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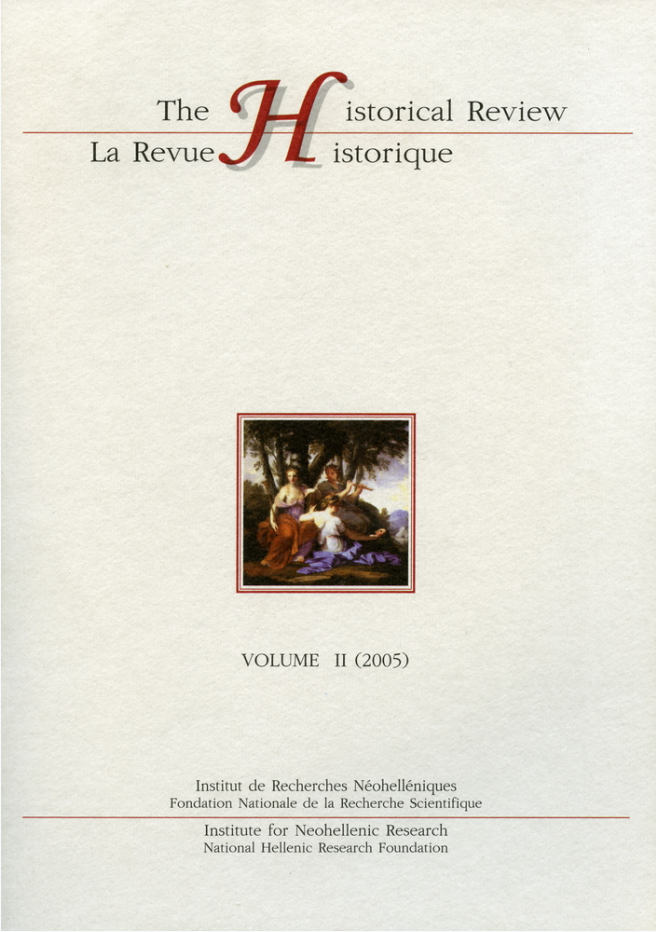

Nikolay Aretov, Natsionalna Mitologia i Natsionalna literatura. Siuzheti, Izgrazhdaschti Bŭlgarskata Natsionalna Identichnost v Slovesnostta ot XVIII i XIX Vek

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Nikolay Aretov,
NATSIONALNA MITOLOGIA I NATSIONALNA LITERATURA. SIUZHETI, IZGRAZHDASCHTI BŬLGARSKATA NATSIONALNA IDENTICHNOST V SLOVESNOSTTA OT XVIII I XIX VEK
[= NATIONAL MYTHOLOGY AND NATIONAL LITERATURE: SUBJECTS CONSTITUTING THE BULGARIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE LITERATURE OF THE 18th AND 19th CENTURIES],
Sofia: Kralitsa Mab, 2006, 544 pages.

This newest work by Professor Aretov takes forward one of the issues which has already been the subject of his researches, namely the use and exploitation of myths and mythical constructions as features of national ideology and mentality.

If we take into account the modern theories on nationalism and in particular the theory of the "Imagined Communities" (Benedict Anderson),[1] we become cognisant of the crucial role which has been played by mythological concepts and constructions and national myths and legends in the shaping and the consolidation of a national community. Bulgaria does not escape from this rule. Aretov's "national mythology" amounts largely to the workings of Anderson's "national imagination". In comparison to the ancient, classical mythology, but also to the folklore and the myths of the folk tales, whose structure and patterns have been analysed by authors like Vladimir Propp (in his *Morphology of the Folktale*), Aretov notes that "the national mythology is a secondary mythology and is formed at a comparatively late period" – with the emergence of national ideology, after the middle of the eighteenth century.

