

SERBO-RUSSIAN CONTACTS IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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Abstract. *This paper tries to determine the period when the first contacts between Serbs and Russians happened and to follow their development, as well as the parallels between the two nations up until the end of the Early Middle Ages, i.e., the end of the 12th century. It is needless to say that the sources on this topic are extremely scarce. We shall rely on the data provided by Cosmas of Prague because there was some confusion over the similarity of the names Russian (Serbian: Rus) and Ras (citizen of Raška). We shall try to answer the question when the first encounters between the two nations could have happened.*

We shall point out the importance of worship in the Slavic language, the intertwining of the culture of both these nations, and the similarities when it comes to establishing the cults of the first saints. The first recorded arrival of a Russian to Serbia dates from the end of the 12th century. A monk came to Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja's court, and after that Rastko left and went to a Russian monastery on Mount Atos.

Key words: *Serbs, Russians, Early Middle Ages, Prince Vladimir Sviatoslavich, Prince Vladimir, Beloš.*

The expansion of Slavs to the east, west, and south of their motherland began at the end of the ancient period and the beginning of the Middle Ages. At that time, the majority of today's Slavic people had not yet built their identity. The division of the common Slavic language began in the Early Middle Ages, at the same time when the Latin language started its differentiation into many languages. However, Slavic languages kept many more common traits than Romance languages, which makes the Slavic people of today much closer than members of the neighboring Indo-European language groups (Mallory 2006, 98, 99).

Slavs came onto the historical scene in the 6th century when the written Byzantine and Latin sources started mentioning them. Roman writers have some hazy notions about the

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Veneti, the western Slavic group as early as the 1st century and starting from the 6th century there are mentions of a Southern-Slavic group living near the lower Danube, which the Byzantine sources call the Sclaveni, and an Eastern-Slavic group, which the Byzantine sources call Antes. It is considered that the Antes tribal alliance, which was mentioned in 602 for the last time, is actually the first phase in the development of the original Russian country – Kievan Rus'. However, every reconstruction of Russian or the Eastern-Slavic history up until the 9th century remains speculative (Stokes 2003, 63).

Procopius, a Byzantine historian, says in the middle of the 6th century that the Sclaveni around lower Danube and Antes both have the same ancestors (Spori), a religion with the same deities, the same social system (tribal democracy) and the same language (VIINJ, 1955, I, 25–27). Sources have never confirmed that Slavs had ever been called Antes. Pyotr Shuvalov, a Russian historian, believes that this name comes from the Gothic epic tradition in which some Slavic groups had been called Antes. Shuvalov thinks that the Byzantine historian Procopius, who had written about Slavs, got his information from the so-called Little Goths, Gothic soldiers guarding the Byzantine border in the lower Danube in the 6th century. This is the reason why there is mention of the Antes name in his work, and it reappeared later in the works of other writers as well (Shuvalov 2003, 352–358).

Slavs were undoubtedly an ethnic and cultural unity in the 6th century. And this unity that prevailed until the beginning of the Late Middle Ages will be in contrast with the lack of authentic political centralization in the Slavic world (Geary 2007, 196–197).

When discussing the Serbian and Russian lands in the Early Middle Ages, what instantly draws our attention is the similarity of the names Russian and the Serbian town Ras and the Ras territory. The origin of the Russian name is uncertain,¹ while on the other hand the name Ras is derived from the name of a late Roman town Arsa by metathesis, and was mentioned by Procopius in the 6th century. The name Arsa is of Illyrian or Trachian origin. The reason why the Serbian land will be mentioned as Raška in foreign sources in the Late Middle Ages is because of the name of the town Ras and the area surrounding it, even though Serbs themselves will always use the name “Serbian land” (Dinić 1978, 33–44; Kalić 1989, 9–17). So, even though the names are similar, this is purely coincidental, and there is no correlation whatsoever between the names themselves.

