

HOW MANY NATIONS DID KING BORIS CONVERT TO CHRISTIANITY?

By Nikola Tsartsarov

The conversion of Bulgaria to Christianity is seen as one of the most important periods in Bulgarian Medieval history. The overwhelming majority of scholars studying that topic believe that Bulgarian society was divided into „Slavs and Old Bulgarians and these two groups were also divided religiously”. Analyzing the ethno genesis of Bulgarians, many scholars put forward the idea that Bulgarians were a Turkic-speaking (recently also Iranian-speaking) minority occupying an enclave in the north-east of Bulgaria, which was surrounded by a sea of Slavs. According to the famous archeologist Rasho Rashev, *„The Bulgarian tribe is an amalgamation of three ethno-linguistic groups namely – Iranian, Ugric and Turkic.”*¹

Veselin Besheliev insists that *„Bulgarians were likely a union various Turkic tribes who accepted the name of the ruling tribal group, as it had been often the case with other Turkic and related tribes inhabiting the vastness of Central Asia. The same holds true for the modern name of Bulgaria, which Bulgarian Slavs inherited from the Turkic-speaking tribe that once ruled them.”*²

The distinguished Bulgarian linguist Stefan Mladenov sees the ethnonym „Bulgarian“ as having been derived from the Turkish-Tatar word „bulamach“ („bulgamak“)³. He believes that „bulgar“ means „mongrel“. Having accepted as a certainty the existence of at least two separate ethnic groups in the “SlavicBulgarian state”, scholars started to introduce empty religions (such as Tangraism), titles (khan), and nonsensical terms such as Proto-Bulgarian and so on. Some argue that Slavs were subjugated by ProtoBulgarians, others insist they were simply their allies. Various opinions have been offered as to whether Slavs were more developed as a nation than Bulgarians or vice-versa.

Professor dr. Georgy Bakalov claims that *„to insist that Slavs and Bulgarians were at the same stage of their cultural development at the time their historic paths merged during the second half of the 7th century is, simply put, without merit.”*⁴ Other acclaimed historians have written books with bombastic titles such as *„Bulgarians – Civilizers of the Slavic world”*.⁵

Academic Dimitar Angelov is of the opinion that *„Until the Christianization in 865, the Slavs and ProtoBulgarians, although they had become considerably closer to each other, nevertheless differed from each other because of the differences in their religious understandings and the rites, customs and traditions associated with them.”*⁶

Many Bulgarian historians who have researched the matter speak of a necessity for *„cultural consolidation, which could naturally remove the differences between the two ethnic groups”*. It is believed that *„Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians were on relatively separate trajectories in their cultural development until the end of the 9th century”*.

To put it another way, the belief that at the time of the conversion to Christianity there were two different ethnic groups living in Bulgaria, Slavs and (Proto-)Bulgarians is strongly entrenched in Bulgarian historiography.

These opinions look strange when they are compared against written records from that period, all of which speak of one people living on the territory of Bulgarian. Let me first go over the domestic sources, which, I believe, are most relevant for the issue at hand.

KEY DOMESTIC WRITTEN RECORDS ON THE CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

1. An Old Bulgarian Story about the Conversion to Christianity (Старобългарски разказ за покръстването).⁷

This written record is very valuable because it is one of only very few accounts that present the conversion to Christianity from a Bulgarian point of view. It starts as follows:

„How and by what means Bulgarians became Christians will be laid out briefly in the following.“

2. The Miracle of St George with the Bulgarian (Чудото на св. Георги с Българина).⁸

The Old Bulgarian Story was written in the 10th century and provides valuable information about the conversion to Christianity. The author writes:

„I belong to the newly-converted Bulgarian people, which the Lord enlightened with holy baptisms in the aforementioned years through his chosen agent, Knyaz Boris, named Mihail upon his holy baptism.“

3. Synodic of King Boril (Синодик на цар Борил).⁹

„The beginnings of Bulgarian kings: To Boris, the first of the Bulgarian kings, who was named Mihail upon his holy baptism, and who led the Bulgarian people to a path of wisdom through baptism, eternal memory.“

Conclusion: Domestic records only mention the conversion to Christianity of one people.

