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The Temperance and Prudence of Simeon, the Bulgarian Ruler in the Letters of Nicholas Mystikos, Patriarch of Constantinople: Some Remarks

Between 912-925, Nicholas Mystikos – twice Patriarch of Constantinople² – maintained a correspondence with Simeon, ruler of Bulgaria.

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² Nicholas was born in 852 in Constantinople. He was one of Patriarch Photius' students. His career was initially secular in nature. From this period came the nickname Mystikos (μυστικός), that is, an official dealing with secret affairs. He is known to history as the Bishop of Constantinople. He first held this function from 901-907, and then from 912 until his death in 925. The loss of the patriarchal throne followed Nicholas' tenacious attitude toward the fourth marriage of Leo VI. On Nicholas' role in the affair of the tetragamia, see: P. Karlin-Hayter, *Le synode à Constantinople de 886 à 912 et le rôle de Nicolas le Mystique dans l'affaire de la tétragamie*, JÖB 19 (1970) p. 59-101; S. Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI (886–912). Politics and People*, Leiden – New York – Köln 1997, p. 156; G. Dagron, *Kościół i państwo (połowa IX – koniec X wieku*, in: *Historia chrześcijaństwa. Religia. Kultura. Polityka*, v. 4: *Biskupi, mnisi i cesarze 610–1054*, tr. M. Żurowska – G. Majcher – A. Kuryś – J.M. Kłoczowski – M. Kurkowska, ed. G. Dagron – P. Riché – A. Vauchez, Polish ed. A. Romaniuk, Warszawa 1999, p. 163-169. Neither the circumstances nor the exact date of Nicholas' reinstatement to the position of patriarch are known. However, there seem to be indications that this happened while Leo VI was still alive, which would suggest that he and the emperor reached an agreement. Cf. I. Bozhilov, *Car Simeon Veliki: zlatnijat vek na Srednovekovna Bulgarija*, Sofija 1983, p. 102; Dagron, *Kościół*, p. 166. On the career of Nicholas Mystikos, see J.Ch. Konstantinides, *Nikolaos A ho Mistikos (ca. 852-925) patriarches Konstantinupoleos (901-907, 912-925)*, Athenes 1967; R.J.H. Jenkins, *A Note on the Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus*, in: R.J.H. Jenkins, *Studies on Byzantine History of the 9th and 10th Centuries*, London 1970, art. V, p. 145-147; L.G. Westerink, *Introduction*, in: Nicholas I Patriarch of Constanti-

Twenty-six of his letters have been preserved³. They were written in a period when Nicholas held his patriarchal office for the second time, amid the Byzantine-Bulgarian conflict⁴. During the early part of this period (May/June 913-February 914), Nicholas headed the regency council, which ruled on behalf of the minor Constantine VII (he still held this position for a short time in late 918 and early 919, along with the magister Stephen). Mystikos was entrusted with the resolution of the first phase of the Byzantine-Bulgarian conflict. It seems that his later letters to Simeon were inspired, on the one hand, by a sense of shared responsibility – as head of the Constantinopolitan Church – for the fate of the state, and, on the other hand, by a purely personal obligation to conclude the matter he was trying to settle during his time as regent of Constantine VII. In the letters addressed to Simeon, Nicholas presented himself as an arbitrator, an intermediary between the Bulgarian ruler and the Constantinopolitan court, and even in some of them, as a representative of the Bulgarian ruler's interests⁵. Per-

nople, *Letters*, tr. R.J.H. Jenkins – L.G. Westerink, Washington 1973, p. XV-XXVII; V. Stanković, *Carigradski patrijarsi i carevi makedonske dinastije*, Beograd 2003, p. 87-112.

