The Image of Serbs during the Reign of Manuel I (1143-1180)

When Heraclius invited the Serbs and Croats to settle on the Balkans as the Empire’s federates, after the failed siege of Constantinople by the Avars and Slavs (626), he probably did not imagine that his actions would not only alter the balance of power in the Haemus Peninsula, they would also usher in a new sphere of Byzantine influence, one that would affect the South Slavs for centuries. From the seventh to the twelfth century the Empire managed to maintain its domination over the Serbs, one way or another. However, the Serbs would often attempt to disengage from Byzantine authority, despite the fact that their efforts were unsuccessful.\(^1\) The rise of Manuel I, the last powerful representative of the Komnenian dynasty, to the throne of Constantinople in 1143 coincided with an intensification in the struggle of the Serbs towards independence. Despite the fact that during his reign these attempts proved fruitless, the appearance of Stefan Nemanja\(^2\) at

\(^1\) See for instance A. Papageorgiou, «Βυζάντιο και Σέρβοι: το ζήτημα των εκστρατειών του Ιωάννη Β’ Κομνηνού εναντίον των Σέρβων», Εώα και Εσπέρια 8 (2008-2012), 353-367, where the question of John II Komnenos’ expeditions against the Serbs is examined.

the forefront of Serbian history was about to trigger the emergence of an independent Serbia, ruled by a dynasty which was founded by him and was destined within the span of two centuries to transform Serbia from Byzantium’s vassal state to an empire.

The first attempt at resisting Byzantine overlordship during the reign of Manuel I was made by Uroš, Vukan’s son or nephew. During his period in power (c. 1115 - c.1145?), Uroš tried to shape a foreign policy that was independent of Byzantium, a course which his successor, Uroš II (1145-1161), also tried to follow, but without success, since he was dethroned by Manuel and replaced first with Bello and then with Desa (1149-1166, Grand Zupan 1153-1155 and 1162-1166).

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3 He is mentioned for the first time by Anna Komnene as one the hostages Vukan surrendered to Alexios in 1094: Annae Comnenae, Alexias, ed. D. R. Reinsch – A. Kambylis, [CFHB 40/1 and 40/2), Berlin 2001, b. IX, ch. 10, p. 280b-12: ἐκεῖνος δ’ εἰσίθης τεθαρρηκὼς προσελήλυθε συνεπαγόμενος τούς τε συγγενείς καὶ ἐκκρίτους τῶν ζωντάνων καὶ προθυμώς ὀμήρους τοὺς αὐτοῦ ἀνεψιαδεῖς τῷ αὐτοκράτῳ παραδέδωκε, τὸν τε Οὐρεαὶν καλούμενον καὶ Στέφανον τὸν Βολκάνον καὶ ἐτέρους τὸν εἰκοσιὸν ἀριθμὸν ἀποπληρώντας.


5 Regarding Desa see Fine, Early Balkans, pp. 237-244, 298; Stephenson, Balkan Frontier, pp. 122-123, 244-245, 250, 266-267; M. Blagojević, «Srpske
John Kinnamos refers to appointment of Desa as Grand Zupan by Manuel in 1162: βασιλεὺς δὲ τὸν ὑστατὸν ἀδελφὸν μετάπεμπτον θέμενος, δὲ Δεσὲ μὲν ἐκαλεῖτο Δένδρας δὲ χώρας ἤρχεν, ἥ Ναισσὼ εὖ γειτόνων ἐστὶν εὐδαίμων καὶ πολυάνθρωπος, τὰ πιστὰ τε παρ᾽ αὐτοῦ λαβὼν ὅπως ἀνόθεντον αὐτῷ τὸ τῆς δουλείας σχῆμα ἐς τὸν πάντα τῆς ζωῆς φυλάξῃ αἰῶνα, πρὸς δὲ καὶ ώς παντάπασι Δένδρας Ῥωμαίως ὑπεκοστήσεται, ἣν καθάπερ ἐφη καρπιζόμενος ἦν, ἀρχιζουπάνον ἀνεῖπεν.6

In 1165 or 1166 Manuel dethroned Desa, replacing him with Stefan Nemanja. It should be noted that until recently many researchers, led by P. Magdalino and Averil Cameron, claimed that Desa and Nemanja were one and the same. However, as I have proved in one of my papers, they were two distinct individuals7. Despite the fact that Nemanja was Manuel’s personal choice, he was quick to exhibit his separatist

