

Theorising the Iranian Ancestry of Bulgar(ian)s¹ (19th – 21st Century)

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Introduction

Bulgarians have several genealogical myths with noble protagonists, but these myths are more or less marginal. One of them is to be found in the late 12th century *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian and it reads, in brief, the following: three brothers, Scythians, with 30 thousand people left the valleys of Mount Imeon (Pamir) and after 60 or 65 days they were at the bank of the river of Tanais (Don); one of the brothers, named Bulgarios, crossed the river with 10 thousand men and marching towards Danube asked emperor Maurice to give his people land to settle; Maurice gave him Upper and Lower Moesia and Dacia, and they settled there as a Roman guard; and these Scythians were called by the Romans Bulgar(ian)s (Sources, 2002: 24). Works of modern historiography, which shaped the common knowledge of early Bulgarian history, underestimated it, relying instead on another one... What I want to stress is that such accounts are given meaning within myths of a ‘second degree’, produced to explain the origin according to the conventions of ‘scholarship’. This specific designing of collective self-cognition and self-identification is called sometimes, when a Durkheimian approach is employed, “ethnohistory” (as makes Daskalov, 1994: 27-35).

In the 1960s–1980s the scholarly myth read that the Bulgarian ethnos was built of Slavs, Bulgars (who were considered a relatively small Turkic horde which left a few traces in Bulgarian culture) and the remnants of Roman population (mostly descendants of Hellenised or Romanised Thracians), and that the process took the 8th – 10th centuries. Its *variants* permeated the official academic history (History, 1981), ‘high’ scholarship for celebratory use (e.g., Beshevliev, 1981)², ‘high’ popularisations (e.g., Beshevliev, 1984), artistic ‘transpositions’ (like L. Staikov’s 1981 film *Khan Asparukh*), school and media, marking some issues as indisputable: Bulgars were a Turkic people; the ethnos which was formed *then* and the modern Bulgarians are diachronically identical; the descendants of ancient Thracians, the Slavs and the Bulgars were three separate groups of population; only the first one was autochthonic. After 1989 these four ‘historemes’ were contested and all the contesters had reasons to claim that they have had forerunners. Loyalty to all but the first one is still inseparable from the *bon tone* in Bulgarian scholarship.

In brief, some versions of Bulgarian ethnogenesis were canonised, others for a long time existed in ‘pre-natal’ condition but recently rose and some remained tabooed. “Ethnohistory” is indeed “ethnobiography”, a “product of memory prone to its work” (Daskalov 1994: 35). Ethnobiographical versions compete for recognition.

A version accentuating on an/the Iranian legacy in Bulgarian identity seems to be the current champion in gaining popularity. In this paper I will try to trace its Bulgarian (pre)history and to explore the reasons for its (in)success.

¹ “Bulgar(ian)” refers to the ethnos which, according to the majority of scholars, was formed on the Balkans in the 8th – 10th centuries as a result of a symbiosis of three different ethno-cultural groups; it refers also to the contemporary Bulgarians, who preserved the function of this name as *self*-designation. Differentiation between “Bulgarian” and “Bulgar” was introduced by the 19th century scholarship, “Bulgar” was meant to designate one of the constituents. In Bulgarian language the word most commonly used to signify the ‘Bulgars’ became “Proto-Bulgarians”. Some authors use a word with analogical structure translatable as “Primary Bulgarians”. After 1989, circulate also the designations “ancient Bulgarians” and “Bulgarians”, thus the disambiguation being renounced. This renouncement is intertwined with the depreciating of Slavic heritage in Bulgarian culture and identity.

² In 1981 the Bulgarian State celebrated its 1300th anniversary.

European scholarship approached the Iranian hypothesis of Bulgarians' origin as early as 1933 when Bernd von Arnim argued that the non-Slavic [Danube] Bulgarians had been a "Hunnic"-Iranian mixture (or of Hernac's "Huns" and alanian Sagadarii; the quotation marks his) and added that only a small part of the Bulgar linguistic remnants in Bulgarian were explicable within the Turkic hypothesis (cf. von Arnim, 1933: 350-351). Next, the hypothesis was cautiously re-approached by Veselin Beshevliev at a symposium held in Leningrad in 1964 (Beshevliev, 1967).

