

Greek Inscriptions from Ninth-Tenth Century Bulgaria

A Case Study of Byzantine Epigraphy

Abstract: This article focuses on the dissemination of Greek in Bulgaria in the second half of the 9th and in the 10th century. Many examples of inscriptions on different media clearly demonstrate that Greek was used both officially (palace chancellery, ecclesiastical administration etc.) and in everyday religious life.

At the beginning of my paper I am tempted to refer to the latest discovery of a Greek inscription in Bulgaria. This happened in 2011 in the course of my excavations of the Early Byzantine and medieval monastery of St John the Forerunner on the island of Sveti Ivan near Sozopol.¹ The inscription is incised on a small box of tuff in which relics of St John the Baptist were translated to the island for the consecration of the early basilica perhaps from Antioch or Constantinople. The inscription dates to the 4th–5th centuries and reads as follows (Fig. 1):

Κ̅Ε ΒΟΗΘΗ ΤΟΝ ΔΟΥΛΩΝ ΣΟΥ ΘΟΜΑΝ ΤΗΣ ΠΑΡΑΜΟΝΗΣ ΕΚΗΝΗΣΑ ΤΟΥ ΑΓΗΟΥ ΗΘΑ-
ΝΟΥ ΜΗΝΗ ΗΟΝΗΟΥ Κ̅Δ̅ ΕΠΗΧΘΗ Ο ΚΗΟΝ Κ̅Ξ̅

Κ(ύρι)ε βοήθη τὸν δοῦλόν σου Θεομᾶν τῆς παραμονῆς ἐκίνησα τοῦ ἀγίου Ἰοάννου μηνῆ Ἰονίου κδ̅ ἐπήχθη ὁ κίον Κ(ύρι)ε.

“Lord, help thy servant Thomas ... of the vigil I moved ... of Saint John in the month of June 24th was set up the pillar, Lord.”²

Obviously this inscription does not belong to the group of inscriptions I deal with in my paper but certainly can not be omitted in the long-awaited Corpus of Byzantine inscriptions. Furthermore, this inscription brings me to the first statement I would like to make with respect to the Bulgarian contribution to the Corpus. It is related to the diversity of the Byzantine inscriptions found in Bulgaria from the point of view of chronology, cultural context and content. From the point of view of chronology, it is not surprising that two main groups of inscriptions can be established: early Byzantine and medieval Byzantine inscriptions.³ And, while there can be no doubt as to the Byzantine identity behind the inscriptions made in the 4th–6th century in the dioceses of Thracia and Dacia which coincide with the present territory of Bulgaria, the cultural context in which the Greek inscriptions appeared in the same territory since the 7th century onwards, raises a number of important questions. How should we consider the Greek inscriptions from the 8th–9th centuries issued by the chancellery of the Bulgarian khans: “protobulgarian” as published by V. Beševliev,⁴ or rather evidence of Byzantine epigraphy of the “Dark Ages”? And, are the Greek inscriptions made after the conversion of the Bulgarians to Christianity in the middle of the 9th century really “Byzantine,” since certainly most of them might have been made by educated Bulgarians?

The present article does not aim at providing definite answers to these questions, but rather attempts a brief overview of the characteristics of the medieval Greek inscriptions issued in medieval Bulgaria in the 9th–10th centuries. I have two reasons for focussing precisely on this group of inscriptions: first, I have found

¹ The excavations are conducted by K. Popkonstantinov (University of Veliko Tarnovo), R. Kostova (University of Veliko Tarnovo) and Ts. Drazheva (Regional History Museum – Burgas).

² The reconstruction of the text is made by K. Popkonstantinov and N. Sharankov (St Kliment of Ohrid University of Sofia). English translation by N. Sharankov and A. Rhoby.

³ V. BEŠEVLIEV, *Spätgriechische und spätlateinische Inschriften aus Bulgarien*. Berlin 1964, 235.

⁴ V. BEŠEVLIEV, *Die protobulgarischen Inschriften*. Berlin 1963, 382.

most of them in the course of my archaeological practice;⁵ and second, these inscriptions perfectly demonstrate not just the survival of the Greek language in Bulgaria after the official adoption of the Slavic alphabet in the middle of the 9th century, but its importance in further establishing the Christian identity of the Bulgarians.

