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THE BYZANTINE HISTORIOGRAPHY ON THE STATE OF SERBIAN DESPOTS*

The four Byzantine historians of "the Fall" of the Byzantine Empire, Doucas, Chalcocondyles, Sphrantzes and Critobulos, as well as the Byzantine short chronicles, bring many news concerning Serbian history of the first half of the XV century. Although almost all of them refer to the Serbian political history of the period, they also imply that Serbia was a state, having its own territory, ethnicity, government, diplomacy, army and economic resources.

The Fifteenth Century Byzantine sources narrating, among the other things, of the Serbian history of the first half of the century, also testify that the contemporaries regarded Serbia as a state. It appears, from their news, that Serbia of that time had complete apparatus of a body which could be, from a contemporary historian's point of view, understood as a state structure.

Territory — First of all, the 15th century Byzantine authors certify that Serbia had its own territory. Their sporadic and imprecise news do not mention the borderlines, but there are some implications that the region might most roughly be defined as Moravian Serbia, or the continental land drawn by the rivers of Velika Morava and Južna Morava. Although Zeta formally belonged to despot Stefan Lazarević's state since 1421, it is not considered as a part of Serbia. They do not even allude to Zeta in their works. It is no wonder, concerning the fact that it has been widely accepted today and apparently clearly perceived by the contemporaries that in the restored Serbian state, Moravian Serbia represented its most significant part.¹

Critobulos offers the most concrete description of the land position of the Triballi, the name he applies when referring to the Serbs. It, as historian details,

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¹ I. Božić, *Srpske zemlje u doba Stefana Lazarevića, Moravska škola i njeno doba*, Beograd 1972, 115 (hereafter, *Božić, Srpske zemlje*).

was placed at the favorable place of the Upper Trace (κεῖται μὲν ἐν ἐπικαίρῳ τῆς ἄνω Θράκης), starting with the Upper Moesia and the Heamon mountain, reaching the Istros, which separates their land from that of Dacians and Peonians.² Since for the writer the Heamon mountain was also the Rila mountain, which belongs to the Rodope mountains because the Marica river springs from there, therefore one may infer that, according to Critobulos' words, the territory of Serbia began from the places where, set apart by the Trajan's Gate,³ the Balkan mountain (Stara Planina) meets the Rodopes.⁴ Thus, it would be the Serbian eastern borderline. The river Danube marked the northern frontier. The southern borderline, after the year of 1389, was gradually being moved northwards. Chalcocondyles was reporting that prince Lazar, after the deaths of king Vukašin and despot Uglješa, in 1371, took the provinces in Macedonia as well as the land known as Priština spreading thus his power to the north up to the Illirian river Sava.⁵ Doucas, however, judging by the news that Mehmed II, after demanding from despot Djurađ Branković to leave Serbia, in return offered the Serbian ruler some parts of his father Vuk's lands and the town of Sofia, has already suggested that the territory of Serbia shrank.⁶ The Byzantine writers do not declare at all the western borderline, thus not knowing of the properties of Serbian despots in Bosnia, though they often speak of rich mines of Serbia and they are acquainted with the fact that the Serbian despots held numerous possessions in Hungary.⁷

Within the very territory of Serbia, the Byzantine sources hint at certain important towns and provinces. Above all, it's the field of Kosovo, as, according to Chalcocondyles, was called the region of Priština (ἐν πεδίῳ Κοσόβῳ οὕτω καλουμένῳ τῆς Πριστινίου χώρας).⁸ Novo Brdo, the town Doucas names as μητέρα τῶν πόλεων, is also in Kosovo.⁹ Going farther to the north, Niš is mentioned as well.¹⁰ A great deal of space and attention has been dedicated to Smederevo.¹¹ Doucas notifies that the town was founded on the basis of the Murad's permission, who for that purpose even released the special charter.¹² Chalcocondyles compe-

² Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae, ed. D. R. Reinsch, Berlin — New York 1983, 94–95 (hereafter, Critobulos).

³ On Trajan's Gate cf. Tabula Imperii Byzantini 6. Thracien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos), von P. Soustal, Wien 1991, 190–192, 279–280, 427–428.

