

**THE TERM SLAVS AND ITS GRADUAL OBSOLESCENCE IN BYZANTINE  
SOURCES (IX – XII)**

*Stojko Stojkov*

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Byzantium (9th–14<sup>th</sup> century)*

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**Abstract**

*The process of gradual abandonment of the term Slavs in Byzantine sources – happened in the period from the mid - IX to the end of XII century and it is divided into three main stages. In the first period (820s – 870s) the term Slavs stopped to be used in references to inner Bulgarian affairs, as consequence of centralization of the khanate and the disbanding of the Slavic tribal “autonomy” and replacement of Slavic domestic duxes with Bulgar governors which led to use of the term Bulgarian as politonym for whole population of the khanate. Still the term Slavs continued to be used for inner Byzantine affairs. In the second period the term ceases to be used for people into the Byzantine Empire – it happened through the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This terminological change was caused by a gradual assimilation of Slavic entities as Sclavinias and Sclavo-archontias into Byzantine administrative system and converting of the once independent and rebellious Slavs into loyal subjects of the Empire. The third phase includes reappearance of the term in some of Byzantine sources into the 12 centuries, before becoming fully obsolete in the XIII c. There had been investigated various reasons especially political, cultural, and social changes and their influence over the used terminology in Byzantine sources.*

**Presentation**

The term Slavs was regularly used in Byzantine sources in the VII – IX c. as generic and general term for dozens of small tribes spread on great territories in Eastern Europe and their population. From the IX c. it went into process of gradual abandonment in Byzantine sources.

First it stopped to be used for the subjects of Bulgarian rulers after 820 and even was removed or replaced with the term *Bulgarian* for the events in the past where it was used in the older sources. Simultaneously the term continued to be used for Byzantine and other territories. Byzantine authors

did not cease to differentiate terms Slavs and Bulgars, they simply stopped mentioning Slavs in Bulgaria. One offered explanation is that it is reflection of the ongoing ethnogenetic processes in Bulgaria, Slavization of Bulgars and creation of new Slavic Bulgarian nation. It is impossible for many reasons but especially because on one hand in Slavic sources created in Bulgaria in the end of the IX and in the X c. Slavic authors expressed strong non-Bulgarian Slavic ethnic identity and strictly differentiate the categories Slavs and Bulgars. And on other – Byzantine and other sources to the end of the X c. viewed Bulgars as Turkic not Slavic nation. Far more natural explanation is that this terminological change was consequence of centralization of Bulgarian khanate and disbanding of the Slavic tribal autonomous units which led to use of the term Bulgarian as a politonym for the whole population of the state and the terminological change reflected this new political homogeneity, not the ethnic one.

It could be supported by the fact that Byzantine authors continued to use the term for countries where Slavs preserved some autonomous status, such as Kievan Russ or Dalmatia and especially their own state where through the IX c. there were still many Slavic autonomous or semi-autonomous formations under imperial control.

In the IX – X c. the socio-political reality reflected through the use of the term Slavs gradually diminished in whole Europe – Bulgaria was just a beginning. Majority of Slavic tribes lost firstly their independence and after that their autonomous status, and the few that survived evolved into bigger political units affirmed under their own names, which in the end result in abandonment of the term in Byzantine sources. Relation of this phenomenon with political changes could be followed on even deeper level through relation between political changes and changes in the way terms Slavs and Slavic were used before their abandonment.

Firstly, after Byzantium imposed more direct and permanent control over the Slavic tribes into majority of the Balkan the usual in the VII – VIII c. term “Slavic nation(s)” – which was underling Slavic independence from the Empire was abandoned and on its place was emphasised the term Sclavinia and simultaneously can be noticed territorialization of the names of former Slavic nations; the term Sclavinia was used for the autonomous semi dependant units outside Byzantine thematic systems, whose leaders were domestic Slavic archons confirmed by the emperors through granted titles and salaries; turning these Sclavinia into Sclavoarhontias - autonomous arhontias inside Byzantine themata under archons appointed by the Strategos, whose inhabitant kept their

specific simahoi status was reflected with abandonment of the term Sclavinia (836) and emphasised in Macedonia of the general term Slavs but now bonded to Byzantine administrative units, not with Slavic tribal names – we have Slavs from Strimon or Thessalonica, instead of Drugovitoi and Sagudatoi which appeared as names of the villages or administrative units. Around 900 term Slavs become once more an useful general term for many similar groups of non-Romanised simahoi living inside many Byzantine themata. The term Slavs, in this etape, was used in opposition vis-a-vi Byzantines, not vis-a-vi the Empire.

