The rebellion of the nobles against the baptism of
Khan Boris (865-866)

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One of the most important events for the history of the First Bulgarian Empire was the baptism of Khan Boris I., which is dated to ca. 864 or 865.¹ Most of the overviews of Bulgarian history start with a new chapter when they turn to the reign of Boris, who changed his name to Michael because of his godfather, the emperor Michael.² Christianization is therefore seen as a turning point in Bulgarian history, as the end of the old pagan era of the Proto-Bulgarians and the beginning of the new Christian Bulgaria.³

This perspective also has consequences for the interpretation of Pliska and its monuments. It is the common knowledge in Bulgarian historiography that in 893 the capital of the Bulgarian Empire was moved from Pliska to Preslav.⁴ As an explanation it is argued that the new capital Preslav seems to reflect the new look of a modern Christian kingdom with its churches, monasteries and monuments to the old Bulgarian language, while Pliska on the other hand with its palaces and pagan sanctuaries seems to represent the old face of a Protobulgarian capital. Furthermore it has been argued that Pliska had been one of the centers of opposition against Christianization.⁵ Therefore Pliska was linked to the two attempts to reestablish the old pagan religion: the first time

³  Zlatarski 1927, 351 ff. started with his second volume; Beševliev 1980, 298 finished the historical part of his book; the Ist. Bǎlg. 2, starts 213 with a new chapter as well as Božilov/Gjuzelev 1999, 169.
immediately after the conversion in 864-865, and a second time after the resignation of Boris in 889, when Boris’ son Vladimir Rasate returned to paganism. Regino of Prüm, almost the sole source for these events, informs us of this.6

This paper shall take a closer look at the rebellion that followed the baptism of Khan Boris. Who stood behind the rebellion? Was it really the pagan Proto-Bulgarian class of Boyars who tried to stop the growing influence of the Slavs? Can Pliska really be seen as a center of paganism? What do these events reveal about the structure of the Bulgarian kingdom?

The conversion to Christianity is mentioned by several different sources.7 In Byzantine chronicles Christianization is presented as a result of military successes of the Byzantines and a great famine in Bulgaria, by which the Bulgarians were moved to adopt the new faith.8 Some chronicles like Theophanes Continuatus focus more on the personal aspect of conversion. Theophanes Continuatus describes two legendary stories about the motives for the baptism of Khan Boris. In the first one he is converted by his sister, who had been led captive in Constantinople, where she had embraced the Christian faith. She was released by the empress Theodora in exchange for a captive monk, Theodore Kupharas. After her return to Bulgaria she labored incessantly to convert her brother who remained a pagan until Bulgaria was visited by a terrible famine. Boris appealed to the God of his sister, and the famine stopped immediately. In the second tale Boris commanded a monk named Methodius to paint a picture that was supposed to strike terror in the hearts of those who gazed upon it. Methodious could not imagine anything more terrible than the Last Judgement and because of the terror of this picture, Boris received instruction in Christian doctrine and was secretly baptized at night.9

About the following events Theophanes Continuatus and the other Byzantine chronicles are less informative. He reports that after receiving the message of the baptism the whole Bulgarian people revolted against Boris/Michael, but he together with

6 Regino of Prüm, Chronicon, a. 868, 96.
7 For an overview of the sources, see e.g.: Zlatarski 1927, 27-30; Petrov 1964, 575-578; Gjuzelev 1969, 78, n. 61, 127.
8 Genesios (Lesmueller-Werner/Thurn), 69; Theoph. Cont. (Bekker), 163; the versions of the Symeon Logothetes, e. g. Georg. Mon. Cont., 732-733 who says that Boris/Michael himself came to Constantinople to be baptized; Skylitzes (Thurn), 91.
9 Theoph. Cont. (Bekker), 162-164; Skylitzes (Thurn), 90-91.
only a few supporters and under the sign of the cross crushed the rebellion and made the rest of the people Christians.10