The Pre-Liberation Period (until 1878)

Georgi Rakovski's linguistic and ethnogenetic speculations are pregnant with theoretical heurism in several directions; they seem to have prefigured some of the main parameters of the Bulgarian debate on the origin. At first glance, they hardly differ from the speculations of some Western 16th-17th centuries' authors who claimed their respective mother tongues to be the tongues of Adam, Eve or God (cf. Olander, 2002: 15-17); with Rakovski the point of reference being not the Bible's Genesis but rather the Vedas and the Iliad – in concordance with the spirit of time (the rise of Indo-European studies) and place (the Balkans in an epoch when modern Greeks' right over the legacy of ancient Hellas was contested; on how this interplayed with Bulgarian collective self-identification see Lilova, 2003: 204-227). Acquainted with current works on the 'Indo-Europeans' (cf. Rakovski, 1988: 537), he recognised in Bulgarian folklore, folk rituals and language traces of Vedic as well as of Avestan pantheon and faith (several passages in different works from the 1850s-1860s, cf.: Rakovski, 1988; at least once he claims the predominance of Zoroastrian, dualistic, remnants, cf. 1988: 351).

A scholarly question of high epistemic value, the question of the "Greek interpretation" of cultural artefacts intertwines here with the national emancipation of a particular ethnos (the Bulgarian). This makes the Bulgarian critique of Hellenocentrism morally and gnoseologically vulnerable but does not deprive it of grounds. The first epigraph of his work *A Brief Discussion on the Obscure and Misleading Fundaments, On Which the Old History of All European People Is Based*, re-introduced in a next work, *The Advantage of Bulgarian Language before the Old Hellenic, Or the Genuine Content of Hellenic language*, casts light upon the main cognitive drama of what I. Buruma and A. Margalit called "Occidentalism". A major aspect of this drama is bound with the tacit preference given to written evidence and discourse over oral, of History over Memory within the scholarly discourse.

A fundamental characteristic of Rakovski's version of origin is its synoptic vision – one which almost blurs the difference between an autochthonism and heterochthonism.

The potential of Rakovski's identification project remained unused; it was marginalised – though Rakovski was an influential politician and writer (on immediate reactions on his tractates and on his followers see Lilova, 2003: 213-216). Rakovski claimed that Bulgarians inhabited the Balkans (under different names) for at least 2000 years yet that they had come from Hindustan being the first [Indo-European] settlers in Southern Europe (seemingly he does not imagine the existence of a pre-Aryan population here). With the rise of Bulgarian academic scholarship his theory was reintroduced in an abridged version by Gancho Tsenov (1907; etc.), cf. Z. Daskalov in (Tsenov 2002: I-II), who tacitly eliminated from it the migration from Hindustan. Tsenov's theory was rejected by the head of Bulgarian medievalist historiography Vasil Zlatarski and is still stigmatised in Bulgarian academia (cf. Dimitrov, 2005: 11). It is irony of history that Tsenov (1907: 4 ff.) began his first book explaining the mythological grounds of all heterochthonic theories of origin. Autochthonic theory is cautiously regenerated since the late 1970s in the works of one more (after Tsenov)

emigrant to Germany, the remarkable art historian Asen Chilingirov. Within this lineage the Iranian trace evaporated.

The synopticism of Rakovski's vision had a luckier fate. In fact he had offered a programme for investigation of Bulgarian cultural memory, the subject requiring an approach quite different from identifying/constructing of causal chains characteristic of historiography. In the 1980s–early 1990s, Ivan Venedikov attempted studies of Bulgarian folklore which revealed Bulgar, Thracian and ancient Near Eastern ritual and mental (mythological) remnants, some of them an actual part of the early 20th century rural culture; and Alexander Fol, relying on his investigations of Thracian Orphism, offered ontology of temporality experience in culture; he outlined a variety of “kinds” or types “of time” far exceeding the pair “linear vs. cyclic”, one of them being the “synoptic time” (cf. Fol, 1998).

During the 19th c. fragments of what could be identified with the Iranian hypothesis appeared as elements in theories which now we conceive as syncretic (containing the ‘germs’ of different ethnohistorical versions; attaining the ambivalent stance between intending to investigate forms and meanings and intending to create them).

