НИШ И ВИЗАНТИЈА

Niš & BYZANTIUM
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XIII

ЗБОРНИК РАДОВА XIII
THE EARLIEST MENTION OF STEFAN NEMANJA
IN BYZANTINE SOURCES

Constantine Porphyrogenitus’ work addressed to his son Romanos (Πρός τὸν ἱόν τιν υἱὸν Ῥωμανοῦ, better known under its modern title, De administrando imperio) is the only medieval source that provides information on the settlement of the Serbs in the Balkans, then part of the Byzantine Empire, during the seventh century. According to Porphyrogenitus, the Serbs arrived in the region after an invitation by Emperor Heraclius (610-641), who was in need of fighting men to face the threat posed by the Avars. More specifically, the De adminis-


3 Regarding the Avars see A. Avenarius, Die Awaren in Europa, Bratislava 1974; J. Deér, «Karl der Grosse und der Untergang des Awarenreiches», in: H. Beumann (ed.), Karl
trando imperio places the Serbs’ original homeland in White Serbia (near the borders of the Frankish state, in Bohemia) and White Croatia. Two brothers, whose names have not come down to us, left that region after the death of their father, having divided his regal authority between them, and headed towards different directions. One of them entered the territory of the Byzantines, where the emperor initially gave him and his people lands near Thessaloniki, in a place called Servila.

However, for some reason that Porphyrogenitus does not divulge, the Serbs decided to return to their homeland. They had already crossed the Danube when they had yet another change of heart and asked Heraclius to be granted another region where they could settle. The Byzantine emperor gave them the land between the Sava and the Dinaric Alps, where they remained for good. This is the way the tenth-century Byzantine emperor presents the arrival of the Serbs in the Balkans.

For five centuries, from the seventh to the twelfth, the Byzantines never lost ultimate control of the Serbian territories. However, the Serbs often showed centrifugal tendencies against Byzantine authority, although the Empire dealt swiftly with whatever separatist attempts were made. Shortly before the middle of the twelfth century (in 1143), Manuel Komnenos, who was essentially the last powerful ruler of his dynasty, ascended the imperial throne of Constantinople. The coronation of Manuel I (1143-1180) coincided with the intensification of the Serbian rulers’ tendencies to break away. Despite the fact that during his reign the efforts of the Serbs proved unsuccessful, the appearance of Stefan Nemanja to the forefront of Serbian history was a clear sign of Byzantium’s inability to retain its direct hold on the region for much longer.
Even though Stefan Nemanja (1166-1199) was Manuel I’s personal choice for ruler of the Serbs, he was quick to reveal his separatist tendencies. Already in 1171 he was making overtures to the Venetians for an anti-Byzantine alliance and in 1172 he offered his friendship to the German emperor Frederick Barbarossa.9 However, those actions did not secure for Nemanja the gains he was hoping for: he was severely defeated by Manuel and was forced to take part in the humiliating triumphal procession the Byzantine emperor had prepared for him in Constantinople.10

Manuel’s death in 1180 was a turning point in the fulfillment of the ambitions of Stefan Nemanja. The fall of the Komnenoi signified the beginning of a course that ultimately led to the Latin capture of Constantinople in 1204. The difficulties that Isaac II (1185-1195), first ruler of the dynasty of the Angeloi, faced against the Bulgarians and Hungarians allowed Stefan Nemanja to expand his territory towards Dalmatia and Đaklja. At the same time, he tried to take advantage of the opportunity that arose during the Third Crusade (1189-1192) and form an anti-Byzantine alliance with Frederick Barbarossa. He even went as far as to propose becoming a vassal of the German emperor, but the latter refused the offer. Thus, in 1190 Nemanja was defeated by Byzantine forces in the battle of the Morava. However, even though he had to give back to Byzantium all the lands he had recently conquered, the Serbian ruler was able to hold on to his previous possessions in the region of the South Morava, Kosovo and the coastal cities of Dalmatia which until then were under Byzantine domination. The Byzantine emperor on his part, in order to secure Nemanja’s friendship, concluded a marriage alliance between his niece and the Serbian ruler. This marriage proved even more beneficial to Nemanja when Alexios III (1195-1203) overthrew his brother Isaac, which resulted in Nemanja’s son being upgraded to son-in-law of a reigning emperor, a family connection that was recognized when the latter awarded the Serbian ruler’s son the title of sebastokrator.11

9 In 1176, Manuel’s armies were defeated at Myriokephalon in Asia Minor. This event led to the general collapse of his external policy and the creation of an anti-Byzantine alliance, with the participation of the German Empire, Venice and Hungary. See R.-J. Lilie, «Die Schlacht von Myriokephalon (1176). Auswirkungen auf das byzantinische Reich im ausgehenden 12. Jahrhundert», REB 35 (1977), 257–275, and P. Magadalino, The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143-1180, Cambridge 1993.

