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FOOD OF PLANT ORIGIN IN THE LIFE OF EARLY MEDIEVAL BULGARIANS (END OF 7TH – BEGINNING OF 11TH CENTURY)

Regardless of historical period or habitat, human beings have always needed food, as it is an integral part of their everyday life – whatever their social status may be. In the early Middle Ages, feeding habits in the Balkans were quite unlike those in Antiquity. This was mainly due to the rise of a new predominant population in the territory of the First Bulgarian Empire, with feeding habits markedly different from those of the local population of late Antiquity. Therefore, in order to understand what foods were consumed by the population of the Bulgarian state from the 7th to the beginning of the 11th century, one must first consider the nutritional habits of the two main components underlying the Bulgarian nation – Slavs and Bulgars. No less important is another factor – the change in the aforementioned populations' diet that occurred after the conversion to Christianity.

Concerning the Slavs' food habits, the *Strategikon of Maurice* says the following: [*The Slavs*] possess an abundance of all sorts of livestock and produce, which they store in heaps, especially common millet and Italian millet¹. On this basis, it could be argued that the Slavs subsisted on a diverse diet combining vegetable and animal elements. This information is supplemented by the *Miracles of St. Demetrius*, where it is stated that the besieged Thessalonians went with ten ships to the Belegezites inhabiting the vicinity of Thebes and Demetrius to buy some grain from them². In addition, the archaeological evidence of Slavic settlements also confirms the consumption of food of both plant and animal origin.

The diet of the Bulgars – a people with a nomadic lifestyle – mainly involved meat and dairy, just like that of any other nomadic society.

¹ *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*, XI, 4, ed. G.T. DENNIS, Vindobonae 1981 [= *CFHB*, XVII]; *Псевдомаврикий*, [in:] *FGHB*, vol. II, ed. Ив. ДУЙЧЕВ et al., София 1959, p. 281–282 and fn. 1 on p. 281. English translation quoted from: *Maurice's Strategikon. Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, trans. G.T. DENNIS, Philadelphia 1984, p. 120.

² P. LEMERLE, *Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de saint Demetrius et la penetration des slaves dans le Balkans*, vol. I, *Le texte*, Paris 1979, p. 203 [254].

In order to determine what the food of the population of the First Bulgarian Empire was like, it is first necessary to review the foodstuffs that were certainly familiar to the people inhabiting these lands at that time.

The present paper focuses on the food eaten by the common people of the First Bulgarian Empire. Parts of it were present on the tables of the Bulgarian aristocracy as well, but we should not forget that, in view of their financial capacities, members of the latter group were able to acquire a range of other imported items, not common in the region. Moreover, various exotic foods were probably present at the royal court, arriving *via* orders, gifts and purchases.

An examination of food of plant origin must take into the account the paleoclimatological characteristics of the region, since these determine the presence or absence of a given species³. Furthermore, an important factor for the inclusion of any food in the menu of a certain people are the latter's nutritional habits: it is possible for a food item to be exclusive to a given ethnic group, while at the same time being absent from the diet of other peoples inhabiting the same area. A prime example in this regard is the consumption of pork by Christians and its non-consumption by Muslims living in the same parts of the world simultaneously.

The following review of food items covers the entire territory of the First Bulgarian Empire. Certain areas feature specific kinds of food, which will be discussed separately. Moreover, regrettably, it must be noted that – with a few exceptions – the examination of paleobotanical samples has not been among the priorities of Bulgarian archaeologists working on objects from the period in question. As a result, the available data in this regard are remarkably scanty.

Grains

Wheat. Known in our lands since the Neolithic⁴, it has been used without interruption as a main staple crop to this day. It has been the basic raw material for the production of bread from the inception of its cultivation to modern times. Wheat is known from many finds from the early Middle Ages, both from the territory of the capitals and from other sites⁵. In the medieval period, two main varieties were used – emmer and hexaploid/durum⁶. It is characterized by high protein content and calorific value⁷.

³ This claim is based on the opinion of Associate Professor Dr. Tsvetana Popova, expressed in private communication.

⁴ Ц. ПОПОВА, *Каталог на археоботаническите останки на територията на България (1980–2008)*, ИИЗ 20–21, 2009, p. 95 onwards.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 141–142; К. КОНСТАНТИНОВ, *Храните с растителен произход на плисковската трапеза*, ТКИБ 7, 2004, p. 16–17.

⁶ Ц. ПОПОВА, *Каталог...*, p. 141–142, tabl. 2; Й. ПАНАЙОТОВ, М. МИХОВ, *Кратка характеристика на основните продоволствени и технически култури*, [in:] *Дуранкулак*, vol. I, ed. X. ТОДОРОВА, София 1989, p. 216.

⁷ J. MCCORRISTON, *Wheat*, [in:] *The Cambridge World History of Food*, vol. I, ed. K.F. KIPLE, K.C. ORNEALS, Cambridge 2000, p. 158–159.

Rye. In the Middle Ages, rye turns out to be a very important crop for many parts of Europe⁸. Evidently it was the case in early medieval Bulgaria as well, for traces of rye were found during the excavations of the Royal Church in Preslav⁹, as well as in Pliska (by the northern gate and in the mortar of the Great Basilica¹⁰) and in the early medieval settlement on the island near Durankulak¹¹.