KEY FOREIGN WRITTEN RECORDS ON THE CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

1. Answers by Pope Nicholas I to questions by Bulgarians (Отговорите на Папа Николай I по запитванията на българите).¹⁰

One of the most interesting foreign sources of information on Bulgarian history in the 9th century, this document was written by the Pope's secretary, Anastasius Bibliothecarius on the behest of Pope Nicholas I. It contains 106 answers to 115 questions raised by the newly converted knyaz of the Bulgarian people, Boris.

Because the questions are included in the answers, we find out what Boris wanted to know.

„17. And so, by telling the story of how you, through the grace of the Lord, adopted the Christian faith and how you led your *entire people* convert to Christianity...”

Academic Dimitar Angelov writes the following: „Nowhere in his ‘Answers’ did Pope Nicholas mention separately „Slavs” and „Proto-Bulgarians” as having their own religious or other distinctions in their way of life. On the contrary, his references seem to always be to a unitary population with uniform material and spiritual culture.“¹¹

2. Letter by Patriarch Photios I of Constantinople to Knyaz Boris I (Писмо на патриарх Фотий до княз Борис I).¹²

An exceptionally highly educated man, Patriarch Photios was one of the premiere encyclopedic minds of Byzantium during the 9th century and one of the ideologues of the conversion to Christianity of the Bulgarian people. He writes the following in his letter to Boris:

„...May the Lord, who adorned you with these feats and supports you to this day on your path to achieving them, keep you and protect you for the rest of your life so you will preserve your virtues and acquire even greater ones so that you will serve, *to the people that are under your blessed rule*, a shining and unforgettable example, to all the other peoples, a model for salvation, conversion and deliverance, and to us, of the humble, eternal praise.”

3. Epistle of Photios (Окръжно послание на Фотий) 867.¹³

The patriarch writes the following about the Bulgarian people:

„Even Bulgarians, a barbaric people averse to Christ... Not two whole years had passed since this people had converted to the Christian faith...”

4. The Latin-language records containing information about the process of converting to Christianity.

Include the Annales Bertiniani and Annales Fuldenses, Regino’s chronicle and the chronicles of Anastasius Bibliothecarius¹⁴ among others. Like the Bulgarian and Byzantine records, they refer to one people’s conversion to Christianity.

ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF THE CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

1. The inscription of Ballshi.¹⁵

The inscription was cut into a stone column found near the Albanian village of Ballshi during World War I by Austrian soldiers digging trenches (**picture 1**).

The text announces „the conversion and the communion of the people with Christ” as described in

Chapter 9 of the *Кратко житие на св. Климент Охридски (Brief Passional of St. Kliment of Ohrid)*, written by Demetrios Chomatenos¹⁶. This exceptionally valuable archeological record created at the behest of Boris himself, mentions the conversion to Christianity of only one people.



Picture 1. The text reads: „...[and by the Lord the ruler of the Bulgarians converted to Christianity] Boris, named Mihail, **along with the people given to him** in the year 6347 [866]“.

2. Latin inscription discovered in the Bulgarian capital Preslav.¹⁷

*„During the term of his holiness Pope Nicholas I, on the tenth year, in the name of all-powerful Boris this church was consecrated in the presence **of the prince of the Bulgarians**, Boris and his clergymen and his people.“*

3. Seal of Knyaz Boris I (**picture 2**)¹⁸:

Face: „*Holy Mother of God, help Mihail, ruler of Bulgaria.*“

Back: „*Dear Lord, help Mihail, ruler of Bulgaria.*“

4. Seal of Monk George, Bulgarian sinkel – lead, fourth quarter of the 9th century (**picture 3**).¹⁹

The item was discovered in the Selishte area. The inscription reads: „ΓΕΩΡΓ[ΗΥ]
 ЦРЬНЬЧЮ Н
 СΥΝΚΕΛΥ ΒΛΪΓΑΡΣΪ[ΚΟΜΥ]“.

5. Seal of Archbishop George of Bulgaria (**picture 4**).





Picture 2

Picture 3

Picture

4

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN „SLOVENE“ AND „BULGARE“ ?

