the Hemus*

mountain was accompanied by accelerated stable development of settlements and town life including crafts and trade. Settlements became more densely built out, especially the unfortified ones. The growing density and the building up of towns led to a population increase and

¹⁴ **Stamenov, Iv.** Неподправената история: Тракийско или готско е името на река Дунав? – <https://www.otizvora.com/2018/04/9757>.

¹⁵ According to Svetlana Yanakieva: „*Not only in Bulgaria but also in many of its neighboring countries and territories where Thracian was spoken in antiquity, to this day many of the rivers still have their Thracian names such as Struma, Mesta, Iskar, Osam, Timok, Yantra, Striama, Tundzha, Olt, Muresh, Nishava, Ergene, etc.*“

/Yanakieva, Sv. Тракийската топонимия:

http://www.thracians.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=668&Itemid=103/.

For the name the Osam, see **Torbatov, S.** Anasamus/Ansamus/Ἀσημοῦς/ Ἀσήμος (urban and fortification sites near the mouth of the Osam). – Българско е-Списание за Археология, 6, 2016, с. 21–79. Considering the name of the Lom and the town of Lom (Almus), it turns out that almost all large rivers in Northern Bulgaria have Thracian names. Could it be that the aforementioned pockets of indigenous people were in fact much larger communities? ¹⁶ **Barakov, V.** Трявна и Предбалканът през Античността и Средновековието. Veliko Tarnovo, 2018.

underpinned the flourishing of trade between settlements.“ ¹¹ However, the status quo was about to change drastically: „*During the second half of the 4th century and in the beginning of the 5th century a new trend emerged in the development of settlements in the area. Constant uncertainty and the threat of raids first by Goths and then by Huns caused settlements to shift from the plains toward terrains that were easier to defend and offered better defensive capabilities provided these were augmented by walls and towers. ...On the one hand, people were leaving the plains for the better security offered by semi-mountainous ground surrounded by hills and peaks.*“ ¹⁸ At the end of the 6th and the start of the 7th century a number of fortresses in the region and throughout presentday Northern Bulgaria were demolished and abandoned. Historians and archaeologists explain this phenomenon with raids by Avars and Slavs between 582 and 602. Let us assume that this interpretation is correct.

¹¹ Source quoted above, p. 80-81. ¹⁸ Also therein, p. 162-163.



Pagan burial near the village of Gledachevo, Stara Zagora region (7th – 8th century), gold pendant

What happened to the people who lived in the areas between the Danube and Stara Planina and those to the south of the mountain? Scholars such as Tsvetelin Stepanov, Valentin Pletnirov, Kamen Stanev, Angel Velinov and many others focus on facts such as the disruption of urban life on the Balkans, the decline of business and currency turnaround, the destruction of infrastructure and so on as means to support the thesis that the indigenous population was almost entirely wiped out in the process. Ts Stepanov believes that the *contact* between Bulgarians and Thracians took place south of Stara Planina.

This idea contradicts the opinion shared by Kamen Stanev, who writes the following: „*The history of the region [Thrace] between the end of the 6th and the start of the 10th century can be divided into four clearly delineated periods. The first is the end of late antiquity (end of the 6th start of the 7th century), when as a result of raids conducted by Avars and Slavs all cities and fortresses were either taken or abandoned, the empyrean [Roman] structures were completely*

wiped out, and the population from Late Antiquity practically disappeared (killed off, banished or taken into slavery)... The Avar and Slav hordes destroyed completely the world of Late Antiquity and Thrace ushered in the early Middle Ages as a veritable desert dotted with the charred ruins of hundreds destroyed and abandoned fortresses... Thus, between 680 and the middle of the 8th century Thrace was virtually depopulated and left to its own devices stuck between two states – the gradually recovering Byzantium and the up and coming Danube Bulgaria. Bulgarians found this status quo advantageous because there was a large empty area almost along their entire southern border... Thus, during the fourth period

