

MEDIEVAL BULGARIAN SHORT CHRONICLES¹

Abstract:

The paper examines short chronicles as an essential aspect of medieval Bulgarian literary culture, one that reflects changes in the perception of history by Bulgarian society during the Middle Ages. The Bulgarian short chronicle of the Tsar Simeon period, which is represented by *Istorikii* ("Histories") of Constantine of Preslav and the "Short Chronicler", initiated the evolution of the Bulgarians' historical consciousness to the gradual perception of Bulgarian history as part of universal Christian history. The Bulgarian short chronicle of the 14th century, which took the form of appendices to the Chronicle of Constantine Manasses, underlines the idea that the Bulgarians and the ruling Bulgarian dynasty are God's chosen people. The short chronicles of the 15th–16th centuries are the result of a Serbo-Bulgarian cultural synthesis; they symbolize the unity of Orthodox southern Slavs and their history under the conditions of Muslim Ottoman domination.

Keywords:

Middle Ages, Bulgaria, short chronicle, Constantine Manasses, Synod copy, Vatican copy, Vissarion chronicle, Sarandopor chronicle, Belyakovets chronicle, Gabarevo chronicle.

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В статье рассмотрены краткие хроники как ключевая часть болгарской средневековой книжной культуры, отражающая изменения в восприятии истории болгарским обществом на протяжении всего Средневековья. Болгарская краткая хроника времен царя Симеона, представленная *Историкиями* Константина Преславского и *Летописцем вкратце*, положило начало появлению в болгарском историческом сознании идеи о болгарской истории как части мировой христианской истории. Болгарская краткая хроника XIV в. в виде добавок к Хронике Константина Манассии подчеркивает богоизбранность болгар и их династии. Краткие хроники XV–XVI вв. — результат болгаро-сербского культурного синтеза, они символизируют единство православных южных славян и их истории в условиях мусульманского османского владычества.

Ключевые слова:

Средние века, Болгария, краткая хроника, Константин Манассия, Синодальный список, Ватиканский список, Виссарионова летопись, Сарандопорская летопись, Беляковецкая летопись, Габаревская летопись.

Short chronicles are one of the most representative genres of Bulgarian medieval literature. They are characterized by their aim of describing the entirety of history in a brief form: from the creation of the world onwards, reckoning time on the basis of Tsardoms and ending with the present time. The tra-

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ditional manner of compiling a short chronicle presupposes the possibility of adding ever more relevant information to the chronicle as it becomes available. This peculiarity makes it a particularly valuable historical source.

The genre of the short chronicle was adopted by the Bulgarians from the neighboring Byzantine Empire, where it enjoyed wide popularity. While Byzantine historiography tended towards universal chronicles and narrative historical works, Bulgarian authors preferred to record the most significant facts and events of Bulgarian history in the form of short chronicles. In all likelihood, this feature of Bulgarian historiography dates back to the pre-Christian traditions of brief inscriptions of historical content on stones and columns, carried out at the order of the Bulgarian khans. It is to this period that the emergence of the Bulgarian short chronicle in the form of the Khan Chronicle can be attributed: the so-called “List of names of the Bulgarian khans” was composed in the eighth century with the aim of fixing the reigns of successive Bulgarian rulers.

The development of the genre continued under the rule of Simeon I the Great (893–927), when Bishop Constantine of Preslav, a prominent court scholar, created *Istorikii* (“Histories”, 893–94), a compilation of several chronicles. In *Izbornik* (collection) of the Russian Prince Svyatoslav of 1073, there was another work of this genre from the period of Simeon’s reign — “The Short Chronicler.” Both documents reflect the evolution of the Bulgarians’ historical consciousness to the gradual perception of history as being the result of divine providence.

Along with creating their own short chronicles, Bulgarian medieval scribes were actively engaged in translating Byzantine chronographs. A new stage in the development of this genre was marked by the translation of the universal poetic chronicle of a Byzantine writer of the 12th century — Constantine Manasses. The translation was made in 1340–45 at the court of Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331–71).