6 Kinnamos, p. 20415-21. The translation of the passage is by Ch.M. Brand, Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus by John Kinnamos, New York 1976, pp. 155-156 : The emperor caused to be summoned the last of the brothers, who was called Desa and ruled the region of Dendra, a prosperous and populous one near Naissos. After he [Manuel] had received pledges from him that for the whole period of his life he [Desa] would preserve pure the condition of obedience to him, and in addition that he would entirely abandon to the Romans Dendra, which as stated was fruitful, he [Manuel] named him grand župan.

tendencies. As early as 1171 he attempted to approach the Venetians and form an anti-Byzantine alliance, while in 1172 he offered his submission to Frederick Barbarossa. Nemanja’s actions backfired, as he was defeated by Manuel and was forced to take part in the triumphal procession organised by the emperor in Constantinople. Until the death of Manuel, Nemanja remained chained to the chariot of Byzantine suzerainty.

Within this framework of relations and attempts at mastery, Byzantine historians and orators make frequent references to the Serbs, offering us a glimpse of the image they perceived of them. Before we move on to the way the Serbs are drawn in Byzantine sources, we ought to make a few clarifications. The study of the image of the Serbs is part of a wider scholarly interest in the image of the “other”. The Byzantines form an image of the other, in this case the foreigner, in order to enhance their own image, their own reality as they perceive it. Furthermore, Byzantine historians, orators and poets, in other words the primary opinion-makers, tend to deal with the “others” in stereotypes, based on certain motifs. The non-Byzantine is first and foremost a “barbarian”, be he a Westerner, a Christian or an infidel, a stereotype from which the Serbs are also unable to get away. Nevertheless, despite the existence of recurring elements in the description of

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8 In 1176, Manuel’s armies were defeated at Myriokephalon in Asia Minor. This event led to the general collapse of his external policy and the creation of an anti-Byzantine alliance, with the participation of the German Empire, Venice and Hungary. See R.-J. Lilie, «Die Schlacht von Myriokephalon (1176). Auswirkungen auf das byzantinische Reich im ausgehendn 12. Jahrhundert», REB 35 (1977), 257–275, and P. Magadalino, The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143-1180, Cambridge 1993.

9 See below.
“others”, those descriptions do not lack originality in their characterizations, which allows us to form a clear picture of the way the Serbs were perceived during the period in question 10.

John Kinnamos has penned a detailed description of the wars of the Serbs and their Hungarian allies against Manuel, and is, along with Niketas Choniates, one of our key narrative sources in reconstructing the image of the Serbs during the period in question. For Kinnamos the fundamental characteristic of the Serbs was the submission of their župans and their dependence on Manuel. This subjection (δούλιον),

however, which manifested itself in the selection of the person to become Grand Zupan (*veliki župan*) being made by the emperor himself, was marked by a tendency to rebel and become independent. Manuel was quick to quash that tendency, with help from the cowardice of whoever was *veliki župan* at the time; the latter, realizing his weakness, would once again appeal to the emperor with a view to mending relations between them.\(^{11}\)

The most telling image provided by Kinnamos is that of the humbled Nemanja. Without mentioning him by name, which in my opinion is due to Kinnamos’ intention to belittle him even more, the historian paints a picture of a rash ruler whose heart, when he dared oppose the emperor, filled with awe and he tried to make amends. When Manuel refused, Nemanja offered to present himself in front of the emperor (which he eventually did) bareheaded, with arms uncovered as far as the elbows, barefoot, with a noose around his neck and holding a sword, which he proceeded to offer to the emperor along with his permission to do what Manuel saw fit. The latter was magnanimous enough to take pity on him and restore him to power.\(^{12}\) The aforementioned image aimed at highlighting the empire’s authority and grandeur by underlining the Serbian ruler’s insignificance.

The way in which Niketas Choniates depicts the Serbian rulers Desa and Nemanja is also of interest. According to Choniates, Desa was much more evil in 1165 than in the past, despite the fact that it was Manuel who had put him in power, and decided to move against the emperor. Desa’s malice

\(^{11}\) Kinnamos, p. 113\(^{9-16}, 204\(^{15-21}, 212\) \(^{18-23}, 213\(^{6-13}.\)