Western sources present a more detailed description of the rebellion. The Annals of St Bertin, probably composed by the archbishop Hincmar of Reims, say that after Boris/Michael had received baptism his nobles (proceres sui) stirred up the people to slay him, and all the Bulgarians of the ten districts of the kingdom (intra decem comitatus) gathered round his palace. Invoking the name of Christ, Boris/Michael together with 48 companions (cum quadraginta tantum octo hominibus) issued from his palace against the menacing multitude, and as the gates opened, seven clergy, each with a lighted taper in his hand, suddenly appeared and walked in front of the royal procession. Then the rebellious crowd was afflicted with a strange illusion. They imagined that the palace was on fire and was about to fall on their heads, and that the horses of the king and his followers were walking erect on their hind feet and kicking them with their fore hooves. Subdued by mortal terror, they could neither flee nor prepare to strike; they fell prostrate on the ground. The king put to death 52 nobles (ex proceribus) who stirred up the people against him (qui populum maxime adversus eum incitaverunt), while he spared the rest and allowed them to return back home (reliquum autem populum inlaesum abire permisit). He sent an embassy to Louis the German, the king of the Eastern Frankish Kingdom, begging him to send a bishop and priests and received them graciously. Louis, who obviously did not have the material resources for such a great task, asked his brother Charles II the Bald, the king of the Western Frankish Kingdom to send him vessels, vestments, and books for the use of the Bulgarian Church. Charles received what he wanted and sent it to his brother Louis. Boris also sent an embassy with his own son11 and many of his nobles (ex proceribus regni sui) to Pope Nicholas I with questions about the sacrament of Christian faith and asking him for priests and bishops.

10 Theoph. Cont. (Bekker), 164: καὶ κατηχηθεῖς τα καθ’ήμας θεία μυστήρια, νυκτῶν ἀωρὶ τοῦ θείου μεταλαγχάνει βαπτίσµατος. ἐφ’ ὧν καταφανής γεγονὼς τὴν ἐκ παντὸς τοῦ έθνος αὐτοῦ καθυφίσταται ἐπανάστασιν, οὕτω καὶ μετὰ τινῶν ὀλίγων καταπολεμήσας, τὸν τοῦ θείου τύπον σταυροῦ ἐν κόλπως περιάγων αὐτοῦ, τοὺς καταλοίπους οὐκέτι κρύφα, πάντα δὲ ἀναφανδόν ἐποίησε καὶ αὐτοὺς ἐπιθυμοῦντας Χριστιανοῦς.

11 The participation of Boris’ son is doubted by most of the historiography; Zlatarski 1927, 85, n. 2; Gjuzelev 1969, 197, n. 47, 317; Božilov/Gjuzelev 1999, 177.
The embassy presented to the pope, along with other gifts, the arms which the king had worn when he triumphed over his unbelieving adversaries. The embassy took place in August 866.

The report of the Annals of St Bertin obviously depends on another important source for the events, the famous Respensa Nicolai papae ad consulta Bulgarorum by Pope Nicholas I. As the Annals of St Bertin already mentioned, Boris had dispatched ambassadors to Rome, who submitted to him 106 questions on the political, social and religious obligations that the Christian faith imposed upon the Bulgarians. We only have Pope Nicholas’ responses, but they obviously kept the structure and the order of the questions. Furthermore each response begins with a small summary of each question. One of the answers is directly related to the events of the rebellion: “Now I refer to your report on how you received the Christian religion and how you made your whole people be baptized and how after baptism they stood up with great ferocity against you, declaring that you had brought a bad law, and how they intended to kill you and to establish another king, and how you, inspired by the power of God, armed yourself against them and defeated all of them, the big and the small ones, and how you executed all the nobles (omnes primates eorum atque maiores) together with their

