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THE SOURCES MATTER: ON AN ERRONEOUS CONCEPT
CONCERNING RANSOM AND EXCHANGE OF CAPTIVES
IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL BALKANS

In the long-awaited and recently published second volume of *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: AD 500 – AD 1420*, the interested reader will find a number of impressive studies. The zeal and efforts of the contributors turn out to be decisive when it comes to the aspects of slavery in the medieval era. A number of debatable peculiarities are presented and analyzed in depth. Especially when it comes to “various ways of becoming a slave; the slave-trading networks ... the relationship between slavery and empire; the spectrum of dependency; the central roles of gender, sexual relations, and childhood...” as well as the lives in slavery and opportunities for social mobility and manumission (Perry et al. 2021: 5–6). Given the emphasis on the latest contributions and concepts on slavery in the Middle Ages and the undoubted positive aspects of the wide chronological, geographical and thematic scope, or the critical evaluative overview of the previous achievements, there can be little doubt that the essays in the volume in question would trigger new scholars’ activity on the topic. This is certainly true for the present short text. What is decisive for its composition is Hussein Fancy’s chapter named *Captivity, Ransom, and Manumission, 500 – 1420*, and more precisely the generalizing and in fact erroneous statement that “no evidence of ransom or exchange exists during the Byzantine wars against the Russians, Bulgars, and Slavs from the seventh to tenth centuries. The Byzantines simply enslaved their enemies in these wars because the military strength of the Byzantine armies was manifested and uncontested, making exchange unnecessary or irrelevant” (Fancy 2021: 61). In striving for objectivity, it should be specified that Hussein

Fancy's text is interesting and definitely informative enough. His study keeps in focus the Arab-Byzantine wars, the Crusader Levant, as well as the Muslim-Christian rivalry on the Iberian Peninsula, a characteristic that also must be taken into consideration (Fancy 2021: 70). Besides, the interest in specific clashes is completely understandable. On the other hand, however, when it comes to the situation with captives' ransom and exchange in Byzantium, ignoring the particularities of the conflicts in Southeastern Europe is counterproductive and leads to not quite correct generalizations or leaves deficits in the presentation of aspects and problems in the outlined problematic.

As for the ransom and the exchange of captives in the Middle Ages, regardless of the limited volume of the present text, it seems appropriate to recall that although they are sometimes mentioned side by side, they are actually two separate practices. The ransom of those who fell into enemy hands was practiced in Eurasia both before the beginning and after the end of the medieval epoch. Already in the early Byzantine era, the liberation of imperial subjects by redeeming them from enemy captivity was carried out not only by the secular authorities. The late Roman/early Byzantine law regulates both the commitments of the relatives to search for and ransom their captive family members, as well as the role and obligations of the church hierarchs in the specified efforts. (Cf. Buckland 1908: 304–312; Levy 1943; Osiek 1981; Connolly 2006: 116–117; Lenski 2008; Lenski 2011; Rotman 2012a: 230–232, 238–247; Grubbs 2013: 57; Христов 2017: 33–41). The so-called *allagia* – the practice of exchanging prisoners of war, mentioned by a number of Byzantine authors in the various type of texts, at first glance seems the simpler solution. A closer look, however, suggests that it requires a greater bilateral commitment by authorities on both sides of the conflict. The minimum requirement is (especially in the case of a reciprocal exchange) to have a sufficient number of rival warriors and subjects who are in captivity so that they can be exchanged for combatants and non-combatants caught up in enemy hands.

A number of the early medieval accounts concerning the application of both practices in Byzantium's conflicts with rivals in the Balkans gives sufficient grounds for revision and reconsideration of the Fancy statement in question. Perhaps, before paying attention to these reasons, it must be clarified that the mere listing of Slavs, Bulgarians and Rus' leads to neglecting well-known essential details (Obolensky 1966)¹. The present lines, however, are not written due to the

¹ The development of the Southern Slavic tribes did not proceed in the same manner. Some of them never managed to build early medieval states and became the object of the Byzantine Reconquista [i.e., imposition of political supremacy, subjugation, Christianization, integration and assimilation, but not mass-scale enslavement at all]. Until the late tenth century, the subjugation of the Balkan Slavs was most successful in the Peloponnese, mainland Greece and the area around

peculiarities concerning differences between the polities of the Southern Slavs, early medieval Bulgaria and the Principality of Rus'. As has been specified, the real reason stems from the claim of a lack of ransoms and exchanges between the Byzantines and their opponents in the Balkans (mostly with the Bulgarians) which contradicts the information in the sources. Any publication dealing with captives' ransom, exchange or manumission in early medieval Southeastern Europe must take into consideration a few particularly illustrative examples:

1. One of the earliest notices is in the *Miracula Sancti Demetrii* and refers to the arrangements following the Slavic-Avar siege of Thessaloniki in 617. The hagiographer notes:

In addition, since they had made peace, then the barbarians went without fear to the wall and sold cheaply the captives they had taken, and various things for barter (ГИБИ 3: 139).