It is a known fact that in some of the most famous old Bulgarian records of the conversion to Christianity and the creation of the Glagolic and Cyrillic alphabets the term „Slovene“ appears quite often. As I will demonstrate below, in the 9th century, and also thereafter, the term „Slovene“ was not used to refer to anything different or separate from „Bulgare“. In fact, Bulgarians were accepted as one of the Slavic nations all the way until the end of the 18th century when the German scholars Schlözer²⁰, Thunmann²¹ and Engel²² offered the hypothesis that Bulgarians were of Turkic or Tatar origin.

In the 18th century, Paisiy writes the following in his „Istoriya Slavyanobolgarskaya“:

*„Of all the Slavic nations, Bulgarians were the most glorious as they first had kings of their own, and patriarchs, they were the first to convert to Christianity and had the largest territory. Similarly, of all the Slavic nations, they were the strongest, and the fairest and the first Slavic saints were Bulgarians and they spoke the Bulgarian language, as I already wrote in my history.“*²³

To delve further into the matter of the existence or lack of distinction between the terms *Bulgare* and

Slovene, it is important to consider the words denoting „people“ in the old Bulgarian texts. First, „язык“ (tongue, language). This word is used to denote both „people“ and „language“. The clearest example of this is found in „Brief Passional of Cyril“ („Кратко житие на Кирил“), which reads: *„After that he went to the banks of the Bregalnitsa River where he found several of the **Slavic peoples** (языка – tongues) which were converted to Christianity and those that weren't, he baptized them and converted them into the orthodox faith and wrote for them books in the **Slavic language** (словенским языком).“*²⁴

This interchangeable use of the word „язык“ proves without a doubt that if those who write in the Slavic language see themselves as representatives of the Bulgarian people, then Bulgarian automatically equals Slavic (people and language).

Another excellent example comes from Ivan Vladislav, who refers to himself as a **native Bulgarian** (see below).

I would also like to offer the following examples of the absence of distinction between the word „Bulgarian“ and „Slavic“ in written records:

1. In the Old Bulgarian Story, mentioned above, of the „Miracle of St. George with the Bulgarian“, the protagonist says that he belongs to „the newly-converted Bulgarian people“.

2. The „Exhaustive Passional of Kliment Ohridski“ was written by an anonymous student of his after 916 and came to us in an expanded Greek edition. The author of the passional refers to himself and his compatriots as „Bulgarian“ (Βούλγαροι), and the language they used to speak and write, as „the language of the Bulgarians“ (γλώσση Βουλγάρων). Furthermore, he calls Kliment „Bulgarian lightbringer“.²⁵ 3. The famous

mass dedicated to the memory of Ivan Rilski, written shortly after his death, i.e. sometime after 946, refers to him as „*compatriot of the Bulgarians*“ („Българом съгражданине“).²⁶

4. In the „Treatise Against the Bogomils“ („Беседата на презвитер Козма против богомилите“) by Cosmas the Priest, it is written that Father Bogomil preached in the „Bulgarian land“.²⁷

5. In the „Bulgarian Apocryphal Chronicle“ („Български апокрифен летопис“), the author insists that the first Bulgarian king's name was Slav.

6. It is a known fact that Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher created the Slavic alphabet. However, in „Razumnik“, an old Bulgarian apocryphal work, which was very popular among literate Bulgarian readers, the author wrote the following: „*Who invented the Bulgarian book? Cyril the Philosopher*“.²⁸

7. During the reign of King Simeon, a chronicle was compiled and entitled „Histories“ („Историкии“). Its author was Constantine Preslavski. The chronicle was based on Byzantine sources and therefore the author did include too many details on Bulgarian history. Still, he made sure to note that Emperor Nikephoros was killed in Bulgaria.²⁹

8. Todor Doxov, in his notes to the Old Bulgarian translation of „Athanasius of Alexandria's Third Oratio against the Arians“ („Слова на Атанасий Александрийски против арианите“), refers to Simeon as „our Bulgarian knyaz“ („княза нашего българска“). Boris is also referred to as „Bulgarian knyaz“ („княз българскы“) and it is mentioned that he was the one who converted Bulgarians to Christianity. Additionally, Todor Doxov insists that Constantine Preslavski's translation was from Greek to Slavic.³⁰