³ The so-called Bulgarian *dossier* of Nicholas Mystikos contains letters to Simeon [Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus patriarch, *Epistula*, 3, May 912/July 913; 5, early July 913; 6, July/August 913; 7, July/August 913; 8, summer/autumn 914; 9, late August/early September 917; 10, early 918; 11, winter 918/919; 14, between July 9 and early August 920; 15, August/September 920; 16, after December 17, 920 and before February 921; 17, February 921?; 18, spring/summer 921; 19, spring/summer 921; 20, summer 921; 21, between summer 921 and the end of 922; 22, between summer 921 and the end of 922; 23, 922; 24, 922/ June 923; 25, 922/ June 923; 26, 922/ June 923; 27, 922/ June 923; 28, June 922/June 923; 29, 923/924; 30, right after November 924; 31, January/April 925], as well as to the Archbishop of Bulgaria (4, May 912/July 91; 12, winter 918/919) and *To the Chief Man of Simeon* – 13, winter 918/919. Chronology of letters based on Jenkins – Westerink's edition (with a correction regarding Letter VIII).

⁴ On Bulgarian-Byzantine relations in the era of Nicholas Mystikos' correspondence with Simeon, see M.J. Leszka, *Symeon I Wielki a Bizancjum Z dziejów stosunków bułgarsko-bizantyńskich w latach 893–927*, Byzantina Lodziensia 15, Łódź 2013, p. 117-233 (additional literature there).

⁵ This position is visible, for example, in Letter IX (Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Epistula* 9, p. 58-64) in which Nicholas explains that he did not know about the military expedition that the Byzantines organized against Simeon. He mentions his intervention at the court and his resentment that he had not participated in the meeting where the decision was made to take military action against the Bulgarians. At the same time, he makes an attempt to justify it by stating that the mobilization of the army was provoked by the Bulgarian side, and its purpose was to ensure the security of the empire, not to strike a blow against the Bulgarians.

haps this was just a measure calculated at gaining Simeon's trust and sympathy for himself and, by extension, the cause he represented. As Nicholas grew older, he may have been driven by guilt for his failure to fulfill the terms of the 913 agreement⁶.

The goal of Nicholas' correspondence was to persuade Simeon to end hostilities and make peace with Byzantium. For this purpose, he employed various methods and resorted to a variety of arguments⁷. He stressed the horror and tragic consequences of war, and contrasted them with the virtues of peace. On the one hand, he portrayed Simeon as a good Christian ruler⁸ and pointed out the qualities that characterized him as such, while, on the other hand, he condemned his unworthy, impious behavior. This was meant to influence the Bulgarian ruler, to shock him and open him to a peaceful settlement of the Byzantine conflict. It is worth noting that the Patriarch of Constantinople corresponded with a man who was not only a politician and a leader, but also a person well versed in matters of religion. In his youth, Simeon spent nearly a decade in the Byzantine capital, where he studied and became a monk. He continued to be one until he seized the Bulgarian

⁶ On the nature of the relationship between Nicholas Mystikos and Simeon, see M.J. Leszka, *Mikołaj Mistyk, patriarcha Konstantynopola w świetle korespondencji z Symeonem, władcą Bułgarii*, "Balcanica Posnaniensia" 18 (2011) p. 23-33 (additional literature there).

⁷ On the argumentation used by Nicholas Mystikos, see, e.g.: D. Angelov, *Metody vizantijskoj diplomatii v odnoszenijakh s Bolgarijej po danym pisem konstantinopolskogo patriarkha Nikolaja Mistika*, "Voprosy Istorii Slavjan" 1 (1963) p. 60-69; M.J. Leszka, *Wizerunek władców pierwszego państwa bułgarskiego w bizantyńskich źródłach pisanych (VIII-pierwsza połowa XII wieku)*, *Byzantina Lodziensia* 7, Łódź 2003, p. 100-111; P. Angelov, *Religiozni argumenti v korespondencijata na car Simeon*, in: *Simeonova B'lgarija v istorijata na evropejskija jugoiztok: 1100 godini ot bitkata pri Akheloj*, v. 1, ed. A. Nikolov – N. Ky'nev, Sofija 2018, p. 206-213.

