

The Bulgarian Autocephalous (Independent) Archiepiscopate in Ochrid 1018 -1767

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After the conversion of the Bulgarians to Christianity in 864 by Tsar Boris, the Bulgarian Church was elevated to the status of archiepiscopate (archbishopric). It was on March 4, 870. The first Bulgarian archbishop was Archbishop Joseph (Stefan). The autonomy and international authority of the Bulgarian Church rose under Tsar Simeon (893-927) and Tsar Peter (927-970). At the Second All-Bulgarian Ecclesiastical People's Synod the Church was proclaimed "autocephalous" (self-governing) with its own patriarch – Patriarch Damian.

The seat of the Bulgarian patriarchate during the First Bulgarian Kingdom was in sequence the cities of Pliska, Preslav, Dorostol, Sredetz and Ochrid.

In 1018-1019 the Emperor Basil II Bulgarochtone ("Killer of the Bulgarians") conquered Bulgaria and lowered the status of the Patriarchate to Archiepiscopate with its seat in the city of Ochrid. However, considering the authority of the Church and its clergy, Basil kept its independence. Officially its name was *Bulgarian Autocephalous Archiepiscopate*, and its head had the title "*Archbishop of Ochrid and all of Bulgaria*". The clergy and the monks were predominantly Bulgarian, but after the first archbishop – Ioan (John) of Debar (1019-1037) only Byzantine prelates were ordained.

From the mid-fifteen century, led by patriotic fervor, in order not to relate the archbishopric to the name of the Emperor who killed thousands of Bulgarians during the war of conquest, the archbishops started to spread the false legend, that the independent Church was older, namely founded in the begin of the sixth century by the Emperor Justinian the Great. At the same time, so the legend, the city *Justiniana Prima* was established (place of birth of the Emperor), later re-named Ochrid by the Bulgarians. So, with the time, the title of the archbishop of Ochrid was changed to "*Archbishop of Ochrid and of All Bulgaria*". Under this name the Archiepiscopate of Ochrid survived 749 years. Its boundaries included all western parts of the Bulgarian ethnic area – today's Northern Greece, Macedonia, Albania, Eastern Serbia.

Some archbishops of Ochrid signed as "*Patriarch of Justiniana Prima and All of Bulgaria*". From a canonical point of view they were right: the Bulgarian Patriarchate was not reduced in rank to archiepiscopate by a clerical authority, but rather by the secular, laic power of the Byzantine Emperor. According to the Ochrid archbishops this act was invalid therefore the Bulgarian Patriarchate exists without interruption since its founding in 927. Its title was recognized by the Universal Patriarchate (in Constantinople) in fourteen century. The church St. Sophia in Ochrid became the Metropolitan cathedral. The church was built by the Bulgarian Tsar Boris I in 863 on a site where a late-Roman temple existed before. It was one of the seven cathedrals the Tsar built to commemorate the proclamation of Christianity as official state religion of the Bulgarian Kingdom.

The Emperor Basil II Bulgarochtone, ordered in a decrees from 1019-1020 that only ethnic Bulgarians be ordained as archbishops of Ochrid. The first elected and confirmed archbishop to take the episcopate was in fact a Bulgarian from Debar, a monk from the monastery "St. John". But after his death, in the following centuries of the archbishopric's existence, its chair was held more and more by Greeks. Still, many of its Greek hierarchs took good care of the strengthening of the Christian faith in the souls of the Bulgarians.

The most prominent among them was Theofilact of Bulgaria, who held the seat in Ochrid between 1090 and 1126. He was a well known medieval intellectual, author of dozens of theology and history studies, close to the Emperor court. Sent to the remote province, which was Ochrid at that time, far away from the glamour of the life in the capital, still Theofilact executed his duties dedicatedly and honestly. He adopted the cause of the Bulgarian people as his own one, accomplished enormous work in the name of the Orthodox faith, to keep the Bulgarian consciousness alive. For his Bulgarian laity he wrote the seminal work "Comprehensive Life Description" of the most revered saint in Ochrid – St. Clement, great follower of the proto-apostles of the Slavs – the saint brothers Cyril and Methodius. "Thanks to St. Clement", wrote Theofilact, "to his tireless work, the whole Bulgarian country met and recognized God."

Another prominent Greek scholar, Dimitar Chomatian, one of the most-celebrated Byzantine authors of his time was head of the Ochrid Archiepiscopate in the years 1216-1234, and wrote in praise of St. Clement: "When St. Clement arrived in Ochrid in 887", so Chomatian, "the Bulgarian people was not fully Christianized and enlightened and had quite a bit of barbarian primitivism. But the Saint, through his work, brought all Bulgarians closer to the God-anointed and transformed their roughness into a moral nobility, leading them to a just and wise way of life. This great forefather and true light for us, was in origin from the European "Moese" tribe, also known as Bulgarians". The church-goers listened humbly to these enthusiastic words in the temples. "He gave us, Bulgarians, all that relates to the Church. Therefore it is so hard to measure the reverence and respect, Bulgarians of all ages manifest towards St. Clement." In another work of Chomatian, St. Clement is called "The Thirteenth Apostle, who renewed the Bulgarian people through christening."