\(^{12}\) Kinnamos, p. 287\(^{11-288}.\)
transpires from the events that followed. Realizing his inability to face the emperor in battle, he sent an embassy to arrange a meeting. Desa, however, appeared before Manuel “escorted by a bodyguard fit for a great ruler” (δορυφορίας μετέχων σατραπικής), which led the emperor to refuse the truce. The Serbian ruler’s arrogance did not go unpunished, since after a while he was forced to swear “the most dreadful oaths” (φρικώδεσιν ὤρκοις) to Manuel, who ultimately sent him back. However, Choniates goes on to liken Desa to a chameleon, since as soon as he left the emperor he regretted the oaths he had taken, feeling anger and shame because he had given sworn assurances for things he did not want. Thus, donning the skin of a leopard, he said “my tongue has taken an oath, but my mind has not”. This graphic image contains an entire range of stereotypical qualities attributed to barbarians: arrogance, cowardice, and most of all the inability to remain true to an agreement.13

As for Stefan Nemanja, the founder of the Nemanjid dynasty, Niketas Choniates is harsh and scathing in his description of him, no doubt because he was aware of the Serbian ruler’s growth after the death of Manuel. Nemanja had more than his share of being brash and indolent (κακόσχολος), and he mistook cunning for wisdom. He was greedy and insatiable, wishing to acquire lands that did not belong to him. When news reached him of Manuel’s arrival, he hid in mountain caves which he sealed with rocks. Finally, his arrogance ebbed and he groveled at the emperor’s feet, begging for mercy. Once again, Manuel showed magnanimity, but at the same time he made sure to monitor his movements and bring him back to the straight and narrow, much like a shepherd does

13 Choniates, p. 136-137.
a sheep. And Nemanja, Choniates concludes, was afraid of Manuel like beasts fear the lion.\textsuperscript{14} Of course, this vivid description of Nemanja is due to the latter’s actions. Also, Choniates omits to state clearly that the Serbian župan was yet another of Manuel’s personal choices, as he is fully aware of the fact that Nemanja was responsible for that transformation of Serbia from Byzantium’s vassal state to an independent power. Only once is it implied that Nemanja was appointed \emph{veliki župan} by Manuel, when Choniates describes the Serbian ruler’s agony over being returned to power or not. Therefore, the image that one perceives for Nemanja, based on the writings of the foremost Greek historian of 1204, is similar to that for Desa, only more disparaging, precisely because of the different evolvement of the two men. It should also be pointed out that Choniates has a penchant for comparing Serbian rulers with members of the animal kingdom. Although images of sheep, beasts and leopards are not so rare in the works of Byzantine authors, the chameleon metaphor is interesting enough and also shows, if nothing else, the breadth of Choniates’ knowledge of zoology.

Apart from John Kinnamos and Niketas Choniates, Manuel could also rely on poets and court orators to promote his policies. Despite the fact that Stefan Nemanja played a key role in the emperor’s Serbian policy, it is noteworthy that neither Kinnamos nor the orators mention him by name. The sole exception, apart from Choniates, was Eustathios of Thessaloniki. Apparently this is due to the fact that Eustathios, just like Choniates, lived long enough to witness Nemanja’s rise. The learned archbishop also presents Nemanja as a coward trembling in the presence of the ever-magnanimous Manuel.

\footnote{Choniates, p. 158\textsuperscript{15}-159\textsuperscript{17}.}
Eustathios stresses Nemanja’s state of vassalage by using the term “slavery” frequently throughout his text. He too is keen on metaphors, likening Manuel to the sun and Nemanja to darkness, in order to highlight the emperor’s greatness as opposed to the insignificance of rebellious-prone Nemanja. Eustathios also emphasizes submission whenever he refers to the Serbs in general. In fact, he presents the Serbs as being content with their subjugation to Manuel and thinking their previous regime a worse kind of slavery.

The rest of Manuel’s court orators paint the Serbs in more or less similar colors. John Diogenes stresses “the barbarians’ lawlessness and infidelity” (τῶν βαρβάρων ἀθεσμον καὶ παράσπονδον) and so does Michael the Rhetor, who dedicates large parts of his speeches to the oath-breaking Serbs. Michael the Rhetor indulges in metaphors and similes, like most orators who frequent the imperial court. The Serbs are depicted as bowing their heads to the ground, kneeling with their arms open and shedding tears, fearful of the emperor’s wrath. The Serbs are barbarous, brash and arrogant. Michael analyzes the Serbs’ entire range of barbaric traits, noting that cowardice spawns bellicosity which in turn begets barbaric fury; the latter leads to battle, the outcome of