⁸ On the ideology of power in Byzantium, see, e.g.: K.G. Pitsakis, *Sainteté et empire. A propos de la sainteté impériale: forms de sainteté 'd'office' et de sainteté collective dans l'empire d'Orient*, "Byzantinistica" 3 (2002) p. 155-227; G. Dagron, *Emperor and Priest. The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, tr. J. Birrel, Cambridge 2003, esp. p. 13-53; D. Feissel, *Cesarz i administracja cesarska*, in: *Świat Bizancjum*, v. 1: *Cesarstwo wschodniorzymskie 330-641*, ed. C. Morrisson, tr. A. Graboń, Kraków 2007, p. 97-109; on the image of Symeon I in the Byzantine written sources, e.g.: P. Angelov, *B'lgarija i b'lgarije v predstavite na vizantijskite*, Sofija 1999, p. 182-199; Leszka, *Wizerunek*, s. 89-123; K. Marinow, *In the Shackles of the Evil One The Portrayal of Tsar Symeon I the Great (893–927) in the Oration On the treaty with the Bulgarians*, "Studia Ceranea" 1 (2011) p. 157-190.

throne in 893⁹. Nicholas Mystikos knew this and could use it in when crafting his polemic.

The arguments employed by Nicholas Mystikos include direct and indirect references to the cardinal virtues¹⁰ that the Bulgarian ruler had or should have. The patriarch pointed out that virtue comes from God; man, created to the image of God, has the ability to imitate God's virtue, which helps him overcome evil¹¹. Describing the Bulgarian ruler, the patriarch primarily referred to temperance and prudence. I will reflect on these two qualities, however, without ambition to exhaust the subject. Nicholas did not refer directly to the virtue of fortitude, which is not particularly surprising if one considers its military context. Nicholas Mystikos, a student of Photius, was probably familiar with his master's views on the matter. In a letter to Boris Mikhail – a Bulgarian ruler – Photius wrote:

It is not so much his bravery in war as his goodwill and kindheartedness toward his subjects that enhances and saves the ruler. For many rulers, though they had conquered enemies in war were destroyed by their own people because of their cruelty; and many who had run the risk of being captured by their enemies were saved by their subjects, who preferred the safety of their ruler to their own life¹².

⁹ On Simeon's youth and education, see: Kh. Trendafilov, *Mladostta na car Simeon*, Sofija 2010, p. 19-49; Leszka, *Symeon I Wielki*, p. 25-38.

¹⁰ On the understanding of the cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude) in Byzantium, see, e.g.: G. Zografidis, *Ethics, Byzantine*, in: *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy. Philosophy between 500 and 1500*, ed. H. Lagerlund, Heidelberg – London – New York 2011, p. 326-327 (additional literature there).

¹¹ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 21, p. 140; cf. 8, p. 52 (this section notes that Simeon was distinguished by God with prudence, wisdom, kindness and honesty).

¹² Photius, *Ep.* 1, in: *Photii Patriarchae Constantinopolitani Epistulae et Amphilochia*, rec. B. Laurdas – L.G. Westerink, v. 1, Leipzig 1983, p. 28, tr. D. Stratoudaki White – J.R. Berrigan Jr, *The Patriarch Photios of Constantinople to Khan Boris of Bulgaria*, Brookline 1982, p. 66-67. For a more extensive discussion of this letter from Photius, see, e.g.: B. Angelov, *Poslanie patriarcha Fotija bolgarskomu knjazju Borisu*, "Byzantinobulgarica" 6 (1980) p. 45-50; V. Gjuzelev, *Photius' Constantinople Model of a Ruler Newly Converted to Christianity*, "Bulgarian Historical Review" 15/3 (1987) p. 34-42; L. Simeonova, *Vizantijskata koncepcija za izkustvoto da se upravljava spored Fotievoto poslanie do kniaz Boris*, "Problemi na kulturata" 4 (1988) p. 91-104; L. Simeonova, *Diplomacy of the Letter and the Cross. Photios, Bulgaria and the Papacy 860s-880s*, Amsterdam 1998, p. 112-156; Leszka, *Wizerunek*, p. 85-87.