Due to this similarity when it comes to names, there was often confusion among the historians of the Middle Ages. For example, Cosmas of Prague mistook Serbs for Russians in the 12th century, citing the letter by Pope John XIII (965–972) to the Czech Duke Boleslaus in his work. In this letter, the Pope gives mention to church services in Slavic by both Bulgarians and Russians, according to the rites of the “sects” of Bulgarian and Slavic people in the Slavic language. Having in mind that Russians accepted Christianity as late as 988, this letter can by no means refer to them, but to the people of the land of Raška which lay on the border between Serbia and Bulgaria in the 9th and the 10th century (Janković 2007, 265). More precisely, Russia or Kievan Rus' totally accepted Christianity in 988.²

¹ There are two prevailing opinions in historiography. One is that the name is of Scandinavian origin, and the other that it has Alano-Tocharian roots (Stokes 2003, 66).

² Christianity had been present in Russia 130 years prior to that. The Dukes Askold and Dir had accepted it in 860, following the siege of Constantinople. Between 873/874 and 877, the Byzantine Emperor Vasilius I and the Patriarch Ignatius gave the Russians their own archbishop, residing in Kiev. Oleg the Pagan seized Kiev in 882, overthrew Christian rulers Ascold and Dir and reinstated paganism. However, the existence of the temple

Because we do not have enough written sources, the history of Serbs and Russians in the Early Middle Ages is somewhat vague. The most important source for both nations' early history is a treatise by the Byzantine ruler and historian Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio* (=DAI), which was written in the imperial scriptorium in the middle of the 10th century. This treatise, which is sometimes referred to as the treatise "On Nations", gives an account of the nations and lands neighboring the Byzantine empire, excluding Bulgaria. More precisely, this treatise accounts for all the potential Byzantine allies in the war against Bulgaria and its ruler, who took the title of emperor at the beginning of the 10th century, thus jeopardizing the Byzantine supremacy in the Christian world. The Byzantine empire, even though it was the first among Christian countries in imaginary rankings, was paying tribute to Bulgaria at the time of Constantine Porphyrogenitus. This was a yoke that the heir to the Roman Empire was trying to get rid of, so Porphyrogenitus tried to prepare his son and successor Roman for the showdown with the Bulgarians (Živković 2002, 384–387).

Both Serbs and Russians were among the potential Byzantine allies in the war against Bulgaria. Serbs (Σέρβλοι) are mentioned in seven chapters of DAI (no. 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 34 and 36), the most important one being number 32, about the most important country for them – Serbia (Σέρβλια), (VIINJ, 1959, II, 9–26, 26–36, 46–58, 59–61, 61–63, 63–64, 64–65; Porphyrogenitus 2014, 131–144, 145–150, 154–162, 162–163, 164–165, 165–166, 166–167).

The ninth chapter of DAI is dedicated to Russians and Russia (Ρως, Ρωσία) (Porphyrogenitus 2014, 95–101). Russians are also mentioned in chapter number 2 on the Pechenegs, number 4 on the Pechenegs, Russians and Turks, number 8 on navigation along the Danube, Dnieper and Dniester rivers and number 13 on the Turks (Porphyrogenitus 2014, 91–92, 92, 94–95, 102–108).

In chapter 9, among the Eastern-Slavic tribes paying tribute to the Russian prince in Kiev, there is mention of the Dregovichi, the Krivichi, and Σέρβοι. The last name can make us believe that Serbs are mentioned here. However, most editors of Porphyrogenitus' text think that this name is related to Severians (Porphyrogenitus 2014, 100), who we have previously mentioned and pointed out that were neighbors to the Russians. Aside from that, Porphyrogenitus calls the Balkan Serbs Σέρβλοι, adding the letter λ. Porphyrogenitus calls by the same name the White Serbs living in the land Boiki (Βοίκι) somewhere behind Turkey (i.e., Hungary) (VIINJ 1959, II, 46, Porphyrogenitus 2014, 154), which does not coincide with the form Σέρβοι. Not even the first Russian historian Nestor in his book "Primary Chronicle", written at the beginning of the 12th century, does not know about Serbs living on the Russian territory. The only Serbs that he knows of are the ones in the south between the Kingdom of Hungary and Bulgaria³ (ISV 2009, 16, 67).