Millet. The cultivation of this grain – likewise used for the production of bread and known in our lands since ancient times – in the early Middle Ages is documented by paleobotanical research¹². It became widespread during the Roman period and was grown in large quantities until the mid-19th century¹³. Millet was the main raw material for the production of bread used by the poor population until maize started being cultivated in our lands. Even after the replacement of millet with maize, bread made of maize flour traditionally continued to be called *prosenik* (“millet bread”)¹⁴. Due to the nature of millet grains, this bread was markedly flaky and was therefore avoided among the aristocracy. The use of such bread had one main goal – to satisfy hunger.

Barley. Seeds of barley were found during the excavations of the early medieval settlement on the island near Durankulak¹⁵.

Spelt. Seeds of the latter were likewise found in the excavations of the early medieval settlement on the island near Durankulak¹⁶.

Rice. The presence of rice in our lands is only attested archaeologically from the 11th century onwards¹⁷. As such, it cannot be counted among food items consumed by an ordinary Bulgarian of the First Empire. But unlike the regular Bulgarian, whose diet did not include this plant, aristocrats and in particular the inhabitants of the palace were evidently familiar with rice and used it as food. This is confirmed by a reference in the early, short version of the *Romance of Alexander*, preserved as part of the *Hellenic and Roman Chronicle*¹⁸. Despite the strongly Russianized vocabulary of the text, some of the words are preserved in an unchanged

⁸ H. KÜSTER, *Rye*, [in:] *The Cambridge...*, p. 151.

⁹ Ц. ПОПОВА, *Каталог...*, p. 141.

¹⁰ К. ШКОРПИЛ, *Домашный быт и промысел*, ИРАИК 10, 1905, p. 316.

¹¹ Й. ПАНАЙОТОВ, М. МИХОВ, *Кратка характеристика...*, p. 216.

¹² Ц. ПОПОВА, *Каталог...*, p. 141–142; Й. ПАНАЙОТОВ, М. МИХОВ, *Кратка характеристика...*, p. 216.

¹³ J.M.J. DE WET, *Millets*, [in:] *The Cambridge...*, p. 118.

¹⁴ Д. МАРИНОВ, *Народна вяра и религиозни обичаи*, София 1994, p. 97.

¹⁵ Й. ПАНАЙОТОВ, М. МИХОВ, *Кратка характеристика...*, p. 216.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

¹⁷ Material from the grave from the mound by the village of Vinica, near the city of Parvomay: Ц. ПОПОВА, *Каталог...*, p. 141.

¹⁸ *Летописец еллинский и римский*, vol. I, *Текст*, ed. О.В. ТВОРОГОВ, Санкт-Петербург 1999, p. 85–178.

Bulgarian version. One of such words, not subject to Russianization, is the noun *оризъ*¹⁹. Rice was presumably delivered to the royal palace from or *via* Byzantium.

Vegetables

Plants of the subfamily *Allioideae*. Here belong onion, garlic and leek. These plants, which are common on all continents of the Old World, are undemanding as regards climate conditions. Used both as staple foods and as spices in various dishes, they were apparently the only vegetables carefully distinguished from others.

The so-called *Sermon of the Interpreter* (*Слово на Тълкувателя*) makes it clear that garlic was used not only as a food item, but also for certain pagan rituals of the newly baptized Bulgarians in the time immediately following Christianization²⁰. Theophylact of Ohrid, albeit speaking of a somewhat later period, also claimed that Bulgarians used a lot of onion and garlic in their food²¹.

Widely accessible and easy to grow, these vegetables were patently widespread and used as daily food by early medieval Bulgarians. This position of the plants of the subfamily *Allioideae* apparently remained unchanged until recent times, because in folk conceptions onions, garlic or leek are treated as ready-to-eat meals²².

Bean family (*Fabaceae*). The main modern representative of this family, beans, only appeared much later, after the discovery of America. However, representatives of the family were not missing from the diet of early medieval Bulgarians. John the Exarch mentions bean plants in the *Hexameron*²³. Lentils and peas were widely grown in medieval Europe²⁴. In our country, traces of peas from the period under discussion are known from Drastar²⁵, and of lentils – from the settlement on the island near Durankulak²⁶. The consumption of broad beans is attested in Byzantium, at a later period. Apparently, the paleoclimatological optimum from that time allowed the cultivation of a more thermophilic legume – chickpeas, called

¹⁹ *Летописец еллинский и римский*, р. 142; *Словарь русского языка XI–XXVII вв.*, Москва 1987, р. 68.

²⁰ А. КАЛОЯНОВ, Т. МОЛЛОВ, *Слово на Тълкувателя – един неизползван източник за старобългарската митология*, БЕТ 28.4, 2002, р. 25–41.

²¹ И. САКЪЗОВ, *Храната на старите българи*, УМ 9.7, 1928, р. 433.

²² И. ПАВЛОВ, *Присъствия на храненето по българските земи през XV–XIX в.*, София 2001, р. 29.

²³ ЙОАН ЕКЗАРХ, *Шестоднев*, ed., trans. Н.Ц. КОЧЕВ, София 2000, р. 122.

²⁴ Л. КАРЛАН, *Beans, Peas and Lentils*, [in:] *The Cambridge...*, р. 278–279.

²⁵ Ц. ПОПОВА, *Каталог...*, р. 142.

²⁶ Й. ПАНАЙОТОВ, М. МИХОВ, *Кратка характеристика...*, р. 218.

*slanutak*²⁷; these are mentioned as a staple food of St. John of Rila during his eremitic life in the Rila mountain²⁸.

The cruciferous family. This family includes Cabbage (known in the Balkans since the time before Christ), different varieties of turnips as well as mustard (used for the preparation of the homonymous relish)²⁹. Direct written or archaeological evidence for the consumption of these plants by the population of the Bulgarian state in the 7th–10th century is wanting; nevertheless, given their use in Byzantium³⁰, we can also suspect their presence on the Bulgarian table. Besides, it is likely that in the Old Bulgarian language the words corresponding to modern *zele* and *zлак* had collective value and designated vegetables in general³¹.