Leaving aside whether Nicholas Mystikos concurred with this argument or not, to say that the ruler ought to be characterized by fortitude was certainly out of place in the era of Simeon's conflict with Byzantium. Moreover, justice is also a relatively rare thread in the narrative of the Constantinopolitan Patriarch¹³.

1. Temperance

In his letters to Simeon, Nicholas Mystikos refers to the virtue of temperance, although without using the specific term. The most vivid example of this reference seems to be the paragraph in Letter XIV, which describes Simeon as someone "who is above sensual pleasures, who stints his belly like a hermit on the mountains, who tastes no wine, who differs from those who profess to live out of the world in nothing except in his government of the rule granted to him by God"¹⁴. It appears that the patriarch is not so much postulating such behavior of Simeon, but portraying the actual lifestyle of the Bulgarian ruler, who cultivated the virtue of temperance and applied it to his everyday life. This attitude of Simeon was probably linked to the aforementioned fact that before becoming the Bulgarian ruler, he had been a monk. As illustrated in Nicholas' letter, he retained these habits after 893. The belief that Simeon had a fondness for monastic life and monks, in general, is evoked in the patriarch's descriptions of the horrors of war, where a recurring motif are destroyed monasteries and murdered monks and nuns¹⁵. It reveals Nicholas' hope that this element could influence the Bulgarian ruler.

In his letters to Simeon, the Patriarch of Constantinople explores the theme of power, which is given to man by God to make him an example to his subjects. He should use it with temperance, restraining his passions and not harming his subjects¹⁶.

¹³ Nicholas Mystikos applies this quality to both the Bulgarian ruler (e.g. Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 5, p. 29 in the context of accusing Simeon of seeking to usurp the throne; 14, p. 94), and the Byzantine emperor (Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 31, p. 210)

¹⁴ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 14, p. 94 (tr. p. 95); cf. Photius, *Ep.* 1, p. 28.

¹⁵ E.g. Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 14, p. 96; 24, p. 170; 26, p. 182. I elaborated on this thread in the text: M.J. Leszka, *Obraz wojny w Listach Mikołaja Mistyka do Symeona, władcy bułgarskiego*, „Slavia Antiqua” 47 (2006) p. 9-16.

¹⁶ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 3, p. 18.

Nicholas Mystikos touches on temperance relatively often in the area of Simeon's political aspirations. One of the most significant themes addressed by the patriarch in this context is Simeon's assertion of his right to rule in the Byzantine Empire. It is exemplified in Letter XIX, in which Nicholas Mystikos wrote that Simeon should not demand that the Byzantine emperor (Romanos Lekapenos) resign from the throne and offer Simeon the rule of the empire. The patriarch clearly indicated that this was not possible. At the same time, he suggested that the Bulgarian ruler make his demands feasible, which he defines as stipulations that could benefit the Bulgarians and would not bring "intolerable loss"¹⁷ to the Byzantines.

In this context, the paragraph of Letter XXI is particularly clear and unambiguous. There the patriarch urges Simeon "to be content with the lordship and honor granted to you by God from the beginning and received from your fathers, and not to transgress the boundaries which your fathers set, or the peace between Bulgarians and Romans that was agreed upon when you recognized Christ Who is God"¹⁸. The patriarch notes that he should exercise temperance in his ambitions, because failing to do so would mean going against God, who defined the nature of the relationship between Bulgarians and Byzantines when they adopted Christianity. Modifying it would serve the devil and would not please God. Preservation of the established order would guarantee "sacred peace" between Bulgarians and Byzantines.