The Pre-War Period (1879–1914): Dimităr Daskalov

Dimităr Daskalov graduated from the High School of Arts in Sofia. He taught history of art, was member of the Archaeological society, practised art criticism and painting. Daskalov accessed the question of ethnogenesis unpremeditatedly, having realised that he had to explore it in order to access his main theme – the origin and development of the so-called Scytho-Sarmatian style in ornament, to employ it in an exploration of medieval Bulgarian art (cf. Daskalov, 1913: 3). His major work on the issue is the study *The Bulgarians – Descendants of the Royal Scyths and Sarmatians* (1913), which consists of the following parts: *Historical Sources about the Bulgar(ian)s in General*; *Historical Sources about the Volga Bulgars*; *Archeological Data about the Volga Bulgars*; *Scythians and Sarmatians*; *Bulgars and Slavs – Heirs of Scythians and Sarmatians*; *Origin and Sense of the National Name Bulgarians*; *The Thracian Origin of Scytho-Sarmatians (a Brief Sketch)*. Like Rakovski and Tsenov, he regarded the inhabitants of a given territory as diachronically identical under the guise of changing ethnonyms. But, unlike Tsenov, who unconventionally claimed that a vast part of Central Europe, the land between the Black sea and the “springs of Danube” pertained to what since Herodotus was named Scythia (cf. Tsenov, 1907: 9 ff.), Daskalov adhered to the tradition of localising Scythia in the mainland on the northern coast of the Black Sea considering the Carpathian mountains its Western boundary. Thus the scenery of ethnogenesis (or ethno-*persistence*) moved to the East and was able to integrate the Volga Bulgars’ legacy and to become partially compatible with the heterochthonic theory in its to-be-canonised version (introduced by Vasil Zlatarski in 1918).

There are some passages in this work which are relevant to hypothesising an Iranian origin of Bulgar(ian)s regardless to the ethnic identifications made by the author. Daskalov paid attention to the use of popular representations, in literature and painting, of the Bulgars as Mongoloids and inferred that these had an irrational power (Daskalov, 1913: 41, note 94). Retelling A.T. Likhachev's paper from the proceedings volume of the 1st archaeological congress in Russia, 1876, *An outline of the culture and material remnants of Great [Volga] Bulgaria*, he delivered that “Tatar writers call the Bulgars fire-worshippers” (Daskalov, 1913: 26). Daskalov himself attended archeological, historical and ethnographical data witnessing that Scythians (and Sarmatians) (ibid: 62-63, 65) and Bulgars (64) were fire-worshippers. Interpreting some underestimated archeological findings and some figures of the Slavic pantheon (ibid: 58-60), he argued

that the part of the Scythes he had identified with the Bulgar(ian)s preserved worship of fire much longer than the other Scythians; while the Slavs, having accepted the worship of “Dionysus and other Thracian and Greek deities”, called them *light-worshippers*, whence the ethnonym “Bogar”, or “Bo/ulgar” (ibid: 61). Thus Daskalov broke with the “curious” (ibid.) scholarly tradition of explaining this ethnonym only via external languages. Daskalov’s work has sunk in oblivion (a 1965 collection of his works didn’t include it). It is quite probable that certain similarities with Tsenov’s views have been of importance.

In the eve of First World War an image of the Iranian hypothesis was proposed for first: it was a coherent whole of its own, not a fragment or aspect within a broader or compound theory. It was promoted by an art historian – a disciplinary position not marginal but not in the core of the disciplinary bundle considered most appropriate to approach ethnogenesis. It is a conclusion one can draw from reading the programme of Proto-Bulgarian studies drawn in (Shishmanov, 1900: 274). It is assumable that a historian, archaeologist, ethnographer, philologist expanding his inquiry into the field of art history should have been more common a case than the reciprocal. Such an assumption is deducible, besides, from our idea of the epoch: modern Bulgarian culture of philosophising and historicising “took its shape in the second half of the 19th century when in Europe dominated the positivistic-naturalistic style of philosophising” (Stamatov 2000: 43). It seems that this fundamental pre-disposition of Bulgarian theoretical culture in the humanities survived during the 1890s–mid-1940s (cf. Stamatov, 2000: 45), despite the dominance of attempts to synthesise positivistic-naturalistic epistemology with the evaluative-teleological one (cf. ibid: 49-136). Daskalov died in 1914, at the age of 39; we could only guess what would have been his place and place of his works within the field in the 1920s–1930s.

The Inter-War Period: Bogdan Filov and Andrei Protich

In the interwar period the scope of scholarly theorising on *Iranica in Bulgaria* shrank, but gained a higher symbolical status.