The gourd family. Although pumpkin itself was only brought from America, the table of the early medieval Bulgarian did feature certain representatives of the family. The excavations in the inner city of Pliska revealed watermelon and melon seeds in a ceramic vessel³². Whether these fruiting vegetables were part of the daily summer diet of the population of the First Bulgarian Empire is hard to say; given the location of the find, it can rather be surmised that it contained food remnants or sowing seeds associated with the palace.

Wild plants

Dock, lettuce and nettle. No direct data confirm the use of these plants as food during the period in question, but given the fact that they are frequently found and that they have long been known as food items, it is possible that they were consumed both in Bulgaria and in the Byzantine Empire³³.

Spices. It is likely that certain wild plants (still used as spices in modern times) were employed for flavoring food. These presumably included savory, thyme etc.

²⁷ Н. ГЕРОВЪ, *Речникъ на българския езикъ*, vol. V, Пловдивъ 1904, p. 190.

²⁸ И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Рилският светец и неговата обител*, София 1947, p. 102; *Стара българска литература*, vol. IV, ed. Кл. ИВАНОВА, p. 131–132.

²⁹ R.C. FIELD, *Cruciferous and Green Leafy Vegetables*, [in:] *The Cambridge...*, p. 288.

³⁰ Д. ДИМИТРОВ, *Масата събира, масата разделя: храната и храненето във Византия и различията по отношение на хранителните навици през Средновековието*, [in:] *Стандарти на всекидневието през Средновековието и Новото време*, ed. К. МУТАФОВА, Н. ХРИСТОВА, И. ИВАНОВ, Т. ГЕОРГИЕВА, Велико Търново 2012, p. 24.

³¹ I. TARNANIDIS, *The Psalter of Dimitri the Oltarnik*, [in:] ИДЕМ, *The Slavonic Manuscripts Discovered in 1975 at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai*, Thessaloniki 1988, p. 91–100; Б. ВЕЛЧЕВА, *Новооткрити ръкописи в Синайския манастир "Св. Екатерина"*, РВг 12.3, 1988, p. 126–129.

³² С. СТАНЧЕВ, *Разкопки и новооткрити материали в Плиска през 1948 г.*, ИАИ 20, 1955, p. 192.

³³ Д. ДИМИТРОВ, *Масата...*, p. 25.

However, the chief application of herbs (including spices) at the time was for healing purposes. Herbs were widely used for treating various diseases and wounds. This is evident from the only book of cures dating to the period in question found thus far. It is preserved on three inserted pages (f. 141 A, B and C) in the so-called *Psalter of Dimitar Oltarnik*, discovered in St. Catherine's monastery in Sinai³⁴. Among the items found there are рѣпѣи (burdock), лѡ҃҃҃҃҃҃҃ (onion), корєи (root) and others.

Mushrooms. Mushrooms were probably used as food mainly by the Slavic component of the population of the Bulgarian state, because ethnic groups with a nomadic lifestyle consider this type of food repulsive³⁵. The word *gāba* (mushroom) itself, as well as the names of most individual species of fungi in Bulgarian, is of Slavic origin³⁶.

Food plants specific to particular regions

Olives. *Wood oil*, i.e. olive oil, is mentioned by John the Exarch in the *Hexameron*³⁷. Given that the period of the existence of the First Bulgarian Empire featured a paleoclimatological maximum, it can be concluded that olive trees were grown in the southern areas of the country, just as they are now in these same territories.

Fruit

Apples. This fruit was known and consumed already by Ancient Egyptians³⁸. Also in the Balkans, it is one of the most traditional fruit trees (as well as fruits), known to the ancient Greeks and Thracians. Apple is one of the fruits most frequently mentioned (besides its use a Biblical symbol) in John the Exarch's *Hexameron*³⁹.

Grapes. Vines or grapes – besides being among the earliest cultivated plants – also appear to have been one of the most commonly consumed fruits in the Middle Ages, in the form of wine. Medieval people obtained from it much of the sugar supply necessary for the organism; but on the other hand, it is known to sometimes cause serious discords and disasters. Perhaps is it due to the latter reason that khan Krum outlawed winegrowing⁴⁰. Moreover, after Christianization, wine

³⁴ I. TARNANIDIS, *The Psalter...*; Б. ВЕЛЧЕВА, *Новооткрити ръкописи...*, *passim*.

³⁵ According to the information provided by Caucasologist Prof. V.B. Kovalevskaia.

³⁶ А.С. БУДИЛОВИЧ, *Первобытные славяне в их языке, быте и понятиях по данным лексикальным*, Киев 1878, p. 85–87.

³⁷ ЙОАН ЕКЗАРХ, *Шестоднев*, p. 231.

³⁸ Т. РОРОВА, *Archaeobotanic data about the origin of the fruit trees on the territory of Bulgaria. A view of the past*, АБу 9.1, 2005, p. 39.

³⁹ ЙОАН ЕКЗАРХ, *Шестоднев*, p. 106, 108, 111, 129.

⁴⁰ *Свидас*, [in:] *FGHB*, vol. V, ed. Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА et al., София 1964, p. 310.

became an integral part of the church ritual, symbolizing the *blood of God*. Thus, it is no accident that – just like apples – vine, grapes and wine are among the plants frequently mentioned by John the Exarch⁴¹.