The appendices by the nameless translator of Bulgarian and world history to the text of the work of Manasses actually constitute a new Bulgarian short chronicle, which consists of 27 marginal notes, nine of which describe events in world history; the remaining 18 are devoted to the most important events in Bulgarian history. They concern the formation of the Bulgarian state in 680–81, the baptism of the Bulgarians under Boris I (852–89), the Bulgarian-Byzantine struggle and the establishment of “Greek domination” over Bulgarian lands in 1018. The last note of the chronicle is devoted to the revival of independent Bulgaria under the rule of Tsar Ivan Asen I (1190–95), which was supposed to complete the entire cycle of the history of Bulgarian statehood.

In the form of notes, the text is presented in the Synodal List of the *Chronicle of Constantine Manasses*, considered to be the closest to the original source, compiled for Tsar Ivan Alexander. It is now preserved in the Synodal Slavic collection of manuscripts of the Moscow State Historical Museum under № 38. The manuscript is made on so-called Carta Bombycina, a coarse rag paper imported from the East, and placed in a leather binding. The text was written in

semi-uncial script with red cinnabar. On sheet 140 there is mention of a copyist, a priest named Philip. The manuscript was probably created in the capital of medieval Bulgaria, Tarnovo, and the customer was a high-ranking hierarch. The manuscript was brought to Russia from Mt. Athos by Arseny Sukhanov, a famous church leader and statesman of the time of Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich (1645–76).

By about the 1360s the short Bulgarian chronicle was transforming from marginal notes into a full-fledged text, occupying the entire page of the manuscript. This phenomenon is reflected in a later copy of the Manasses Chronicle, called the Vatican copy because of its current location: the Vatican Library under the code Cod. Vaticanus Slav. II. Judging by the magnificent design of the manuscript, researchers suspect that its customer was the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander himself.

The manuscript consists of 26 parchment notebooks, which seem originally to have been collected in a very ornate cover, but it was lost many years ago. The new cover was made in the 18th century at the order of Pope Pius VI. The text is written in a beautiful uncial. The scribe used red cinnabar for inscriptions, titles and individual initial letters. Some parts of the Bulgarian short chronicle are also written in red cinnabar, obviously with the aim of emphasizing the special importance of this component of the manuscript.

Apart from the text itself, 69 miniatures of the manuscript are of particular interest, a significant part of which is devoted to events in medieval Bulgarian history. They include, for example, a campaign of 811 against Bulgaria undertaken by the Byzantine emperor Nicephorus I, a scene of the baptism of the Bulgarians, Emperor Basil II the Bulgar Slayer ordering the blinding of 15,000 captured Bulgarians, and the death of Bulgarian Tsar Samuil after seeing an endless procession of his mutilated soldiers, etc. A separate place in the manuscript is occupied by images of the likely customer of the manuscript, Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander.

In the first miniature, for example, he is represented standing between Christ and Constantine Manasses. At the top of the sheet one can read the title of the Bulgarian ruler: “Ivan Alexander, in Christ the noble Tsar and Autocrat of all Bulgarians and Greeks.” Both elements, the inscription and the miniature, reflect the idea of the unity between the Church and the State and the harmonious connection between them.

After the conquest of the Balkan peninsula by the Ottoman Turks, the genre of the Bulgarian short chronicle was strongly influenced by Serbian literature. This was connected with the migration of Bulgarian culture to the southwest of the former Bulgarian state, emphasizing the idea of a South Slavic Orthodox unity. A great majority of the Bulgarian scribes started to use the Serbian orthography: they used the so-called Resava spelling and actively rewrote the Serbian chronicles, regarding Serbian history as something shared and thus “their own.”

A result characteristic of this Bulgarian–Serbian cultural synthesis was the creation of a short chronicle of the 16th century, from a collection of mixed contents now stored under № 49 in the monastery of Nicoljats in Montenegro. One of the scribes working on this manuscript was the hieromonk Vissarion, a famous scribe born in the city of Debar in modern North Macedonia. A short chronicle entitled *A Short Tale of Real Events from Adam to the Present Time* is located at the very end of the collection. It occupies six text-filled sheets; the first sheet and the end of the chronicle have been lost. The last event mentioned dates to 1496. Many milestones of Biblical history, the rule of Alexander the Great, Cleopatra, Emperor Constantine the Great, events of medieval Bulgarian and Serbian history, and the Ottoman conquest are recorded in this work.