[from 812 until the start of the 10th century] Bulgaria gradually took over the entire region and purposefully replaced its indigenous population... Thracians, who had been the main ethnic component in Antiquity, were losing their ethnic identity until by the end of the 6th and the start of the 7th century they went completely extinct... The barbarian incursions in the 3rd and 4th century hit the rural areas the hardest and that is where the great majority of Thracians lived. This, along with the multiple waves of barbarian and federate settlers coming here contributed immensely to the slow but sure extinctions of Thracians as an ethnic group. [The third] factor which influenced this was the lack of sophistication of Thracian culture, which was no match for Roman culture... While Thracians were being killed off or dying... [in Thrace] steady waves of settlers were coming in to replace them... Sarmatians and Alans (4th – 5th century), Germanic peoples (4th – 6th century), Bulgarians and Slavs (6th century)... Between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages there was a serious hiatus ...encompassing the period from the start of the 7th to the end of the 8th century. At the time Thrace was not ruled by Byzantium but was virtually depopulated... The raids by Avars and Bulgarians at the end of the 6th and the start of the 7th century decimated the network of temples and, as happened with the military and administrative systems, organized religion was wiped out. This, along with the virtual extinction of the indigenous population from Late Antiquity, could explain the total lack of memory of the local saints from the 4th and the 5th century. ...The hypothesis of the complete depopulation of Thrace and the loss of control of the region on the part of Byzantium could look exaggerated but it has been suggested a long time ago [see S. Vaklinov, “Формиране на старобългарската култура” Sofia, 1977] and the archaeological expeditions conducted since have failed to provide evidence that disproves it. The situation with Moesia, Sofia Region, Macedonia and the Rhodopes is similar. ...Between 680 and 716, Bulgaria and Byzantium shared a border only in an area north of Mesembria. To the west, the two states were separated by a vast depopulated wilderness.... Realistically, with the conquest of Thrace and Macedonia in the first half of the 9th century Bulgaria added to its territory vast expanses of land which, however, were almost completely depopulated.¹²

Therefore, if Kamen Stanev is correct, there could not have been any contacts between Thracians and Bulgarians south of Stara Planina, simply because the area remained depopulated for decades. As you can see for yourselves, my dear readers, such are the absurd situations that can be brought about by preconceived and unprovable theses offered to the audience as *scientifically grounded* and defended categorically with no regard for any evidence of ethnographic, genetic, linguistic and art history, etc. nature.

Incidentally, Milko Garchev has a very interesting perspective on this topic. His reasoning is as follows:

„If even for a moment one was to accept the hypothesis that Slavs, Goths and so on barbarians were decimating and chasing away the indigenous population from the Balkans, one would have to answer a whole host of logical questions that would

¹² Stanev, K. Тракия през ранното средновековие. Veliko Tarnovo, 2012, p. 207, quotation by Lyubomir Tsonev.

crop up almost immediately. Why would they want to do such a thing? What did it cost them?...What traces did this leave in the material and spiritual culture?

The answers are contained within the questions themselves. If one wanted to pillage and plunder, wouldn't it be more beneficial to leave the population in the target territories alive, in good health and fit for work so that one could go on another raid to the same territory some time later? What are the risks for one's life and property if one sets off on a raid not just to loot and pillage but to destroy or drive away a relatively well organized populace protected in fortified settlements and ready to go to battle? Before Moesia, Thrace and Macedonia were depopulated, these lands would surely get covered by the bones of millions of Slavs, Goths and other barbarians... If that were the case, what would our heritage look like today? Thracian temples, ancient settlements, developed agriculture, ceramics, exceptional customs and fantastic folklore... or mass graves and legends of bloody battles and vicious slaughter?... The incongruence and lack of balance are evident.“
13

Yes, the incongruence is evident but still there is no way to test empirically the claims of either side in this argument. Thus, the next best thing we could do is find similar situations throughout history, which could offer possible solutions to the problem.

The events that transpired between the end of the 6th and the start of the 7th century can be compared to the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans in the second half of the 14th century. Let us again consult the archaeologist and historian Venelin Barakov who has researched many fortresses in the central section of the Stara Planina mountain range that date back to this period. This is what he writes: „*At the end of the 14th century, all fortresses in the Gabrovo and Sevlievo regions were abandoned. They were not stormed, taken over or destroyed. The only fortress that was burned is the one located in the Vitata Stena area near the village of Zdravkovets. The local boyar and the citizens did not fight the invading Ottoman Turk forces.*“¹⁴ A little further on, the author concludes that „*The ottoman conquest had tragic repercussions for Bulgarians, who lost their political sovereignty, saw the Bulgarian church and their religion trampled and lost their aristocracy. Still, ordinary Bulgarians survived.*“¹⁵

I believe that the situation was very similar during the turbulent years of the 6th and 7th century. Despite the destruction and the restrictions on trade and religious expression and any other adverse impacts, the population was not destroyed. It moved temporarily or more permanently in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions, where it lived in small settlements and hamlets embracing a materially more modest lifestyle. This way of life was also dictated by what they did for a living, namely herding and breeding animals. This is difficult to corroborate archaeologically since the objects that are left from this period are very few.