⁴ Critobulos, 103.

⁵ Laonici Chalcocandylae Historiarum Demonstrationes, I, ed. E. Darkó, Budapestini 1922, 49 (hereafter, Chalc. I).

⁶ Ducas, Historia Turco-Byzantina (1341–1462), ed. V. Grecu, Bucharest 1958, 397 (hereafter, Ducas).

⁷ Ducas, 263; Laonici Chalcocandylae Historiarum Demonstrationes, II, ed. E. Darkó, Budapestini 1923, 24 (hereafter, Chalc. II).

⁸ Chalc. I 49–50; II, 126; Ducas, 277.

⁹ Chalc. II, 125, 127; Critobulos, 98, 99; Giorgio Sfranze, Cronaca, a cura di R. Maisano, Roma 1990, 144 (hereafter, Sfranze, Cronaca); Ducas, 263.

¹⁰ Chalc. I, 49; II, 125; Ducas, 277.

¹¹ Chalc. II, 24, 179, 217; Critobulos, 99, 112, 113, 114, 119; Sfranze, Cronaca, 148; Ducas, 257, 261, 263, 273, 397.

¹² Ducas, 257.

tently intimates the existence of the settlement during the reign of despot Stefan Lazarević, but erroneously designates it as his capital, which Smederevo became in 1430.¹³ Nevertheless, the same author is precise claiming that Smederevo was the Serbian capital at the time of the Murat II's siege in 1439.¹⁴ Belgrade as well drew Byzantine writers' attention.¹⁵ Still, while for Chalcocondyles it is a Hungarian town, Doucas sees it as a Serbian one, although aware that some time before Murad II conducted his campaign for it, Djurdj Branković surrendered Belgrade to the Hungarian king.¹⁶

The Byzantine historians mention the Serbian rivers as well — the Morava,¹⁷ the Sava¹⁸ and the Danube.¹⁹ The short chronicle no. 72a notes that the Turks in 6946. (=1438) plundered the monastery of Ravanica (τὴν Ῥαβανίτζαν).²⁰ In the short chronicle no. 71a we read that the Hungarians in 6945. (=1437) captured the Turkish ships in Kruševac (εἰς τὸ Κρούσιω).²¹ In the chronicle no. 96 was written that Musa, after Suleyman defeated him near Hadrianopolis in July 1410, escaped to τόπο Κολτζοῦ, which has been identified as Golubac.²² Sphrantzes also records that, after despot Lazar Branković died in 1457, the sultan sent the beglerbey Mahmud to take over Serbia peacefully. Having failed, Mahmud first occupied Peristerin, i. e. Golubac.²³ The short chronicle no. 72 marks that in 6934. (=1426) the sultan Murad conquered Sofia, Pirot and Krahovo (τὴν Σοφίαν, τὸ Πίρο καὶ τὸ Κράχοβο).²⁴

The Land Name and the Population — The 15th century Byzantine authors used various terms to denote Serbia. Tending to prove their erudition, grounded on the Hellenistic cultural heritage, they, in the manner of the Byzantine historiography of the previous centuries, called the Serbs as the Triballi and, accordingly, their land the Tribal land (Τριβαλλίς). It is the feature of Chalcocondyles²⁵

¹³ Chalc. I, 165; *M. Dinić*, *Grada za istoriju Beograda u srednjem veku*, II, Beograd 1958, 14; *Božić*, *Srpske zemlje*, 119.

¹⁴ Chalc. II, 24.

¹⁵ Chalc. II, 25, 178, 179; Critobulos, 108, 112; Sfranze, Cronaca, 146; Ducas, 263, 421.

¹⁶ Chalc. II, 25–26; Ducas, 263.

¹⁷ Chalc. II, 125.

¹⁸ Chalc. I, 49; II, 25; Critobulos, 27, 108, 175; Ducas, 263.

¹⁹ Chalc. II, 25; Critobulos, 94, 95, 96; Sfranze, Cronaca, 26; Ducas, 47, 79, 123, 149, 155, 157, 169, 177, 217, 229, 237, 257, 259, 263, 271, 273, 275, 277, 295, 397, 433.