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12 Annales Bertiniani, 85-86: Rex Bulgarorum, qui praecedente anno, Deo inspirante et signis atque afflictionibus in populo regni sui monente, christianus fieri meditatus fuerat, sacrum baptisma suscepit. Quod proceres sui moleste ferentes, concitaverunt populum adversus eum, ut illum interficerent. Quotquot igitur fuerunt intra decem comitatus, adunaverunt se circa palatum eius. Ille vero, invocato Christi nomine, cum quadraginta tantum octo hominibus, qui erga christianam devotionem ferventes sibi remanserant, profectus est contra omnem illam multitudinem; et max ut portas civitatis exit, apparuerunt ei et his qui cum eo erant septem clerici, et unusquisque eorum tenebat cereum ardentem in manu sua, sicque praecedebant regem et illos qui cum eo erant. Eis vero qui contra eum insurrexerant visum erat, quod magna villa ardens super eos caderet, et equi eorum qui cum rege erant, sicut contrariis videbatur, erecti incedebant et cum anterioribus pedibus eos percutiebant; tantusque timor eos apprehendit, ut nec ad fugiendum nec ad defendendum se praepararent, sed prostrati solo se movere nequibant. Rex autem ex proceribus, qui populum maxime adversus eum incitaverunt, interfecit numero quinquaginta duos, reliquum autem populum inlaesum abire permisit; et mittens ad Hludowicum regem Germaniae, qui et foedere pacis in Christi nomine de suis adversariis triumphavit, cum aliis donis sancto Petro transmisit et plures quaestiones de sacramentis fidei consulendo Nicolao papae direxit et episcopos atque presbyteros mitti ab eo sibi poposcit; quod et obtinuit.
13 Lib. Pont. (Duchesne), 164.
14 Dujčev 1949, 127-129.
children (*cum omni prole sua*), while you saved the minor or lower class (*mediocres vero seu minores nihil mali pertulerint*). You wanted to know about those who lost their lives, whether this was a sin.” Nicolas answered, that “this certainly cannot be done without any sin and without your guilt, that the children, who did not participate in the plans of their parents and who did not rise in arms against you, were killed despite their innocence together with the malefactors.”

The resemblance to the report of the Annals of St Bertin makes it very likely that Hincmar of Reims received the information about the events in Bulgaria and about the Bulgarian embassy directly from Rome. The question whether the execution of the nobles was to be regarded as a sin is rather astonishing, if we take into account that the Bulgarian king considered himself a ruler by the grace of God. Such a question seems even to challenge the position of Boris/Michael as Bulgarian king.

There had been different kinds of explanations for the rebellion. Zlatarski interpreted it as the resistance of a traditional Hunno-Bulgarian noble class confronted with a centralising policy of Boris/Michael, which was focused on Byzantium and promoted the Slavs instead of the Proto-Bulgarians. Vasil Gjuzelev put less emphasis on the confrontation between Proto-Bulgarian and Slav groups, but instead described the rebellion as a blind, not fully conscious and instinctive reaction of traditional and maybe Western orientated nobles with an anti-Byzantine tendency. The historians largely agree about the anti-Byzantine thrust of the rebellion.

It is quite clear that the events are presented from the perspective of the victorious Christian party, that of Khan Boris/Michael and his companions. As far as the report by Hincmar is concerned, there are certain aspects that attracted the attention of historiography. An interesting detail is the reference to the ten districts of Bulgaria, which could be used to reconstruct the administrative structures of the Bulgarian kingdom.

15 *Responsa*, 577, cap. 17: Igitur referentes, qualiter divina clementia Christianam religi-nem perceperitis qualiterque populum vestrum baptizari omnem feceritis, qualiter autem illi, postquam baptizati fuerunt, insurrexerint unanimiter cum magna ferocitate contra vos, dicentes non bonam vos eis legem tradidisse, volentes etiam vos occidere et regem alium constituiere, et qualiter vos divina cooperante potentia adversus eos praeparati a maximo usque ad modicum superaveritis et manibus vestris detentos habueritis qualiterque omnes primates eorum atque maiores cum omni prole sua gladio fuerint interempti, mediocres vero seu minores nihil mali pertulerint: de his nosse desideratis, qui vita privati sunt, utrum ex illis peccatum habeatis. Quod utique sine peccato evasum non est nec sine culpa vestra fieri potuit, ut proles, quae in consilio parentum non fuist nec adverus vos arma sustulisse probat-ur, innocens cum nocentibus trucidaretur.