¹³ **Garchev, M.** Наука ли е българската история или... „пирамида“? – <http://www.otizvora.com/files2018/mg-nauka-li-e-bg-istoria.pdf>.

¹⁴ **Barakov, V.**, as quoted above, p. 210.

¹⁵ Same source, p. 211.

Additionally, there are still vast mountainous and semi-mountainous areas in Bulgaria that are yet to be studied in detail by archaeologists.

Let me continue with my review of the arguments offered by Tsvetelin Stepanov, as he reaches the main point he wants to make based on the organization of the state and the administration of the First Bulgarian Kingdom. Here, his arguments are solid: the Thracian title of kniaz (*kanaz/kanez/kanas*), defined by the *Autochthonists*, according to the author, does not appear in any source (Latin or Greek) from Antiquity, which discounts any possibility for Danube Bulgaria to be, to any degree whatsoever, a successor of Thracian statehood from the times before Christ. This could very well be the case, but there are certain circumstances that need to be considered. In the Thracian language/languages there are a number of personal names and monikers of deities that are formed using the prefix кан-/kan-/can- (for example Candaon, Kandi, Kanzo, Kankaro, etc.).¹⁶ An analysis of their meaning reveals that they are related to sacred objects and

ideas and warrior right-of-passage rituals. Therefore, it is completely possible that they are connected to the original meaning of the title *kanas*.

There is something else that deserves attention here. Recently Pavel Serafimov talked about an inscription of the name Kanas (Κανας) found in Anatolia and more precisely the Vitinia area.¹⁷ The researcher Pınar Özlem-Aytaçlar was categorical in her conclusion that the name was of Thracian origin. As far as its meaning is concerned, I have yet to come across any suggestions, but the possibility that the title of Kanas/Kanaz was derived from a personal name should not be discounted. After all, the titles Tzar and Kral were derived from the personal names Caesar and Carl.

Another argument, this time from the field of onomastics (the study of proper names), which Tsvetelin Stepanov uses requires a serious and detailed counter. Bulgarian royal names from the 7th century onward include the well-known and discussed Asparuh, Tervel, Sevar, Kardam, Krum, Omurtag, Malamir, Presian and so on. Then we have the Thracian royal names Rhesus, Tereus, Lycurgus, Orpheus and Teres, Sparatocos, Seuthes, Hebryzelmis, Berisades, Amadocus, Cotys, Rhoemetalces, Oroles, Decebalus, Mostis and so on. Here Tsvetelin Stepanov sees a clear-cut incongruence with the *Thracian paradigm*, because none of the names of the Thracian royal tradition appears in the (old)Bulgarian.

This looks like a solid argument. Indeed, if the claim is that there was continuity between the state traditions of Thracians and Bulgarians it is rather peculiar that none of the Thracian royal names is used by the Bulgarians. Moreover, Tsvetelin Stepanov emphasizes that old Bulgarian names are of (Indo) Iranian origin, or at least the majority of them. I think that we are constructing our question the wrong way. Between the First and the Second Bulgarian kingdom there is a gap of less than two centuries and, evidently, the rulers of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom

¹⁶ For more details see **Georgiev, P.** Българите през V-VII век. С., 2019, с. 137-156.

¹⁷ **Özlem-Aytaçlar, P.** An onomastic survey of the indigenous population of north-western Asia Minor. – In: *Onomatologos: Studies in Greek Personal Names presented to Elaine Matthews*. Oxford, 2010, pp. 506-529; **Serafimov, P.** Новооткритото тракийско име KANAC и българската титла KANAC. – <http://sparotok.blogspot.com/2017/07/kanac-kanac.html>.

wanted to present themselves as successors to the traditions of the First Bulgarian Kingdom, especially in the initial period of the Asenevtsi dynasty. Still, only one of the names of the kings of the First Bulgarian Kingdom appears in the Second Bulgarian Kingdom and the Asenevtsi dynasty – Petar. The name Petar is taken by Teodor for the singular reason of signifying the continuity between the new kingdom and the ruling dynasty of the 9th and the 10th century.