dedicated to Saint Elijah in Kiev in 944 points to Christianity. Another example of how Russians accepted Christianity is that the Russian Duchess Olga, who came to Constantinople in 957, was during this trip accompanied by priest Gregorius. She accepted Christianity while visiting the Byzantine capital, with the intention of having her subjects follow her example as well. In 959, she sent a request to the German ruler at the time, Otto I, asking him to send priests who would perform baptisms. The King sent a Latin bishop to Kiev in 961, but he returned to his country because he was met with hostility there (Stokes 2003, 71–73, Komatina 2014, 312–314).

³ What is interesting is that Nestor mentions Croats as one of the oldest Southern-Slavic tribes. Vladimir the Great of Russia fought with them in 992.

However, the idea of the existence of Serbs among the southern Slavs and in the vicinity of the Russians not been entirely abandoned by the scholars in Serbia.

Božidar Ferjančić emphasizes the opinion by Pavle Ivić, a linguist, that there is a linguistic similarity between the Serbo-Croatian language and the language used in the Carpathian part of Ukraine. Furthermore, he claims that this similarity existed “when the forefathers of Southern Slavs left there” (Ivić 1981, 16–18; Ferjančić 1996, 128–129).

Tibor Živković connects the Serbian motherland with Slavic people mentioned in a text by Bavarian Geographer around 870. Bavarian Geographer speaks of people called *Zeriuani* and their large land that most of the Slavs at the time considered their motherland (*Zeriuani quod tantum est regnum ut ex eo cunctae gentes Sclavorum exortae sint et originem sicut affirmant ducant*). He also points to a Latin document from 921, which was published by F. Kos in 1906 in “*Gradivo za zgodovino Slovencev*”, in which it says that Hungarians moved to the Pannonian Basin from Serbia (*Ungarorum gensa Serviae gressa Pannoniam*). These two quotations from the Latin sources from the 9th and the 10th century, he believes, confirm the data on White Serbs and the Boiki land mentioned by Porphyrogenitus in chapter 32 of DAI (Živković 2013, 96). Given the fact that Hungarians came to the Pannonian Basin from the east, this Serbia in question can only be situated on the territory of Kievan Rus’ or in its vicinity.⁴ Živković also claims that in the 9th century some Slavs thought that they originated from the Serbs in the north (Živković 2013, 97).

Since we previously pointed out that Serbs had been nomads before coming to the Balkans (Đekić 2017a, 213–223), we can consider that their sojourn on the territory of Ukraine today was entirely possible.

There are no direct data about the contacts between the Balkan Serbs and Russians. However, two facts given by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus indirectly provide testimony for the potential connections between Serbia and Kievan Rus’.

The first fact is given in chapter 42, which describes the country north of Thessaloniki, around the Danube river up to Russia, as well as the rivers and towns on the coast of the Black Sea:

”Geographical description from Thessalonica to the Danube river and the city of Belgrade; of Turkey and Patzinacia to the Chazar city of Sarkel and Russia and to the Necropylla, that are in the sea of Pontus, near the Dnieper river; and to Cherson together with Bosphorus, between which are the cites of the Regions; then to the lake of Maeotis, which for its size is also called a sea, and to the city called Tamatarcha, and of Zichia, moreover and of Papagaia, and of Kasachia and of Alania and of Abasgia and to the city of Sotirioupolis” (1967: 183). Jovanka Kalić believes that this DAI chapter was written according to a lost itinerary, describing a trade route from Thessaloniki, through Belgrade and there on the Danube to the countries lying on the coast of the Black Sea” (Kalić 1993, 7–10).