10 See below.

In 1196 Stefan Nemanja appointed his son Stefan as his successor and retired to the monastery of Studenica, which he had founded in 1183. In 1198 he took refuge to Mount Athos, where he founded the Serbian monastery of Hilandar and adopted the monastic name Symeon. The man who used to be known as Stefan Nemanja died on 13 February 1199 in Hilandar. His remains were brought back to Studenica, resting place of all the rulers of the Nemanjić dynasty he had founded.

The reign of Stefan Nemanja was a turning point in the history of the Serbs, even though its significance had not been made clear in his lifetime. During his rule, Nemanja recognized that he was under the dominion of the Byzantine emperor, a situation which entailed both actual and symbolic obligations on the part of the Serbian ruler, who found himself operating within the framework of Byzantine provincial administration. However, the balance of power in the Balkan region had changed. The Byzantine Empire was in disarray, Peter and Asen had created the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185), while Nemanja was busy increasing his power and territories.

But who was Stefan Nemanja and when exactly did he first appear in Byzantine sources? In other words, what do we know (that is, what do our Greek sources know) about his ancestry? Are Desa and Nemanja the same person, as some modern authorities seem to believe? These are important questions that lay at the core of the issues pertaining to the rise of Serbia in the twelfth century and her ultimate emancipation from Byzantium. The aim of this paper is to try and pinpoint evidence in the written sources which might provide answers to the aforementioned questions.

The first to attempt resistance against Byzantine domination during the reign of Manuel I was Uroš, Vukan’s son or nephew. He is mentioned for the first time by Anna Komnene as one of the hostages Vukan surrendered to Emperor Alexios I Komnenos in 1094. After the death of Vukan (probably around 1115), Uroš returned to Rascia and was elected Grand Župan. During his rule (c. 1115-1140s) he tried to formulate his own independent foreign policy and rid himself of the influence of the Byzantine Empire, if we are to judge from the support he gave during the 1120s to Đorđije against the pro-Byzantine ruler of Duklja and from the fact that around 1129 or 1130 he married his daughter Jelena to Béla, future king of Hungary (1131-1141). His successor,
Uroš II (1145-1161), formed an alliance with Hungary and the Normans, but ultimately failed to avoid defeat at the hands of Manuel I’s troops. After overthrowing Uroš II, Manuel installed as Grand Župan first Beloš and then Desa. Desa was župan of Duklja (1148-1162) and Serbia (1149-1153, Grand Župan 1153-1155 and 1162-1166). He was the son of Uroš I, župan of Rascia. In 1148 Desa attacked Radoslav of Duklja and became the region’s župan with his elder brother, Uroš II, as overlord; both brothers were under the dominion of Byzantium. The twelfth-century historian John Kinnamos refers to Desa being proclaimed Grand Župan by Emperor Manuel I in 1162:

The emperor caused to be summoned the last of the brothers, who was called Desa and ruled the region of Dendra, a prosperous and populous one near Naissos. After he [Manuel] had received pledges from him that for the whole period of his life he [Desa] would preserve pure the condition of obedience to him, and in addition that he would entirely abandon to the Romans Dendra, which as stated was fruitful, he [Manuel] named him grand župan.

Paul Magdalino and more recently Averil Cameron, apparently following the views of earlier scholars, identify Desa with Stefan Nemanja, founder of the Nemanjic dynasty. However, no evidence exists to support the aforementioned identification. John Fine and Paul Stephenson both disagree with the identification of Desa with Nemanja, but they do not offer any arguments. The truth is that little argumentation is necessary in order for someone to accept the view of Fine and Stephenson, since both main Byzantine sources on Nemanja and Desa are clear enough. John Kinnamos describes the deposi–


16 Kinnamos, p. 204. The translation of the passage is by Ch.M. Brand, Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus by John Kinnamos, New York 1976, pp. 155-156 : The emperor caused to be summoned the last of the brothers, who was called Desa and ruled the region of Dendra, a prosperous and populous one near Naissos. After he [Manuel] had received pledges from him that for the whole period of his life he [Desa] would preserve pure the condition of obedience to him, and in addition that he would entirely abandon to the Romans Dendra, which as stated was fruitful, he [Manuel] named him grand župan.