Between Asparuh's Bulgaria and the last independent Thracian statesmen there is a gap of nearly seven centuries. It would be almost improbable for a concrete memory of the ancient Thracian royal tradition to linger in the memory of the indigenous population, except as part of distant, nebulous legends and myths. Even if they existed, these legends were not enough to bring back from oblivion the names of the Thracian royal tradition from the times before Christ. What is more, the Dulo dynasty comes from beyond the banks of the Danube and has its own naming tradition. What is its origin? It would be interesting to find some Thracian/Illyrian/Moesian counterparts of the names Kubrat, Asparuh, Tervel, Kardam and so on. Tsvetelin Stepanov quotes a publication by Nikolay Todorov from 2006 in which he offers many Thracian, Celtic, Gothic, Illyrian and other counterparts of the names of the (old)Bulgarian kings.¹⁸ Nikolay Todorov offers a very interesting summary of his research, which is worth quoting here: „As a result [from the study – note A. M.] we compiled 8 contrastive dictionaries of anthroponyms, including nearly

400 “Thracian”, 4000 “Old Celtic”, 765 “Old Illyrian”, some 1300 “Gothic”, over 6500 “Old German “, nearly 2800 German, nearly 2000 Italian and almost 500 North Germanic matches to names used by Bulgarians for at least 13 centuries and until present day.“

We should also mention the study of Pavel Serafimov entitled „Произход на старобългарските имена“ („Origin of Old Bulgarian Names“). In it, the author writes the

following: „Let us see what is what, starting with the name of Kniaz Asparuh. It is similar to the name of the Rhracian-born general Aspar, who Jordanes identifies as a Get (*De Origine Actibusque Getarum* – XLV – 239). According to Herodotus, the Getae were the bravest and the most just Thracian nation. Other names related to that of Asparuh include Adr-aspos and Haraspos, ancient kings of Dobrudzha who ruled the region some nine centuries before the “arrival” of Asparuh. The name is also connected to the Thracian theonym Um-aspios (an epithet for the Thracian horseman according to V. Georgiev).

Let us, for a moment, acknowledge that the semblance between Asparuh and the Thracian Aspar, Ut-aspios, Adr-aspos and Har-aspos is some sort of a coincidence. Let us see what compares to the next old Bulgarian name we are going to look at, Alcek, brother of Asparuh, who settled in Italy. Alcek – Alceco is similar to Alcetas – the name of an ancient Macedonian king... His descendant is Alexander the Great, who viewed himself as having descended from Achilles the Myrmidon. John Tzetzes refers to Bulgarians as Myrmidon but, evidently, this, too, can be chalked up to coincidence.

¹⁸ Todorov, N. За имената на българските владетели от Средновековието. – Published in: Българи в античния свят. Сборник статии, Sofia, 2006, p. 105-116.

We continue with the name of Kniaz Pagan. This, in fact, is a Greek record of the name Bagan. Bagan, in turn, is the Phrygian name Bagun. It is derived from the Thracian word bagos (God) which appears on inscription G-136. Let us assume that this is also a curious coincidence.

The fourth comparison we will make focuses on the name Batbaian. The prefix bat means master, ruler, one who is held in high regard. This prefix is found in the Phrygian personal names Bata, Batak and in the Illyrian name Bato (King of Desiatians). According to Duruy, Illyrians, Thracians and Pelasgians were three groups of one and the same nation...

...The name of King Bezmer is an interesting case. His kingdom was to the north of the Danube and his rule was before that of Asparuh. The particle bez or bes is also present in the Thracian name Besa. The particle mer, which means great, big, is found in the Thracian theonym Pur-merul and also in the toponyms Gigamer, Merit.

Boris I is one of Bulgaria's best known rulers. What we do not know about him is that his name is of Thracian origin. In his study of Lycian and Phrygian names, W. G. Arkwright mentions the Phrygian names Boras and Boriskos.

From "Historia Romana" by Paul the Deacon we know about the wars between our ancestors and the Visigoths of Theodoric. The Bulgarian nobleman Buzan is mentioned, whom other authors have referred to as king. The old Bulgarian name Buzan is the Thracian name Buzen (mentioned by V. Beshevliev in Проучвания върху личните имена у траките).

The name of Kniaz Vineh appears in Nominalia of the Bulgarian Kans. Here we should mention that a document written in Linear B contains the anthroponym Vinaio. In other documents from the same period written in Linear B we have found references of Thracian names such as Getas, Batas, Buzos and many others (К. Порожанов. Общество и държавност у траките).“¹⁹

¹⁹ Serafimov, P. Произход на старобългарските имена. — <http://sparotok.blog.bg/politika/2012/12/29/proizhod-na-starobylgarskite-imena.1036320>.



