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On the Authenticity of a Speech by Czar Asen II

Abstract: The current essay is an attempt to find answers of the questions regarding the authenticity of the dialogue, rhetorical situation, political context and the impact of a speech of the Bulgarian Czar Asen I.

Key words: Bulgarian rhetoric, authenticity, Czar's speech.

The names of brothers Asen and Peter were mentioned for the first time in 1185 in connection with their meeting with Byzantine Emperor Isaac II Angelos. That occurred in Kipsala, modern Ipsala, in Eastern Thrace where he was camping with his army. In his "Historia", Niketas Choniates describes prejudicially the brothers as men of petty ambitions: "...asking to join the Byzantine troops and to be allotted a village, difficult to reach, near the Hemus Mountains" [1]. Since the plea was rejected, Asen used strong language hinting on a possible insurrection if the brothers' wish was turned down. Sevastokrator John, the Emperor's uncle, ordered that Asen should be slapped in the face "as a punishment for his impudence" [2]. And further down, Niketas Choniates sheds a tear: "And what these infidels and scoundrels did against the New Romans; what words can describe it, what story will encompass the Iliads of wrongdoings?" [3].

In 1185, Byzantium experienced one of its greatest crises. Normans occupied and plundered the second largest city in the empire, Thessaloniki. That, as Ivan Duichev puts it, had a shattering effect both on the Byzantines and the Bulgarians [4]. Asen and Peter erected a monument to the holy martyr Dimitar in Turnovo. They also made a move quite strong for the time: when some Bulgarians who lived in Thessaloniki rescued miraculous icon of St. Dimitar of Thessaloniki and took it to Turnovo, they spoke of providence. The saint, patron of Thessaloniki, had abandoned the New Romans and had started protecting the Bulgarians.

Peter crowned himself with a gold wreath and wore purple shoes as a sign of royal power and aspirations for Bulgarian statehood. The following year, he was enthroned as Bulgarian Czar (1186-1197).

The uprising was led by Asen; he was its ideological and political mastermind. He was a remarkable strategist and tactician. War was in his blood. He commanded the defense of Turnovo during the campaign of Byzantium against Bulgaria in 1190. He provoked astutely the bringing down of the capital's siege and crushed the Byzantine armed forces at the Tryavna Mountain Pass. Isaac II Angelos suffered the loss of his helmet but saved his head. Bulgarians won for themselves many valuable trophies. Byzantine historian Georgios Akropolites wrote: "Bulgarian people were proud because they had great gains from the Byzantines and also got the most valuable imperial insignia. For they appropriated the emperor's pyramidal crowns, the noblemen's chalices, lots of money and the personal cross of the emperor... It was made of gold and inlaid with a piece of the sacred wood on which Christ was crucified. That piece of wood was cut in the shape of a cross. The cross had many partitions with the relics of the greatest saints" [5]. After the victory, Asen (until then, had been presented as co-ruler, together with Peter) was described as the first Bulgarian Czar. Peter preserved his royal title [6]. During the following years, 1191 and 1192, Asen enlarged Bulgarian lands. He raised the authority of Bulgaria's capital by collecting relics of great saints; according to medieval thinkers they gave the city "great invincible power" (Andreev, J., op.cit. 114). Even now such events will enhance the influence of modern towns. For example, the finding of John the Baptist's relics in Sozopol has increased considerably the number of visitors to the town and has influenced the revenues from tourism. Patriarch Evtimij wrote in the Life of Ivan Rilski: "Benevolent Czar Ivan Asen prepared venerably everything necessary for the procession of the saint; he gave everything to the patriarch leaving 300 strong men to accompany the saint. He rushed and arrived urgently in his royal city..." [7]. Niketas Choniates maintained that Bulgarians were pleased with the instability in the empire and derided the Byzantines; they asked God to give longevity to the family of the Angelos, rulers of Byzantium [8]. We should not be displeased with Byzantine historians for shedding negative light on Asen. In fact, even they recognized the strengths of the Bulgarian Czar.