18 Fine, Late Balkans, pp. 2-3; Stephenson, Balkan Frontier, p. 267, n. 46.
tion of Desa in 1165 or 1166, while Nicetas Choniates also refers to the same incident: Ἰὼν δὲ τὸν Λεόντα μετεικόσιμον, ἔκαστο γενόμενον κακοφιάτερον, τὴν ἐς Σερβίλον ὄρμα τραπεύσα, ἀλλ᾽ ὁ Λεόντα καὶ πάροδοις ἐπηρεάσα τὰ πρακτό-
μενα, μάλλον δὲ ἦπερ ἢν δολίως, μὴ τὰ ἀρδεῖς πάθου καὶ ἀπεικυάζειν βασιλέως εἰς τὴν ἐκαστόν παραμικαλώντος, πέμψας ἐς βασιλέα ἐνδοθὴν οἱ καθικτεῖτε τὴν ἐς αὐτὸν ἄπαθεν ἡμίζει, ὡς ὁν ἔχει δ᾽ ἠπίσταν, ἀρίστετον δομφορίας μετέχειν σατραπικῆς καὶ ἐς θέαν τῷ βασιλεί καταπάτος τὸ δυσλόφορον τῆς γνώμης κατενακλή-
ζεται καὶ ὀπιτῶς ὡς ἄπονος ἀποκύπτεται.20

The cause of this confusion between Desa and Nemanja obviously stems from the fact that Kinnamos’ next reference to the Serbian Grand Župan contains no names. Kinnamos describes the humiliation of Nemanja by Manuel in 1172, but without naming him: ὃ δὲ βασιλέως ἐπειδὴ ἔβλεψε ἐπὶ τῆς ἄρχης κατεπτασας, ἦπερ τῷ Σερβίλοιν ἐπάρτατο ἑνθον, ἀμοινηθάντα τῇ τολίμης αὐτοῦς πρὸ-
θυμομήν: ἀλλ᾽ ἦπερ θαυμάζειν ἄλ ξέπο, ὀντὸ τὸ στράτευμα ἤθοριστο πάν, καὶ βασιλέως χρύσαν ἔλις διὰ τινῶν ἐρμίων καὶ ἀποκρήμιας χορίους εὐπλάσις ἦπερ τὴν ὑμῶν τῷ ὄρμου πεμικαλών συμφέρεν ἡμείς, ὁ δὲ καὶ δεῖξαι πανοραμὴν ἐκατὰ μέρος συστημθένης σύμμαχον ἐφαρκεῖ μὲτ τὸ πρώτον, ὡς ὁ δὲ δόθην αὐτοῦ τὴν γνῶμην ἐπιφοράκεν, προσεθῆς ἐς βασιλέα πέμψας κοικῶν ἁμηνητῆς ἐξῆλυ τε-
χεῖν. Πεθένοι δ᾽ οὖν ἔχον, ἄλλα τῆς ἐς αὐτὸν ἤπειρο παρόδον τῷι ἀκελθόντι τεχεῖν. ήρε τοινὸν βασιλέως ἑπινοιακόν, καὶ ἔστη οὐρά τῷ βήμα, ἀκαλωρῆς τε κεφαλῆς καὶ χείρας εἰς ἀγκάκα μηνομίκον, ἀνιεκαδοῦσε τόν όπως, σχοῖνος δὲ οἱ τῷ τραγχίον ξήπτο, καὶ ἤρος κελεύσα, ἔπει τουλίτας μήραντα βασιλέως ἔκαστον παρεκρήμενος.21