²⁰ *P. Schreiner*, *Die Byzantinischen Kleinchroniken I*, Wien 1975, 564 (hereafter, *Kleinchroniken I*).

²¹ *P. Schreiner*, *Die Byzantinischen Kleinchroniken III*, Wien 1979, 159 (hereafter, *Kleinchroniken III*).

²² *P. Schreiner*, *Die Byzantinischen Kleinchroniken II*, Wien 1977, 400 (hereafter, *Kleinchroniken II*).

²³ Sfranze, Cronaca, 148; *R. Radić*, *Georgije Sfrancis i Srbija*, *Leskovački zbornik* 43 (2003) 22.

²⁴ *Kleinchroniken I*, 563. For identification of Krahovo cf. *S. Ćirković*, *Srpski letopisi i vizantijske kratke hronike*, *Srpska književnost u doba Despotovine*, Naučni skup Despotovac, 22–23. avgust 1997, Despotovac 1998, 107.

²⁵ Chalc. I, 14, 19, 20, 23, 26, 27, 30, 49, 67, 75, 146, 161, 165; II, 20, 23, 59, 176, 177, 277, 278. He uses the term "Serbs" only two times in his work (Chalc. I, 26, 32). The author here, apparently, leans himself on Nicephoros Gregoras, who, in one point of his work, obviously mentions

and Critobulos²⁶ particularly. Opposite to them, George Sphrantzes exclusively uses the terms Serbia and the Serbs.²⁷ Nonetheless it seems that Doucas makes the difference between the Triballi and the Serbs. Only few times he mentions the Triballi,²⁸ leaving the impression of considering the wider ethnic area of the Balkans, specifically the parts of Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia. Reading his opus, one is likely to get the impression that Serbia played the prominent role in the struggle against the Turks, which is the reason why the author, quite precisely, discerns the Serbs and the Triballi.²⁹ Similar to Doucas, Symeon, the Archbishop of Thessalonica, made the difference between the Triballi and the Serbs. Reporting of Mehmed I's campaign against Ochrid in the early 1417, he marked down that the sultan began a war against the Triballi.³⁰ Yet, the same author differs the Bulgarian, Serbian and Triballian Christian rulers (τοὺς τῶν Βουλγάρων καὶ Σέρβων καὶ Τριβαλλῶν).³¹ It is believed that the here mentioned Triballi were the local population, settled on the north-west border of the Turkish state, so that is wrong identify them as the Serbs.³²

Army — All the Byzantine writers of this period agree that Serbia had an extraordinary army. The reports of the brave Serbian soldiers start with the illustrious battle of Kosovo, whose greatest hero, Miloš Obilić, inspired the exalted tales of Doucas and Chalcocondyles of the very battle.³³ Doucas' description of the Serbian soldiers' courage during the battle of Angora is an eulogy of the bravery of Stefan Lazarević and his armour-clad calvary, which has not been recorded by any other source.³⁴ Speaking of the Angora battle, Chalcocondyles points out that Bayazid was very proud of the 10 thousand Triballi's unit, because they expressed the courage wherever they fought at.³⁵ Not only do the Serbian and the Byzantine sources admire Stefan Lazarević and his troops for the fearlessness shown at the Angora battle, but the Turkish as well, and the winner himself, the Great Timur.³⁶

Stefan Dušan as ὁ τῶν Τριβαλλῶν ἀρχηγὸς ἐτεθνήκει Κραλῆς Σερβίας, Nicephori Gregorae Byzantina historia, III, ed. I Bekkerus, Bonnae 1855, 556; Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije VI, Beograd 1986, 293.

²⁶ Critobulos, 27, 85, 94, 95–6, 97–98, 108, 109, 111–3, 114, 156, 175.

²⁷ Sfranze, Cronaca, 108, 110, 116, 136, 140, 144, 148, 170, 186.

²⁸ Ducas, 35–37, 55, 99, 219.

²⁹ On Doucas news concerning Triballi cf. M. Nikolić, Srpska država u delu vizantijskog istoričara Duke, ZRVI 44/2 (2007) 481–491.