If such an itinerary did exist, its purpose was undoubtedly practical, meaning that merchants traveling that route used it for guidance, which tells us that trade connections between the Balkan countries and those occupying the north coast of the Black Sea existed at the time. According to Porphyrogenitus’ data, it took 60 days to travel from Belgrade to

⁴ An ethnic group named Boiki exists today in western Ukraine, and the name is the same as the name of the country the Serbs came from to the Balkans, as Porphyrogenitus mentions.

Sarkel (Russian – BilaVezha), a Khazar town on the Don estuary. A little farther was Tmutarakan, which Porphyrogenitus calls Tamatarcha, the most prominent Russian trading town near the Byzantine Empire (Porphyrogenitus 2014, 179, 181).

The economy in Serbia at the time was mainly natural and hunting was dominant, which is best shown in the data about leather clothes, two falcons and two dogs (VIINJ 1959, II, 52, 57; Porphyrogenitus 2014, 158, 161). The travelers who used this route most frequently were Byzantine or Khazar merchants going from Thessaloniki, via Belgrade to Sarkel and vice versa. It can be assumed that among them there were also Russians, even more so given the fact that Sarkel, or Bila Vezha, was seized by the Russian prince Sviatoslav I in 956/7 (ISV 2009, 45).

Another of Porphyrogenitus' works indicates possible encounters between Serbs and Russians. It is called *De Ceremoniis* ("Book of ceremonies"). The credibility of this fact can be trusted because the event in question happened during the author's lifetime, in 949. This was the year when the Byzantine Empire made a conquest on the island of Crete, which was under Arab rule at the time. Nine ships from the Adriatic (Dyrrachium and Dalmatia) joined the Byzantine fleet during this naval expedition. There were 629 Russian sailors and 368 Talmats, members of a Pechenegi (Turkish) tribe living in the Southern Russian steppes (Živković 2002, 378–381). This fact tells us that there were Russian soldiers, mainly sailors on warships, in the Byzantine themes of Dyrrachium and Dalmatia bordering the Serbian coastal lands. The number of 629 Russians in Dyrrachium and Dalmatia was not final, because it is certain that not all of the sailors in Adriatic ports left to participate in the conquest on the island of Crete in 949. On the other hand, we should bear in mind that Serbian coastal lands (Duklja, Travunia with Konavle, Zachlunia, and Pagania with the islands) were in the immediate hinterland or the vicinity of these themes, so we can assume that there were Serbs in the Byzantine army as well.

There was an opportunity for Russians and Serbs to make contact during prince Sviatoslav's conquest to help the Byzantine Empire destroy Bulgaria. The Russian Prince appeared on the lower Danube in 968 and took significant territories in the middle of Bulgaria.⁵ However, he fell out with the Byzantine Empire, and Emperor John I Tzimiskes (969–976) banished him from Bulgaria in 971 (Božilov 2008, 91–92).

Even though Russians probably reached Kladovo then (Janković 1990, 38), there are no data indicating that the encounter between the two peoples did happen at the time.

The only thing known about Serbia at the time is that a Byzantine theme Morava appeared at its borders and a Byzantine garrison lead by protospatharios John seized the eastern part of the Serbian land, and it functioned as the Catepanate of Ras (ISD 2000, I, 58).

Historical sources on the Serbs in coastal lands are much more abundant. There is one fact about them that can connect them to Russians. Saint Athanasios of Athos says in a charter to the Monastery of Great Lavra that in 992/993 that there was a Serbian mission travelling by sea to Constantinople with the intention of reaching Emperor Basil II. Islamic pirates captured the Serbs during this journey on the Aegean island of Gymnopelagision. The imperial emissary Sospala freed these Serbs and took them to the Emperor who was at the time at war with Bulgaria. According to George Ostrogorsky, these Serbs were sent by the ruler of Duklja, Vladimir (Ostrogorsky 1970, 147–158) and there they could easily encounter the Imperial Guard consisting of Russian Varangians. These Varangians were

⁵ It is said that he conquered as many as 80 cities.

sent to Basil II by his sister Ana's husband, Vladimir the Great Sviatoslavich in 980. Aside from Varangians (Scandinavian), the Imperial Guard also consisted of Southern-Slavic warriors. This Imperial Guard was a veritable small army, consisting of several thousand soldiers, who fought not only Bulgarians but also the Arabs in Italy as well (Krauze 2011, 180–184).