The absence of an eponymous reference to Nemanja on the part of Kinnamos is not due to the former being identical to Desa, since it is clear that the latter had already been deposed in 1166: τὰ πλήθος μενομίκον βασιλέως οὐκέτα μέλλαν ἔγενε, καὶ τοινὸν ἦπερ δὶκην κολάσας αὐτόν, ἐπιαδήπορο ἐκράτει, τῶν κατη-
γόροιν αὐτῷ καὶ συνειδόςταν κατὰ πρόσωπον ἱστημένων ἁμην καὶ θεαμοίζουσιν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ τὴν ἀπατεῖν, τίτε ἔντε ἐν τῷ ἀνφαλεί οὐ πάντι ἁμην τοῦτον ἔσχε: ταρφεῖ γὰρ τὴν σκηνὴν αὐτῷ περισχεῖν κατὰ τὸν ἐν τοῖς χαρακωμιαί νῦν ἐτέρει, ὡς ἀπ᾽ ἐκείνου λοιπῶν Λέοντα χαράκα τὸν τόπου διαμοιράζεται (οὐ καὶ τὴν ταρφεῖν ἀνωτέρων δομίζοισιν οἱ πατριώι ἐλίγυ δ᾽ ἐστερον ἐς Βούλιπον πέμψας ξη-
φοροῦρ ἐς πατελέῳ κατακτησας.22 in fact, before that Manuel Komnenos had already offered Desa a chance to return to Byzantium’s sphere of influence: ὃ δὲ δοξοπροτοὶ τὲ καὶ ισχυρογινομὸν ἐφάνετο ἐπὶ μακροχείρες τας ταῖς ἔλπις ἕξολο καὶ εἰς τὴν ἐπισήμανθην τὴν ἄριστεν ὑποχιεῖτο. ὃ μὲν οὖν βασιλέως δὲτα πάθα, ἐπειδὴ πρὸς τῇ Ναοίῳ ἐγκλήτερον, ἔνθα ταῖς ἄδων ἁμφιτεράν ό μὲν ἦπερ τὴν Σερβίκην ἄγει, θατερα δὲ ἦπερ ἐπὶ Ίστρον καὶ γῆν τὴν Παονικὴν, ἐν μεταγματικῇ τῇ στραταποτείχει ἐπιχάζει, Λεόντα δὲ τὸν ἐπικεκατέμενον ἠδη κίνδυνον αὐτῷ συνιόταν τὸ περὶ αὐτὸν

19 Kinnamos, pp. 21218-2144
20 Choniates, p. 13647-54. For a translation of the passage see H.J. Magoulas, O City of Byzantium, Annales of Niketas Choniates, Detroit 1984, pp. 77-78.
22 Kinnamos, pp. 213210-2144. For a translation of the text see Brand, Deeds, p. 162.
Therefore, there is no way that the Grand Župan who is mentioned in 1172 is identical to the one deposed six years earlier. The absence of Nemanja’s name in Kinnamos is due either to the Byzantine historian’s lack of information or, more probably, to the fact Kinnamos did not wish to name yet another Serbian ruler who had caused trouble to the hero of his story, Manuel I, and who was (yet again) the emperor’s unfortunate personal choice. In the end, Manuel managed to bring this insubordinate vassal to heel as he did with the others. What is more, if we take into consideration the fact that John Kinnamos did not live to see the evolution of Nemanja into one of the Byzantine Empire’s main enemies, we see that there was no reason for the historian to name someone who seemed to have yielded to the supremacy of Manuel I.

Nicetas Choniates picks up the thread of the narration at Desa’s dethronement. After the Grand Župan was overthrown, Choniates proceeds in the following book of his Διήγησις Χρονική to the first (and less than flattering) mention of Stefan Nemanja (what follows is the Greek text, while an English translation will be provided in the next paragraph): ἠκηκόει γὰρ ὁ τῶν Σέρβων σατράπης (ἄν τότε ὁ Νεμανίν Στέφανος) ὑπὲρ ὁ δεῖ θρασύτερος γέγονε καὶ κακόσχολος ὅν τις ἡγηταν σοφὸν τὸ περίφρην καὶ τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν τρέφων ἀκόρεστον καὶ πρὸς τὰ ἕκαστα διαιποιηθῆναι μολυνείκοιν τοῖς ἐκ τοῦ ἀντού φύλου βαρὺς ἐμπίπτει καὶ ζύφει τὸ γένους μέτεισι, μήτε μὴν τὰ ὁμοία εἰδῶς μέτρα ὁρίσατα ὑποποιεῖται καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτῷ ἐπιστάτα τῶν Δεκατάρων τὴν κυριότητα. The phrase in parenthesis (ἄν τότε ὁ Νεμανίν Στέφανος) is used by the historiographer in order to make clear which of the Serbian rulers is being mentioned, since this is the first time that Choniates refers to Nemanja. Had the author known, or at the very least presumed, that Desa and Nemanja were the same person, he would have mentioned it either when he was referring to Desa, with a phrase often used by Byzantine historians («ἄλλα ταύτα μὲν ὅστερα»), or when he was mentioning Nemanja’s name, with an addition («ὁ Δεσ»). However, Choniates uses neither of these modes to identify Desa with Nemanja. On the contrary, his Διήγησις goes on to use the name Νεμανίν exclusively whenever mention is made of the Serbian ruler’s actions. Therefore, neither John Kinnamos nor (much less) Nicetas Choniates believe that Desa and Nemanja are one and the same.