³⁰ D. Balfour, Politico-historical Works of Symeon Archbishop of Thessalonica (1416/17 to 1429). Critical Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary, Wien 1979, 50–51; 131–132 (hereafter, Balfour, Symeon of Thessalonica).

³¹ Balfour, Symeon of Thessalonica, 133–134.

³² Balfour, Symeon of Thessalonica, 133, 254–255.

³³ Ducas, 37–39; Chalc. I, 49–51; 53–55.

³⁴ Ducas, 97.

³⁵ "... ἐς μυρίους μάλιστα που γενομένους τούτους, ἐφ' οἷς δὲ μέγα ἐφρόνει ὥς, ὅποι παρατυγχάνοιεν, ἀνδρῶν ἀγαθῶν γενομένων...", Chalc. I, 139. Cf. Chalc. I, 146.

³⁶ F. Giese, Die Altosmanischen Anonymen Chroniken, Teil II — Übersetzung, Leipzig 1925, 54–55; M. M. Alexandrescu — Dersca, La campagne de Timur en Anatolie (1402), Bucarest 1942.

Suleyman Çelebi, Musa, Mehmed, and in a way even Murad II, took the rule over Ottoman Rumeli by having Serbia as either an ally, providing the military support for their rise to the throne, or, at least, by remaining neutral and not plotting against them. Some scholars regarded Manuel II Palaeologus' confirmation of Stefan Lazarević's title of despot in 1410 as, at least, the slight attempts of the Byzantines themselves to win over the Serbian ruler.³⁷

Unable to defeat his brother Musa, as Chalcocondyles narrates, Mehmed I finally went to the territory of despot Stefan Lazarević in order to unite his troops with those of his own, since the Serbian army was superior.³⁸ At the battle of Čamurlu, in July 1413, where Musa was defeated and then strangled, the Serbian military units also participated.³⁹ After resuming the power, Mehmed rewarded Stefan Lazarević, as a sign of gratitude for his help, a great deal of non-serbian territory.⁴⁰ Critobulos, summarizing the events between 1439 and 1444, noted down that Murad II returned to despot Djuradj Branković his land because the Serbian ruler turned out to be an indispensable ally in the war against the Hungarians for his good knowledge of their land and customs, but primarily because he was a daring man and a brave warrior.⁴¹

Armament — The Byzantine sources record a few things about Serbian military armament of the first half of the 15th century. The above frequently mentioned battle of Angora is the most illustrative example. Doucas reports that Bayazid by his side in his army had Stefan, Lazar's son, with a multitude of lancers.⁴² The Serbian unit was placed on the right wing and covered by the black iron armours.⁴³ Heavily armed calvary seems not to have been the regular component of any military force of the time. That was the fact that the Byzantine sources noticed while writing on the Serbian military units. Since the Byzantine, as well as the Turkish sources, notify too great a number of the Serbian soldiers at the battle of Angora,⁴⁴ the Serbian armament and military skillfulness must have left a last-

(=M. M. Alexandrescu — *Dersca*, La campagne de Timur en Anatolie (1402), Variorum Reprints 1977), 68 (hereafter, *Alexandrescu — Dersca*, Timur); M. Kalicin, Korona na istoriite na hodža Sadeddin. Pūrva čast. Prevod ot osmanoturski ezik, studija i komentari, Veliko Tŭrnovo 2000, 290 (hereafter, Sadeddin); M. Grković, Imena zarobljenih ratnika Stefana Lazarevića u Samarkandu, Onomatološki prilozi II (1981) 93.

³⁷ J. W. Barker, Manuel II Palaeologus (1391–1425): A Study in Late Byzantine State-manship, New Brunswick — New Jersey 1969, 282.

³⁸ Chalc. I, 169.

³⁹ Chalc. I, 170; Kleinchroniken I, 563; Konstantin Filosof i njegov život Stefana Lazarevića despota srpskoga. Po dvijema srpsko-slovenskim rukopisima iznovice izdao V. Jagić, Glasnik srpskog učenog društva, 42 (1875) (=reprint Gornji Milanovac 2004), 308 (hereafter, Konstantin Filosof).

⁴⁰ Chalc. I, 172; Konstantin Filosof, 309.