16 Zlatarski 1927, 51-57.
17 Gjuzelev 1969, 114-117.
19 Venedikov 1979, 16-30.
Another interesting aspect is the number of 52 executed nobles on one side against the 48 supporters of the Khan on the other side. But it is difficult to decide, whether these figures really reveal the ratio of the two parties or whether they are just of a symbolic character. The emphasis on the social aspect of the rebellion is one obvious detail that can be observed. To put it more precisely, the report stresses that the punishment by Boris/Michael was mainly carried out against the members of the noble class. The nobles, the *primates* and *maiores* of the *Responsa*, or the *proceres* of the Annals of St Bertin, were put to death while the *mediocres seu minores* of the *Responsa* or the *reliquum populum* of the Annals of St Bertin were saved.

We have little evidence as to a social division of Bulgarian society. An inscription probably by Khan Malamir tells us that he held banquets and drinking bouts for Bulgarians while he presented large gifts to the “Boilads” and “Bagaines”. Sometimes we find a combination of the different sectors of society, employing the terms “inside” and “outside”. In the *Miracle of Saint George with a Bulgarian*, George answers the question about his rank by saying that he does not hold any duty and does not live where the king lives but outside. An epitaph of the time of Khan Omurtag (814-831) tells us about a nobleman who “died inside.” From these examples can be concluded that there was a kind of noble class in Bulgaria that was perhaps divided into an inner circle around the Khan himself and his family and an outer circle including, for example, the holders of minor offices.

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20 Beševliev 1963, No. 57, 277-278 (text and German translation), 278-280 (commentary); Κάνα συβηγήθη Μαλαμιρ ὁ ἐκθεο ἄρχον ὁ παλεῶς αὐτοῦ θεαὶς ὁ Ἑρμουλός ὁ καυχανος ἐπήλθε τὸ ἀνάβρυτον τοῦτο καὶ ἄρθον τοῦ ἀρχονταν καὶ ὁ ἄρχον πολάκις ἔδοξεν τοις Βουλγαρίσις φαγῇ ἐν καὶ πιό τοὺς βοιλάδας καὶ βαγαίνους ἔδοξεν μεγάλα ἑξένθη ὁ δι(δ) εξή αὐτὴν καὶ ἂν τὸν ἐκθεο ἄρχονταν ἐτί ἐκτὸς μετὰ τὸν Ισηθελον τὸν καυχαίνων; for the inscription, see Bury 1912 370; Zlatarski 1918, 335; Beševliev 1963, 291; Ist. Bǎlg 2, 159; Gjuzelev 1999, 157.

21 Loparev 1894, 20; Zlatarski 1921, 303-309; Dujčev 1954, 233-234.

22 De cer. (Reiske) I, 681, 17-18: πῶς ἔχουσιν οἱ ἡξ Βολιάδες οἱ μεγάλοι; πῶς ἔχουσι καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ οἱ ἔσω καὶ ἦσοι Βολιάδες; πῶς ἔχουσιν τὸ κοινὸ τοῦ λαοῦ; 682, 15-17; Zlatarski 1921, 298-312; Dujčev 1954, 231-244.


24 For a more detailed discussion of this problem: Zlatarski 1921, 298-312; Dujčev 1954, 231-244.
What can we say about the ethnic make-up of the noble class? Is there really a traditional Proto-Bulgarian class, which tries to defend its privileges and faith against the rising group of Christian Slavs? Actually we do not have any clear evidence for a confrontation between Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians as it was depicted in the historiography. In the middle of the ninth century, Bulgaria had already changed to a multiethnic kingdom. There is evidence for Greek and Slav commanders and artisans in high positions. When Khan Omurtag talks about moving his army against the Slavs, he talks about those Slavs who lived outside the Bulgarian kingdom and who were integrated step-by-step into the Bulgarian Kingdom in the course of the ninth century.