And if these arrangements between the besieged and the besiegers after the cessation of hostilities can be attributed to some "arbitrariness" of the local authorities and the common decision of the Thessalonians, then another known redemption of imperial subjects caught in Slavic captivity is definitely related to a decision at the highest management level. Undoubtedly, Theophanes the Confessor's account of the exchange of captives between Byzantium and the Caliphate in 769 is of high significance. Given the scholars' wide interest in aspects of Arab-Byzantine wars, its frequent mention in the relevant studies is hardly surprising. However, this was not the only return of Byzantine captives to the Empire during the year in question. At the time when in the East a group of imperial subjects were benefiting from the first *allagia* between Byzantines and Arabs, an equally impressive release of another group of captives was being

Thessaloniki and had limited results north of the *Via Egnatia*. In the Danube plain as well as in the valleys of Struma, Vardar and Morava rivers, Slavic groups were absorbed by early medieval Bulgaria, while in the western parts of the peninsula Croats and Serbs built their own vital principalities (Fine 1991: 25–66, 69–72; Живковић 2002; Curta 2006: 96–121, 134–147, 191–200, 210–213; Komatina 2010). It cannot be disregarded either that from the 680s until the triumph of Emperor Basil II (r. 976–1025) in the second decade of the eleventh century, Bulgaria was the Empire's main rival in Southeastern Europe. The Byzantines were repeatedly on the defensive against the walls of Constantinople itself. Quite often, the Imperial armies were defeated in the conflicts, not vice versa (Ангелов, Кашев, Чолпанов 1983; Sophoulis 2012; Hupchick 2017). There are various examples concerning the capture and deportation of Byzantine warriors and civilians (Stouraitis 2020: 149–153). As for the Rus' on the other hand, their naval attacks on Constantinople made them a threat that the Imperial ruling elite would pay due attention to. In the Early Middle Ages, they remained mostly enemies at sea. Without underestimating their devastating raids on the Black Sea coast, with the exception of the pressure on the Imperial possessions in the Crimean peninsula, the Rus' threatened the Byzantine positions in Southeastern Europe only in the late 960s – early 970s (Franklin, Shepard 1996: 112–151; Shepard 2006).

negotiated in the Balkans. While describing the events of 768–769, the information about the exchange between the Caliphate and Byzantium was indeed omitted by Patriarch Nikephoros of Constantinople (806–815) in his *Short history*, but noteworthy he writes about Imperial subjects in captivity among the Balkan Slavs, ransomed by Emperor Constantine V (r. 741–775). The text in the Nikephoros chronicle's part in question reads:

In the 7th indiction, a son was born to Constantine, whom he called Anthimos. At the same time Niketas, the bishop of the City, restored certain structures of the cathedral church that had fallen into decay with [the passage of] time. He also scraped off the images of the Savior and of the saints done in golden mosaic and in encaustic that were in the ceremonial halls that stand there (these are called secreta by the Romans), both in the small one and in the big one.

As for Constantine, he sent emissaries to the chieftains of the Slavonians and ransomed in exchange for silken vestments the Christian captives they had taken a long time previously on the island of Imbros, Tenedos, and Samothrace, to the number of 2,500 (Nikephoros 1990: 163).

If one takes into account the fact that the author was a contemporary and an eyewitness to the events described in this part of the *Short history*, and the fact that the chronicle itself may have been completed between 775 and 787, at a relatively early stage in the career of the future Patriarch of Constantinople, the record about the ransomed captives acquires even greater significance (Alexander 1958: 162; Mango 1990: 8–12). It is highly likely that it was due to the repercussions the diplomatic success of the iconoclast emperor had in Constantinople and its vicinities in the Sea of Marmara as well as in the mentioned Northern Aegean islands.