A coin believed by some scholars to have been minted on orders by Kan Asparuh.

While I would never claim that all of these parallels are grounded and substantiated, the fact that there is a multitude of possible explanations of the origins of the names of old Bulgarian rulers should indicate that not everything surrounding them has been clarified yet. The publications of Nikolay Todorov and Pavel Serafimov are from 2006 and 2012, respectively. Since then, in 2015, a voluminous and detailed study was published which offers a great deal of information on the subject.²⁰ Yet, none of these studies elicited any commentaries from representatives of academic and humanities communities, with the exception of the notes Tsvetelin Stepanov offered on the article by Nikolay Todorov. I find this strange given the fact that the matter of these names has been resolved only partially. If this is the case, why are scholars keeping quiet about these alternative explanations? Or maybe the prevalent attitude is that any further discussion is useless? I believe that the desire for a democratic discussion on equal footing should be at the core of scientific research and therefore all matters, for which well-structured theories have been offered, should be discussed. In the case of the alternative hypotheses, they are not just rejected, the mere idea of alternative hypotheses triggers hostile reactions. This type of (in)action, for me, creates distrust and causes new allegations to be levelled against conventional historians accusing them of all manner of sins. In scientifically developed countries most of the alternative theses offered in public space, even the most extreme and ridiculous, are discussed and critically tested by established and respected scholars. Here, silence and dismissal, purposefully or not, seem to be the accepted tactics and that does not lead to positive outcomes.

I will not dwell on Tsvetelin Stepanov's opinions as to the origins of the word *kolobar* and the Madara horseman, because I have already made my position clear on both of these topics and no evidence of real significance has been produced since. I think his opinion on the DNA studies that were part of the research into the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages on the Balkans is far more important. Here, he shares a thesis which has seen many iterations by different scholars, and which essentially boils down to the following: DNA research

²⁰ Sabotinov, A. *Bulgarian Nominalia T.1: Род Дуло, Кубрат и синове, Тервел, Севар*. Sofia, 2015.

evidently demonstrates the origins and migrations of populations but that has very little to do with their ethnic and ethno cultural identity, therefore in the case of the origin of Bulgarians (or any matter of ethno genesis in general) DNA research is useless.

Once again I would agree with part of the thesis, but I categorically disagree with his inference. When one proposes the idea that the indigenous Balkan population was almost entirely wiped out by invasions, epidemics, natural disasters and other destructive factors, considerations such as ethnic and ethno cultural self-identification do not apply. It is a matter that to a certain degree can

be resolved via genetic genealogy methods. Of course, genetic studies cannot prove a particular individual's belonging to one ethnos or nation or the other. There are no Bulgarian, Greek, Serbian, Spanish and so on genes. What genetic studies pick up on is mutations of the Y-chromosome and mitochondrial DNA – the so-called haplogroups, which are a virtual reflection of human migrations. If a substantial database is built in the process of studying representatives of a given population, adequate comparisons can be made with geographically close or remote population groups. Based on this, it can be inferred how close or distant one ethnic group is from another in genetic terms. In the case of Bulgarians, if a high degree of similarity is found with neighboring Balkan nations, this would basically mean that present-day Bulgarians have descended from the Balkan population from Antiquity. Romanians, Greeks and Albanians are largely believed to have descended from autochthonic Balkan and Mediterranean populations. The alternative would be for almost the entire population of the Balkans – present-day Romanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbians, Macedonians and Albanians – to have descended from the wave of *barbarian invaders* (*Goths, Huns, Avars, Slavs and Old Bulgarians*), which according to academic science flooded the entire region all the way to the islands in the Aegean Sea, sweeping away almost everything in its path. If that were the case, however, we would have to acknowledge that the *new settlers*, for the most part, did not come from Central and East Asia, but were rather fellow Eastern Europeans from present-day Hungary, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine and even the Western Balkans.



Global Map of Y-DNA Haplogroups

What has happened in the field of genetic genealogy research in Bulgaria since 2015? First and foremost, the results of several new studies were published. Among them, I would like to mention the studies by the Bulgarian DNA Project, which already include 857 specimens.²¹ The Project's director, Evelin Delev, published two books, which are the first of their kind in Bulgarian literature as they are entirely focused on genetic genealogy.²² I would like to quote the conclusions the creators of the project reached based on the results so far:

²¹ <https://www.familytreedna.com/groups/bulgariandna/about/results>. The specimen count is as of 22. 09. 2019.