National mythology uses to a great extent the structures and patterns of the traditional ("primary") mythology, such as the mythology of folk culture but also of Christianity. Nationalism has been quite successful in transforming the

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, London and New York, 1991. For a transposition and adaptation of Anderson's scheme to the situation in the Balkans see the classic contribution by P. M. Kitromilides, "'Imagined Communities' and the Origins of the National Question in the Balkans", *European History Quarterly* 19, no. 2, 1989, pp. 149-192 [= *id.*, *Enlightenment, Nationalism, Orthodoxy*, Aldershot: Variorum, 1994, Study No. XI].

various patterns of the "mythical universe" in which we all live, and which is composed of conscious and subconscious presuppositions and faiths, as well as desires and fears, into a hierarchical construction in which the dominant myths have been "nationalised" and the basic positioning of a person or a community is between "own" and "stranger" or "other". The success of nationalism is to a great extent due to the fact that – as it is observed by Aretov –

> the change is not so radical, as, at least among the Bulgarians and in general in the Balkans and in Europe, the new mythological structure (nationalism) does not reject the old one (Christianity) but on the contrary – declares the harmony with the latter, in spite of the fact that it changes it institutionally – not only among the Bulgarians but also among the other Christian Balkan peoples (p. 34).[2]

This was the result of a long process which went through the nationalisation of religion (which in the case of Bulgaria was the main arena of the struggle for national affirmation culminating in the creation of a Bulgarian national church, the Exarchy, in 1870). However, until this happened, it should be noted that key figures among the intellectuals who were the initiators of Bulgarian national ideology shared a condescending attitude towards the Orthodox religion, which they conscientiously wanted to change with a new modernist system of values based on national ideology. This attitude is often expressed in early nationalist literary and non-fictional works such as, in particular, Zahari Stoyanov's *Notes on the Bulgarian Uprisings* (1884-1892), one of the pillars of the Bulgarian national ideology after the liberation and the creation of the Bulgarian Principality (1878).

The focus on the mythical features of the national identity has been obvious in the earlier work by Nikolay Aretov, *The Bulgarian Revival and Europe*, Sofia 2001 (in Bulgarian), and in particular in his article "The Kidnapped Identity and the Myth of the Book Burning", *Balkan Studies* 42 (2001). The latter subject is also further elaborated and included in the present work. *The Bulgarian Revival and Europe* had focused – among other subjects which have to do with the relationship of the Bulgarian Revival movement with Europe – on the mental representations by the Bulgarian intelligentsia of the position of Bulgaria in the world. In this context were presented in particular the various theories on the origin of the Bulgarians which were in vogue in the period of the Bulgarian Revival period (roughly from 1806-1878), either as the legacy of medieval, pre-nationalistic traditions, or as a conscious effort by intellectuals to

[2] Page numbers in parentheses refer to the edition under review.

"construct" or to *imagine* a glorious past which would give to the Bulgarians (as they entered into the nationalist era) a dignified position among other nations. The first such theory situates the Bulgarians in the biblical tradition and unites them with the Orthodox Slavs (it is expressed in particular in the *Slav-Bulgarian History* by Paisii Hilendarski, which was written in 1762). Another theory, which was developed in the middle of the nineteenth century, mainly on the basis of etymological research, linked the Bulgarians to the Indo-Europeans and the Bulgarian language to Sanskrit. This theory was promoted by some of the most fervent Bulgarian Romantic nationalists (in particular Georgi Rakovski) in their preparation for an all-out battle with the Greeks for political and cultural domination in the Balkans. Some other theories about the origin of the Bulgarians (the "Sarmatian", the "Scandinavian", the "Hunnish" ones) were even more marginal and did not play a very important role beyond stirring passions among the circles of the intellectuals.

The *National Mythology* takes forward these subjects and enriches them with a real compendium of the various mythical constructions and types which formed the core of Bulgarian national ideology since the beginning of the period which became known as the Bulgarian Revival, as they are reflected in national literature. To this purpose the author examined a number of sources which belong to the canon of the Bulgarian literary tradition – poetry and fiction (short stories, drama) but also non-fiction (in particular polemical essays from the time of the Bulgarian Revival, but also historical works and memoirs).

The book's extensive Introduction discusses the various modern concepts of identity, the contribution of mythological constructions to the content of national identity, as well as the main themes of the Bulgarian national mythology. The author remarks that:

> the national mythology is a mental construction, which is expressed in literature, in educational, journalistic and scientific texts, in folklore, in local legends and published texts, which are distributed in ways known from the medieval literature (p. 477).