The 1920s were favourable for developing a specific notion of multiculturalism and for employing it in medieval studies, especially with regard to phenomena “peripheral” to the Latin Middle Ages and, *per analogiam*, Constantinople. I mean the impact of theories like Strzygowski’s and systems like Spengler’s; and the kind of aesthetic pluralism which had been taking place in the intervals *between* the periods of *Sturm und Drang* in the succession of modernisms. Accounts on Medieval East-Christian Art from the epoch indicate its interoperability with the aesthetical culture brought up by expressionism (Filov, 1931: 426-427; Mavrodinov, 1928). Such a notion is both a symptom of and a means for overcoming the epistemologically primitive dichotomism recurring in conceptual pairs like classic – barbaric, realistic – non-realistic etc., regarding not only art but the collective identity of those who brought this art to being. There were some assets in the Bulgarian cultural memory to both back it and benefit from it. By the mid-nineteenth century the Bulgarian elite had assumed a kind of a *concessive* strategy of national self-identification and since then this strategy pervaded its mainstream (cf. Lilova, 2003: 207 ff.). It gave up aspirations for the symbolical capital of Balkan antiquity and adopted the archetype best expressed in the Bible parable ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’ (Psalom 118: 22). The self-affirmative component of this programme, for some reasons, remained underdeveloped in the Bulgarian self-cognition throughout the 20th century, but the self-intimidating one recurrently stimulated self-identifications with (uncultured, young, feminine) Slavs and (uncultured, wild, masculine) Huns/Bulgars (hence the irrational,

archetypal power of Hunnic/Turkic hypothesis; that power had other sources too (cf. Dobrev, 1998: 99; Dimitrov, 2005: 7-9; etc.)). To the contrary, an Iranian ancestry would offer a moderate version, an intermediate and therefore potentially *central* position within the scale between the much celebrated sedentary civilizations and the outcast descendants of *Gog and Magog* (this hypothetic prospective has been personally witnessed and articulated recently, cf. Stamatov, 1997: 107-120, esp. 112).

Filov launched the hypothesis of Sassanian origin of 8th – 9th century Bulgarian art in his monograph *The Old Bulgarian Art*, published in French, English and German in Bern in 1919 (an expanded edition in Bulgarian was issued in 1924), establishing the basic corpse of relevant monuments and artefacts (the palaces in Pliska; the bas-relief of a Horseman at Madara; the Treasure found at Nagy-Szent-Miklos in Hungary).

Thinking in terms of a variety of oecumena, each of them with its own centre of gravity and requiring from the explorer to recognise its own, in particular, aesthetical norm was characteristic of Filov. (I cannot estimate the intensity of the Vienna *Kulturkreis* school impact on him.) Although he never left an explicit account of his epistemic premises, several of his works could witness the suggestion: in a study on Thracian art he demonstrated consciousness of an interaction between the Hellenic and the Thracian-Scythian oecumena (and not between superior hellenity and inferior barbarity) (Filov 1919: 53-54),³ a decade later he attended the phenomenon of two Europas: the one having as its classics Hellas, and the other – Byzantium (Filov 1927), and recurrently inferred the idea of an Iranian oecumene. (See a recent development of this kind of vision in (Stepanov, 2008: 55-63; etc.)). In fact, Filov argued for a dualistic origin of old Bulgarian art – Oriental-Sassanian and local Hellenistic-Roman – this being articulately suggested in his 1929 characteristic of the Madara Horseman (Filov, 1929: 297), in a specifically popularising paper – one addressed to the artistic and humanities elite outside the guild. Thus Filov preserved in the subject matter a niche which, in prospective, could sustain a moderate autochthonist vision; and he induced a model of development embedded in *at least* two (insofar for a later period the Constantinople factor could not be ignored) autonomous and relatively equally powerful aesthetical norms.

Accidentally, Filov approached the question of Bulgars' ethnogenesis, localising their primary homeland in the Turanian plain to the east of the Caspian Sea and to the north of Iran (Filov, 1929: 294) and in Iran's neighbourhood (ibid: 300) and, besides, letting the reader know that Proto-Bulgarians were Turkic people (though with Iranian culture) (297). Thus he inferred the notion of a heterogeneous identity.

In his *Sassanian Artistic Tradition with the Proto-Bulgarians* (1927) Andrei Protich, an elder colleague of Filov, expanded the scope of his hypothesis. E.g., he interpreted some works of Old Bulgarian art as witnessing the Zoroastrianism of the ruler ideology in the First Bulgarian Tsardom... Later excavations showed astonishing parallels between pagan temples in Bulgaria on Lower Danube and Parthian and Sassanian fire

³ Filov found himself between the Scyla of Greek interpretation and the Haribdis of Scythian interpretation of Rostovtsev. 'Scythocentrism' had its political correlate in Eurasianism and could be regarded as a projection of Russian imperialism into the remote past. Political projections of Filov's position are also visible. I do not infer on the scholarly reliability of any of these stances. But what I hypothesise is that a theory backed by a more influential political discourse has more chances to be widely accepted – without relation to its scholarly assets and shortcomings, the former being emphasised and the latter underestimated.

temples, though radical interpretations had to wait⁴ (cf. Vaklinov, below; Chobanov, 2010: 18-23; etc.).