Fig. This southern fruit is also frequently referred to by John the Exarch (in the *Sermon on the Third Day* in the *Hexameron*⁴²). Thanks to the paleoclimatological temperature maximum, it is possible that this tree was grown in early medieval Bulgaria; nonetheless, the possibility that fig fruit were imported from the neighbouring Byzantium for the needs of the local aristocracy should not be excluded.

Pear. Another fruit mentioned by John the Exarch as part of the plant kingdom created by God and thus clearly known to the early medieval Bulgarian⁴³.

Cherry. Is not found among the fruit trees listed by John the Exarch, but its presence in the flora surrounding early medieval Bulgarians and its culinary use by the latter population is evidenced by paleobotanical research⁴⁴. In fact, it is attested already in the earlier periods of the presence of Bulgarians on the Lower Danube.

Mulberry. Likewise not found among the fruit trees listed by John the Exarch, but again confirmed by paleobotanical analysis of early medieval archeological material⁴⁵.

The possibility should not be excluded that wild berries such as raspberries, blackberries, rosehips and others (all still found in forests of the Balkan Peninsula today) were consumed as well.

Nuts. Almonds and walnuts. These are mentioned by John the Exarch among the trees known to early medieval Bulgarians as providing edible fruit⁴⁶. Probably hazelnut was also found in wild state.

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The above-mentioned varieties probably do not exhaust the full range of foods of plant origin actually consumed in medieval Bulgaria, but the written sources, supported by paleobotanical data (extremely limited for the place and period in question), yield such a picture.

The aristocracy (especially the royal court) also made use of various imported items, supplied from different regions, predominantly from the Byzantine Empire. The diversity of food of plant origin in the southern neighbour of the First

⁴¹ ЙОАН ЕКЗАРХ, *Шестоднев*, p. 105–107, 126, 129.

⁴² ЙОАН ЕКЗАРХ, *Шестоднев*, p. 106, 108, 111, 128.

⁴³ ЙОАН ЕКЗАРХ, *Шестоднев*, p. 108.

⁴⁴ Ц. ПОПОВА, *Каталог...*, p. 142.

⁴⁵ Т. РОРОВА, *Archaeobotanic data...*, p. 41, table 1.

⁴⁶ ЙОАН ЕКЗАРХ, *Шестоднев*, p. 106, 110, 127.

Bulgarian Empire is eloquently documented by the *Geoponica*, a Byzantine agricultural encyclopedia⁴⁷; additional material is provided by Simeonov's research on fruit consumption in the empire⁴⁸.

According to the claims made by the anonymous author of the vita of St. Clement of Ohrid, there were only uncultivated trees in the Bulgarian lands before the advent of the saint⁴⁹. It is plausible that the population of Slavs and Bulgars, both new to the Balkans, did not know how to cultivate fruit trees. Given the Slavs' hunter/gatherer way of life in their ancient homeland, as well as the nomadic economy of the Bulgars, there is nothing unusual in the practice being unknown to them. Thus, the author of the vita states that St. Clement of Ohrid ...*transferred from the land of the Greeks all kinds of cultivated trees*⁵⁰. This makes it possible to suggest that these cultivated species included some that were absent from Bulgarian lands at that time, but had been present here during the Roman and Byzantine Ages. This would apply to peaches, apricots, plums, etc.⁵¹

Based on the frequency of references to different kinds of crops in the *Farmer's Laws* – one of the first Byzantine laws to be translated and implemented in the Bulgarian state – it could be argued that the primary focus of the Bulgarian farmer in the period following Christianization was on fields with cereal crops (of various kinds) and vineyards. Fruit trees and their cultivation remained somewhat peripheral to the interests of both the farmers themselves and those who caused damage to them⁵².

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Not a single recipe for a dish or a drink from the period under discussion has survived to our time, but based on certain indirect evidence an attempt may be made to reconstruct some of them.

Food from cereals

After being harvested, crops were threshed with threshing boards⁵³ and grain was stored in pots specially made for this purpose, or more usually in pits dug out

⁴⁷ *Геопоники. Византийская сельскохозяйственная энциклопедия X века*, ed., trans. Е.Э. Липшиц, Москва–Ленинград 1960.

⁴⁸ G. SIMEONOV, *Obst in Byzanz. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Ernährung im östlichen Mittelmeerraum*, Saarbrücken 2013.

⁴⁹ Ц. КРИСТАНОВ, И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Естествознанието в средновековна България*, София 1954, p. 52–53.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 52–53.

⁵¹ Т. РОРОВА, *Archaeobotanic data...*, p. 41, table 1; ЕАДЕМ, *Каталог...*, p. 133–141.

⁵² *Земеделски закон*, [in:] *FGHB*, vol. III, ed. Ив. ДУЙЧЕВ et al., София 1960, p. 209–220.

⁵³ Michael the Syrian informs us about the use of threshing boards, but for purposes quite different from threshing, by emperor Nicephorus I during his stay in the Bulgarian capital in 811. He recounts

in the floor of the house. Storing cereals in pots is a tradition inherited from Antiquity; its application should be ascribed to influence from the Byzantine Empire or to related local traditions. This practice, requiring the production of special grain storage vessels, was more labour-consuming, but also provided better storage for the grain. Pottery finds show that this method of storing grain was typical of palace centres⁵⁴ as well as aristocratic homes and monastery complexes.

Ordinary people in Bulgaria in the 7th–10th century kept their grain reserves at home or outside in special pits. Considering the small size of these pits and the fact that the necessary supply of grains for a family of at least four people is significantly larger than the amount that would fit into such a pit, it can be assumed that only short-term reserves of grain were stored in this way. Most probably, settlements included separate structures used as barns (recalling the *horrea* known from late antique settlements) where common stocks of cereal foods could be stored.