The majority of the inscriptions have been found in the last 30 years in monastic complexes situated in Northeastern Bulgaria (Ravna,⁶ Chernoglavtsi⁷) and Dobrudzha (Basarabi, present-day Romania)⁸, which show that the educational and literary activity of the monks took place not only in the state centres of Pliska, Ohrid and Preslav. It is interesting to note, moreover, that in those monasteries the Greek inscriptions were found together with Cyrillic, Glagolitic, Latin and pseudo-Runic inscriptions.⁹ Greek was only one of the alphabets employed by the monks yet one of the most frequent since, for instance, the Greek inscriptions constitute ca. 40% of the epigraphic material found in the monasteries of Ravna and Chernoglavtsi.¹⁰

The number of Greek inscriptions found in those monastic complexes together with the inscriptions incised on seals of Bulgarian officials, tombstones, gold and silver objects, and lead amulets is around 300. With regard to the cultural context and the content they provide witness to the great diversity of the use of the Greek language in medieval Bulgaria in the late 9th–10th centuries.

GREEK IN ADMINISTRATION

One might expect that after the conversion of the Bulgarians to Christianity the Greek language must have mostly served as a liturgical language in contrast to the pagan period when it served as a language of the state administration and for communication with others. However, the seals of Bulgarian officials from the second half of the 9th and the 10th century (138 in number) demonstrate that Greek remained the main mediator of the legitimacy of power both in the state and ecclesiastical administration.¹¹

Seals of Bulgarian rulers with Greek legends:

27 seals of Michael I archon of Bulgaria (864–889; † 907)¹²

44 seals of Symeon I (893–927)¹³

52 seals of Peter I (927–969)¹⁴

⁵ K. POPKONSTANTINOV, Dvuezichni nadpisi i abecedari ot starobalgarskiya manastir pri Ravna [Bilingual inscriptions and alphabets from the Old Bulgarian monastery near Ravna]. *Izvestiya na Narodniya Muzei Varna* 20 (35) (1984) 65–80; IDEM – O. KRONSTEINER, Altbulgarische Inschriften, I (*Die Slawischen Sprachen* 36). Salzburg–Wien 1994.

⁶ K. POPKONSTANTINOV, Die Verbreitung des altbulgarischen Schrifttums auf Grund von Inschriften. *Die Slawischen Sprachen* 8 (1985) 167–20; IDEM, Oshte vednazh za gratskiya nadpis ot starobalgarskiya manastir pri Ravna [Once again on the Greek inscription from the Old Bulgarian monastery near Ravna]. *Arheologiya* 1 (1986) 11–29.

⁷ IDEM, Za dva nadpisa ot X vek ot manastira pri Chernoglavtsi, Shumensko [On two inscriptions from the monastery of Chernoglavtsi]. *Epohi* 4 (1994). 98–106.

⁸ IDEM, Die Inschriften des Felsklosters Murfatlar. *Die Slawischen Sprachen* 10 (1986) 77–106.

⁹ IDEM, Razprostranenie na starobalgarskata pismenost prez IX–XI vek (po epigrafski dannii) [The spread of the Old Bulgarian literacy in the 9th–11th c.]. *Starobalgarska literatura* 17 (1985) 39–80.

¹⁰ IDEM, Oshte venazh za gratskiya nadpis 11–29; IDEM, Traditionen von Kyrill und Methodius im altbulgarischen Literatur- und Ausbildungszentrum des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts beim Dorf Ravna, Bezirk Varna (nach epigraphischen Angaben), in: Symposium Methodianum. München 1988, 187–217; IDEM, Das altbulgarische Kloster bei Ravna – Das Schrifttums- und Kulturzentrum, in: Preliminary publications. XIth International Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy. Rome, 18–14 September 1997. Rome 1997, 71–723; IDEM – R. KOSTOVA, Literacy, Literature and Liturgy in Bulgarian Monasteries of the 9th–10th c., in: Love of Learning and Devotion to God in Orthodox Monasteries. 5th International Hilandar Conference. Belgrade – Columbus 2006, 145–163.

¹¹ Y. YURUKOVA – V. PENCHEV, Balgarski srednovekovni moneti i pechatii [Bulgarian medieval coins and seals]. Sofia 1990, 16–50; I. YORDANOV, Korpus na pechatite v srednovekovna Balgariya [Corpus of the seals in medieval Bulgaria]. Sofia 2001, 11–90; K. POPKONSTANTINOV, Прѹложение кьнигъ i gratskiyat ezik v srednovekovna Balgariya [Прѹложение кьнигъ and the Greek language in Bulgaria], in: Vizantiya, Balkanite, Evropa. Izsledvaniya v chest na prof. V. Tapkova-Zaimova. Sofia 2006, 413–423.

¹² YORDANOV, Korpus 31.

¹³ *Ibid.* 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 58.