Departing from the artistic artefacts, Protich argued that only a lasting contact could have produced a tradition capable of surviving centuries after the collapse of Sassanian Empire (Protich, 1927: 214) and even after official Christianisation (211, 230-231; compare Filov, 1929: 300). And he called the Proto-Bulgarians the sole successors of Sassanian artistic tradition (214).

The period of communist rule (1944 – 1989)

During this period attempts were made to incorporate the Iranian “elements” already recognised into a theory of a mixed origin.

In his 1967 paper *Iranian Elements with the Primary Bulgarians* Veselin Beshevliev approached a complex, multidisciplinary theory of Bulgars’ origin, language and culture, which does not coincide with the widely recognised Turkic one. He was very cautious in launching it, and in his later writings designed for a wider public (Beshevliev 1981; 1984; 1992) it vanishes.

Already in the first paragraph of the paper he infers the idea that taking the Turkic origin of Bulgars for granted might be misleading, saying that it was misleading with regard to Bulgar anthroponyms: “Proceeding from the premise that the Proto-Bulgarians were a Turkic people, it is usually assumed that their personal names should also be Turkic and corresponding Turkic etymologies are looked for.⁵ For some of the names several etymologies have been suggested. [...] But in none of these cases identic or at least sounding alike actually existing names from other Turkic languages are introduced to support them. Usually for each particular case non-existing but possible Turkic forms are created. That is why the most of the Turkic readings are improbable, unacceptable or at best represent only one among a group of possible solutions.” (Beshevliev, 1967: 237). From this standpoint several routes of argument are possible: a) that Turkic theory is contestable; b) that linguistic data and other data (archeological, sources criticism etc.) could not coincide in their indications and that a more complex concept of ethnic identity should be elaborated; c) that Bulgars have a compound ethnic identity; d) that Bulgar ethnicity, including language, was Turkic, but that the language accepted a group of non-Turkic (Iranian) words; etc. Beshevliev takes direction (c). He argues for the Iranian origin of Asparukh (239-241) and ten more Bulgar anthroponyms (of rulers and of high officials; 241-245), focusing on the first one, commenting a variety of Iranian etymologies for this name and mentioning a number of 19th century Iranian attributions of it unsupported by explanations (238). He attends the hypothesis of intense Turkic-Iranian (Bulgar-Alanian resp.) contacts in the lands to the north of Caucasus and drew parallels from the anthroponymy of ruling dynasties in Armenia, Georgia, Caucasian Albania, Cappadocia and Pontus in order to support, by analogy, number of varying ideas: of Iranian ideological impact on the Bulgars; of kinship between the elites; of Iranic origin of the ruling dynasty (246). Till the end of the paper he mentions some other “traces” of Iranian “influence” in the culture of Bulgars: the “so-called Proto-Bulgarian signs, inscribed on stone objects, on bricks etc. could hardly be considered apart from the so called Sarmatian signs” (246), referring to conclusions about the Iranian origin of the latter (246-247); “in the Proto-Bulgarian inscriptions, the

⁴ A contemporary author considers troublesome the fact that Bulgarian scholars are still scarcely acquainted with Iranian studies issues in general and Zoroathrianism and its sects in particular (Chobanov, 2010: 9).

⁵ I am afraid that the same logic (though introduced with precaution) acts in a recent and authoritative research (cf. Slavova, 2010: 272, 277-278) on the Old-Bulgarian administrative lexica.

Madara stone relief, the ceramic ornament in Preslav and Patleina” (247). One wonders why no attempt was made to harmonise this variety of traces, forgetting for a while the axiom of Turkic origin (instead, the words “Iranian influence” are recurrently used to define the phenomena). The end of the paper leaves the door half-open: “This Iranian element was, as it seems, of considerable weight and that is why it should not be ignored in fixing/ascertaining⁶ the ethnogenesis of Proto-Bulgarians” (247).