2. It is worth emphasizing that the concept of reciprocity may fit ransom and exchange practices in the zones outlined by Hussein Fancy, but the mentioned Treaty of 816 indicates that the Byzantine authorities were willing not to follow it strictly, especially if it was counterproductive to the return of captured warriors and civilians. Part of the treaty clauses is preserved in Khan Omurtag's stone inscription of Suleimankoi. The relevant lines read:

The fourth chapter is about the Christian prisoners of war and those captured ... for the turmarchs, spatarii, and the comites. He will give ... the rank and file will be a soul for a soul (i.e. a man for a man – Y.H.). Two water buffalos will be given for those captured in a fortress, if ... villages. If a strategos defected ... (Petkov 2008: 8).

The damaged parts are considerable, but even in the current state, the epigraphic inscription unequivocally shows that ordinary warriors are exchanged on a reciprocal basis. Despite such arrangement, apparently, the captured By-

zantine (who varied in rank and status) were far more numerous compared to the Khan's subjects caught up by the Emperor. This required additional commitments on Byzantine's behalf since the reciprocity option is not sufficient (Бешевлиев 1992: 164–175. See also Treadgold 1984; Филипу 2012: 93–99). There is some reason to believe that at least in general terms the exchange (and release) agreements were respected during the first years of Khan Omurtag's rule (814/815–831). This does not mean that all captives returned to the Empire, or that they were given a chance to do so (Николова 1997; Станев 2011; Христов 2016).

Ignoring the terms of the well-known Byzantine-Bulgarian Treaty of 816 by the contributor of the Cambridge edition is perhaps due to the acceptance of the idea that the Byzantines were reluctant to apply the practice of exchanging captives with Balkan enemies, but instead preferred to enslave them. The latter seems a bit strange, as far as the initial footnotes of Fancy's study in question refer to Youval Rotman's remarkable book on slavery in Byzantium. Rotman specifies that the information in the primary sources about the conflicts between the Byzantine Empire and its enemies in Southeastern Europe is rather scarce in comparison to the accounts concerning the Arab-Byzantine wars. However, he dwells on the exchange of captives between the Bulgarian Khanate and Byzantium, a circumstance to which he also draws attention in other publications (Rotman 2009: 43–46; Rotman 2012b: 27–28; Rotman 2016: 131).

3. Another reference related to the exchange of captives comes from *Theophanes Continuatus*' chronicle. Before the record of Bulgarians' conversion to Christianity in the mid-860s, the chronicler describes the request of Empress Theodora to Knyaz Boris I (r. 852–889, † 907) for ransoming “*a monk called Theodore, by surname Koupharas, who had been taken captive long before*”. Instead of a ransom, the Bulgarian ruler proposed that the monk should be exchanged for his own sister, “*who had once been taken captive by the Romans and was now being held at the court of the emperor*” (Theophanes Continuatus 2011: 232). The story of the ruler's sister has long attracted scholars' interest. Capturing a monk, even if he was an influential member of the monastic community in the European provinces of the Empire, was not impossible in view of the hostilities between the Bulgarian Khanate and Byzantium. On the other hand, the captivity of a young female member of the Bulgarian ruling dynasty seems to be more difficult to explain. Not surprisingly, doubts about the historical accuracy of this particular record in the chronicle remain. In this situation, it is worth asking whether it is even possible to include the story of the monk Theodore Koupharas and the Bulgarian princess in the list of accounts concerning captives' ransom or exchange between Byzantium and Bulgaria. The answer is both positive and negative. If it comes to a specific and certain historically reliable fact – rather not. However, if it is about a more general principle, according to which for both Byzantine and Bulgarian ruling circles important members of the

society who were in enemy captivity could be returned to their homeland by exchanging other distinguished prisoners, then it definitely leans towards a positive answer. To some extent, the latter is also related to the fact that Byzantine chronicles at the time were not simply or at least not only strict historical narratives. In their texts, the chroniclers also used literary techniques and motives in order to respond to the tastes and attitudes of their audience (Ljubarskij 1998; Nilsson 2006; Nilsson 2010; Magdalino 2012; Lilie 2014; Howard-Johnston 2014: 11–62; Macrides 2016; Treadgold 2016; Neville 2018: 101–109). To put it simply, the veracity of this most likely fictional passage in *Theophanes Continuatus*' text is dubious. Nonetheless, the fragment fits perfectly in between the legends about the Bulgarian Christianization that were popular in the Byzantine milieu and was included in the chronicle precisely because it corresponded to the contemporary notions in the Empire (Dujčev 1971; Иванов 2003: 162–163).