Asen was given the nickname Belgun which includes the Turkic or Old Bulgarian root "bel"/"bil", meaning "know". According to J. Andreev the epithet should be interpreted in the sense of knowledgeable, wise, and clever: "a characteristic which probably corresponds with his remarkable skills" (Andreev, J., *Bulgarian Khans and Czars*, VII-XIV, Sofia, 1998, p. 108). In the literature, there is information that Asen was a Turkic name meaning "light", "nimble". So he was of Kuman origin. The claim that it was an Old Bulgarian name is equally justified. Ivan Duichev maintains that it did not matter if "in the veins of the leaders of the uprising, the brothers Asen and Peter, the blood of Bulgarian and Kuman noblemen flowed" [9].

After a coup, Alexei III Angelos came on the Byzantine throne. He blinded and exiled his brother Isaac II Angelos in April 1195. Then he offered peace to Czar Ivan Asen I. The terms of the Bulgarians seemed to him too big and absolutely unacceptable: "These people gave haughty replies and offered such peace conditions that, of course, were unacceptable and dishonest to the Romans." [10]. So to the signing of a peace treaty didn't happen.

Sometimes Choniates called the Bulgarians "Valachs" due to his interest in the Valach population in the Balkans. This could be seen in the following short comment: "The Valachs advised Asen not to attack the Romans, carried away by his feelings, but to have in mind the war rules of the strategy, as they learned, on the reign was a man – soldier, who was far superior to his brother. "

Provoked by these words, Asen gave a speech, indicating that well-deserved he is considered to be wise. This is clearly an educated and intelligent man, prone to analysis and certainly impressive orator. After reviewing the nature of the hearing as such, it goes to the analysis of the facts that allow the hearing to be checked in some way. Only then he could have any trust. This is an emphasized logical approach. Based on the characteristics of Alexei Angelos III, he reduced the argument for the power of the new emperor to absurdity. The statement of Asen is that things have not changed much. The war against Byzantium should continue, the enemy is the same, if not worse. Moreover, the new emperor must be punished because he betrayed the former one and usurped the power from the man who rescued them from the Normans. "Those who arm themselves against their rescuers shouldn't they be quickly destroyed by their enemies as perjurers" [11].

Niketas Choniates published this speech and concluded: "With such thoughts the barbarian lifted the spirits of his subordinates and with greater confidence attacked the areas around Strymon (Struma River) and the city of Amphipolis, situated between Kavala and Drama near the river mouth.

In theory there is no definite opinion as to whether this is a speech actually pronounced by Asen or "literary model" created by Niketas Choniates itself.

Expressing doubts on the matter, J. Andreev tells us about "the words pronounced by Czar Asen" for his "statesmanship wisdom", for the "iron" arguments of the Czar", etc. which I think is overlap, although indirectly, in favor of the statement referring to the authenticity of the speech. It's not accepted to analyze the meaning of a text and at the same time, challenging its authenticity [12].

P. Angelov, without being quite explicit, assumes that this could be a tool of the Byzantine historian that he used so he could give his personal opinion on the underlying issues in speech, in a way that would have saved him from serious problems with the authority [13]. In favor of his thesis he underlines the fact that here is presented "a very extensive speech" that oppose to the usual practice of Byzantine authors to include only individual lines of the Bulgarian rulers in their texts. Furthermore, stays the issue of what unknown ways this speech reached the Byzantine historian? [14]. At the same time he implicitly assumes that speech is authentic. "Nevertheless, even if a purely stylistic technique, but not the actual words spoken by Asen I, they are strong evidence that in the eyes of the Byzantines, he was not a random figure ... " [15]. We tend to assume that this is the speech, given personally by Asen. No convincing arguments in favor of the opposing argument can be found.