If there is no clear evidence for a conflict between Slavs and Protobulgarians within the noble class, what can we say about the role that these circles play in relation to Christianization and the revolt against it? For investigating the personal background and the reasons for the rebellion, it is useful to look at its political implications. From the report of the Annals of St Bertin and from the Responsa as well it becomes clear that the Khan did not act on his own, though there is the obvious attempt of mystifying his victory as a sign of God. The number of 48 companions that can be combined with the 58 executed noblemen could also be interpreted as members of the noble class, perhaps the so-called “inner boyars.” Many nobles (plures ex proceribus) took also part in the embassy to the pope. In the Responsa we obtain even more information about the relationship between the nobles and Christianization. One of the answers deals directly with the relationship between the Bulgarian king and his nobles. The pope had been asked about his opinion that the Khan was accustomed to having supper at a table separated from the nobles, who had to sit on the floor and had to eat from the ground. The pope did not want to interfere in the customs of the court but advised that the nobles should be regarded with respect and that the kings of the Old Testament used to dine

25 In 813 a Bulgarian embassy led by a certain Dargameros, a Slav, was sent to the emperor Michael in order to start consultations about a peace treaty. Theophanes, Chron. (de Boor), 497, 16-18: „Τούτῳ τῷ ἐτεὶ Κρούμμος, ὄ τῶν Βουλγάρων ἀρχιγός, διὰ Δαργαμπροῦ τὰ περὶ τῆς εἰρήνης αὐτῆς πρὸς Μιχαήλ τὸν βασιλέα ἐπερεψεθεύσατο ...; Zlatarski 1918, 262, n. 7, 290, 384; Dujčev 1962, 193, Theophanes, Chron. (Mango), 686, n. 2; proof of commanders of most likely non-Bulgarian origin within the Bulgarian army is presented by an inscription with the Greek names: Leon, Bardanes, Johannes, Kordylis and Gregoras (Beševliev 1963, No. 47, 220-229, text 220, 8-221, 30).

26 Beševliev 1963, No. 56, 260-277 (. κὲ με[τί]ζεν] τὴν δύναμίν του [ις τούς] Γρικοῦς κὲ Σκλάβους ...
together with their friends and even with their servants. This can be interpreted as a clear signal for the nobles that in his opinion the Christian faith did not necessitate an exalted position of the ruler as that of the Byzantine emperor, but a moderate relationship between the king and his nobles as in the Frankish Kingdoms. Nicholas himself sometimes had a tense relationship with the Western emperor Louis II of Italy and he had exercised his power by refusing the divorce of king Lothar II and sealing the fall of his kingdom. There is no doubt that the *Responsa* has an anti-Byzantine tendency in criticizing some of the mandates of the Greek clergy in Bulgaria. In fact Byzantium’s Christianization of Bulgaria was not a voluntary act, at least at this point in time and with this method. Though there is early evidence that Khan Boris planned to convert to the Christian faith, it is evident that military failure affected the timing of his final decision. From that point on Greek clergy poured into Bulgaria, and Patriarch Photios composed a long letter in which he explained the foundations of the Christian faith and the duties of a ruler to the neophyte. The omnipresence of the Greek clergy, who tried to influence many aspects of the political, social and cultural life of the Bulgarian Empire, is clearly revealed by the *Responsa*. Cruelty, uncertainty and despotism seem to have stirred up Bulgaria. Obviously the Greeks were blamed for the situation while the Bulgarians hopefully turned to the pope for answers. The desire for a written law is indicated more than one time in the *Responsa*. It seems that the *Responsa* are not directed only to the Khan himself but to both the embassy (that is the nobles) and the Khan.