4. Quite significant information about the Byzantines in Bulgarian captivity is related to the war of 894–896. It is well known that in the initial stages of the conflict, the troops of the Bulgarian ruler Symeon (r. 893–927) invaded the enemy territory and defeated the Byzantine army sent against them and despoiled the area. Among the captured Byzantine warriors were members of the Imperial Guard. According to the chronicles of the era, they were released but were previously mutilated. On the other hand, there is not even a hint about some kind of mistreatment of the other Byzantines in Bulgarian captivity at that time (Theophanes Continuatus 1838: 357–358; Symeon Logothete 2006: 275–276).

The situation with the captives became even more complex as the Byzantines allied with the Magyars (Howard-Johnston 2006: 342–356). The latter invaded Bulgaria, defeated the troops who tried to repel them and kidnapped non-combatants. Emperor Leon VI (r. 886–912) redeemed these captives and transferred them to Byzantium. By eliminating the Magyars as a Byzantine ally, the Bulgarian ruler made it a condition that his captured subjects be returned to Bulgaria. The will of the Bulgarian ruler expressed to the high Byzantine dignitary and diplomat Leon Choerosphactes, sent specifically to settle the conditions for the cessation of hostilities, was described unambiguously both in Symeon the Logothete's text and in that of *Theophanes Continuatus* (Theophanes Continuatus 1838: 358–359; Symeon Logothete 2006: 276–277)². Although the request was accepted and complied with, hostilities continued. Meanwhile, after the new triumph of Symeon's army in 896, the number of Byzantines in Bulgarian captivity increased even more. In one of Choerosphactes' letters to Emperor Leon VI himself a very impressive number of 120 000 Byzantine subjects in

² As is well known, at a later stage the information in question was included both in John Skylitzes' and John Zonaras' chronicle (Skylitzes 2006: 176–178; Zonaras 1897: 442).

Bulgarian captivity was stated (Léon Choerosphactès 1939: 113). Of course, certain doubts of exaggeration exist, however, in other narratives of the epoch there is an open accusation that the Bulgarian ruler's actions in 896 were dictated by the intention to take more prisoners (Pseudo-Symeon 1838: 701–702; Symeon Logothete 2006: 277). After the mentioned Bulgarian triumph in 896, there were not many options left for the Byzantine emperor and he was forced to become more lenient on the terms of peace. Moreover, given that Arab actions were resumed in 897 along the Eastern border of the Empire, the settlement of the relations with Bulgaria became more and more imperative (Лешка 2017: 110–111; КЪНЕВ 2021: 161–169).

Some additional key details regarding the fate of the prisoners of the war of 894–896 are found in the correspondence of the Byzantine diplomat Leon Choerosphactes. Thus, for example, in response to the provocative question from the Bulgarian ruler about whether his intentions could be predicted, the Byzantine diplomat answered:

We have already learned that, oh, most philanthropic of princes, what you have informed us. However, we do not communicate through live speech, because speech that is translated from one language to another by a translator is most uncertain. But moving the stylus, we predict that you will send the Roman [i.e. Byzantine] captives, you will not retain them in any way, rather, you will hand them over, and not for gifts or ransom. And this you will do in imitation of your most divine father [i.e. Emperor Leon VI]. (Léon Choerosphactès 1939: 77).

Most recently, Nikolay Kanev drew attention to the fact that the release of the Bulgarian captives took place without the issue being put on a matter of reciprocity. It was without Emperor Leon VI being compensated for the costs of their ransom from the Magyars, their transportation by sea to Constantinople and their stay in the Byzantine capital (КЪНЕВ 2021: 159–160). It is no coincidence that Leon Choerosphactes, who accompanied the Bulgarian envoy Theodore and took part in the process of their release, wrote that he expected the same display of philanthropy and goodwill, and despite the procrastination on the Bulgarian side, the abducted Byzantines also would be released without ransom. It is noteworthy, however, that the return of captives from both sides in the conflict can be described neither as a reciprocal nor as a simultaneous exchange³. What is more important, judging by the accounts, one cannot speak of Byzantine reluctance and refusal at all, especially being dictated by some

³ “*You have informed, as I have now learned, your father and emperor that you will send away the captives you have with you...*” – one can be seen in another letter from Choerosphactes to Symeon (Léon Choerosphactès 1939: 89). Perhaps, the stay of Byzantine captives in question ended with the settlement of relations between Bulgaria and Byzantium. There is an idea that their

kind of unconditional principle of enslaving the Bulgarian captives (warriors and non-combatants alike).