This means that the national culture is communicated to us by the agency of its more biased interpreters. The author remarks that most preserved texts were written by those members of the intelligentsia who claimed to have been speaking in the name of the people, but who represent their own views of the event. He underlines that we do not know what the view of the Vogorides

family was,[3] nor of other representatives of the higher echelons of Bulgarian society, and of course we know almost nothing about the views of the mass of the illiterate peasants, whose views the members of the intelligentsia claimed to represent: "The national mythology is discussion *on* the people, and in no case is it the undisputed voice *of* the people – something which is hardly possible" (p. 480).

The author further proceeds to discuss briefly the contribution of early Bulgarian historiography to the creation of national myths. The main focus is upon fiction and non-fiction works which belong to the "canon" of Bulgarian literature of the Bulgarian Revival period and thereafter and their key role in creating the main national myths. Works such as the *Mountain Roamer* (1857) by Georgi Rakovski, the *Unhappy Family* (1860) by Vasil Droumev and the *Lost Stanka* by Ilia Blŭskov, as well as Vasil Popovitch and Liuben Karavelov's short stories, and historical memoirs – in particular the *Notes on the Bulgarian Uprisings* by Zahari Stoyanov – constitute the backbone of the author's analysis. The main "national myths" constructed or promoted by these literary works are presented and commented upon (the myths of the kidnapped identity, kidnapped faith and kidnapped language and culture; the motif of the "unhappy family", of the "hero-protector of the people"), as well as the parodies of those myths which are often present in literary works of the period and testify to the existence of a certain consciousness of the artificial ("constructed") character of those myths.

Mythical constructions can be based on real facts – which are then exaggerated and mystified by the initiators and authors of the corresponding "myth"– but most often they are not based on facts: convenient facts are invented later on

[3] It is indeed true that (from what is known to date) the archive of Stefanos Vogorides, the patriarch of the Vogorides family and a high Ottoman official, has not been preserved. I would like to underline though that a substantial body of letters of Stefanos Vogorides to his son-in-law Constantine Mousouros has been preserved in the Mousouros Archive at the Gennadeios Library in Athens. These letters are written mostly in Greek (one of the main languages spoken in the Vogorides house, next to Turkish and French) and contain some marginal references to issues relating to identity (for instance, defending an understanding between Christians and Muslims at the time of the Ottoman period which is known as Tanzimat), and which I have presented in my (as yet unpublished) doctoral thesis, *Paisii Hilendarski and Sofroni Vrachanski: From Orthodox Ideology to the Shaping of Bulgarian Identity* (defended on 9 January 2006 at the Department of Political Science, University of Athens).

the basis of the ideas to be promoted. Nikolay Aretov does not discuss the reality of the facts which support the various mythical constructions – except, probably, in relation to the myth of the burned books – but he rightly points out that the most important element of the mythology is its use. He examines, however, to what extent (in particular in more recent times) there have been efforts to express doubts about the veracity of the various facts which support the Bulgarian national myths – and this is a serious contribution to the understanding of the workings of the formation of nationalism.

The book also discusses in some detail the issues around the phenomena of what the author terms "the economy of women", i.e. the transfer of the woman to a community different from her own. This covers the contacts of "own" women with foreigners or "own" men with foreign women in the context of marriage or relationships of a sexual character. Here enter the motif of the "unhappy family", the motif of the kidnapped Bulgarian woman (one of its variants being the motif of the "temptations of the Bulgarian woman"), but also the motif of the "unfaithful foreign woman" in various versions. The examined texts exalt and celebrate what is "one's own" and revile, demonise and scorn what is "stranger" (of another faith or of another nation). Very often this subject is linked with the issue of the reception of modern civilisation.

Instead of conclusions, the book ends with reflections on the authenticity of key texts which have contributed to the creation of some Bulgarian national myths (especially those reputedly of folk origin) and a short discussion of the issue of "dominating and suppressed voices". The book remains open-ended as the author concludes that further analytical research in the long-run could add "more depth and a tri-dimensional perspective to the images which we create about ourselves and through which we perceive the other" (p. 481).

