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**Jovanka Kalić**

*Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts  
Belgrade*

## Information about Belgrade in Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus

**Abstract:** The paper looks at two sets of data provided by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus' *De administrando imperio*, one concerning information about Belgrade in the context of Serbian settlement in the Byzantine Empire under Heraclius, the other Belgrade itself.

**Keywords:** Belgrade, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, Serbian settlement in Byzantium,

The exceptionally valuable writings of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus have long been known to Serbian scholarship. Evidence suggesting the emperor's earliest Serbian readers, even if only through excerpts or in other languages, takes us, according to one hypothesis, as far back as the late seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Since then Constantine Porphyrogenitus has not ceased attracting scholarly attention, in accordance, of course, with times and the development of historical methods. His capital work *De administrando imperio* (The Book on Peoples) has become the basis of our knowledge of the early history of the Serbs in the Balkans. Among the abundance of data it contains new discoveries are constantly made, especially if one looks at the wider picture of Byzantine politics, neighbouring regions and nearby lands. On this occasion, we shall draw attention to only two sets of data, one well-known in scholarship, the other neglected. Both have a broader significance.

The first set of data has come to occupy a privileged place in historiography: Porphyrogenitus' account of Serbian settlement in the territory of the Byzantine Empire under emperor Heraclius in the early seventh century. With the emperor's consent, the Serbs – Constantine Porphyrogenitus claims – first settled in the theme of Thessalonica, in Servia. At some later point they chose to return to their native land but, having crossed the Danube, regretted their decision and, through the *strategos* (military governor) of Belgrade, appealed to

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<sup>1</sup> N. Radojčić, "Proučavanje spisa Konstantina VII Porfirogenita u srpskoj istoriografiji", *ZRVI* 6 (1960), 1–2.

emperor Heraclius to allot them some other lands for settlement.<sup>2</sup> Every single aspect of this account has been carefully examined over and over again (its essential meaning, the settlers' movements, the issue of a *strategos* in Belgrade, the name of the city, etc.).<sup>3</sup> It basically concerns the earliest history of Belgrade, the presence of Serbs in the area of ancient Singidunum, which raises the questions surrounding Slav settlement in the Balkans and the role of the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers in the process. This is a topic that leads us to a critical period, one that transformed the Balkan landscape, with late Roman settlements, cities in particular, disappearing, and settlements of a new society rising. Viewed in this way, the fate of Belgrade ceases being merely the history of a city.<sup>4</sup> An important contribution to the efforts to sketch the outlines of this process has lately been made by archaeology, exploring the formative period of the oldest Slav settlement on the site of Belgrade. In that way the accuracy of Constantine Porphyrogenitus' information can be proved or disproved, its chronology in particular. The excavations conducted so far have revealed the remains of a Slav settlement in the so-called Lower Town of Belgrade. Most researchers have dated it to the ninth century.<sup>5</sup> Of course, further investigations are necessary.

The other set of data survives in Chapter 40 of *The Book on Peoples*. It did not go unnoticed by K. Jireček, but has not since received due attention in Serbian historiography.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 40 of the emperor's writing is devoted to the settlement of Hungarians (Turks) in the Pannonian Plain or, as he put it in his text, "in the land

<sup>2</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus *De administrando imperio*, ed. G. Moravcsik, transl. R. J. H. Jenkins [hereafter DAI], 2nd rev. ed. (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection, 1967), 152.

<sup>3</sup> For main interpretations and overviews of the earlier literature see F. Barišić, "Vizantijski Singidunum", *ZRVI* 3 (1955), 1–14; B. Ferjančić, ed., *Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije*, vol. II (Belgrade: Vizantološki institut SANU, 1959), 49; J. Kalić Mijušković, *Beograd u srednjem veku* (Belgrade: SKZ, 1967), 26–27; Lj. Maksimović, "Severni Ilirik u VI veku", *ZRVI* 19 (1980), 17–57, and others.

<sup>4</sup> J. Kalić, "Neueste Ergebnisse der historischen Forschung zur Landnahme der Slaven auf dem Balkan", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 33 (1985), 375–377.