In our opinion, the argument that it is not usual for the Byzantine historians to cite a relatively extensive speech, when they have used to cite only short lines, itself carries little weight. Medieval historians have included in their texts what they had, of course if it meets their attitudes and goals. It is not impossible that this happened after some editing. If we follow this logic, even the short lines can be "literary forms" and can also be used with similar intentions.

Size is a rather technical aspect of the problem. There is verbal memory and also a developed script and it was hardly difficult for a text to be saved. And how did it reach Byzantium? The same way the short lines had reached the territory. Furthermore, the size only in comparative perspective / by short lines / looks long. We are talking about less than two standard pages if we use our current measures.

Of course, another thing would be if we assume that Niketas Choniates generally used this technique in its historical essay and included in it rhetorical speeches, in which he presented his thoughts for someone else's. It is similar to Livy's "History of Rome" where speeches are fictitious and are certainly entirely literary models. But I have not come across a similar claim anywhere. At the same time, Aval Gely in the "Attic Nights" presents fragments of authentic rhetorical texts. There is a third option - some of the texts are authentic while others are not. Given that we don't have firm evidence how we can be sure which of the options is available.

The issues which Asen spoke about, including the comparison between Isaac II Angelos and Alexei III Angelos, can actually be taken as a statement of Niketas Choniates, but what we today assume it would not be far from the mind of the Emperor Alexius, or clever heads around him. Therefore, he does nothing to protect himself from possible sanctions. Moreover if we speculate on the matter today, because of the lack of information, things stood in quite another way for the contemporaries.

Most likely, the text of the speech reached Constantinople; so that's how Niketas Choniates posted it. It is not a secret speech delivered in front of a limited audience, but certainly a great speech given to a crowd. It can hardly be argued that there were plenty of witnesses at the delivery - direct and indirect. The countless Byzantine spies also brought information about the speech to the Emperor. It would not be amazing, if the text of the speech was brought quite deliberately in the capital from Bulgarians or as a Bulgarian order. This is pure psychological warfare. Behavior of this type is familiar to Asen and Peter, who already have a similar psychological course in their practice - the rumor that Demetrios - the saint patron of Thessaloniki, had abandoned the Byzantines and became the protector of the Bulgarians. By declaring the text to the public in Byzantium, it is accepted as attack and discredit of the Byzantine emperor as a perjurer and ungrateful person. And if there is no text and / or evidence for the existence of the speech, then it would be a good reason to think that this text was created by Niketas Choniates. How come this speech is known only by him? He is intelligent enough, as we can see, to reach the same conclusion and would hardly risk. It is indicated that he is more of a conformist - he provides to himself the favor of both Emperors, compiling eulogies in their honor [16].

And last but not least. Asen's words find full confirmation in his works. The image which we are building up in our minds, reading his speech, is completely in charge of what is said about him and what he actually did. He is a king and a warrior, reasonable and logical, even in his oratory argumentation.

Niketas Choniates gave us a unique opportunity for comparative analysis of his creative work. Apart from the "History", he left also 18 speeches. If this is a speech by Asen, it should differ somewhat from the other speeches in language, style and compositional terms, the approach to the arguments and type of the arguments. As I have already noted, to some extent, it is possible that it was edited by Choniates, so it would be similar to the others. Nevertheless, it is worth a try.

There could be made a comparison between the speech by Asen and some of the orations devoted to Emperors Isaac II Angelos and Alexei III Angelos. High emotionality and lavishness of style are typical of the panegyric; the orations represent that type of formal public speech. Without opposing them to the emphasized logic and conciseness of style in Asen's text, we can note that the orations are written by an Asiatic orator and Asen's speech is written by an Attic orator. And this is not due solely to the type eloquence - epideictic in the orations and deliberative in the speech. A deliberative speech can also make use of the tools of the formal, praiseworthy speech as this is also valid for the judicial speech. Such a thing did Cicero in court in defense of the poet Arch [17].