5. As regards the interest in the topic, here a study about the prisoners of war in Byzantium by Athina Kolia-Dermizaki can be taken into consideration. She shares the opinion that in the 920s a procedure for the exchange of captives was established between the two main rivals in the Orthodox world of the tenth century (Kolia-Dermizaki 2000: 608). Even with some mistrust concerning the stable mutually accepted procedure, there can be no doubt about it when it comes to the efforts in arranging ransom and exchanges between Bulgarians and Byzantines at that time. Patriarch Nicholas I Mystikos' letter in his well-known and voluminous correspondence with Tsar Symeon is particularly illustrative (Nicholas Mystikos 1973: 140). In this connection, it should not be omitted that in the 920s, after a series of Byzantine military failures, the exchange of captives with Bulgaria was a promising option to reduce the negative effect of the army's bloodshed and the loss of taxable population. Moreover, judging by the Patriarch's correspondence except for the prisoners of war's exchange, compensation in money, livestock, and valuables, and even territorial acquisitions in Bulgarian favor, were among the desirable and possible solutions that the ruling circles in Constantinople were willing to accept in attempts to arrange peace with the Bulgarians (Nicholas Mystikos 1973: 122, 128, 176).

The reports concerning the Byzantine captives in letters composed by Theodore Daphnopates and sent to the Bulgarian ruler on behalf of Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos (r. 919–944) are also of prime importance. They give sufficient reason to believe that during the war of 913–927 there was a difference in the Byzantine attitude toward the captured Bulgarians, compared to that manifested toward the Imperial subjects in Bulgarian captivity. Judging by the information in the narratives, the Byzantine authorities, pressured by the development of the conflict, tended to keep the captured Bulgarians imprisoned (at least at first) hoping to use them as a bargaining chip at the right time. Obviously, these Bulgarian captives were neither enslaved nor forcibly resettled in the provinces of the Empire. In addition, in Daphnopates' letters recognizable intimations and appeals about the exchange of prisoners of war and the release of the Byzantines into Bulgarian hands can be seen (Theodore Daphnopates 1978: 59–61, 69–71, 83–85). Of course, the latter does not mean that the Byzantines were so reticent at all. Nonetheless, this in fact is another ignored information in the primary sources showing the fictionality of the statement that from the seventh to the tenth centuries the Imperial authorities were so successful on the Balkan

release happened as early as 897 (Shepard 1999: 570–571). According to another opinion, it is assumed to have occurred by the summer of 899 at the latest (Božilov 1980: 79–80).

front and preferred to enslave their enemies instead of practising exchanges and ransoms.

6. In view of the entire interest in the topic of captivity it is worthwhile to remember Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus' account in *De administrando imperio*. Despite the expressed disagreement with the marriage between the Bulgarian Tsar Peter I (r. 927–969) and Maria, granddaughter of Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos, the author admits that “*by this action, so many Christian prisoners were ransomed, and that the Bulgarians too are Christians and of like faith...*” (Constantine Porphyrogenitus 1967: 74)⁴. Most probably, the number of those ransomed or released in goodwill did not cover all Byzantine captives in Bulgaria by the early 930s.⁵ At least the chronicles of the era give sufficient ground to assume such an outcome. For example, Logothete's text reads as follows:

Peter the Bulgarian [i.e. Tsar Peter I] was attacked by his brother John, who was acting together with other of Symeon's leading men. On being discovered, John is beaten and put into prison, whereas the others are subjected to no mean punishment. When Peter informed Emperor Romanos about this, the Emperor sent the monk John, who had been a Rector, to him, on the pretext that they should make an exchange of prisoners, but in truth to get hold of John and bring him to Constantinople... (Symeon Logothete 2019: 245. With insignificant differences within the phrase in Theophanes Continuatus 1838: 419; later retold by Skylitzes 2006: 225–226).

In the attached fragment of the chronicle, it is evident that much greater attention was paid to the coup and the threat of overthrowing Tsar Peter I. It also hardly needs any special clarification why Emperor Roman I Lekapenos supported his granddaughter's husband. As for the exchange of prisoners of war referred to, even if it was feigned and ostentatious, it still should not be disregarded, at least because this could be considered a sufficient reason for a high-ranking dignitary to travel on a diplomatic mission to Bulgaria. The above-mentioned letter of Patriarch Nicholas I Mystikos in the summer of 921 precisely specifies such diplomatic missions, when negotiating the conditions for the exchange of prisoners of war. The travel of the Bulgarian boyar Theodore to Constantinople and the

⁴ It has been pointed out that provisions concerning the release of the captives are alluded to in *De pace cum Bulgaris homilia* (Маринов 2016: 347. Cf. also Karlin-Hayter 1968; Dujčev 1978; Marinow 2014).