<sup>5</sup> J. Kovačević, "Arheološki prilog preciziranju hronologije slovenskog naseljavanja Balkana", in *Predslavenski etnički elementi na Balkanu u etnogenezi Južnih Slavena*, ed. A. Benac (Sarajevo: Centar za balkanološka ispitivanja ANUBiH, 1969), 65; G. Marjanović Vujović, "Slavic Belgrade", *Balcanoslavica* 2 (1973), 9–15; G. Marjanović Vujović, "Slavenski Beograd", in *Istorija Beograda I* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1974), 292–295; G. Marjanović Vujović, "Najstarije slovensko naselje u Beogradu", *Godišnjak grada Beograda* 25 (1978), 7–16; M. Popović, *Beogradska tvrđava* (Belgrade: Arheološki institut, 1982), 38–40.

<sup>6</sup> K. Jireček, "Hrišćanski elemenat u topografskoj nomenklaturi balkanskih zemalja", *Zbornik Konstantina Jirečeka*, vol. I (Belgrade: SANU, 1959), 521. This set of data was not included in vol. II of *Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije*.

where they *now* live”.<sup>7</sup> In describing the area of their settlement, the author uses known concepts or clear geographical reference points. There are – the writers says – ancient monuments (landmarks), above all the bridge of emperor Trajan, at which point “Turkey” begins, i.e. the land of the newly-settled Hungarian tribes; then, at a distance of three days (walk) from there is Belgrade and, in it, “the *pyrgos* of the holy and great emperor Constantine”. Then, at a distance of two days’ river journey upstream from Belgrade is Sirmium and beyond it lies Great Moravia.<sup>8</sup> The areas of “Turkey”, he says, are *now* called after the rivers that flow through them: the Tamiš/Timiș, the Tutis, the Maros/Mureș, the Karaš/Caraș and the Tisa/Tisza. There follows a list of neighbours – in the east, Bulgarians are separated from Turks by the river Istros, also called Danube, to the north are Pechenegs, to the west Franks, and to the south Croats.<sup>9</sup> Chapter 40 ends with an account of the internal situation of the Hungarian tribes and the genealogy of the ruling family.<sup>10</sup>

It is obvious that smaller textual units were merged into a single chapter here, as was done elsewhere in the emperor’s text. The multiple chronological and thematic layers of this source require that the structure of the section containing information about Belgrade be analysed first. This leads us to the question of the genesis of the text.

It is well known by now that emperor Constantine VII had several assistants preparing material for him to use in individual chapters. *The Book on Peoples* is in fact a compilation from various written sources (reports by provincial and other officials, reports by imperial envoys, observations about people, events and, especially, neighbours, all of these having been accumulated in Constantinople). These different units can usually be recognized by the use of typical introductory formulas (*ὅτι ἰστέον ὅτι*) announcing a new set of data.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes it is only an intratextual analysis that makes it possible to distinguish between these different units. The analysis of the text of Chapter 40 requires the use of both methods along with a comparative examination of other parts of the book.

Chapter 40 was put together in the same way as most of the other chapters. Various sources were used, earlier and later, the latter including Hungar-

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<sup>7</sup> DAI c. 40.25–27.

<sup>8</sup> DAI c. 40.27–33.

<sup>9</sup> DAI c. 40.35–40. G. Moravcsik, *Áz Arpád-köri Magyar történet bizánci forrásai* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984), 48.

<sup>10</sup> DAI, c. 40. 41–68.

<sup>11</sup> J. B. Bury, “The Treatise *De administrando imperio*”, BZ 15 (1906), 524 ff.; *Constantine Porphyrogenitus De administrando imperio: Commentary*, vol. II, ed. R. J. H. Jenkins (London: Athlone Press, 1962), passim; *Vizantijski izvori*, vol. II, 3; B. Ferjančić, “Struktura 30. glave spisa *De administrando imperio*”, ZRVI 18 (1978), 69–79; Lj. Maksimović, “Struktura spisa *De administrando imperio*”, ZRVI 21 (1982), 25–26.

ian ones. In the second part of Chapter 40 this is quite clear even at first sight, given that the abovementioned opening formulas occur as many as five times.<sup>12</sup> The segment containing references to Belgrade is fitted into a text that lacks such formulas, but its being a separate unit is suggested by some other details. It describes the geographical situation at the time of writing. Firstly, the text expressly states that it is the land where Hungarians “*now live*”. Secondly, the areas where they live are “*now*” called after the rivers that flow through them. This points clearly enough to the tenth century. Furthermore, the use of the present tense makes this geographical description conspicuously different from the previous part of the text.