Bread and cereal foods. Since prehistoric times, bread in its many varieties has been one of humanity's basic foodstuffs, irrespective of differences pertaining to class or wealth.

Before it can be turned into bread, grain first needs to be ground into flour. Depending on their social status, the various classes of society consumed bread of different quality and composition; probably, aristocracy ate wheat bread, while the bread of ordinary people was made of flour obtained from wheat mixed with other grains (rye, barley, oats, millet), or from yet different grain crops. The situation regarding the distribution of bread was similar in the neighbouring Byzantium⁵⁵.

Grinding grain into flour was done in mills. Animal-driven mills were likely used, known since Antiquity. Besides, an innovation appeared during the period under discussion – watermills⁵⁶. The existence of these two types of mills is well documented in the *Farmer's Laws*⁵⁷. The only prerequisite for the construction of a mill was for it to be placed on a level ground. A watermill, on the other hand, had to be built on a deep or swiftly-flowing river that could drive the waterwheel, no matter whether the latter was positioned horizontally or vertically. The suggestion that watermills may have been located on the Asar-dere and generally in Pliska⁵⁸ is too daring and unprovable, given the extremely low flow rates of this and the surrounding rivulets as well as their seasonal nature.

that the atrocities of the emperor went as far as ordering the use of threshing boards for crushing small children. *Vide: Chronique de Michel le Syrien patriarch jacobite d'Antioch 1166–1199*, ed. J.-B. СНАВОТ, vol. III, Paris 1905, p. 17.

⁵⁴ See, for example, such pots found in Pliska: С. СТАНЧЕВ, *Разкопки...*, p. 191, fig. 10.

⁵⁵ Д. ДИМИТРОВ, *Масага...*, p. 22–23.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁵⁷ *Земеделски закон*, p. 219–220.

⁵⁸ К. КОНСТАНТИНОВ, *Храните...*, p. 19.

While the above-mentioned two ways of grinding grain are only documented by written sources, the use of the most primitive method of grinding grain – with quern-stones – is attested archaeologically both in the palace complex of Pliska⁵⁹ and in the inner city⁶⁰, as well as in other settlements of the First Bulgarian Empire⁶¹. In view of the small size and weight of these quern-stones, the grain was ground quite coarsely, yielding an output rather similar to fine groats. In order to achieve a finer grain, it was probably necessary to pass it through the quern-stones several times.

For obtaining fine flour free of husks, the palace complex and the monastery near the Great Basilica in Pliska used large stone mortars in accordance with the ancient tradition⁶². In this technique, the grain is wetted and crushed with a hammer in the mortar in order to remove the husks.

The Old Bulgarian word *бръшно* denotes *food, something to eat*⁶³. Based on this broader meaning of the word, one could try to connect it with other possibilities of the culinary use of grains. For example, the easiest way of preparing ready-to-eat food out of grain is by boiling it. This is the oldest, least labour-consuming and quickest way of cooking cereals suitable for human consumption. Grain (or groats obtained from it by grinding with quern-stones or crushing) could be cooked into a kind of porridge or into a drier form. The resulting product could be consumed on its own, seasoned with spices, or alongside meat, etc. It is precisely grain cooked into porridge that was the main food of Romans in the period of the Kingdom, for which reason they were called *porridge-boilers* by surrounding tribes⁶⁴. Another variant of porridge, but one prepared from rice – pilaf – was the

⁵⁹ Т. МИХАЙЛОВА, *Сгради и съоръжения на запад от Тронната палата в Плиска. X–XI в.*, [in:] *Плиска – Преслав*, vol. V, ed. Р. РАШЕВ, Шумен 1993, p. 170–184.

⁶⁰ Л. ДОНЧЕВА-ПЕТКОВА, *Сгради при южния сектор на западната крепостна стена на Плиска*, [in:] *Плиска – Преслав*, vol. V, p. 133, fig. 27.

⁶¹ С. МИХАЙЛОВ, Г. ДЖИНГОВ, В. ВЪЛОВ, В. ДИМОВА, *Ранносредновековно селище при с. Стърмен*, [in:] *Разкопки и проучвания*, vol. VII, София 1982, p. 17 (fig. 3, 8, 9, 10), p. 26, fig. 18–20; Х. ТОДОРОВА, *Архитектурата на средновековното селище*, [in:] *Дуранкулак...*, p. 45–48, fig. 12, 13.

⁶² К. ШКОРПИЛ, *Домашный быт...*, p. 307; П. ГЕОРГИЕВ, С. ВИТЛЯНОВ, *Архиепископията – манастир в Плиска*, София 2001, p. 145, fig. 77.

⁶³ *Старославянский словарь (по рукописям X–XI вв.)*, ed. Э. БЛАГОВА, Р.М. ЦЕЙТЛИН, Р. ВЕЧЕРКА, Москва 1994, p. 101; М. ЦИБРАНСКА-КОСТОВА, *Покаяната книжнина на Българското средновековие IX–XVIII в.*, София 2011, p. 72. As for the opinion expressed by К. Maksimovich, according to which the word is a “Moravism”, it obviously cannot be deemed correct, since all words previously defined by him as “Moravisms” have turned out to be of South Slavic origin. On the native origin of all of Maksimovich’s “Moravisms” cf. Р. СТАНКОВ, *О лексических моравизмах в древних славянских рукописях*. 3, *ПКШ* 10, 2008, p. 40–71. Moreover, Tsibranska-Kostova has located the word in question in the so-called *Tsarkovno skazanie (Church Legend)* – a text translated (possibly by Constantine of Preslav) into Old Bulgarian during the reign of Simeon – which may in fact completely invalidate Maksimovich’s claims. *Vide*: М. ЦИБРАНСКА-КОСТОВА, *Покаяната книжнина...*, p. 73.