⁴¹ Critobulos, 96–97.

⁴² Ducas, 93.

⁴³ Ducas, 97; Sadeddin 290; *Alexandrescu — Dersca*, Timur, 73 expressed the opinion that the Serbs possessed even fire-arms.

⁴⁴ Sadeddin, 290 mentions 20 thousand Serbian soldiers, and Chalc. I, 139, as already said, 10 thousand.

ing impression which made people think they were more numerous than they actually were. All this was a logical consequence of the rich economic resources of the Serbian despots.

The country wealth — The 15th century Byzantine authors made some remarks of the Serbian riches of the first half of the century. Doucas informs us that Bayazid after Kosovo (1389) took “many silver talents from the Serbian mines”.⁴⁵ He repeats that while telling of Mara’s marriage to Murad II.⁴⁶ When vizier Fadulah persuades sultan to take over Serbia, he casts the emphasis on the favorable position, particularly of Smederevo, as well as of the boundless springs of silver and gold, which might enable the Turks to conquer Hungary and even reach Italy.⁴⁷ The Serbs paid 12 thousand golden coins to Mehmed II as a tribute, which was more than the despots of Mistra, the lords of Chios, Mitilene and the emperor of Trebizond were supposed to give.⁴⁸ In 1454, carrying the assigned tribute, despot’s men even ransomed many captives and returned them to Serbia.⁴⁹ Also John Anagnostes adduces that despot Djuradj, after the fall of Thessalonica in 1430, purchased many prisoners from the Turks.⁵⁰

Critobulos most certainly surpasses all the others when it comes down to describing the Serbian riches. He communicates that the beneficial position of the land of the Triballi was the immediate of the Turks to attack Serbia in the spring 1454, as that could facilitate the seizure of Hungary.⁵¹ However, the land of the Triballi was very fertile providing the prolific cropping of grains and cultivated plants. Many domestic animal species were taken care of. One could view the herds of various animals, both domesticated and wild. Its utmost supremacy in comparison to the other countries was the production of gold and silver. These were dug all over the Triballi region, because the land had better deposits of gold and silver than India.⁵² Sphrantzes, having heard of Murad II’s widow Mara Branković’s return to Serbia, suggested to Constantine XI Dragaš Palaeologus a marriage to her. He points out to the emperor that the Church will not object to it, though the possible spouses were relatives. His argument was that the Church, priests, monks, nuns and the pauper were despot’s debtors with a huge respect and gratitude for he was very generous and open-handed to them.⁵³ On the other hand, it is no wonder that Sphrantzes once complains that Christians failed to send aid to Constantinople and that he singles out for particular blame that “miserable despot, who did not realize that once the head is removed, the limbs, too, dis-

⁴⁵ Ducas, 39.

⁴⁶ Ducas, 257.

⁴⁷ Ducas, 261.

⁴⁸ Ducas, 395.

⁴⁹ Ducas, 395.

⁵⁰ Ἰωάννου Ἀναγνώστου Διήγησις περὶ τῆς τελευταίας ἀλώσεως τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης, ed. G. Tzaras, Thessalonica 1958, 56.

⁵¹ Critobulos, 94.

⁵² Critobulos, 96.

⁵³ Sfranze, Cronaca, 110.

appear”.⁵⁴ Short after, Sphrantzes once again expresses his grief, saying that the Turks, who besieged the walls of Constantinople, were acclaiming that even the Serbs are with them.⁵⁵ His accusations have partly been denied by the two, up till today preserved, inscriptions witnessing that despot Djuradj Branković financed the reconstruction of the Constantinople’s ramparts in 1448.⁵⁶ Taking into consideration the general impression the Byzantines at that time had of Serbia, clearly visible in the works of the mentioned historians, it seems that the despot was expected to perform more, especially in the crucial year of 1453.