Seals of Bulgarian officials with Greek legends:

1 seal of John bagatour (i. e. personal mentor) of the heir to the throne¹⁵

10 seals of Michael bagatour of the heir to the throne (Fig. 2)¹⁶

Seals of Bulgarian clerics (864–971) with Greek legends:

10 seals of George archbishop of Bulgaria¹⁷

GREEK IN LITURGICAL PRACTICE

After the official adoption of the Slavic language and alphabet in the middle of the 9th century Greek was not totally discarded, but instead it remained a liturgical language as evident from a number of Greek and bilingual (Greek-Cyrillic) inscriptions, such as the order of weekly services in a painted inscription on a ceramic tile from the Round church in Preslav; the Gospel text on a gold diskos from Preslav; the inscribed names of the saints on the painted ceramic icons from Preslav; and the graffito-inscriptions with Psalter texts from the monasteries of Ravna (Fig. 3) and Basarabi (Murfatlar).¹⁸

GREEK IN MONASTIC SCRIPTORIA

The study of Greek by the Bulgarian clergy was indispensable not only for the purpose of smooth compromise with the Byzantine domination in the newly established Bulgarian church, but also because of the required translations of liturgical books.¹⁹ It is difficult to believe that all the monks-bookmen charged with that duty in the Bulgarian scriptoria²⁰ had mastered Greek in Byzantine monasteries. Certainly most of them were also taught by Greek monks in Bulgarian monastery schools. One of those schools was organized in the monastery of the Mother of God near Ravna, in the Provadiya district. The convincing argument in support of this suggestion is provided not only by the Greek alphabets found there (Fig. 4), but also by the bilingual inscription with verse 3 of Psalm 53 (Fig. 3). Furthermore, verses 13–16 of Psalm 144 entirely incised in Greek as well as the Greek minuscule inscriptions (Fig. 5) indicate that the monks were not only trained in basic literacy in Greek. Rather the main purpose of their education was to produce well trained translators and copyists.²¹

GREEK IN AMULETS

In the last 20 years a new type of epigraphic material has appeared in Bulgaria – lead amulets inscribed in Greek, Glagolitic, and Cyrillic. Some of the texts contain prayers and incantations against various diseases, while others were inscribed with Psalter and Gospel citations. Twenty out of the 80 lead amulets dated to the

¹⁵ K. POPKONSTANTINOV, Novootkrit pechat and Mihail bagatur i bagaturskiyat rod Ioan, Sondoke i Mihail [A newly found seal of Michael bagatour and the bagatour family of Ioannes, Sondoke and Michael]. *Arheologiya* (Sofia) 1–4 (2008) 68–80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ YORDANOV, Korpus 78.

¹⁸ POPKONSTANTINOV, Прѹложение кѹнигѹ i gratskiyat ezik 414.

¹⁹ IDEM, Traditionen von Kyrill 188; IDEM, Das altbulgarische Kloster 716; IDEM – KOSTOVA, Literacy 146.

²⁰ K. POPKONSTANTINOV – V. PLETNYOV – R. KOSTOVA, Manastirite pri Ravna i Karaachteke v manastirskata geografiya na Balgariya prez IX–X vek [The monasteries of Ravna and Karaach teke in the monastic geography of Bulgaria in the 9th–10th c.], in: *Acta Musei Varnaensis* III-2. Varna 2005, 107–121.

²¹ K. POPKONSTANTINOV – R. KOSTOVA, Skriptoriyat v Ravnenskiya manastir: oshte vednazh za ukrasata na starobalgarskite rakopisi ot IX–X vek [The scriptorium of the Ravna monastery: once again on the decoration of the Old Bulgarian manuscripts from the 9th–10th c.], in: *Medieval Christian Europe: East and West. Traditions, Values, Communications*. Sofia 2002, 719–726; POPKONSTANTINOV – KOSTOVA, Literacy 146.

9th–11th century were inscribed in Greek (Fig. 6).²² This fact firstly provides evidence of the existence of a kind of corpus of such texts and prayers in Greek which was popular in Bulgaria as well. Secondly, the ordinary clergy was sufficiently trained in Greek to be able to read and reproduce these texts on the lead plaques. And thirdly, in everyday religious life Greek was equally perceived as a magic-making language together with the Slavic.

Summing up, it must be noted that the examples listed above demonstrate widespread and competent use of Greek on all levels of Bulgarian society in the second half of the 9th and in the 10th century: the Palace chancellery, the ecclesiastical administration, liturgical practice, monastic schools and scriptoria, and in everyday religious life. These inscriptions are exceptional evidence of the importance of Byzantine Greek beyond the political borders of the Empire. Therefore, I believe that these inscriptions demonstrate the need for the future Corpus of Byzantine Inscriptions properly to include not only the epigraphic material from Byzantium, but also from the Byzantine world.