9. In the prologue to the Byzantine book „Bogoslovie“ („Heavens“) the translator, John the Exarch, refers to himself as the „exarch of Bulgarians“ („ексархомъ българскомъ“). In the same prologue, he praises his holiness, Constantine, who drew the „letters for the Slavic books“.³¹

10. In the „Legend of Tessoniki“ („Солунска легенда“) which describes the life of Cyril, the terms

Bulgarians and Slavs are used interchangeably – „...go amongst the Slavic peoples, called Bulgarians“.³² 11. The Passional of Naum from the first half of the 10th century the author speaks of „Bulgarian land“ and of „Bulgarians“ and, at the same time, of the „Slavic nation of Devol“.³³

12. The „Brief Passional of Cyril“ („Кратко Кирилово житие“) from the Middle Ages claims that Cyril was „also of Bulgarian heritage“ („родом съхъ Българинъ“).³⁴

13. The mass dedicated to Cyril in the Skopje Menaion reads „and Bulgarian books were created which reached all the way to Rome“ („и книгами българскыши проиде и до Рима же дошедь“).³⁵

14. In a mass for Ivan Rilski from the 13th century, it is mentioned that Kliment and Naum wrote in Bulgarian and that Ivan Rilski was a Bulgarian native.³⁶

15. Byzantine records from the 9th century and later speak solely of Bulgarians living on the territory of Bulgaria. There are multiple examples from the 9th century to offer. For instance, the chronicle of Priest George, the passional of Peter the Patrician, the passional of Nicholas Stoudites, an anonymous chronicle dated between 848 and 886, „Kletorologion“ by Philotheos, the collections of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Photios³⁷ etc.

16. Western records mentioning Bulgarians from the 9th century also provide valuable information. These include the so called „Universal Chronicle“, „Gesta Episcoporum Neapolitanorum“, „Annales Laurissenses Maiores“, „Annales Sithienses“, the accounts of the so called „Bavarian Geographer“, „The Life of Charlemagne“ by Einhard, „Annales Fuldenses“, „Life of Louis“, „Annales Vedastini“, verses by Walafrid Strabo, letter of Lothar II to Pope Adrian, the commentary to the gospel of Christian Druthmar, Letters by Pope John VIII, „Life of Pope Adrian II“ by Anastasius Bibliothecarius, „Annales Bertiniani“, Regino's chronicle and so on.³⁸ They all speak of

only one people (bulgarorum gens, bulgarorum nation, populus bulgarorum), as Dimitar Angelov has pointed out.³⁹

17. A surviving work of the Arab writer Abū al-Bakrī contains a story about the Jew Ibrahim ibn Yaquub who in 965 had the opportunity to meet and interact with envoys of the Bulgarian king. They introduced themselves as Bulgarians (al Blakari) and that they had translated the gospel into Slavic.⁴⁰

18. Arab authors often use „Bulgarians” and „Slavs” (Saqaliba/Saqlabi) interchangeably as in the following examples:

- At-Tabari, an author who lived in the late 9th century, writes that in 897 „Slavs conducted a massive raid on the Byzantines and killed a large number of them”.⁴¹ This refers to the losses inflicted by the armies of Simeon on the Byzantines in the battle at Boulgarophygon.
- Ahmad ibn Fadlan visited Volga Bulgaria in 922. He wrote down his impressions of what he saw and heard there in the book „Treatise“ („Risāla”).⁴² This is perhaps the most valuable and earliest surviving written records mentioning Volga Bulgarians. Ibn Fadlan was one of the envoys sent by Bagdad at the behest of the Bulgarian ruler Almus to help reinforce the Islamic religion to which the state had recently converted. For the author, the terms „Slavs” and „Bulgarians” are interchangeable. Sometimes, he refers to Almus as the „ruler of the Bulgarians” and sometimes, as „king of the Slavs”.
- The famous Arab historian geographer and writer Shahab ud-Din Abu Abdullah Yakut Ibn Abdullah al-

Hamawi ar-Rumi al-Baghdadi (approximately 1179 – 1229) writes the following about the capital of