⁶⁴ М.Е. СЕРГЕЕНКО, *Ремесленники Древнего Рима*, Ленинград 1968, p. 5–7 (and the sources cited therein).

main food of the Ottomans in the 15th–19th century; couscous fulfilled a similar role for the Bedouins. A remnant of this way of eating in traditional Bulgarian cuisine is the *kolivo* – boiled wheat. According to Dimitar Marinov, not a single vow or rite (related to religion, death etc.) could be performed without the *kolivo*. On par with bread, it was subject to great religious reverence⁶⁵. The link between boiled wheat and religious rite shows the great conservatism of this food and demonstrates once again that it is the predecessor of bread, playing an important role in the religious beliefs of our people.

Also related to the above-mentioned wide use of grain pulps as a staple food of the Bulgarians in the early Middle Ages is the distribution of quern-stones and their use in the settlements of the First Bulgarian Empire. As has been mentioned here already, in Pliska and some other settlements (Starmen, Durankulak) the existence of specific complexes with quern-stone grounds on which grain was milled has been well documented. In some other settlements, quern-stones have not been found at all⁶⁶. In yet different ones – some of which are identifiable as Slavic (Popina, Garvan, Kladentsi, Huma)⁶⁷ – fragments of quern-stones or whole quern-stones have been found, but not on quern-stone grounds and not used for the original purpose in the households. Instead, they were utilized as construction material, as well-carved stones. Basically, parts of quern-stones were used as furnace walls within dwellings⁶⁸ or for shaping the area in front of the furnace⁶⁹. The finding place of other quern-stone pieces discovered within houses is not specified⁷⁰. Vazharova explicitly states that only fragments were found, not whole quern-stones⁷¹.

The above unambiguously indicates that the quern-stones discovered in these Slavic and Slavic-Bulgar settlements were not used for their original purpose, i.e.

⁶⁵ Д. МАРИНОВ, *Народна вяра...*, p. 96, 716.

⁶⁶ В. ЙОТОВ, Г. АТАНАСОВ, *Скала. Крепост от X–XI в. до с. Кладенци, Тервелско*, София 1998; Т. ТОТЕВ, *Средновековна Виница*, Шумен 1996.

⁶⁷ Ж. ВЪЖАРОВА, *Славянски и славянобългарски селища в българските земи от края на VI–XI в.*, София 1965, p. 105; ЕАДЕМ, *Средновековното селище с. Гарван, Силистренски окръг VI–XI в.*, София 1986, p. 60–61; С. ВАКЛИНОВ, С. СТАНИЛОВ, *Кладенци ранносредновековно българско селище*, София 1981; Р. РАШЕВ, С. СТАНИЛОВ, *Старобългарското укрепено селище при с. Хума, Разградски окръг*, [in:] *Разкопки и проучвания*, vol. XVII, София 1987.

⁶⁸ Ж. ВЪЖАРОВА, *Славянски и славянобългарски селища...*, p. 105 (dwellings № 48, 55 and the three furnaces at dig XIII); ЕАДЕМ, *Средновековното селище...*, p. 99 (dwelling № 22), 100 (dwelling № 25), 131 (dwelling № 60), 140 (dwelling № 70), 164 (dwelling № 95), 166 (furnace under dwelling № 96); С. ВАКЛИНОВ, С. СТАНИЛОВ, *Кладенци...*, p. 19 (dwelling № III).

⁶⁹ Ж. ВЪЖАРОВА, *Славянски и славянобългарски селища...*, p. 21 (dwelling № 6); ЕАДЕМ, *Средновековното селище...*, p. 115 (dwelling № 42), 133 (dwelling № 63), 136 (dwelling № 66), 140 (dwelling № 70), 162 (dwelling № 92), 173 (dwelling № 102).

⁷⁰ Ж. ВЪЖАРОВА, *Средновековното селище...*; Р. РАШЕВ, С. СТАНИЛОВ, *Старобългарското укрепено селище...*, p. 32–33 (dwellings № 15, 16).

⁷¹ Ж. ВЪЖАРОВА, *Средновековното селище...*, p. 60.

for grinding grain into flour, but rather as handy building material (*spolia*), found near the settlement⁷².

Grain porridges, whether consumed only with seasoning or in conjunction with meat, constitute a nutritious food, a kind of bundle of bread and main dish. It takes less time to prepare than bread combined with another separate dish and requires much less effort and skill. In an age when quantity (or the very presence) of food was far more important than taste qualities, it was an essential circumstance. The consumption of porridges by the population of early medieval Bulgaria is mentioned by John the Exarch⁷³.

The above considerations on the status of quern-stones and the ways of consuming cereals are in full accord with the observations by Balabanov, who discovered quern-stones during the excavation of a settlement in the southwest corner of the outer city of Pliska. The fragments of quern-stones found at this site are made of hard sedimentary limestone with very large pores (up to 1 cm)⁷⁴. According to him, such quern-stones would not have been suitable even for grinding kibble; they must have served chiefly for removing husks from grains. These grains, which were merely husked, were not suitable for making bread, but could only serve for the preparation of a crude porridge⁷⁵. Subsequently, the author comes to the same conclusions as reached here, observing that the main food of the ordinary population of early medieval Bulgaria was comprised of various kinds of porridge.