Aside from these facts that serve more as an indirect testimony of possible contacts rather than actual relations, there are also those which, indirectly as well, indicate the contacts that need to have happened.

To be more specific, after accepting Christianity, Russia entered the Byzantine circle of political, cultural and religious influence, which historian Dimitri Obolensky calls *The Byzantine Commonwealth* (Obolensky 1996). The Serbian people had entered this circle before the Russians. Accepting Christianity from the Byzantine Empire meant accepting worship in the Slavic language, as well as the Old Slavic alphabet, first the Glagolitic script and then the Cyrillic alphabet. This is the language used in the first translated, and then original literature, which reached both nations (Loma 1993, 210; Trifunović 2001, 154–155). The works written during the so-called Bulgarian Golden Century are preserved mostly in Serbian or Russian manuscripts (Trifunović 2001, 97–98).

There is also testimony on the Serbian influence on Russian manuscripts. Some Serbian words appear in the 9th century (Trifunović 2001, 66–67), which indicates that the connections between Russians and Serbs must have existed. Furthermore, a spelling school⁶ was founded in Hum, prior to Sava's arrival, under the Russian influence (Mošin 1979, 106).

It is important to note that both Serbs and Russians got their first saints at the same time. For Russians, this was Vladimir the Great Sviatoslavich, grand prince of Kiev (978–1015), who accepted Christianity in 988.⁷ He built the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Kiev where he was buried. He was canonized shortly after his death (Alekseev 2006; Tarasjev 2015). The Serbs got their first saint at the same time – Prince Vladimir, who was first the independent ruler of Duklja, and then later he was a liege to Samuel. He was killed by Ivan Vladislav in 1016, in Prespa, the capital of the Bulgarian Empire. Just like his Russian namesake, he built the Church of the Virgin where his wife Kosara had his remains carried to from the Bulgarian Empire (Đekić 2017b: 34–110). So, both nations got their saints who died in a single year. Both of them dedicated churches to the Virgin. This creation of the cult of the ruler at the same time testifies to the fact that both Serbs and Russians, independently of each other, were at the same time deeply Christianized enough to feel the need for their own saint. And the fact that the first saints were rulers in the lay world testifies to the need for the first saint to also become a role model to his subjects.

There is also a similarity between this Serbian prince cult and two Russian saints, Boris and Gleb, who were killed in a fight for the throne in 1015, one year before Vladimir himself was murdered. Boris willingly sacrificed himself, not wanting to challenge the lay rule and said: "It is better I die myself and not so many other people". When prince Vladimir realized that his resistance to Samuel's lay rule was futile, he said:

⁶ "Spelling school" means: when, how and whether will vocalisations or loss of nasal voices occur or not, etc.

⁷ Christianity was before him present in Russia for brief periods only.

“My very dear brothers, as I can see, I am the one who should fulfill the evangelic saying ‘A good shepherd gives his life to save his flock.’ So, my brothers, it is better I give my soul for all of you and willingly give my body to be butchered and murdered, than for all of you to face the peril of hunger and the sword.”

This shows that, just like with Vladimir, there is a similarity here, too. We have the same role model here. First, there is the refusal to challenge the lay rule, and then secondly, both Boris and Vladimir utter almost the same words. Such great a similarity in building a cult at almost the same time can only be explained by using the same role models, namely, the same literature used by both nations to build their Christianity. This indirectly testifies to the contacts between Serbs and Russians. The cult of Prince Vladimir can be compared to the cults of saint kings and rulers who were spread throughout Europe from the 6th to the 12th century, who are in the Russian hagiography called “passion-bearers” (Bojović 1999, 348, 423).