But there was one more and very important reason for using the term – Slavic questionable loyalty to the Empire – the Slavic rebellions continued until the reign of Roman Lekapenos. This behaviour autonomy of the Slavs together with their not-fully roman status kept term Slavs current. Romanization of the Slavs in their legal status but even more in their loyalty towards the empire through the X c. made the term obsolete. In the second half of the X c. term Slavs was used only for the past events in Byzantium but even from there it started to be removed or replaced with terms as Scythians (Contiunatoir of Theophanes, Pseudosymeon) or putting the Slavs among mythical nations (Genesii) and from the end of the X c. forward the term was abandoned in the main Byzantine sources especially these from Constantinople as it is noticeable in the works as Pselos, Ataliates and Zonara.

Still the term continued to be used in some provincial sources. Reasons for this were two. First, there were still noticeable on the local level autonomous Slavic archontias as in Peloponesus and Strimon valley. More importantly after 1018 Byzantium incorporated vast territories on the Balkans in which Slavic liturgy was established and had an official and institutional status which was recognised through formation of the Byzantine Ohrid archiepiscope Because of it is not strange that we find the term in many local sources in the second half of the XI c. Still there we can find the same tendency of replacing of the term with more current Byzantine terminology. In the themata of Thessalonica and among the Greek speaking archbishops of Ohrid archiepiscope of the “whole Bulgaria” the term Slavs start to be replaced with the official name of archiepiscope and the name of the catepanat Bulgaria inhabited by Slavs. The term Bulgarian in this way become synonymous to the term Slavs in general and term Bulgaria was spread even over the lands outside these Byzantine administrative institutions and even outside the former Bulgarian state in places such as Great Moravia, Pannonia, Dalmatia, and Chalcidice. It was related to the pretentions of

Ohrid archbishops through appropriating the Slavic apostolic mission to prove apostolic foundations and hence – the independence of their archiepiscopate. This was strictly Byzantine phenomenon which neither originated from, neither was reflected in contemporary Slavic sources where the Slavic terminology and identity continued to be kept and reinforced while the term Bulgarian was viewed as term for others, not Slavs and even used in negative connotation. Also authors related to dynasty of Comtopuloi by blood or marriage as Anna Comnena and her husband Nechepor Brienius in opposition of the new Byzantine terminology clearly differentiated the terms Slavs and Bulgars.

Updating of terminology in accordance with the new administrative realities was not only caused by, but also helped for abandonment of the term Slavs in the local Byzantine sources.

In parallel could be noted a clear symptom that the term Slavs was losing its concrete meaning – it is appearance of a new interpretation of the term Slavs as equal do Slaves — this relatively marginal phenomenon has its origin in the West and its parallel in Muslim world, and in Byzantine empire it firstly appeared in Italy and in the XII c. was implemented in some core Byzantine sources as Zonara, marking practically the beginning of the final end of the term Slavs as population term in Byzantine sources. This prolonged agony received its final end in the 1204 reset of Byzantine state. After that the term was not used anymore for population, despite it continued to be current in the Balkan Slavic texts.

This analysis point to the different directions I will mention a few.

First, the term Slavs and its variations together with the terms it was replaced with, or shortly - the used terminology in general was directly related to political reality not to identity of the population terms denoted – relation to the last seems to be mostly indirect. It was also predominantly the outside terminology, an *exonym*, which may or may not match the *endonyms* used from the described populations. It was Byzantine terminology, created for the need of Byzantines to organize and describe their surrounding not a simple reflection of reality or the identity of described people and we should be careful not to suppose so.