Volga Bulgaria: „*Bulgar is the city of the Slavs, located in the north*”.⁴³

THE FAMILY (GENUS) OF KING BORIS

Bulgarian historians are virtually unanimous that Boris is a descendant of Bulgarian rulers Krum, Omurtag, Malamir and Presian. This is supported by the account of 10th century Byzantine author Joseph Genesisius.⁴⁴ However, it is also accepted as a fact that they were not of Slavic origin. This is highly controversial if one was to consider the relevant sources. The names of the sons of Omurtag are undoubtedly Slavic – **Enravota**, **Voin**, **Zvinitsa** and **Malamir**. They are mentioned by Theophylact of Ohrid in the „Martyrdom of the Fifteen Martyrs of Tiberiopolis“ („Мъченичеството на 15-те тивериопулски мъченици”).⁴⁵ The names of **Malamir** and his son, **Presian**, are also recorded in rock inscriptions in Greek. **Presian** called himself the „ruler of the many Bulgarians” ([To]v πολὼν Βουλγαρον

[ο] εκ θεου αρχον)⁴⁶, as opposed to the king of „Bulgarians and Slavs”, which is something Kaloyan did in his letters to Pope Innocent III, where in places he refers to himself as „ruler of Bulgarians and Vlachs.”⁴⁷ The very name **Boris**, which some linguists believe was derived from the Turkic bjori, the Altay bars or the Mongol bogoris, also appears as Borisav. Interestingly, the name Boris also appears in the compound names of Thracian tribes such as MukaBoris, Mukabur, Mukaburis. They are a combination of two components – Muka and Boris. The name Muka appears on its own in the forms Mukas, Mukos, Muka and so on.⁴⁸ One of the sons of **Boris** is named **Vladimir**.

In the introduction to his book, which was written circa 922, the aforementioned Arab traveler, Ibn

Fadlan, names the envoys sent by the Arab sultan to Volga Bulgaria. One of them was **Baris as-Saqlabi** –

„Boris the Slav”.⁴⁹

According to the convention, Slavic language was adopted as official on all levels of state administration. Would that have been possible, if the ruling class spoke a different language?

In fact, the facts point in the opposite direction – the Boris's family spoke perfect Slavic. A note to the Gospel of Cividale (5th – 6th century) made in 867 starts with the following: „*These are names from Bulgaria. Firstly, their knyaz, Mihail, and his brother, Dox...*“⁵⁰

The son of Dox, who was Knyaz Boris's nephew, was called Todor Doxov and in his note to the Old Bulgarian translation of „Athanasius of Alexandria's Third Oratio against the Arians“⁵¹ he himself writes in Slavic.

The surviving headstone of one of Boris's daughters, Ana, (picture 5). Has an inscription on it in Bulgarian (Slavic) and Greek, which reads: „*In October, on the ninth day, passed away Anna, servant of the Lord*“.⁵²



Picture 5

The heirs to Boris's throne also consider themselves rulers of Bulgarians and not as rulers of Bulgarians and Slavs.

Lead seal of King Simeon:

Face: „*Mother of God, help Simeon, ruler of Bulgaria.*“

Back: „*Dear Lord, help Simeon, ruler of Bulgaria.*“⁵³

On the rock pillar excavated near the village of Narush, Thessaloniky region, which was used to mark the border between „Bulgarians and Romais [Byzantines]“, Simeon is referred to as „*By God ruler of Bulgarians*“.⁵⁴

It should be considered that according to the „Detailed Passional of Methodius“, which was written in the late 9th century „all citizens of Thessaloniki spoke fluent Slavic“ („солоуняне вси чисто словенски беседуют“).⁵⁵ An inscription discovered near Thessaloniki, which was dated back to 904, the border between Bulgarians and Byzantines was closer to the city. Therefore, Bulgarians spoke Slavic.

Based on lead seals, it is evident that Peter saw himself as „*Peter, King of Bulgarians*“ and „*Peter, Basileus of Bulgarians*“.⁵⁶

Samuil's Inscription of 993 (picture 6) is a very important epigraphic from the end of the First Bulgarian Kingdom. It was written in Slavic* in honor of a Bulgarian ruler:

„*In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, I, Samuel, servant of God, made a memory of my father, of my mother and of my brother on these crosses. Here are the names of the deceased: Nikolas, servant of God, Ripsimia and David. Written in the year 6501 since Creation, VI indiction.*“⁵⁷



Picture 6

*The inscription is in Old Bulgarian (note by the editor).