This is a matter of rhetorical style.

Asen's speech contains several theses. First: "There shouldn't always "be given ear" to the rumors." After reviewing the nature of the rumor and a short analysis, he warned the listeners not to overrely on rumors, but to examine the available facts. He told series of facts relating to the personality of Emperor Alexius to prove the opposite of what is distributed. This is a classic logical approach used in the refutation of the thesis.

Asen used example in his arguments: strips hanging on his spear. It is accessible and comprehensible argument, although in this case - manipulative, and serves as a conclusion by analogy with the argument that the old and the new emperor did not differ much. The differences are only external. They are "consanguine brothers" "had one parent, came out of the same womb, were born on the same land, and received the same things." From here it has become quite easy to go to the final thesis: "Therefore, as I think and as we all know from experience, they should not differ in the military." This conclusion is entirely manipulative. There is a manifest of the error/praise "if - so." It is not necessarily for two brothers, raised under the same conditions, to be similar in behavior and especially in this particular behavior. Here it should be regarded as the public

speaking skill of the Bulgarian Czar. And even the emperors to look alike as two drops of water, there could be something else that has changed and this is the obstacle, the speaker don't miss to stress the discursive moment "and now we'll stand against those who have been previously on the opposing side, and I don't have to say to stand even against the weaker."

Asen's speech was delivered in an emergency. This allows even determines emotion, but one is almost absent. It could only be seen in the final of the speech after the call "let's go to war again" where he saw the Bulgarians as performers of "the wrath of God" punishing the betrayers and the perjurers. In this aspect, it resembles to some of the ancient Chinese military speeches, Suvorov's speech to the soldiers in the memorable crossing of the Alps, etc. [18].

Choniates has the custom of changing, although not consistently, medium size with quite long sentences with many complex components in his speeches. We do not notice anything like this in the speech of Asen. The sentences are approximately equal in length.

And another thing is impressive – in Asen's speech the references and the quotations from the Scripture are missing, which, although not abundant enough, are commonly found in Choniates' oratorical texts. Although much more rarely, he used these references even in the "History" [19].

If that was a text by Choniates, we believe, at any rate we would find such a thing. First of all, because the text of the speech and the reason for delivery, are in favor of using this type of arguments. Secondly, because they are watertight arguments for that age and meet the expectations of the Byzantine audience. The lack of a similar type of argumentation is not a good impact. And thirdly, because this is the personal style of Choniates.

As an erudite, it is typical of him to make references to ancient history, mythology and literature. He used them as comparisons and arguments in both his speeches [20]. There is no such thing in Asen's speech such a thing.

"History" by Niketas Choniates (XII - XIII century) is an extremely important source of information for the restoration of the Bulgarian state after the Byzantine domination and the establishment of the Latin Empire, and also for the other countries in the area and the relations between them in this period. It contains 21 chapters and covers the period from 1118 to 1206. In his essay about the Bulgarians, he used the archaic word "Moesians" (also used by other Byzantine authors).

And, to avoid being entirely theoretical, let me present the text of the speech in question.