His books designed for wider circulation slam the door. In 1981, the year when the 1300th anniversary of Bulgarian State was celebrated, the publishing house *Nauka i Izkustvo* (“Science and Art”) issued Beshevliev’s monograph *The Primary Bulgarians: Customs and Culture*. The first chapter dealt with the question of Bulgars’ ethnic identity (Beshevliev 1981: 11-23). “Four hypotheses were created: 1. Thracian, 2. Slavic, 3. Finnic and 4. Uralo-Altai. The first two are mentioned only for the sake of exhaustiveness insofar they do not rest on any scholarly evidence.” (15). Having discussed several variants of the “Uralo-Altai” hypothesis, Beshevliev finishes the chapter with the following conclusion: “There is one certain thing, devoid of all suppositions mentioned: that the Danubian Bulgarians are heirs of the Bulgarian tribe unogundurs, the exact ethnic identity of which is not ascertained, but who without doubt were of Turkic origin” (20). It is among the endnotes of the chapter where one first stumbles on information reminding of the 1960s paper: “B. von Arnim [...] assumed that the Primary Bulgarians were “hunnisch-iranisch Mischbevölkerung”. This hypothesis did not have followers.” (23). (Yet putting something outside the brackets could be ambivalent.) The second chapter, *Language Remnants and the Language of Primary Bulgarians*, proved to be disappointing too: data relevant to the hypothesis suggested in the 1960s were scattered throughout this and some of the next chapters – with an evident lack of intention to be re-employed. Several passages demonstrate a route of thought oscillating between adhering to the Turkic premise and urging to interpret the data detaching himself from the premise (ibid: 30, 31, 32 etc.). Beshevliev next books (cf. Beshevliev, 1984: 7; 1992: 20) witnessed a hardening position.

Stancho Vaklinov’s 1968 paper *The East in the Old Bulgarian Art from the 7th till the 11th Century*, attended architectural remnants which had parallels in fire temples and put them in the context of different in character and scope Eastern influences (e.g., the Bulgar-Alanian cohabitation in the 4th – 7th c., cf. Vaklinov, 1968: 129 etc.). In a 1977 monograph Vaklinov *left the door open* and even referred to recent foreign investigations on the geography and architecture of fire temples, one of them comparing the findings in Pliska with those from Iran (cf. Vaklinov, 1977: 112-114). He did not question the Turkic theory (cf. ibid: 15 etc.), but he continued unobtrusively to argue for the formative role of Bulgars’ relations with the Iranian people of the Alans (ibid: 16). Vaklinov obviously inclined toward a theory of a heterogeneous identity.

The Post-Communist Period

Petăr Dobrev launched a complex theory of Bulgars’ origin, *Urheimat*, migration, language, customs, religion and economic (he is a theoretic and historian of economy by learning). He is the most fluent of the historians writing on Bulgar(ian) ethno-cultural identity. The theory was introduced first in 1991 and was given its most detailed and expanded version in (Dobrev, 2005). A part of its subject was codified in the unprecedented *Dictionary and Grammar* of the 7th century Bulgars’ language (Dobrev

⁶ The Bulgarian text reads *ustanoviavane*. The Russian abstract on the same page ends with the same syntagm, but a verb with different meaning (investigating, exploring: *izuchenii*) is introduced; it makes the final conclusion far less definite, and the importance of the Iranian element in the solving of the issue is diminished.

1995). He abandoned the ‘neoclassicist’ scholarly stance developed throughout the 20th century (it probably reached one of its peaks in some of Beshevliev’s works) which included, besides a heavy scholarly apparatus, a tendency toward self-restraint, hyper-cautiousness in suggesting hypotheses. Moreover, within that stance the early medieval past was never treated as potentially actual for the nation’s existence, as pertaining to an archetype in Jungian sense. (I lay aside the late writings rehabilitating Rakovski’s synoptical and panchronist ethnology, cf. above). A comparison between the titles of two books on common topic published in one and the same year (1992) would tell enough about the two stances: *Primary-Bulgarian Stone Inscriptions* (Beshevliev) and *The Stone Book of the Proto-Bulgarians* (Dobrev). Dobrev’s manifest position and the tint of *publicism* probably served him a poor service among the guild and the neighbouring guilds, but earned for the theory wider popularity. Nevertheless Dobrev didn’t take the rhetoric of a rebel. He paid tribute to the classics in the guild but sometimes was may be too pious (cf., e.g., Dobrev, 2005: 137-138).