²² **Delev, E.** Introduction to Genetic Genealogy. C., 2016; **Same author.** Population Genetics of the Bulgarians, Founders of the European Civilization. Sofia, 2017.

*„Reading of the results from the Y-chromosome analysis:
1/ indigenous Paleolithic Balkan gene type:*

Scientists believe that haplogroup I settled on the Balkans by around 30,000 BC, during the early Paleolithic age. Initially, haplogroup I lived in the Western Balkans – the so called Denaroid anthropological type – in present-day Dalmatia in Croatia. Later, after the end of the Ice Age, this gene type spread across the territory of the entire Balkan Peninsula, in Central Europe and on the Scandinavian Peninsula. Sub-haplogroups of haplogroup I include nations such as Goths, Scythians, Parts of the Southern Slavic Nations and so on. It is very commonly found in a large percentage of present-day eastern Slavic nations, Germans, Hungarians, Croatians and so forth.

Haplogroup R1a, of the branches that are found in Bulgaria, is considered a strong marker for

Slavic and central European origin. It has two main branches – one is found in present-day Northern India, and the other – in Eastern and Northeastern Europe. It is also found in the peoples of Tarim Valley.

Haplogroup R1b is considered a Celtic genetic marker – people from this sub-haplogroup are believed to have come to Europe as late as the Bronze Age. This group has very strong presence in Western Europe and in Northern Iran. To find out whether Bulgarians from this haplogroup descended from Celts or Northern Persian peoples, a detailed and precise analysis has to be conducted because the two genetic profiles are very similar.

2/ Middle Eastern Neolithic gene type:

During the Neolithic age about 10,000 BC, with the spread of agriculture, peoples from haplogroups G2a and E1b1b1 came to the Balkans from the Middle East. The latest studies by Cruciani (Italy) also show close spreads for haplogroups J2 and E1b1b. In present day, concentrations of these haplogroups are highest on the Balkan peninsula, Southern Europe and Western Asia.

It would be interesting to find out which gene type old Bulgarians belonged to? It is almost certain that haplogroup G is typical for nations such as old Alans, whose descendants are presentday Ossetians. They have the highest concentrations of haplogroup G. We know that Alans are closely related to old Bulgarians and that the two nations migrated together from Tarim Valley towards the Caucasus. This leads us to believe that part of Bulgarians were from the same haplogroup. Curiously enough, Stalin belonged to that group as well. Realistically speaking, it is much more likely that Bulgarians were a mixture of several haplogroups, haplogroups R1b, R1a, J2, and maybe also group H. In any case, this is a question that will likely find its answer in the near future.

CONCLUSION:

As it turns out, present-day Bulgarians are mostly direct descendants (from the paternal side) of the indigenous Balkan population. From the maternal side, haplogroups that have spread throughout Europe prevail.“

The conclusion is clear-cut. What I take away from this is the fact that in all likelihood the so-called old Bulgarians, and also Thracians and Slavs, were not homogenous groups. Rather, they were more likely mixtures of kindred and not so kindred ethnic groups, which for the most part originated in Eastern Europe, Western Asia and the Black Sea region. As far as some claims regarding Bulgarians, Tarim Valley and the Alans go, I will refrain from venturing any comments as too much of the subject matter remains unclear.

To circle back to the beginning of this chapter, is a *Thracian paradigm (im)possible?*



Prevalent Y-DNA haplogroups amongst Europeans

I would like to believe that I managed to demonstrate that the indigenous theory is not only possible but actually quite probable alternative theory. Let us remember that the Turkic, Iranian and Slavic theories originated from linguistic explanations of separate words, personal names and names of settlements appearing in historical records and inscriptions. The indigenous theory today has a linguistic component

but also ethnographic/ethnological and genetic part. In other words, it encompasses arguments from scientific disciplines with diverse methodologies and subjects. The results from DNA studies are especially valuable because they offer a rare opportunity to identify the origins of ethnic groups objectively and independently from historical, archaeological and linguistic theories. In the case of Bulgarians, studies have revealed a substantial incongruence between theoretical constructs and genetic evidence. The Bulgarian nation in present day comprises individuals of diverse origin and roots as it is an alloy of no fewer than 5 to 7 major haplogroups only on the male side! This fact challenges the traditional three- or two-component theories, which has dominated triumphantly the pages of high school and university text books.

There have been instances where bone fragments extracted from archaeological sites identified as Thracian have been analyzed.²³ For example, analysis of samples taken from the mound necropolis at the village of Stambolovo, Haskovo region indicates that the studied individuals (probably relatives) belonged to mitochondrial haplogroup H2a2a1, which occurs frequently among present-day Bulgarians.