One of the most famous Serbs in European history, Hungarian palatine and ban Beloš (1110/5 – before 1198), also came in contact with Russia. He was the son of Uroš I, the Grand Prince of Serbia, and he built his political career in the middle of the 12th century by marrying his sister Helen to the Hungarian King, Bela II the Blind (1131–1141). Beloš was the ruler of Hungary as a regent during his nephew Geza II’s rule (1141–1162). At that time, the Hungarian Empire intervened in the conflict regarding the throne in Kiev between the Russian princes from the Rurik and the Monomachovichi dynasty. The most important thing for Hungary was to secure its north-eastern borders with Galicia and Volhynia, two Russian principalities. Beloš is responsible for the marriage of his nephew Geza II and the Russian princess Euphrosyne, who was the sister of Iziaslav II Mstislavich, Prince of Volhynia. A few years later, in 1150, Beloš’s daughter whose name is unknown, married Euphrosyne and Iziaslav’s brother Vladimir. Russian sources note her as “Banovna”. That is the first time that the marriage between members of a Serbian and a Russian dynasty was recorded. Beloš the Regent, his brother, Grand Serbian Prince Uroš II and Russian prince Iziaslav were allies against the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenos (1143–1180), Conrad III Hohenstaufen (1138–1152) and Yuri Dolgorukiy (Kalić 1997, 67–72).

The first definite direct contact that we have actual testimony of, between the Serbs, living in the Serbian land of Raška, and the Russians, coming either from Russia or a Russian monastery, was made as late as the end of the Early Middle Ages. It is the well-known encounter between Rastko and a Russian monk from the Saint Panteleimon Monastery (Rossikon) around 1192. This happened when Rastko fled to Mount Athos and became a monk in this Russian monastery. Following this encounter, the contacts between the two nations and data about them will become greater in number, more regular and will come from many different sources (Teodosije 1988, 104–116).

Serbo-Russian relations barely existed during the Early Middle Ages, but definitely did happen, as we have managed to show. The very fact that both nations have roots in the Slavic culture and were developing under the Byzantine influence and Slavic literacy managed to connect them, and what was influenced the most was the culture.

Geographical distance disabled them from making political contacts, except for when a Serb, Beloš, who was a regent of the country bordering the Russian principalities – Hungary, made a more profound political connection leading to the first recorded Serbo-Russian marriage.

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SRPSKO-RUSKI KONTAKTI U RANOM SREDNJEM VEKU

Rad nastoji da prati srpsko-ruske kontakate, od prvih veza do kraja ranog srednjeg veka. Nepotrebno je i naglašavati da su izvori za ovu temu izuzetno oskudni. Ukazaće se i na zabunu do koje je došlo kod Kozme Praškog zbog sličnosti imena Rus i Ras. Nastojaćemo da odgovorimo na pitanje kada su mogli biti ostvareni prvi kontakti između dva naroda.

Ukazaće se na značaj i bogoslužjenja na slovenskom jeziku, na prožimanje kulture oba naroda, ali i na izgradnju prvih svetiteljskih kultova. Sva ova saznanja dolaze do nas posredno. Prve lične veze sa Rusijom, o kojima postoje sigurni podaci, uspostavio je Beloš, kao palatin Ugarske, polovinom XII veka. Ukazaće se kakve su bili i u čemu su se ogledale. Na samo kraju XII veka beležimo i dolazak prvog Rusa, čiji je dolazak zabeležen u izvorima monaha na dvor velikog župana Stefana Nemanje. Ovaj monah odvodi potom princa Rastka u ruski manastir na Svetoj gori.

Ključne reči: *Srbi, Rusi, rani srednji vek, knez Vladimir Svjatoslavič, knez Vladimir, Beloš.*