Despite the fact that court panegyrists played an important role in the Komnenian era, celebrating as usual the emperor’s victories on the field of battle, there is not a single mention of Nemanja in any of their works – and this in spite of Manuel’s success in curbing Stefan’s separatist tendencies and leading him humiliated to Constantinople in order to participate in the emperor’s triumph. Thus, the first actual mention of Nemanja by name in a contemporary Byzantine source is that by Nicetas Choniates. The latter was either disinterested in – or, more probably, unaware of – Nemanja’s lineage and that is why he does not provide a single clue about it. The fact that he had no information regarding

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24 Choniates, pp. 15882-15991.
Nemanja’s ancestry did not prevent Choniates from making some rather unflattering remarks. According to the Byzantine author, Nemanja was a mischievous fellow who deemed meddlesomeness to be shrewdness, Nemanja nurtured an insatiable appetite, eager to expand his territories. He mounted a heavy attack against his own countrymen and pursued them with the sword, and, completely ignoring his own boundaries, he subjugated Croatia and took possession of Dekatariot.25 Naturally, Nemanja’s «meddlesomeness», «shrewdness» and «insatiable appetite» were a reflection of his actions, i.e. the annexation of Croatian lands and Kotor, actions obviously undertaken without the approval of his overlord, Manuel I. It is interesting to note that Choniates avoids stating unambiguously that Nemanja was the emperor’s personal choice, keeping in mind the Serbian ruler’s later actions, which directly contradicted Byzantine interests. Let us not forget that Choniates composed his Ιστορία after 1204, being aware of the transformation of Serbia from a vassal state of Byzantium to an independent power and of the rise of the Nemanjid dynasty, whose founder, Stefan Nemanja, had been hand-picked by Manuel. Furthermore, the Serbian ruler did not stop making trouble for Manuel, even though the latter always succeeded in managing Stefan’s troublemaking: Thus did Manuel deal with Nemanja and prevail upon him to make a pledge of good faith: whenever he observed him straying from the straight and narrow, or acting independently, or entering into an alliance with the king of the Germans, or inclining towards the Hungarians and sharing a common purse and pouch with them, “he was more diligent than a shepherd guarding a small flock. And Nemanja feared Manuel more than the wild animals fear the king of beasts; often Manuel led out only the cavalry and commanding his bodyguards, „Follow me,“ crossed the Roman borders and rode against Nemanja at full tilt, restoring conditions in these parts according to his own design.”26 The fact that Manuel had chosen Nemanja as Grand Župan of the Serbs is alluded to by the historian only when the Byzantine emperor has managed to “recall to order” the troublesome vassal; Choniates’ exact phrase is: Lying outstretched (Nemanja), mighty in his mightiness, he pleaded that he not be made to suffer cruelly; he was anguished lest he be removed as sovereign over the Serbs and political power be transferred to those who were more fit to rule, those whom he had pulled down so that he might seize power.27

In summary, Nicetas Choniates is the first Byzantine author to mention Stefan Nemanja, founder of the Nemanjid dynasty, by name, but without providing any information regarding his ancestry or descent. Choniates limits himself to a brief sketch of Nemanja’s personality and a cursory description of the problems he caused to Byzantium. John Kinnamos does not mention Nemanja by name and I think that it has been made clear by now that the only thing Desa and Nemanja had in common was the fact that they both found themselves ruling the Serbs as Grand Župans after they were appointed to the position by

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25 Magoulias, O City, p. 90.
26 Magoulias, O City, pp. 90-91.
27 Magoulias, O City, p. 90.
Emperor Manuel I. Nemanja, however, contrary to Desa, succeeded in creating his own dynasty, which two centuries later would lead Serbia out of a five-century subjugation and into her own empire.
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