16 Eustathios of Thessaloniki, p. 352-10.
which is the opposite of what they expect\textsuperscript{21}. Cowardice is an inherent quality of the Serbian barbarians and leads them to defeat\textsuperscript{22}. Michael too is unable to avoid animal comparisons. Thus, he describes the Serbs crying and wailing in lamentation, while the voices of the men sound similar to those of oxen, of the women to those of goats and of the children to those of sheep.\textsuperscript{23} Finally, when they realize that no other salvation remains, they appeal to Manuel on their own, unarmed, without helmets, with their arms exposed as far as the elbows, without shield or sword\textsuperscript{24}. This image almost replicates that of the humiliated Nemanja, as described by John Kinnamos. I do not believe that one text has copied the other. The similarity is based on the fact that in reality the image of a humbled leader or a humbled army was exactly as described. That Nemanja, much like his army, was forced to present himself to the emperor in such a fashion is an indication of the magnitude of his defeat.

Before we conclude our survey of the ways in which the Serbs were perceived, it is necessary to go through the historical poems of Theodore Prodromos, a corpus rich in images. To Prodromos, as with every other Byzantine author, the Serbs are Byzantium’s subjects, indeed they are “thrice the slaves” (τρίδουλοι).\textsuperscript{25} It is for this reason that they cannot escape Byzantine suzerainty. Whenever they attempt something similar, they are crushed like the lion crushes the mosquito, like

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{21} Michael the Rhetor, p. 161\textsuperscript{2-5}.
\bibitem{22} Michael the Rhetor, p. σ. 161\textsuperscript{9-16}.
\bibitem{23} Michael the Rhetor, p. 147\textsuperscript{14-17}.
\bibitem{24} Michael the Rhetor, p. 149\textsuperscript{18-27}.
\bibitem{25} Theodoros Prodromos, Historische Gedichte, ed. W. Hörander, Wien 1974p. 354\textsuperscript{196-200}, 358\textsuperscript{327-330}.
\end{thebibliography}

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the hunter captures the hare, the deer, or the bear\textsuperscript{26}. Naturally, the lion was Manuel, while references to game allude to the emperor’s hunting prowess, a skill for which he was highly praised. In his other poems Prodromos deals with Desa, Uroš and their actions against the empire. The Serbian rulers are rebels, cowards, fools, brash, pleading with Manuel to restore them to power.\textsuperscript{27} In two of his poems Prodromos makes a pun on Uroš’ name: Οὐρείσις φόβῳ συνταλείς καὶ τοὺς μηροὺς οὐρῆσαι/ἄλλος ἐξ ἄλλου γέγονεν ἐκ τοῦ συμβεβηκότος/φυγας ὀρείτης οὐρητῆς ἐκ τῆς τοῦ φόβου μέθης,\textsuperscript{28} and μετὰ τῶν ὅλων οὐραν μου τάν τότε κενωθέντων/καὶ πᾶσαν ἑξεκένωσα τοῦ τύφου μου τὴν ὅλην.\textsuperscript{29} The play on words between the personal name Uroš and urine aims precisely at humiliating the Serbian ruler through the mirth that this word association would cause to Prodromos’ audience. One final, yet crucial element on which Prodromos insists is arrogance and how it is knocked down. Arrogance was like a mountain, but the mountain turned to dust; audacity, pomposity, vanity, hauteur, typhos (arrogance amounting to foolishness), all words that denote the same character flaw, are used by Prodromos to stress the emperor’s humility and the Serbian ruler’s superficiality.\textsuperscript{30}

To summarize, the image of the Serbs that emerges from the sources is that of a people with barbaric elements: rebellious, oath breaking, foolish, cowardly, arrogant. The absence of any positive traits is due to the conditions prevailing

\textsuperscript{26} Prodromos, p. 356\textsuperscript{254-281}.

\textsuperscript{27} Prodromos, p. 32\textsuperscript{271-33}, 34\textsuperscript{329-351}.

\textsuperscript{28} Recueil des Historiens des Croisades, Historiens Grecs, t. 2, Paris 1881, p. 76\textsuperscript{36-38}.

\textsuperscript{29} Prodromos, p. 46\textsuperscript{90-91}.

\textsuperscript{30} Prodromos, p. 44\textsuperscript{22-46}.
at the time. The Serbs were Byzantium’s subjects and owed allegiance to her. On the contrary, however, throughout Manuel’s reign they were trying, one way or another, to become independent. This arrogant attitude, as the Byzantines viewed it, could not go unpunished. Manuel was able to confound all their plans, thus gaining much praise from Byzantine writers. The ungrateful Serbs, however, are ridiculed for trying to throw off Byzantine suzerainty.

About the author

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