For the group of villages where quern-stone platforms were found together with obvious traces of their use it can be claimed with confidence that their residents used and made bread. More interesting is the other group of settlements, where quern-stones have never been found or where they were used for purposes quite different from the original ones. This group includes settlements certainly identified as Slavic – Garvan and Popina, which is blatantly incompatible with the notion that Slavs were traditional producers and consumers of bread⁷⁶.

As regards the baking of bread, it is generally assumed that special ceramic pans were used, such as traditionally found in Slavic settlements; ethnographic parallels with the so-called *podnitsa* (a traditional earthenware vessel) have been pointed out⁷⁷. This parallel with the *podnitsa* is dubious, however; technologically,

⁷² As a rule, settlements from the time of the First Bulgarian Empire were established on top of earlier ones from Thracian or Roman times.

⁷³ ЙОАН ЕКЗАРХ, *Шестоднев*, p. 108.

⁷⁴ Т. БАЛАБАНОВ, *Селище в югозападната част на Външния град на Плиска*, [in:] *Плиска – Преслав*, vol. X, ed. P. РАШЕВ, Варна 2004, p. 156.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ F. CURTA, *The Making of Slavs. History and Archaeology of Lower Danube Region, c. 500–700*, Cambridge 2001, p. 295–297.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 295; В. БАВИЋ, *Срепунја, срепна, podnica – posebno značajan oslonac za atribuciju srednjovekovnih arheoloških nalazišta Balkanskog poluostrva Slovenima poreklom sa istoka*, [in:] *Materijali IX. Simpozijum srednjovekovne sekcije Arheološkog društva Jugoslavije*, Belgrade 1972, p. 101–123; С. ВРИОНИС, *Славянското общество на Балканите*, София 1999, p. 68–69.

the manufacturing of Slavic cooking pans and that of the *podnitsa* are quite dissimilar. Cooking pans were products of pottery workshops, the same ones that produced the other major ceramic form typical for the Slavs – pots. The same composition of clay and an identical way of firing was employed for the production of both cooking pans and pots⁷⁸.

Unlike cooking pans, which were part of the output of pottery workshops, *podnitsas* were – according to data from popular culture – invariably the products of the work of each individual family. They were obligatorily made on the feast day of St. Jeremiah, and on that day only. Clay was brought and mixed by the younger girls and brides of the family, along with those of the whole village; this process was universally accompanied by ritual songs and dances. Then, back at home, the mixed clay was delivered into the hands of the older (and hence more skilled) women; they molded the *podnitsa* and the *vrashnik* (a cone-shaped object used as a cover) for the family and left them to dry in the sun⁷⁹. The production of the *podnitsa* concludes at this stage; after drying, the *podnitsa* is ready for baking bread. If exposed to poor weather conditions for a longer time, it begins to crumble.

The common ritual songs and dances that accompanied the collecting and mixing of clay reveal the archaism of this ritual. This is further confirmed by the fact that each family prepared their *podnitsa* individually. Marinov emphasizes that the production of the *podnitsa* was only taken over by professional potters toward the end of the 19th century⁸⁰.

In view of the above-mentioned differences in the technology of making Slavic cooking pans on the one hand and the *podnitsa* on the other hand, it could be argued that these cooking pans had a different purpose than what has been thought so far, i.e. baking bread⁸¹. Note that one more compulsory element of the ethnographic picture of bread production is missing in these cooking pans: the *vrashnik*⁸². This is yet another argument against the theory postulating a relationship between early medieval cooking pans and the *podnitsa*.

Nonetheless, *podnitsas* from the times of the First Bulgarian Empire do exist; but they are static. They have been found in close proximity to the above-mentioned quern-stone equipment. Other objects found nearby typically include furnaces for baking bread⁸³. These complexes can already be connected with bread production with a high degree of certainty.

⁷⁸ On clay composition and firing methods in both types of vessels *vide*: И.П. РУСАНОВА, *Славянские древности VI–VII вв.*, Москва 1976.

⁷⁹ Д. МАРИНОВ, *Народна вяра...*, p. 192, 625–626.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 625–626.

⁸¹ F. CURTA, *The Making...*, p. 295; С. ВРИОНИС, *Славянското общество...*, p. 68–69 – who cites a study by Babić published in 1977.

⁸² Д. МАРИНОВ, *Народна вяра...*, p. 625–626.

⁸³ Т. МИХАЙЛОВА, *Сради...*, p. 170–184, fig. 3, 9, 17, 18, 19; С. МИХАЙЛОВ, Г. ДЖИНГОВ, В. ВЪЛОВ, В. ДИМОВА, *Ранносредновековно селище...*, p. 84, fig. 14, 16; А. МИЛЧЕВ, *Материали, открити*

Bread consumption may be associated with different population groups, but not categories. Thus, the population can be grouped in two highly distinct parts according to the way grains were used: consumed in the form of bread or as porridge. Whether these groups can be associated with particular regions or some other characteristics would have to be determined by future (more specific) research.

What kind of bread was produced and consumed in pagan early medieval Bulgaria – leavened or unleavened – can only be guessed at. Following the adoption of Christianity as the official religion through Constantinople, the consumption of unleavened bread was hardly possible⁸⁴, except in the short period of time when papal missionaries were present. The alleged use of both types of bread, and especially the prevalence of unleavened over leavened, are unprovable conjectures⁸⁵.