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Among the various elements which constitute the Bulgarian national mythology, Aretov discerns positive and negative myths, which are however intertwined and in most constructions presented together. I think the most important contribution of this book is to present and analyse in all its aspects the myth representing Bulgaria as a *kidnapped valuable object* or *treasure* as the *key myth* of the Bulgarian Revival. Bulgaria and the Bulgarian identity in its various incarnations (innocent boy or youth, maid, "unhappy family", faith, [medieval] state, old valuable books) are understood as a *treasure* which

somebody (an archetypal "enemy", aided by a "cheating ally") wishes to conquer or kidnap. This is the *founding negative myth of the Bulgarian national mythology,* which finds a correspondence among a number of positive myths, in particular the myth of the hero, defender of the nation or of the traditional Bulgarian community, in most cases the *haidutin* (equivalent to the Greek *kleftis*) who takes to the mountains and challenges the power of the "Turk", the "Phanariot" and sometimes their local ally, the presumed "hellenized" local notable (*tchorbadjia*).

The main enemy in this nationalist mythology is the Greek or, in some variants, the Turk or Muslim (who, however, in most cases is aided by the "Greek" in the role of the "cheating ally"). It is known that the affirmation of the modern Bulgarian national identity has been done against the Greek element in the social and cultural life in Bulgaria, therefore the Greeks (Phanariots in particular) are supposed to be either those who have kidnapped the Bulgarian treasures or helped the Turks to do the same. The Greeks and the Bulgarians constituted one community under the Ottoman Empire and probably even before, within the common Byzantine Orthodox culture. In fact, as Professor Aretov rightly points out, in the seventeenth century and eighteenth century – before the development of the Bulgarian nationalist ideology – the unity of the Orthodox and the absence of conflict between Greeks and Bulgarians was the dominant approach, as shown in the autobiography of Parthenius Pavlović (Silistra, 1695 - Sremski Karlovci, 1760). In order for the Greeks to become convenient enemies for the nationalist mythology, many facts have therefore been substantially reworked or invented. This "reworking" of facts is in particular true for the myth of the burned books. This also largely applies to the issue of the "kidnapped Church" – that is, the closing down of the Ohrid Archbishopric, which, according to the Bulgarian national mythology of the period of the Bulgarian Revival, had been Bulgarian, in the national sense, and its abolition was due to a Greek (Phanariot) plan to conquer an element of the Bulgarian treasure.

In the works of fiction of the Revival period prevails a presentation of facts following a mythological pattern and aiming at showing that past events which are at the core of the Bulgarian national mythology were indeed of a *dramatic character* and there was a genuine *popular tradition* about them. The evocation of a popular tradition has been considered the most secure means to claim the authenticity of those events in the absence of other sources. The mythological pattern prevails also in the non-fiction prose works of the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries (starting from the *Slav-Bulgarian History* by Paisii Hilendarski, completed in 1762). At the other end of the historical spectrum a synthesis of all key elements of the Bulgarian national mythology (covering the Ottoman era, the suffering and resulting resistance of the Bulgarians during the Revival period and the role of national education) is provided by the works by Ivan Vazov (1850-1921), in particular his novel *Under the Yoke* (1894).

A very important contribution of the work by Professor Aretov is the presentation of the relationship between the revived Bulgarian identity and (Western) civilisation. By examining a number of literary works from the Revival period (in particular theatrical plays), Professor Aretov shows how the majority of the literary figures of the Bulgarian Revival sided with the local village tradition *against Western civilisation*, which is shown as a "badly understood civilisation": "Literature (which is a new phenomenon at the time) prefers to express itself as the spokesperson of the old and traditional values, in correspondence with the dominating ideology of the time of the Revival" (p. 470). Western culture and morals are presented as a *fashion* and through the deeds and words of comical figures (which are often foreigners, Greeks, Romanians, even Turks), to which the genuine Bulgarian tradition ought to resist. This approach is in line with the well-known idea from the literature of the period that "patriotism is the highest moral category" and that this category is placed above "the Law" (p. 470). In this context Western culture is criticised for "putting human life above honour", and even a serious criminal act such as murder is presented under a positive light when honour and protection of the national values are at stake.