In a recent work of Dobrev the heterochthonist extreme and the autochthonist converged. He rehabilitated a major evidence for the Thracian hypothesis – a source believed by the scholarly community to be a mystification: *Veda Slovena*, a collection of folk epic songs published by the Croat ethnographer Stefan Verkovich in 1867, 1874 and 1881. Considering it as a tool for penetrating the “the times preceding the mission of St. Cyril and probably a far deeper past” (Dobrev 2007: 182), Dobrev symbolically changed the collection’s name into *Veda Bulgarica*.

Atanas Stamatov entered the discussion (*Tempora incognita in the Early Bulgarian History*; Stamatov, 1997) from the marginal position of a man trained in scholarship within a neighbouring field. He tried not to explain but to *understand*, accessing the sources disregarding authoritative attitudes usually taken for granted, to *interiorise and rationally witness* the Iranian hypothesis. If we introduce here the considerations of the medievalist Veselina Vachkova (2010: 11 ff.; see below), who contests the epistemic value of differentiating between History and Memory (epistemologically codified by Pierre Nora’s and Tsvetan Todorov) and demonstrates its huge capacity to mislead when applied to non-modern phenomena, we could say that Stamatov made a self-disciplining step toward bridging the gap imposed by our academic training toward a reflective synthesis of discerning causality and making sense. And Stamatov demonstrated the fundamental significance of reassessing non-Greek and non-Latin written sources, particularly the Armenian, for rethinking Bulgars’/Bulgarian history (Stamatov, 1997: 52-92).

Tsvetelin Stepanov (cf. Stepanov, 2000; 2005; 2008) accessed early medieval history of Bulgaria and of Bulgars bearring modernisation of collective identity in general and ethnicity in particular. He demonstrated awareness of the various levels of a *fluid* identity on each of which a multi-cultural and multi-lingual reality is modelled or reflected (2008: 12-13, 15-33; 2005); with regard to one of the super-ethnic levels of identification, he discerned the shared impact of *Pax Romana*, *Pax Nomadica* and *Pax Iranica* as sources of power, values and norms in the Black Sea region. His contributions have been particularly valuable for the Iranian hypothesis insofar its *topoi* (the Bulgar monarchy titulature, the Bactrian *Urheimat*, etc.) were introduced into a methodological paradigm which could hardly raise suspicions in ethnocentricity or linguocentrism. At least once he grasped his subject in a way which leaves the linear time of historiographical research to enter the non-linear kinds of time accessed by ethnologists like Venedikov and Fol (Stepanov 2008: 35-47).

Todor Chobanov reinforces (Chobanov 2006; 2010: 9-26; etc.) the theory of Sassanian origin of Old Bulgarian art. It held in fact the germs of theories which came

to contest it (the Armenian, the Near Eastern, the Middle Asia one) or which supplemented it from the very beginning (the autochthonous) and it is its pluralistic potentiality which Chobanov's complex Black Sea-Caucasian theory (2010: 55-76) fulfils. Its main historical rival, the Constantinople theory launched in Bulgaria by Krăstio Miiatev after 1929 (cf. Miiatev, 1942; etc.) is esteemed valid by Chobanov for the period posterior to the official adoption of Christendom by Boris I (864). The standpoint of such a paper as "*Res gestae*" of *Shapur I at Naksh-I-Rustam as a Source on Bulgarian History* (Chobanov, 2010: 27-40) changes the actant structure in which the old Bulgarians and Iranians are involved: no third parties are introduced to witness pro or contra Bulgarian-Iranian relations. Thus the subject of inquiry changes: it is not 'intercultural continuity' but 'intercultural contact'.⁷

Conclusion

To summarise, the Iranian hypothesis has the assets to become a complex, multidisciplinary-based scholarly theory; and some of its insights are interoperable with the autochthonist hypothesis. But I am dubious about its potential to produce an epistemologically complex ethnobiography.

As far as I know, the Iranian hypothesis remained in theory and philosophy of history, in art and in the remarkably popular discipline of Bulgarian self-cognition, *National psychology*, unexploited. I could suppose two reasons for that. First, the hypothesis still strives for scholarly recognition 'excessive' information to be produced. (It needs careful work on a wide front in order 'horizontally' heterogeneous (that is, from different disciplines: philology, archaeology, anthropology, paleogeography etc. – neither of which epistemologically dominates the rest) data to be synchronised.) This supposition implies that a certain stream in Bulgarian culture of exploring identities is still, as in the late 19th c., dominated by a naturalistic-positivistic stance (cf. Stamatov, 2000: 43 etc.), one which does not perform a philosophising or artistic speculation unless it can rely upon empirical and/or causally coherent data... (I wonder whether any epistemic sense could be extracted from the Turkic-Iranian controversy, except for the study of mechanisms and economy of geopolitical engineering of scholarship and of super-individual (but not mass) deceptions; both issues pertain to theory and not to philosophy of history. They were accessed in some works (of P. Dobrev, e.g.) inquiring the reasons for not-formulating the Iranian theory earlier than the 1990s.) Second, it is far from being considered improbable and therefore it does not need extremist, that is, exceeding the usual epistemological complexity, solutions in order to survive; and the case with the autochthonist hypothesis is the opposite.