Concerning the method and stages of the preparation of bread, nothing definite can be said. The ethnographically attested use of rolling pins does not automatically entail their presence and application in the early Middle Ages, contrary to the opinion of Konstantinov⁸⁶. The first mention of them – and at the same time the earliest information about them – only dates back to the Ottoman era. Rolling pins are associated with the making of *banitsa* (a type of traditional filo pastry), on which there is no information dating back to the Middle Ages; again, evidence for this type of pastry only comes to light in Ottoman times⁸⁷.

Thus, bread was baked in the above-mentioned *podnitsa* or on ante-furnace platforms within the housing. In both cases it was necessary to preheat these spaces using embers. After a certain temperature was achieved, the embers were removed and the bread was put inside in their place for baking⁸⁸. The variant suggested by Konstantinov, involving baking the bread over the hot embers, is out of the question⁸⁹. Putting the bread directly on the embers would merely have led to the burning of the dough; no bread could ever be obtained in this way.

Apart from the *podnitsa*, bread was also baked in furnaces, much larger than the standard ones used for heating the house⁹⁰.

в занаятчийските и търговските помещения северно от Южната порта на Вътрешния град, [in:] *Плиска – Преслав*, vol. I, ed. Д. АНГЕЛОВ, Ж. ВЪЖАРОВА, София 1979, p. 150–155, fig. 41; Т. БАЛАБАНОВ, *Селище...*, p. 141, fig. 33/6.

⁸⁴ Д. ДИМИТРОВ, *Масата...*, p. 23.

⁸⁵ К. КОНСТАНТИНОВ, *Храните...*, p. 19.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁸⁷ И. ПАВЛОВ, *Присъствия...*, p. 16.

⁸⁸ The author's own observations.

⁸⁹ К. КОНСТАНТИНОВ, *Храните...*, p. 20.

⁹⁰ *Vide*: Г. ДЖИНГОВ, *Археологически проучвания във Вътрешния град на Плиска*, [in:] *Плиска – Преслав*, vol. V, p. 111–113, fig. 7.

Apparently, the emergence and consolidation of bread as a staple food of the Bulgarians should be dated to the time of Byzantine rule, as it occurred under Byzantine influence. In the 12th century, Gregory Antiochus wrote about several different types of bread among the Bulgarians, the most common being the one with ashes sticking to it⁹¹, i.e. bread baked in a *podnitsa* or in the ante-furnace space (as described above).

In view of the above comparison concerning the way of making bread and porridge from grains and added meat, as well as the adduced examples confirming the fact that certain “classic” peoples that created empires used porridges as their staple food, it can be claimed that the population of the First Bulgarian Empire subsisted predominantly on porridges.

There was no reason for this way of preparing the staple food not to be preserved until the times following Christianization. It was repeatedly pointed out above that the porridge obtained after boiling could be prepared both with and without meat. Moreover, the plants from the bean family – lentils, broad beans, peas and chickpeas (all well-known to – and widely used by – the population of the First Bulgarian Empire), are also convenient and could be used to make porridges and soups as they still are now. Besides, next to the salty variants, these porridges can easily be made sweet through the addition of fruit or honey.

Vegetables in food. Vegetables – the separate kinds of which were few in number and rarely explicitly distinguished – were collectively referred to as *zele* (i.e., the word now meaning *cabbage* in Bulgarian). They were probably used both as sides accompanying other meals and as separate dishes. John the Exarch’s alleged reference to garlic being cooked, purportedly present in older translations of his *Hexameron* and baffling scholars such as Trifonov⁹², has proved false and has been subsequently corrected.

Fruit. In the seasons when various fruits ripen, they were picked and consumed fresh or as a supplement to other foods. In late autumn, winter and early spring, the population made use of fruit dried during the warm parts of the year; these were consumed directly or in the form of a stew or compote. Items that could be used for this purpose included apples, pears, grapes and figs. It is probable that certain spices were also preserved and used in this same way.

* * *

⁹¹ J. DARROUZES, *Deux lettres de Gregoire Antiochos ecrites de Bulgarie vers 1173*, Bsl 23.2, 1963, p. 280, 283; Григорий Антиох, [in:] FGHB, vol. VII, ed. Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА et al., София 1968, p. 266; Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА, П. ТИВЧЕВ, *Нови данни за историята на Софийската област през последните десетилетия на византийското владичество*, ИИИ 14/15, 1964, p. 315–324.

⁹² Ю. ТРИФОНОВЪ, *Сведения изъ старобългарския животъ в Шестоднева на Йоана Екзарха*, СБАН 35, 1926, p. 17–18; К. КОНСТАНТИНОВ, *Храните...*, p. 22.

According to our scarce data, food of plant origin in the diet of an ordinary early medieval Bulgarian was characterized by simplicity and modest variety, reduced to the bare essentials. The resulting picture enables the assertion that the basis of the diet was comprised of porridge made of grains, diversified and supplemented with vegetables, fruit and meat.

A wide variety of fruits and vegetables whose existence or use in the period of the First Bulgarian Empire is not supported by any direct proof may perhaps be implicitly posited for the diet of the early medieval Bulgarian, in view of their being well-documented in the neighboring Byzantium.

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Abstract. The article surveys the available data on food of plant origin used in the period of the First Bulgarian Empire. The information is based on written sources and paleobotanical data, which show the presence of diverse plants used for food. It is also evident that these data are rather scarce compared to those from Byzantium. No food recipes have survived from this period, but there is some secondary evidence allowing the reconstruction of some foods. It suggests that grain porridges, rather than bread, were the main food.

Keywords: First Bulgarian Empire, food, vegetables, grains, fruits, sources, palaeobotanics, Porridge, bread and bread making

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