Professor Aretov shows clearly how the Bulgarian national identity has been based on myths and mythical constructions which have formed the ideology and identity of numerous Bulgarians since the middle of the nineteenth century. The problem we face in this context is to what extent the exposure of these myths at the beginning of the twenty-first century could present a problem for the Bulgarian national identity today. Other national communities in the Balkans face the same problem. It is a pity that works like this one by Professor Aretov remain confined within the limits of their own national language. A wider dissemination of this kind of work in neighbouring countries would contribute to a better understanding of the content of Bulgarian nationalism. A comparison of the various national mythologies would then make apparent to what extent the diverse Balkan nationalisms are communicating vessels, because many of the mythologies developed by those

nationalisms in the nineteenth century (and sometimes later) follow common patterns. According to Aretov, the Bulgarian national mythology is patterned on the effort to confer mythological features to the movement of the Revival itself. This effort, according to some earlier scholars, was based on a Greek pattern (that of the national regeneration in the period before and after the War of Independence). This initially Greek model was then followed by Bulgarian intellectuals, who (as it is known) had extensive Greek education. Pierre Voillery showed recently to what extent Bulgarian nationalism has been based on the Greek national ideology.[4]

If Professor Aretov observes that the Bulgarian national mythology has been based on and used a pre-existing mythological pattern of understanding of what is "one's own" and what is "other" or "stranger", namely the mythological structure of Christianity, he does not discuss the mechanism by means of which this earlier mythological construction was transformed and radically changed into an ethnocentric view of the world. Of course this matter is much larger and probably does not enter into the scope of the present work. It is however one of the key problems of the study of nationalism and it deserves further serious research. In the case of the various Balkan nationalist ideologies and movements – including the Greek one – this process has been so successful from the point of view of nationalism that (in the course of a short period, hardly two or three generations) the traditional world view of the Orthodox Church was radically transformed into an ethnocentric one. Consequently, all mythological constructions of Christianity have taken a national colour, to the extent that the average member of today's national communities or "national" churches in the Balkans does not even suspect that the association of nation and religion poses serious problems of coherence.

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Professor Aretov's book should make us think seriously about the need to further demystify the national mythologies in the Balkans. Apart from the occasional criticism of the one or the other national myth, there has not been any systematic study of the process of myth-creation as a key element of national ideologies since the nineteenth century, nor an analysis of the historical circumstances contributing to the genesis of such myths. Professor

[4] Pierre Voillery, "L'Hellénisme et la Renaissance nationale bulgare. Acculturation, modèle ou matrice?", *Balkan Studies* 41, 1 (2000), pp. 139-156.

Aretov's book is a key contribution to the analysis of the Bulgarian national mythology, but even here there may be a need for further study. Many of the historical myths which have been developed by the Bulgarian intelligentsia and have haunted the minds of patriots during the various stages of the Bulgarian Revival period are absent from Professor Aretov's book (for instance, the presumed presence of Slavs in the Balkan Peninsula since antiquity and the supposed ancient Slavic folk-songs; the claimed descent of modern Bulgarians from Alexander the Great; the claimed Bulgarian origin of Cyril and Methodius; or even the marginal theory about the Hunnish origin of the Bulgarians; but also some of the most persistent myths from the period of the Bulgarian Uprisings before the establishment of the Bulgarian Principality in 1878, i.e. the "sanctification" of the revolutionary Vassil Levski, as well as the conversion to Islam of Slavic-speaking communities in Bulgaria[5] and so on).

The analysis of all these myths on the basis of the methods of modern critical research should help us to reach a better understanding of the real pulse of the historical period when the various elements of the national mythology were elaborated. We should see the work by Professor Aretov as a serious contribution to the creation of a more realistic idea about the modern Bulgarian nation, its position in history and its relationship to other nations.

Vassilis Maragos

[5] This subject has been researched extensively in Bulgaria. Cf., in particular, Maria Todorova, "Conversion to Islam as a Trope in Bulgarian Historiography", in *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*, Maria Todorova (ed.), London 2004, pp. 129-157.