Biographies and divine liturgies were written in praise of another saint from Ochrid – St. Naoum and of Sts. Cyril and Methodius and their five disciples. The same enthusiasm and reverence in these texts is shown towards the Bulgarian Tsar Boris, to his work and his merits. "All of them, they strengthened Bulgaria with the divine doctrines and became unshakable pillars of the Bulgarian Church."

Towards the end of XII c., in 1185, following a massive uprising for liberation, the Bulgarian independence was reinstated. The resurrection was led by the boyar brothers Assen and Peter. At the same time as the coronation of Peter as a Tsar, the Bulgarian Patriarchate was re-established. It was recognized in 1204 by the Pope of Rome and in 1235 by the Universal Patriarchate. Its seat was in the capital Turnovo. During the first twenty years the dioceses of Ochrid's Archiepiscopate remained outside of the boundaries of the Bulgarian state. The territories of eight among them joined the Bulgarian state during the reign of Tsar Kaloian. At the helm of these dioceses the Bulgarian patriarchate ordained new Bulgarian prelates to replace the Byzantine ones who fled. The Bulgarian clergy also remained in place despite of changes made thirty years later.

The Bulgarians within the Kingdom were spiritual subjects of the Turnovo patriarchate, whereas the Bulgarians from outside the Kingdom – belonged to the Ochrid Archiepiscopate. The old historical striving and stubborn ambition of Basil II to gradually assimilate the Bulgarians as a nation failed. The Bulgarian Church united its compatriots within the Christ's faith, gave them hope and strength in the years of hard ordeal.

Particularly important was the role of the Bulgarian Archiepiscopate in Ochrid after 1396, when all Bulgarian lands fell under the rule of the Muslim Ottoman Empire. The Turnovo patriarchate was abolished. The Archiepiscopate of Ochrid remained the only Bulgarian spiritual institution which, through tireless efforts and hardships managed to keep alive the Christian faith among

Bulgarians. The rights of the Christian population in the Ottoman Empire were hugely restricted. All major, more prominent Christian churches and cathedrals were converted into mosques, including "St. Sophia" in Ochrid. This magnificent edifice was turned back into a church only after 550 years, in 1915, as the Bulgarian army liberated the city of Ochrid. Its consecration was made much later, after the communist rule, at Easter day in 1998 in presence of thousands of Bulgarians from all over the world who came to celebrate.

The seat of the Ochrid archiepiscopate during the Turkish rule over the Bulgarian lands was the small, neighborhood church of "Our Lady Theotocos Perivlepta", where the relics of St. Clement were transferred. The church became known as "St. Clement" and still is until today. Beautiful, rich frescoes, icons and decoration mark this impressive medieval jewel.

Centuries of glory and expansion of the Ochrid archbishopric followed, its role rose not only as hierarchical seat but also as a spiritual and educational capital of a broad area. Ochrid took a leading position in the early publishing, and dissemination of the first Bulgarian canonical and educational books, establishing and supervising a printing office first in the Romanian city of Tyrgovishte and later, in 1519 through the monk Pahomius from Skopje - in Venice.

In the XV-XVI centuries the Ochrid diocese grew larger through new territories: the Ottoman authorities decreed the addition of the newly closed Serbian patriarchate, the dioceses of Volochia and Moldova, even some Orthodox dioceses in Italy. Documents exist that point at particularly narrow links between the Ochrid Archiepiscopate and the archenemy of the Turks: Venice. A golden crown, gift from the Venetian Republic was made to the archbishop of Ochrid. The crown features 329 precious stones: rubies, sapphires, grenades, natural pearls.

Numerous monasteries in the region played important role in the preservation of the Bulgarian national consciousness during these dark centuries: "St. Naoum" at Ochrid, "St. John Precursor" at Prilep, "St. Joachim of Ossogovo" at Kratovo. There, a cult toward the first Slav apostles Sts. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples was kept alive, toward the revered Prochor of Pchinja, Gabriel of Lesnovo, Joachim of Ossogovo and toward the great Saint on the Bulgarian spiritual horizon: St. John of Rila.

The accelerated political and patriotic activity of the Ochrid Autocephalous Archbishopric in the XVIII c. provoked the reaction of the Ottoman authorities, who decided to abolish it. This tragic event was caused by the intrigues of the high-ranked clerics of the Greek Universal Patriarchate.

In the year 1767, the Sultan issued a decree to eliminate the archbishopric and all its dioceses to be transferred to the Universal Patriarchate. To do away with all memory of the Bulgarian Archiepiscopate, the Patriarchate even removed Ochrid from the list of Episcopal cities and attached it to the Metropolitan in Drach (Durrës) in Albania. In place of Ochrid, the hierarchs of Kostour (Kastoria), Bitolia (Monastir) and Stroumitza were promoted, bearing the titles: "Exarch of All Old Bulgaria" and "Exarch of All Bulgarian Macedonia".

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Introduction to the Exhibition Catalogue

Translated with some abridgement by Vassil Popvassilev