²² POPKONSTANTINOV – KRONSTEINER, *Altbulgarische Inschriften I* 17, 38, 111, 117, 121, 140; K. POPKONSTANTINOV, *The Letter of Abgar on a Tenth-Century Amulet*, in: *Ars Philologica. Festschrift Baldur Panzer*. Wien 1999, 649–654.



Fig. 1: Inscription on the bottom on the tuff reliquary found in the basilica on the island of Sveti Ivan near Sozopol, 5th-6th c.



Fig. 2: Seal of Michael bagatour of the heir to the throne, 10th c.



Fig. 3: Greek-Cyrillic graffito-inscription with verse 3 of Psalm 53 from Ravna monastery, 10th c.

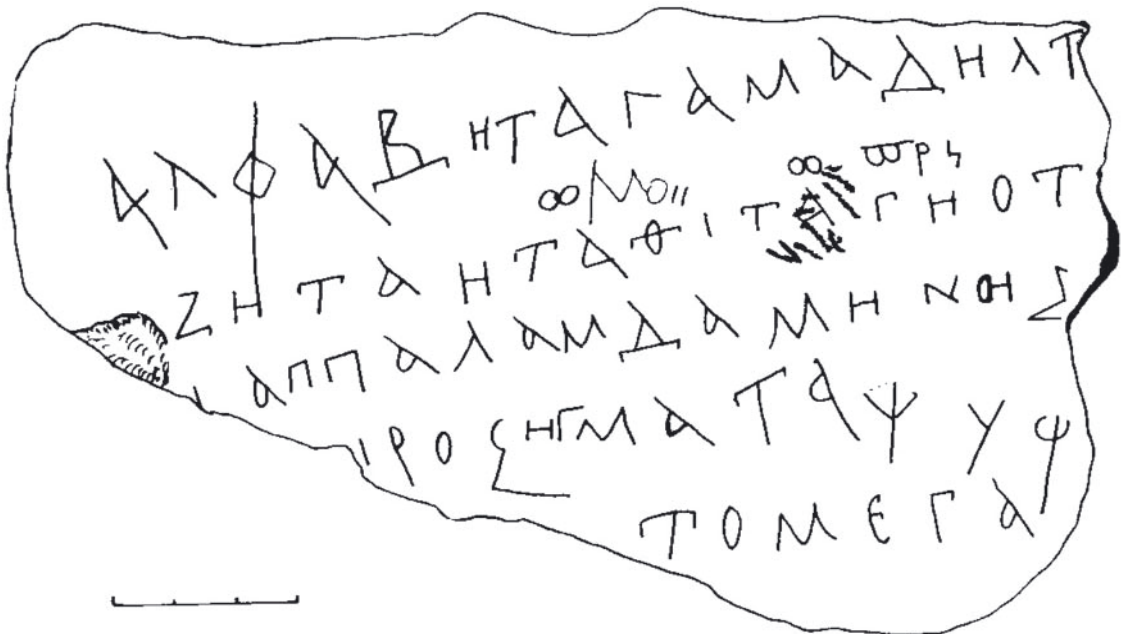


Fig. 4: Graffito-inscription with the Greek alphabet from Ravna monastery, 10th c.

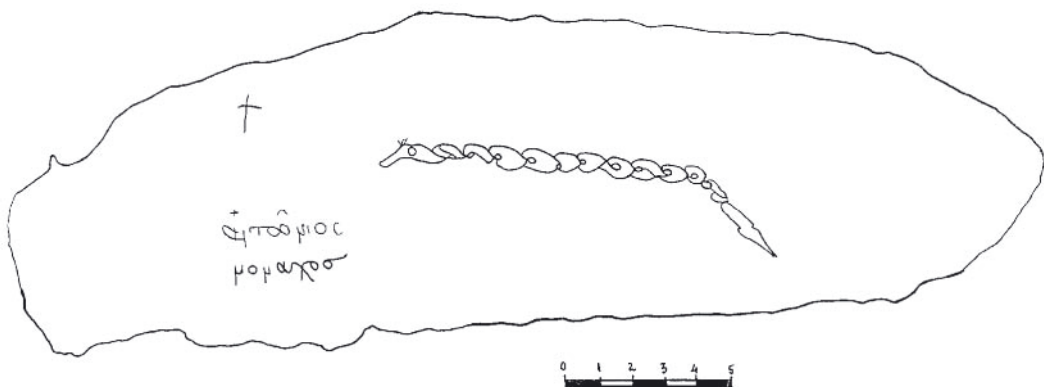


Fig. 5: Graffito-inscription with Greek minuscule from Ravna monastery, 10th c.



Fig. 6: Lead amulet inscribed in Greek from Dolishte, Dobrich district, 10th c.