A Speech by Asen I

One should not always give ear to rumors. And when a word is spread that someone is brave, you should not be afraid, as though he really is. Nor the rumor spread is that someone is fearful or not combative, you should not ignore or throw back him, before you attempt. But do not just ignore the word, because it is not fully unfounded especially when most people distribute it. Then it must be taken as a touchstone for the deeds of men who blasphemed or exalted, but constantly to take "the eye as a judge" of what is spoken, and so to accept rumor as true or rejected as false and be sent to fly somewhere else. Because the ears do not see what's been done, but taking the sound of the tongue, they are guardians of foreign, often contradictory rumors. And the eye is reliable judge for the events and faithful witness to what is seen and no trust in anything that comes from elsewhere and differs from the ear that lends itself to what was said. So, you do not be afraid because of the spreading of the rumor that the current emperor of the Byzantines was brave, but you must assure with what he is famed for. A measure of this should be your previous life – with its help to know this man. If you track back carefully, you will find out that he is not what he is known for. Because he neither participated in wars, nor he was exposed to the danger for the Byzantines, helping his brother in the fighting – that I know myself that constantly ravage and devastate the enemy side, leading to victory after victory and collecting trophies after trophies. He hasn't received the robe and royal crown as a reward for his labor, but as we can see with what he did, but he has mastered the scepter because of a game of blind chance. So I cannot even imagine how this man whom I have never seen in battle, and that neither by speech nor hand, nor intention of ever hurt Mysians suddenly he will change. To explain as much as I could, I will use an example, the situation of this person and all his family are just like these strips that you see, hanging on my spear, waved by the wind, they are different in color, but not in fabric. They are made of the same textile and by the same weaver, but only because they are different in color, they look they are made in different ways. But this is not like that, not like that! So Isaac and Alexei are consanguine brothers one of which is now removed from the kingship, and the other now wears the robe and is crowned with regal crown. They had the same parent, came out of the same

womb, they were born on the same land, and received the same things, although it is clear that one of them, Alexei, is the older one. Therefore, as I think and as we all know from experience, they should not differ in the military. So I say, having in mind our previous project, to resume the war, and now again we'll stand against those who have been previously on the opposing side, and I don't have to say it but most probable to stand even against the weaker. Because I can that the Byzantines look tired and weak in spirit, the Byzantines that we have repeatedly win without letting them not even once to recover their position. And as I think they incur the wrath of God, as they illegally deprived Issac of kingship, who had released them from the worst tyranny. Those who arm themselves against their rescuers shouldn't they be quickly destroyed by their enemies as perjurers?

The text is excerpted from "History" by Niketas Choniates, In: Gibi, p. 11.

References (translated in English):

- [1] Niketas Choniates, Historia, GIBI, 11, p. 26.
- [2] ibid, p.26.
- [3] ibid, p.26.
- [4] Duichev, I., Studies on Medieval Bulgarian History and Culture, Sofia, 1981, p. 44.
- [5] Andreev, J., p. 112.
- [6] Andreev, J., Bulgarian Khans and Czars, VII-XIV, Sofia, 1998, p. 113.
- [7] Evtimij Turnovski, Life of Ivan Rilski, In The Turnovo School of Letters, An Anthology, Sofia, 1996, p. 26.
- [8] op.cit. p. 45.
- [9] Duichev, I., Studies on Bulgarian History and Culture, Sofia, 1981, p. 74.
- [10] Niketas Choniates, p.47.
- [11] Niketas Choniates, Cited Writings. p.49.
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- [13] Angelov, P., Bulgaria and the Bulgarians in the minds of the Byzantines /VII - XIV century/, S., 2011, p. 241.
- [14] Angelov, P., Cited writings, p. 241.
- [15] Angelov, P., Cited writings, p. 243.
- [16] Angelov, P., Bulgaria and the Bulgarians in the Minds of the Byzantines /VII - XIV century/, S., 2011, p. 241.
- [17] On this issue, cf. Rumenchev, V., Oratory of Ancient East, S., 2004, p. 270.
- [18] See text of "Fourth speech at Gang", "Eleventh speech of leaders" and "Back are death and disgrace" in Rumenchev, V, Reader of Oratory Speech, S., 1984, p. 26-27 and 152.
- [19] Niketas Choniates, History, In Gibi 11, p.23, 54, 65, 73 and 84, 89 and others.
- [20] Niketas Choniates, Speeches, In: 11 Gibi, p107 - several times, p 110, 114 - several times; p.115 - several times, using mythological figures to convey the visibility of real historical figures) and in "History" where he compared the Bulgarians with Achilles (Niketas Choniates, History, in 11 Gibi , p. 29, 52, 83.

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