In some of his letters, the patriarch pointed to Simeon's lack of culpability in starting the armed conflict with Byzantium, claiming that an evil spirit and corrupt state dignitaries were behind the war, and that the ruler himself was reasonable and good. However, over time, Nicholas spoke very clearly about Simeon's responsibility for continuing the war as a consequence of his intemperance – his desire to rule over the Byzantine empire¹⁹. The closer it got to 925, the more crystalized this view became,

¹⁷ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 19, p. 128 (tr. p. 129). In this context, it is worth noting a passage from Letter XVIII, where Nicholas Mystikos writes that Simeon considered his demands if not moderate, then at least feasible; the ruler claimed – surely with a dose of irony – that he was not demanding that the dead Bulgarians be resurrected (Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 18, p. 122).

¹⁸ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 21, p. 148 (tr. p. 149).

¹⁹ In addition to the paragraph from Letter XXI indicated above, see: Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 5; 18, p. 126; 19, p. 128; 25, p. 178; 27, p. 190; cf. F.E. Wozniak, *The Metaphysics of Byzantine Diplomacy in the Relations of the Byzantines and Bulgarians 880's – 920's*, GOTR 21 (1976) p. 292-293, 295. In a letter, probably dating from 914, he warned Simeon against losing his own soul, even if he satisfied his ambitions. (Nicolaus

revealing increasing pessimism of the capital bishop as to the effectiveness of his own influence over Simeon.

2. Prudence

Nicholas Mystikos refers to prudence in building a positive image of Simeon. He repeatedly states that the Bulgarian ruler is a prudent man, able to discern between good and evil. As the patriarch writes, God bestowed this virtue on the Bulgarian tsar²⁰. In Letter V, Nicholas claims that Simeon's prudence helped him lament the "wrongful expedition"²¹, which was abhorred by God. This passage suggests that prudence was not a virtue that was permanently associated with Simeon. Indeed, Nicholas Mystikos adds that despite his sorrow over the aforementioned expedition (in other words, understanding that it was evil in the eyes of God), the ruler prepares a new one, according to the patriarch, even more abhorred by God, and aimed at "an infant and an orphan, the son of an emperor", "an innocent who has done you no harm whatsoever"²².

When the Patriarch of Constantinople writes about the fighting between the Bulgarians and Byzantines²³, he indicates that Simeon's prudence helped him see that the blame for the situation rested both on the Byzantine and the Bulgarian side. Nicholas emphasizes that he did not have to explain this to the ruler, because Simeon had realized it himself.

In Letter XIX, Nicholas Mystikos implies that Simeon would be a prudent person if he restored the peace between the Bulgarians and Byzan-

I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 8, p. 48). Incidentally, in Letter XII, the patriarch described Simeon's soul as virtuous (Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 12, p. 86).

²⁰ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 21, p. 50; in Letter X, Simeon's prudence is even referred to as "perfect" (Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 10, p. 70).

²¹ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 5, p. 26 (tr. p. 27). This probably refers to the Bulgarian Byzantine War of 894-896. Cf. *Testimonia najdawniejszych dziejów Słowian*. Seria grecka 3, ed. A. Brzóstkowska – W. Swoboda, Warszawa 1995, s. 364. For more on the war, see Bozhilov, *Car Simeon*, s. 88-94; D. Angelov – S. Kashev – B. Cholpanov, *B'lgarska voenna istorija ot antichnostta do vtorata chetv'rt na X v.*, Sofija 1983, p. 255-263; Leszka, *Symeon I Wielki*, p. 67-98.

²² Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 5, p. 26 (tr. p. 27).

²³ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 9, p. 56. Cf. *Testimonia*, p. 366. It is unclear to which battle he is referring. Most likely, Nicholas Mystikos means the Bulgarian victory in the Battle of Achelous (August 917). On this battle, e.g.: Leszka, *Symeon I Wielki*, p. 177-180; *Simeonova B'lgarija, passim*.

tines that was given to them “by Christ, our God and Savior”²⁴. By doing so, he would end the Christian bloodshed and enmity between Christians, for which the devil was responsible. Prudence means acting in accordance with God’s will and fighting the Evil One.