Isn't it time, at least partially, to change the way the origins of modern-day Bulgarians is being described, including in text books? Obviously, reevaluating the presuppositions, through which we think of our most ancient past is a complex and long process with ambivalent dimensions and repercussions. However, turning this process into a virtual *war of theories* is unacceptable. This war is pointless and has nothing to do with scientific discussion. Each well-rounded-out theory has its place under the sun if for no other reason – just as part of scientific history. What bothers me about Internet discussions is how easy it is to transfer negative emotions triggered by theories to the proponents of these theories. The opponent in this supposedly *scientific* discussion is described as *anti-Bulgarian, traitorous, morally corrupt, an agent of foreign interests and intelligence services* and downright harmful. Newer and newer conspiracy theories are churned out quickly giving platform to paranoid fabrications. The degree of paranoid pathos is reaching boiling point.

Why does the topic of the origin of Bulgarians trigger such emotions? I don't think this is something reserved only for us. Discussions like this are taking place in one form or another in many countries in Eastern Europe and other places in the world. What is specific about us is the atmosphere of distrust toward authorities, government or scientific, and an air of suspicion that has characterized the social climate for the past several decades. The feeling that the truth is being hidden, of a total or partial falsification, has gripped a substantial part of the historically inclined. It is no coincidence that one of the first and *all-time* best-selling books on the ancient history and origin of Bulgarians was entitled „Големият заговор срещу българите” („*The Great Conspiracy against Bulgarians*“).²⁴ This, naturally has its objective reasons. For decades on end unofficial opinions on the subject were taboo. Historical research books were given totalitarian propaganda spin and every attempt at objectivity and non-party thinking was rejected as *heresy*. To this day,

²³ **Dzhelbir, G., M. Petrova et al.** Генетичен анализ на антропологичен материал от могилен некропол при Стамболово, Хасковско. – Published in: Тракийската древност: технологични и генетични изследвания, история и нематериално наследство. Sofia, 2017, p. 33-51.

²⁴ **Madzharov, H.** Големият заговор срещу българите. Varna, 2001.

established historians (with few exceptions as mentioned above) do not think it is worthwhile to respond to Internet publications and *alternative* books, which are thought of as interchangeable. This confines the discussion to the Internet alone and there it quickly mutates into personal attacks and hate speech.

A while back, in an interview the writer Svetoslav T. Todorov said the following: *„It always bothered me that it is as if we, Bulgarians, somehow started our existence in the „middle“ of History. I care about the fact that for the last 75 years we have been imprisoned in a propagandabased matrix dedicated to the year 681 – the establishment of the Bulgarian state. Currently, it no longer exists, so it would be a good idea to try and expand our horizons and look beyond that point in time and discover ourselves somewhere else. We, who were born in these lands, have a long history hidden from us in the layers of time... We keep talking about Ottoman bondage, but we forget that we spent more than five centuries under Roman rule. This is when our Thracian history was distorted and effaced. In order to stop commenting the Turkish presence, we should understand better the calculated cruelty which Rome “civilized” the world for centuries. I wanted to shift the emphasis and demonstrate that we went through a grueling and painful transformation before we could call ourselves Bulgarians once again.“*²⁵

It is precisely the air of half-truths, tongue-in-cheek statements and cover-ups of facts and artifacts that Svetoslav Todorov has picked upon. As far as the question of when, how and who distorted and effaced our Thracian history goes (if we accept that it was indeed distorted and effaced), this is a topic that would require at least several dozen more pages or, better yet, an entire book to sort through. The psychologist Rosen Yordanov has said: *„For various, more often than not dramatic reasons, we, Bulgarians, have always had someone else write our history for us. In other historical periods we have had the excuse of being conquered for a prolonged period of time by the Eastern Roman Empire or the Ottoman Empire, but for the last 150 years it has been as if we are in a state of waking coma. We are not under a foreign rule in the political sense, but mentally and psychologically it is a different matter. For this reason, writing history has been problematic for us. This is precisely the reason why history text books have been the source of many debates. The battle for history is much more than a squabble for what history text books have to say or whether they say it softly or decisively. The battle for history is a battle for the minds and hearts of the people. The battle for historicity and historical facts goes to a much greater depth than it seems at the first glance and it goes far beyond the bounds of scientific discussion.“*²⁶

Indeed, writing history seems to have become an issue for us, Bulgarians. By fixing our gaze on our own past way of life, we scour historic theories to find an outlet for our frustrations and a solution to our present-day problems but in doing so, we burden history – *official* or *alternative*, with the expectation that it will

²⁵ Serdikian comic books with a local pilgrim. – Interview with the author at „Wi-Fi BG Bar”, Svetoslav T. Todorov. – <http://egoist.bg/serdijski-komiksi-ot-mesten-pilgrim/>.