State government — Commencing with the year 1402, Serbia was governed by the rulers bearing the title of despot. In order of importance, by the Byzantine court hierarchy, the title of despot was the second after the emperor’s. From that point of view, the title of despot of the Serbian rulers Stefan Lazarević (1402; 1410), Djuradj Branković (1429) and Lazar Branković (1446) had a great significance. It adjoined Serbia to the Byzantine family of states and rulers, signifying the international recognition of the state, acknowledged by the Byzantine emperor himself, who was, according to the traditions of the Empire, the one to assign the title. The Serbian 15th century rulers’ titles of despot was the one of the ideological foundations of the Serbian state until the fall under the Turkish rule in 1459. Among the other things, this prestigious dignity supported, evidently, the idea of the family rule. Sphrantzes knew very well that by despot Thomas Palaeologus’ order he was supposed to undertake a diplomatic mission to the despots of Serbia, since at that moment there were two of them — Djuradj Branković and Lazar Branković.⁵⁷ The usurped Serbian emperor title’s disappearance seemed to be the reason of vanishing of the Byzantine hostile attitude towards Serbia. Moreover, the appropriate rank assigned by its rulers’ title of despot and regarding its favourable position and the economic potentials made Serbia the natural, even highly admired and desired ally for opposing the Turks. Such was, at least, the impression made by some 15th century Byzantine writers. In that manner, Doucas and Sphrantzes consistently mention the title of despot while referring to the Serbian rulers.⁵⁸ Contrary to them, Chalcocondyles and Critobulos do not mention the Serbian rulers’ title of despot at all, which does not come as a surprise, considering that their works were being written in the spirit of the artificial imitating of the antique models, in which Byzantium was taken as an inferior phenomenon.

The Byzantine writers do not record the assignment of the title of despot to Stefan Lazarević neither in the year of 1402, nor in 1410, when the same was con-

⁵⁴ Sfranze, Cronaca, 136.

⁵⁵ Sfranze, Cronaca, 140.

⁵⁶ *St. Novaković*, Despot Djuradj Branković i opravka Carigradskog grada 1448. godine, Glas SKA 22 (1890) 1–12.

⁵⁷ Sfranze Cronaca, 144.

⁵⁸ Ducas, 239, 247, 257, 259, 261, 287, 395; Sfranze Cronaca, 108, 110, 116, 136, 144, 148, 186. Sphrantzes even mentions “τῆς θυγατρὸς αὐτοῦ βασιλίσσης Σεβίας”, Sfranze Cronaca, 170.

firmed. Regardless of that, Doucas correctly names him as despot after 1402.⁵⁹ It was one more affirmation, apart from mentioning it in *Ektesis nea*, that the Byzantines recognised the full value of Stefan's dignity.⁶⁰ Stefan Lazarević was named as a despot as well in a short chronicles no. 72a and no. 96.⁶¹ However, only Doucas explicitly stresses out that Djuradj Branković received the dignity of despot from the hands of George Philanthropenos, emperor John VIII's deputy.⁶² Finally, only Sphrantzes reports that Lazar Branković was bestowed the same dignity by the same imperial deputy in 1446.⁶³

Diplomacy — The title of despot was, eventually, connected with the closer or more distant family relations with the Empire rulers' family of Palaeologus, as the transparent form of the medieval diplomacy. Primarily Helen, the daughter of mighty Serbian aristocrat Constantine Dragaš, got married to emperor Manuel II Palaeologus in february of 1392. Having been informed that Mara Branković returned to her parents, Sphrantzes suggested to the emperor Constantine to marry her, thus leaving the idea of forming relative connections with the empire of Trebizond and, which is more interesting, neglecting the fact, noted down by himself, that Mara's age could not guarantee to the emperor any offspring, which questioned the very succession to the throne.⁶⁴ It is well-known that despot Stefan Lazarević was married to the sister of John VIII's wife, Helen Gattilusio.⁶⁵ Lazar, Djuradj Branković's son, was married to the daughter of despot Thomas Palaeologus, the brother of the two last Byzantine emperors.⁶⁶

All above mentioned creates the picture of Serbia in the second half of the 15th century, viewed by its contemporaries, through the works of the Byzantine writers of the final century of the Empire's existence. Serbia, in the realistic ratio of forces in the Balkans, between the shadows of the former great powers of the Eastern Europe and the unstoppable Ottoman state, left an impression of the speciality of its position. It creeded the same religion, it was rich and its rulers bore the title of despot received from Constantinople. In the Byzantine theory of hierarchy of states, vivid until the very fall of the Empire, all that placed Serbia in a suitable position. That position made Serbia not only the appropriate, but the desirable support in the hope of preventing the Turkish advance and avoiding the utter fall of the Empire. However, it turned out that nowhere was the strength which will change the course of history.