A short chronicle from the beginning of the 16th century with a similar name — *A Short Tale* — is also called the Sarandopor chronicle. This work was placed in Service Book № E 543 from the Library of the Bosnian Zemal Museum in Sarajevo. It is assumed that the manuscript was copied from the Serbian original by a Bulgarian scribe in the monastery of St Joachim of Osogovo (Sarandopor) in modern North Macedonia. The chronicle consists of six full sheets without any signs of watermarks; half of the last, seventh sheet was lost. With the exception of this sheet, the text written in semi-uncial has come down to us in good condition. The beginning of the titles and, most significant from the standpoint of the copyist, the facts are written in red cinnabar.

The chronicle touches on events from Adam to 1512 (i.e., before the end of the reign of Sultan Bayezid II of Turkey). In accordance with the canons of the genre, events in the Sarandopor chronicle are presented in sequential order: those from the Bible, Byzantine times, medieval Balkan history, the Ottoman conquest, the Kosovo battle of 1389, the capture of the Bulgarian capital Tarnovo in 1393, the Varna battle of the Turks with the Crusaders in 1444, etc.



*Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander
between Christ and Manasses,
thumbnail of the Vatican List Chronicles
by Constantine Manasses
(14th – 15th century)*

Another short chronicle of Serbian origin is *A Short Description of Real Events from Adam to the Present Time*, which was very important for the historical consciousness of the Bulgarians. It survived in a Bulgarian copy, which is a part of the so-called Belyakovets' (as it was found in the village of Belyakovets near Veliko Tărnovo in Bulgaria) apocryphal collection of the second half of the 16th century. The manuscript is now a part of the collection of the Sts. Cyril and Methodius National Library of Sofia under № NBKM 309. The work contains references to significant events from the Bible, ancient Roman times, Byzantine times, the medieval history of the Balkan peoples and the Ottoman conquest. Researchers claim that the first part of the work dates back to the Byzantine chronicle authored by Constantinople Patriarch Nicephorus (806–15).

In addition, in the Bulgarian lands in the 16th century they also used to read a short Gabarevo chronicle of Serbian origin. It was discovered in the mid-19th century in the Bulgarian village of Gabarevo near the town of Kazanlak by a Russian scholar, V. I. Grigorovich, during his scientific research work in the Balkans. Now it is preserved in the State Scientific Library of Odessa under № 415 as a part of a collection of mixed contents, titled as “And this is the Chronicler of the Serbian Lord and Tsar.” An interesting feature of this document is that, unlike other works of this genre, it does not begin from the creation of the world, but from the creation of the Slavic alphabet by St Cyril the Philosopher, the so-called “Slovenian teacher.”

Thus, the short chronicles are an integral part of Bulgarian medieval book culture, reflecting changes in the perception of history by Bulgarian society. The Bulgarian short chronicle from the period of Tsar Simeon is permeated with ideas of divine providence and the participation of the Bulgarians in world Christian history. The Bulgarian short chronicle from the time of Tsar Ivan Alexander emphasizes that the Bulgarian people are God's chosen as is the ruling Bulgarian dynasty. Transcribed by Bulgarian scribes, the Serbian short chronicles of the 15th and 16th centuries symbolize the unity of the Orthodox Southern Slavs and their history under Ottoman rule.

Translated by the author

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ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Bulgarian short chronicle in the form of postscripts. Fragment of the Synodal List of the *Chronicle by Constantine Manasses*. 14th century.
2. Bulgarian short chronicle in the form of postscripts. Fragment of the Synodal List of the *Chronicle by Constantine Manasses*. 14th century.
3. Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander between Christ and Manasses. Thumbnail of the Vatican List *Chronicles by Constantine Manasses*. 14th century.
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