²⁶ Rosen Yordanov: „Because of Russian dependencies, we have been in a state of waking coma for 150 years, the battle now is for the awakening of the nation.“ – <https://faktor.bg/bg/articles/rosen-yordanov-zaradi-ruskizavisimosti-150-godini-sme-v-sastoyanie-na-budna-koma-bitkata-sega-e-za-sabuzhdaneto-na-natsiyata>.

become a political or even spiritual tool for coping with the permanent transitions and crises that shake the foundations of our society. It is obvious that the discussion on the origins of ancient and modern Bulgarians has long, or at least since the Bulgarian Revival, left the scientific domain. It has become, to a great degree, a piece of propaganda, a political matter and a part of the process of constructing our national mythology – a process that apparently has not finished yet and is not likely to finish soon. Its emotional charge will not subside any time soon. The wave of nationalistic speech (and actions) that is sweeping Europe may even heat it up some more, which will hardly contribute to adopting a calm and moderate demeanor during conversations on the topic.

I would like to end with a clarification. I will leave it to the reader to determine for themselves whether the *Thracian paradigm*, also called indigenous (*autochthonic*) theory, is possible or not. Although I support it, I do not propose it should be accepted as an absolute truth. It is only one of many ways to look at the origins of modern Bulgarians. Although it makes the most sense to me, I believe that all other points of view are useful as a means to correct and add to the big picture of our past. The indigenous theory, to me, is a kind of reaction to the loudly advertised search for Asian *proto-homelands* dozens of Bulgarians that were supposedly established by *our forefathers* in various different places across Eurasia. It is an attempt to correct the claim that the indigenous population of the Balkans was completely wiped out and disappeared during the transition between Antiquity and the Middle Ages, which is increasingly being shoved down our throats.

I find the term *indigenous* (Autochthonic) relative and needing a more precise definition. There is no place on earth with an *entirely* native or Autochthonic population. All human groups live where they live today as a result of migratory processes that span centuries and even millennia. Groups of people of various sizes move across small, medium or large distances all the time, even today. In our case, I take the term *indigenous* to mean *of a population that lived on the Balkans and in the Black Sea Region between the 6th and the 7th century*. If we manage to shed, even partially, the mold that is our way of thinking, of the inferiority complex and the aspiration to prove to everybody that our lands are *the cradle of civilization and we are the most ancient, most spiritual and most cultured* and so on, we might see that on the Balkans we have more things in

common than things that differentiate us. We share similar rituals and customs, cuisine and architecture, a way of life, mythological concepts, attitude toward the world and, apparently, common genes.

Whether we like it or not, the heritage of all cultures, civilizations, religions and nationalities that lived within present-day Bulgaria, with no exception, is part of our identity. This cannot be taken only as a source of pride and basis for yet another fit of patriotic-chauvinistic exaltation. To me, this is responsibility above everything else – responsibility to both past and future generations. We can at least try to read and transfer the messages of the past, to preserve, study and popularize the relics of historical epochs close and distant that still lie in our lands.

Memory, both personal and collective, is an integral, core characteristic of humans and human communities. Therefore, it is no small matter to be able to internalize not only *what* we remember but also *how* we remember it. It looks as though Bulgarians, like many other nations, tend to remember historical facts and

epochs selectively. For example, the history of the Balkans and present-day Bulgarian territories prior to 681 does not seem to be a part of our collective memory. What is worse, it is thought of by too many as *foreign* and *non-Bulgarian* and thus having no relevance to our formation as an ethnos and nation. In the nationalistic narrative of our past, the millennia that came before the 7th century, although rife with important events and having left rich material culture behind, are just a footnote in the annals of *Old Bulgarian Glory*. I think it is a matter of self-respect and respect for the land on which we live to change this fact.

To do that, we will likely need to expand our senses and let in the assumption that we may turn out to be less *unique* than we thought. We are an integral part of the community of Balkan nations, a group of peoples with complicated and difficult historical background and relations that today have the rare opportunity to build a shared, peaceful and neighborly future.