⁵⁹ Ducas, 127, 247.

⁶⁰ I. Djurić, Svetovni dostojanstvenici u „Ektesis nea“, ZRVI 18 (1978) 197 (hereafter, Djurić, Svetovni dostojanstvenici).

⁶¹ Kleinchroniken I, 561, 636; Djurić, Svetovni dostojanstvenici, 197.

⁶² Ducas, 259.

⁶³ Sfranze, Cronaca, 98.

⁶⁴ Sfranze Cronaca, 110.

⁶⁵ D. M. Nicol, The Byzantine Family of Kantakouzenos (Cantacuzenus) ca. 1100–1460. A Genealogical and Prosopographical Study, Washington 1968, 171–172.

⁶⁶ Sfranze, Cronaca, 98.

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ВИЗАНТИЈСКА ИСТОРИОГРАФИЈА О ДРЖАВИ СРПСКИХ ДЕСПОТА

Из вести византијских извора последњег столећа постојања Царства Ромеја, Дуке, Халкокондила, Сфранциса, Кривовула са Имброса, као и византијских кратких хроника, који приповедају о кључним војним и политичким догађајима на самом крају не само српске, већ и средњовековне историје читавог Балканског полуострва, стиче се утисак да су савременици Србију посматрали као државу.

Њихове вести, најпре, сведоче да је Србија имала своју територију. Њену источну границу представљао је простор где су се, раздвојени Трајановом капијом, додиривали Стара планина и Родопи. Северну границу означавале су реке Дунав и Сава. Јужна српска граница се после 1389. године са Косова постепено померала ка северу, док западну српску границу византијски писци уопште не помињу. Нису знали, или пак то нису сматрали значајним да би забележили, да се Зета налазила у склопу српске државе од 1421. године. Другим речима, српска држава је обухватала простор који би се, најгрубље, могао дефинисати као Моравска Србија.

Српску државу су насељавали Срби, како то сведоче Дука и Сфранцис, односно Трибали, како бележе Халкокондил и Кривовул. Дука је једини византијски писац који прави разлику између Срба и Трибала, подразумевајући под последњима, чини се, становништво које је насељавало шири простор на Балкану, односно делови Бугарске, Македоније и уже Србије.

Сви византијски писци XV века сагласни су да је Србија имала изузетну војску. Вести о храбрим српским војницима започињу већ приповешћу о бици на Косову, а Дукин опис битке код Ангоре је надахнут хвалоспев јунаштву Стефана Лазаревића и његове тешко наоружане коњице, какав није забележио ниједан други извор. Тешко наоружана коњица, чини се, није била доминантна компонента ниједне војне силе тога доба, што су византијски извори, пишући о српским војним одредима, приметили. Све то је, опет, била последица економских ресурса државе српских деспота.

На многим местима у својим делима су византијски писци XV века забележили вести о богатствима Србије и њених владара прве половине столећа, посебно наглашавајући „вечно набујале изворе сребра и злата“ у њеним рудницима.

Србијом XV века, почевши од 1402. године, владали су владари који су носили титулу деспота, коју су им, у духу традиција Царства Ромеја, доделили управо византијски цареви. Одговарајући ранг, који је, у византијској породици држава и владара, Србији припао деспотском титулом њених владара, чинио ју је, с обзиром на њен положај те, нарочито, економске потенцијале, природним, чак веома цењеним и прижељкиваним савезником у супротставању Турцима.

Деспотска титула је, коначно, била повезана и са ближим, или даљим орођавањем са владарима у Цариграду, важним видом дипломатије у средњем веку.

Све поменуто је, тако, Србију стављало на прикладан положај у односу на василевса у Цариграду и није чинило само подобним, већ и пожељним ослонцем у жељи да се даље османско надирање заустави, а коначна пропаст Царства спречи.