27 *Responsa*, 583, cap. 42: *Asseritis, quod rex vester cum ad manducandum in sedili, sicut mos est, ad mensam sederit, nemo ad convescendum, etiam neque uxor eius, cum eo discumbat, vobis procul in sellis residentibus et in terra manducantibus; et idcirco, quid vobis hinc praecipiamus, nosse desideratis. Unde nos, quia non contra fidem, quod agitur, est, licet bonos mores satis impugnet, non tam praecipientes quam suadentes hortamur, ut ad Christianae religionis cultores principes attendatis et humilitatis eorum considerantes fastigium deponatis ex vobis omne ad nihil utile supercilium; legerunt enim illi in evangelio dicentem Dominum: “Discite a me, quia mitis sum et humilis corde, et invenietis requiem animabus vestris.” Nam antiqui reges, quorum multi sanctorum consortium meruerunt ac ideo veraciter reges dicti sunt, quoniam sancti repperti sunt, cum amicis, quin immo cum servis suis convivati fuisse memorantur; quin potius ipse rex regum et dominus dominantium redemptor noster non solum cum servis et amicis suis, apostolis scilicet, recubuisse, verum etiam cum publicanis et peccatoribus et recubisse et manducasse discibrat.

28 For the image of the Byzantine emperor, see e. g. the papers in: Hunger 1975; for the Frankish Empire, e. g. Hannig 1982; Krah 1987.

29 For Nicolas I., see e. g.: Perels 1920, 53-180; Betz 1965.

30 Dvornik 1948, 114; Heiser 1979, 132-133.


32 *Photios, Epist.* (Laourdas / Westerink), 1-39; a commentary is given by White/ Berrigan 1982; Podskalsky 2000, 53-54.
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The question about the sinful deeds of the Khan in acting against the rebellions shows that there was a group that skeptically observed the crude policy of the Khan and its Greek advisors, but instead of returning to the old religion tried to implement a different kind of Christianity and looked for alternatives in the West. It is not by chance that the embassies to King Louis and the pope were directly linked to the rebellion. Furthermore, by asking the pope to send a patriarch, the Bulgarians revealed the wish for an independent church with its own organisation. We cannot be sure whether it was Boris himself who regretted his cruel policy or whether a group of nobles urged him to contact the Western church in order to reduce or eliminate the Byzantine influence in Bulgaria. But it is very likely that the rebellion was a major impetus for a political change, which resulted in the aforementioned embassies to Louis the German and the pope. We can go even further and say that the embassies were a direct consequence of the rebellion. Though after four years of Latin missionary work, the Byzantine church prevailed at last, the Bulgarians achieved their main goal by establishing a more independent organization of their church. After all it seems to be more reasonable to examine the political outcome of the rebellion than to presuppose a conflict between ethnic groups, for which there is no basis in the sources.

These results have consequences for our view of Pliska. Looking at Pliska we have to realize that Pliska is far from being a center of paganism. Though considered to be the capital of the Bulgarian kingdom, neither any grave of a Bulgarian Khan nor a pagan cemetery has been discovered so far. Instead the latest archeological research calls for reexamination and reinterpretation of the monuments. But on the other hand we have direct evidence from the Christian era, when Pliska probably became the seat of the Bulgarian Patriarch. There may even be proof of the Latin mission in Pliska.

In sum, the rebellion of the Bulgarian nobles against Boris/Michael, which has always been interpreted in the framework of a permanent conflict between a traditional Proto-Bulgarian ruling class and Christian Slavs, has to be linked very closely to the embassies to Rome and to Louis the German. The reexamination of the events revealed the existence of an opposition group among the nobles against the policy of Boris/Michael and the Greek clergy. The embassies are probably a direct consequence of the rebellion, and were sent with the expectation that the pope would bring a “better” law, bolster the authority of the nobles against the Bulgarian ruler, and help to establish the organization of an independent church. It is very likely that the later conflicts of the reign of Vladimir Racate, who reigned from 889 to 893, are not just a return to paganism, but have a similar political and personal background to the revolt of 865-866. But this issue requires further study.

33 Rašev/Dimitrov, Pliska, 35 with further literature 71-101.
34 See the other papers of this volume.
36 Georgiev 1993, 110-130.
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