Of course, not only the cumulative effect of particular 'purely scholarly' explorations has led to the rise of Iranian version of Bulgarian identity. It is symptomatic of an epistemic shift in Bulgarian self-cognition which is probably induced by geo-political factors. Some aspects of that shift refer to *how* identity is conceived.

First, Bulgarian self-identification discourse emancipated itself from the Soviet (in fact Russian) imperial vision of the past, imposed by several factors of heteronomy (state institutions, lobbying networks) and exploiting the heritage or inertia of *Russophilia*, as a dominant cultural and geopolitical orientation within a large part of Bulgarian society (cf. Chilingirov, 2002; 2007b: each investigation can serve as an introductory case study; Dimitrov, 2005; for a documentary account on the initial

⁷ In 1990s a foundation and a publishing house which have the aim of propagating Bulgar(ian) legacy and of advancing Bulgar studies – *Tangra TanNakRa* – were found. In 1995 a magazine named *Avi-tokhol* started. They could and have to be attended in a more detailed inquiry.

process of establishing ideological control over Bulgarian historiography after 1944 see (Trial, 1995)).

Second, a part of Bulgarian intellectual elite and of the academia seems to have attained (or restored?) a relatively detached position regarding the symbolical power of Western scholarship⁸, represented here and today chiefly by the constructivist epistemology (and from its viewpoint the Iranian hypothesis agenda might look outdated). Yet the scholarly ‘hypercorrectness’ of ‘high’ academia in bourgeois Bulgaria seems to have sanctioned a filter more intimately interrelated with the phenomenon of self-colonisation⁹ and more influential than the geography of prestige (though cohering with it): Bulgarian cultural memory¹⁰ – having instrumentalised historiography – systematically excluded sources of a certain kind in discerning the series of events subject to interpretation by historians (Vachkova 2010: 12-17). In short, texts fixing History (and causal consistency) were trusted and texts fixing Memory (and sense: *patriography*, apocalyptic, descriptions of monuments etc.) were excluded, this leading towards the phenomenon of a frozen, or “bookish memory”: a self-identification based only on external written sources (ibid: 14), and having already brought the condition of “cool memory” (one annihilating the connections between the ‘present’ and ‘past’ in order to find for the latter a remote secure place) (ibid: 301 ff.). The current propulsion of constructivist treating the identities (or of aspirations of sociological doubt to be the epistemology of humanities), as well as some authoritative theorisations on History and memory (see above), enhances the tendency, but a part of the elite resists it. The Iranian theory could be considered an unpremeditated (compare with Vachkova 2010) attempt of an indirect (compare with several works of A. Chilingirov) re-warming of Bulgarian cultural memory.

It is not accidental that the rise of Iranian theory coincides with a (less visible) reviving of the autochthonic one. They probably represent a new paradigm in Bulgarian ethnobiography. It radically departs from the *self-evident sensual* margins of Bulgarian ethnic identity – the Slavdom of the maternal language and the Turkic-ness of a major *Other* (the Ottoman and the present-day Turks).

I am aware that my attempt to sketch a map of a field still, as far as I know, unmapped, has flaws, incoherencies, disputable accents and partly hasty conclusions. I chose to draft the whole instead of elaborating a part. I hope I have revealed aspects of a complex intellectual situation. In revisiting the subject, I would try to exploit some neighbouring issues. Do writings on Bulgarian ethno-cultural identity constitute a coherent “field of production”? Do the Iranian hypothesis and Iranian studies in Bulgaria correlate somehow? But, before all, the epistemological premises of my work need elaboration and explication.

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⁸ Among “the 12 myths of Bulgarian history” [until the 20th c.], discerned in (Dimitrov, 2005), none is Communism-born (though some gained momentum then) and most of them are non-homemade.

⁹ On the self-colonising stance of modern Bulgarian culture see Kiosev 1999.

¹⁰ Vachkova operates with Jan Assman’s concept.

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