The ancestry of Samuil is still a subject of debate. The hypothesis that he descended from the ruling dynasty is, however, most compelling. It is supported by the work of the Byzantine princess and writer Anna Komnene (a distant descendant of the Bulgarian royal dynasty from the 12th century). She writes of „...**Bulgarian Basileus Makros and his descendants, especially Samuil, the last of the Bulgarian dynasty...**”⁵⁸

The peculiar name „Mokros” is most likely a typo on the part of the 14th century Byzantine rewriter, who inverted the letter order of the original name „Kromos” or „Krum”.⁵⁹

Samuil’s nephew, Ivan Vladislav, left behind even more convincing evidence as to what the ancestry of Bulgarian rulers who wrote in Slavic truly was. The very name **Vladislav** betrays a Slavic origin. However, the king clearly defines himself as a „native Bulgarian“ („българшъ родомъ“):

„In the year 6523 [= 1015-1016] since the creation of the world, this fortress, built and made by Ivan, **Bulgarian Autocrator**, was renewed with the help and the prayers of Our Most Holy Lady and through the intercession of her twelve supreme Apostles. The fortress was built as a haven and for the salvation **of the lives of the Bulgarians**. The work on the fortress of Bitola commenced on the twentieth day of October and ended on the [...] This Tsar was **Bulgarian by birth**, grandson of the pious Nikola and Ripsimia, son of Aaron,

*who was brother of Samuil, Tsar of Bulgaria, the two who routed the Greek army of Emperor Basil II at Stipon where gold was taken [...] and in [...] this Tsar was defeated by Emperor Basil in 6522 (1014) since the creation of the world in Klyuch and died at the end of the summer.“*⁶⁰

One of the sons of Ivan Vladislav was given the name Presian (same as the father of the „protoBulgarian” Boris). John Skylitzes always refers to him as „Presian the Bulgarian”.⁶¹

A rock tablet discovered in 1951 at the monastery near the village of Mihalovtse in Slovakia was identified as the tombstone of Presian II, son of Ivan Vladislav.⁶² It is written in Old Bulgarian (Slavic). The text reads: „**Here lies Knyaz Presian. In the year 997. In the year 1061.**“



CONCLUSION

Going through the multitude of historic records, there is an ostensible absence of evidence to support a claim that Boris converted to Christianity more than one peoples. It is an established fact that Boris’s ancestors and descendants considered themselves Bulgarian and many had Slavic names.* All of them spoke and wrote in Slavic after the conversion to Christianity.

* Academic Vladimir Georgiev insists that all personal names ending in the suffix „-mir“ are of Thracian origin – Homer, Malamir, Valdemar (Vladimir) etc. (note by the editor).

Therefore, the claim that Bulgarian rulers were representatives of a „minority caste“, which adopted the language of the majority, learned to wield it fluently, and preferred to use it for their tombstones, as opposed to using their native tongue, seems unconvincing. The same also applies to the theory that the majority of the population would agree to call themselves by a foreign name that originated in Asia. This last thesis was proposed for the first time in the late 18th, early 19th century, but unfortunately today it is dominant. Historians who write about the need of consolidation of the two ethnic groups offer no

evidence of the existence of two ethnic groups, “Slavs and Proto-Bulgarian” in Bulgaria in the 9th century. Given that, what need for consolidation could there be?

Of course, if it is true that 9th century Bulgarians spoke Slavic, then that would mean that they either were of Slavic origin, or had “consolidated” into a unitary nation prior to the 9th century. The origins of Bulgarians is too vast of a topic, as is the matter of the origin of Slavs.

In this article, I do not look into the nature of the conversion to Christianity itself and whether or not it was in fact „re-conversion” (conversion to a Christianity of a different type), given that according to many sources a large part of the Bulgarian population had long become Christianized, as had been many of the rulers that came before Boris, and that many of the churches built in the 4th and 5th century show no signs of having stopped functioning.

These and other incongruences indicate that Bulgaria’s transition to Christianity should be re-examined fundamentally.

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