Furthermore, in Letter XIV, the Patriarch of Constantinople stresses that Simeon’s prudence, combined with his love for God, allowed the Bulgarians to achieve great glory²⁵. He continues this theme in Letter XXIX, in which he mentions that prudence was one of the reasons Simeon enjoyed the highest admiration of all the Bulgarian rulers²⁶.

I would like to end these brief reflections with several conclusions. Appeals to temperance and prudence were clearly means of influencing Simeon to abandon military action and take steps that would bring peace.

As for temperance, the Constantinopolitan pastor certainly appreciated that Simeon led an austere lifestyle, which he had practiced since he became a monk at a young age. This unquestionably set him apart from other rulers. For Nicholas, however, what mattered more was the political layer of Simeon’s temperance, or rather the lack of this virtue. In his letters, Nicholas repeatedly pointed out the Bulgarian ruler’s driving ambition, expressed in his appetite for the throne in Constantinople.

Prudence, according to the patriarch, is a tool for judging between good and evil. It is the foundation for the proper management of both oneself and, in the case of a ruler, the state. Ultimately, it brings great fame to both the ruler and the entire state. Prudence is not a permanent quality of the ruler, or more broadly, of a man who takes actions that he previously considered inappropriate.

It seems that for Nicholas Mystikos, the primary criterion for recognizing Simeon as a temperate and prudent man were his actions in the political sphere and whether they were aligned with Byzantine interests. It is not particularly surprising if we bear in mind that while the correspondence was penned by an ecclesiastical hierarch who repeatedly employed religious arguments, its purpose was entirely political. Its author may have tried to seem impartial, but the fact remains that he represented

²⁴ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 19, p. 128.

²⁵ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 14, p. 94.

²⁶ Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 29, p. 200; this thread also appears in earlier letters, such as Letter VI (Nicolaus I Constantinopolitanus, *Ep.* 6, p. 40).

Byzantine interests, and this was the lens through which he viewed the Bulgarian ruler.

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(summary)

Between 912-925, Nicholas Mystikos, Patriarch of Constantinople maintained a correspondence with Simeon, ruler of Bulgaria. The goal of Nicholas' correspondence was to persuade Simeon to end hostilities and make peace with Byzantium. For this purpose, he employed various methods and resorted to a variety of arguments. Appeals to temperance and prudence were clearly means of influencing Simeon to abandon military action and take steps that would bring peace. It seems that for Nicholas Mystikos, the primary criterion for recognizing Simeon as a temperate and prudent man were his actions in the political sphere and whether they were aligned with Byzantine interests.

Keywords: Nicholas Mystikos; Simeon I the Great; Byzantium; Bulgaria; temperance; prudence

Umiarkowanie i roztropność Symeona, władcy bułgarskiego, w listach Mikołaja Mistyka, patriarchy Konstantynopola. Kilka uwag

(streszczenie)

W latach 912-925 Mikołaj Mistyk, patriarcha Konstantynopola, prowadził korespondencję z Symeonem, władcą Bułgarii. Jej celem było nakłonienie Symeona do zakończenia działań wojennych i zawarcia pokoju z Bizancjum. By ten cel osiągnąć, Mikołaj Mistyk miał się różnych metod i sięgał po różnorodne argumenty. Odwoływanie się patriarchy do umiaru i roztropności było jednym z środków wpływu na Symeona, by ten zaniechał działań militarnych, a podjął takie, które doprowadziłyby do zawarcia pokoju. Dla Mikołaja Mistyka podstawowym kryterium uznania Symeona za człowieka kierującego się w swoim życiu m.in. cnotami umiarkowania i roztropności było to, czy jego działania w sferze politycznej były zgodne z bizantyńskimi interesami.

Słowa kluczowe: Mikołaj Mistyk; Symeon I Wielki; Bizancjum; Bułgaria; umiarkowanie; roztropność

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