The writer cites three major points by which the empire marked its border to the north and the settlers: Trajan’s bridge, Belgrade and Sirmium. Leaving aside all other meanings of this particular choice, we call attention to the accuracy of the topographical data in that section. It is in fact a feature of this work in general. Its geographical data as a rule are reliable, of course, depending on the quality of the information used and the period it refers to, as observed long ago by both foreign and Serbian researches. In this case, the sources of this accuracy may be identified more closely.

To do that, we should compare the text on Belgrade in Chapter 40 with the text of Chapter 42. Chapter 42 provides a geographical description that leads the reader from Thessalonica to the Danube, and then towards areas around the Black Sea, to the city of Sarkel and the Caucasus.<sup>13</sup> In this brilliant description we come across Belgrade again. From Thessalonica to the Danube, where Belgrade sits, it takes eight days, travelling at one’s leisure. Turks (Hungarians), the writer says, live on the other side of the Danube, in Moravia, but also on this side, between the Danube and Sava rivers.<sup>14</sup> There follows a description of the lands and cities in the area between the lower Danube valley and Sarkel, including the distances between some places and distinctive features of the landscapes. The compilers had in front of them an itinerary which included the routes from Thessalonica to the Danube.<sup>15</sup> One led to Belgrade, the other towards Dorostol and the border with the Pechenegs.

In both sections the writer used the contemporary name for Belgrade. It is known to be accurate because it occurs in other ninth- and tenth-century

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<sup>12</sup> DAI c. 40.51–66.

<sup>13</sup> DAI c. 42.1–110.

<sup>14</sup> DAI c. 42.15–20.

<sup>15</sup> Bury, “The Treatise *De administrando imperii*”, 568; C. A. Macartney, *The Magyars in the Ninth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1930; 1968), 143; DAI, II, 153–154; Konstantin Bagrianorodnyi, *Ob upravlenii Imperiei*, eds. G. G. Litavrin and A. P. Novoseltseva (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), 400.

sources as well.<sup>16</sup> All this leads to the conclusion that Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his assistants had at their disposal the data from an anonymous tenth-century itinerary.

Let us return to the basic content of the text. In the tenth century there obviously was in Belgrade a *pyrgos* (*stup* in medieval Serbian sources) of the “*holy and great emperor Constantine*”. The manner in which individual emperors are described in Porphyrogenitus’ text leaves no room for doubts about their identity. Constantine I the Great (r. 306–337) is mentioned several times, and always as “great” or “holy” or both.<sup>17</sup> There was no mistake here. Consequently, in Porphyrogenitus’ times there was in Belgrade a *pyrgos* named after Constantine I the Great, most likely because he himself had set it up. Judging by the medieval concept of a *pyrgos*, this was an important tall structure which could be either a free standing one or a complex of structures within the city walls.<sup>18</sup> It cannot be established at present what earlier sources might have been used by the authors of the tenth-century itinerary.

Given that the *pyrgos* is the only structure in Belgrade mentioned in Porphyrogenitus’ text and that the city itself is on a commanding location, it is likely that in the tenth century the *pyrgos* was still very prominent by its size and importance. The text gives us no reason to make assumptions about the structure’s possible renovations, but such an undertaking should not be ruled out. If we look at this piece of information in the context of the historical area of fourth-century Roman Singidunum, i.e. Belgrade, taking into account its geographical position and the inherited situation, it seems likely that the *pyrgos* sat in the dominant, north-western area of the so-called Upper Town. It is believed that this area had also been the focus of the building activity of emperor Justinian I (r. 527–565).<sup>19</sup> Later on the Serbs built a major element of city defences – Nebojša *Stup* (tower) – on the site.<sup>20</sup> Whether the focus on this particular site rested on the structure of emperor Constantine I the Great or the *pyrgos* named after him should be looked for elsewhere will probably be established by archaeology unless all earlier traces have been effaced by subsequent human activity in this case too. Either way, it is important that the builder of the capital on the Bosphorus was also building in Singidunum. Settling Slavs found his structure still standing. It came to symbolize a fading age.

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<sup>16</sup> Kalić Mijušković, *Beograd u srednjem veku*, 27, 344.

<sup>17</sup> DAI c. 13.49; 13.78; 13.141 ff.

<sup>18</sup> J. Kalić “Byzanz und die mittelalterlichen Städte in Serbien”, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32 (1982), 599–603.

<sup>19</sup> Popović, *Beogradska tvrđava*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> J. Kalić, “Kula Nebojša u Beogradu”, *ZFF XV-1* (1985), 115–123.

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