⁵ It is worth remembering that Kolia-Dermitzaki quite deliberately pointed out “the voyage of Rector Ioannes to Bulgaria προφάσει ἀλλαγίου (*on the pretext of an exchange*)...” in her study. (Kolia-Dermitzaki 2000: 608).

activities of the high Byzantine dignitary Leon Choerosphactes in the 890s were also due to the same reasons (Cf. Hristov 2022).

In the end, a few important final remarks must be added. Without any belittling the overall development of the practice of exchanging prisoners of war between Byzantium and the Caliphate, it is necessary to take into account that in the completely different conditions of the wars in Southeastern Europe, the Imperial authorities did not consider it unworthy to ransom their captives. Moreover, some of these agreements were made with local pagan chieftains who ruled polities in the former Byzantine possessions in the Balkans. Given the number of Bulgarian triumphs in the wars against the Empire, the question of the exchange and ransom of warriors and non-combatants was even more acute in the ninth and tenth centuries. The claims to political dominance and the ideological concepts of the supremacy of the Byzantine Emperors cannot and should not be overlooked. However, the rise of the new rival powers in Southeastern Europe at the time required ingenious diplomatic solutions, performed by men of vision in the ruling circles in Constantinople. In this regard, it seems unreasonable to ignore or deny the exchange (and ransom) of captives between Byzantium and its Balkan opponents, especially in view of the sufficient number of primary sources that provide unequivocal key information about it. In fact, due to the desire to show just this type of data, some indicative notices remained outside the scope of this text. Particularly interesting is the information about Pietro, son of Venetian doge Orso II (912–932), captured by Knyaz Michael of Zahumlje. The prominent captive was sent to Tsar Symeon and after some time in Bulgaria, his father eventually ransomed him (Schreiner 2018: 385–387; Uzelac 2018: 237). No less remarkable is the negotiated release of Vladimir, the eldest son of Knyaz Boris I, as well as of twelve high boyars, who were captured by the Serbs in the course of an unsuccessful Bulgarian campaign (Ангелов 2017: 200). Both cases leave no room for doubt that redemptions and exchanges in the region were not solely a “Byzantine patent” during the era in question.

On the bases of the clarifications given above, it can be said with great confidence that at the current stage, the discussion on the fate of captives in Southeastern Europe during the Early Middle Ages is far from reaching a concluding stage. However, with a certainty, it can also be said that the above-mentioned accounts in the primary sources of the epoch are completely sufficient to rethink the misconception that the Byzantines refused to exchange or ransom captives taken during the conflicts in the Balkans at that time.

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ИЗВОРИТЕ ИМАТ ЗНАЧЕНИЕ: ЗА ЕДНА ПОГРЕШНА КОНЦЕПЦИЯ ОТНОСНО
ОТКУПА И РАЗМЯНАТА НА ПЛЕННИЦИ НА БАЛКАНИТЕ
ПРЕЗ РАННОТО СРЕДНОВЕКОВИЕ

(Резюме)

Усилията, посветени на аспектите и проблемите на пленничеството и робството и различните форми на „не-свобода“ през Средновековието, едва ли могат да се определят като проява на някаква научна новост или разгръщане на недокоснати ниши в изследователските търсения по отношение на въпросната епоха. Наред с това трябва да се признае, че в последно време се наблюдава значителна активност. Несъмнени са постиженията при задълбочаването на познанията за връзката между пленничеството и робството, за нюансите, които са продиктувани от религията, пола, възрастта, социалната и етническата принадлежност, уменията. Значително внимание (въпреки понякога ограничаващия недостиг на ключова информация в изворите) се отделя на начина и възможностите за освобождаване на пленниците и робите. В тази връзка появата на дългоочаквания втори том на Кеймбриджката история на робството заслужава специално внимание. В отделните глави на обемния колективен труд се предлага ползотворен поглед към някои стари научни постановки, отхвърля се или се подкопава основателността на редица, считани за непоклатими, обобщения, предлагат се нови концепции, решения и интерпретационни подходи. Наред с това обаче има твърдения, които се нуждаят от преосмисляне и допълнителни уточнения и корекции. Настоящият текст е посветен именно на един такъв дискуссионен момент относно поробването, откупуването и размяната на пленници при конфликтите в ранносредновековна Югоизточна Европа.

Ключови думи: Югоизточна Европа; пленничество; поробване; откуп; освобождаване от робство; размяна на военнопленници.

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