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Preslav the Great: 1,100 Years On

Second capital of First Bulgarian Empire celebrates its birthday

By Magdalina Stancheva

If time is indeed the best judge of human deeds, the past eleven centuries set foolproof standards for evaluating events in AD 893. Proof of this abounds, magnified by the ups and downs in Bulgarian history to date.



Let us start with the facts.

864. Eastern Orthodox Christianity becomes Bulgaria's established religion, cementing a multi-ethnic, multi-

faith people. Prince Boris I is converted by envoys of the Byzantine Patriarchate and adopts the Christian name of Mihail. This is the first major step integrating the vast Bulgarian Empire with Christian Europe.

865. Rebellious noblemen try to restore paganism but Prince Boris Mihail mercilessly quells the rebellion.

Over the next 20 years, Prince Boris I seeks ways to consolidate his lifework, and gets recommendations and advice from Catholic Pope Nicholas I and Byzantine Patriarch Photius, who vie for influence in the newborn Christian empire.

At the same time, Prince Boris lays the groundwork for an independent Bulgarian church.

886. The disciples of Byzantine missionary monks Cyril and Methodius arrive in the capital city of Pliska to launch the noble idea of Bulgarian and Slav letters and literature. This is precisely what would keep Bulgarians spiritually

and culturally independent throughout the following centuries.

889. In his declining age, Prince Boris retires to a monastery and is succeeded by oldest son Rasate Vladimir. During his four-year reign, Vladimir reinstates Proto-Bulgarian religion and customs.

Convinced of the historical indispensability of his cause, Boris and his loyal supporters overthrow the traitors. Vladimir is blinded and pagan boyars punished. The long shadow of these events overcasts the capital Pliska.

893. This is why Prince Boris Mihail calls a nationwide convention in another fortress, bearing the sonorous and tell-tale name of Preslav, "most glorious city". This town would be proclaimed the Empire's new capital. It would house the palace of the Empire's new sovereign, Boris's third son: Prince Simeon.

From 893 to his death in 927, Simeon, also known as the Great, would not only complete his father's lifework, but would achieve such flowering of culture that his reign would come to be known as the Golden Age, and his capital, as Preslav the Great.

Preslav the Great was not the traditional mediaeval city. Its white stone fortress wall enclosed 3.5 sq km. The fortress wall ran along scenic hilltops, dipped down to the fertile valley, skirted a torrential river and closed in groves, vineyards and gardens around monastery compounds and boyar estates. It was as if the capital city sought to encompass all the beauty of the rolling countryside as a backcloth to human creativity.

In about 30 years, Preslav the Great became a centre of talent. The young prince, who had received the best possible education at the famous Byzantine palace school and was familiar with the beauty and wealth of ancient Constantinople, wanted to turn his new-

born capital into an unmistakable centre of new culture.

So he did. The proportions and decoration of buildings eventually erected in Preslav the Great indicate that imagination and talent were given free rein. The palace and church walls were faced with carved stone and marble, featuring an unconventional blend of classical motifs and bold ideas. Rabbits nibbling grapes sneak through the traditional palmettos on capitals, with dogs lurking in the leaves. Lion and monkey heads peep out



Finds testify to old splendour



Preslav's most famous site: the remains of the once opulent palace at the heart of a powerful Medieval kingdom.

under church roofs, and regal griffins stand guard on palace gates.

Back in the late 9th century, Preslav the Great produced Europe's first ceramic tiles - at that, in vast quantities. Simeon could have brought over masters from Mesopotamia to teach local artisans. Either way, local white clay was used for brilliant enamelled decoration on Preslav buildings. Panels from multicoloured tiles cover the stonework, form motley carpets and coat cornices.

Having developed a flawless technology for delicate white tiles, Preslav master craftsmen started painting saints on them. This was the cradle of Bulgarian icon-painting, which produced masterpieces such as the icon of St Theodore Stratelates.

Later, biblical texts, prayers and spellings were inscribed on tiles.

During his reign, Simeon expanded the Empire. He reached the walls of Constantinople twice. Byzantine now had a powerful foe in Southeastern Europe. Bulgaria had united almost all Southern Slav regions. So Constantinople was forced to recognize Simeon as "tsar".

Even though after Tsar Simeon's reign history changed the correlation of forces - Preslav the Great was conquered by the Byzantine army and the royal treasures were carted off to Constantinople as booty for the Byzantine Emperor - there was one thing which Simeon had started and which remained invincible. A wealth of literature in Bulgarian was evolved under his patronage and with his participation in Preslav the Great and Ochrida. The decision, made at the 893 Preslav Convention, that divine services in Bulgarian churches

should be conducted in Bulgarian, was enforced. For the first time ever, a people challenged the ecclesiastical monopoly of the three hallowed languages of Christendom: Hebrew, Greek and Latin. This enabled other Slav peoples to understand the Bible, too.

Preslav the Great established the Cyrillic alphabet for the Slav languages (this was much simpler than the ornate characters invented by St Constantine Cyril and known as Glagolitic). This was a grand achievement, which put literacy within the reach of the broadest strata of the population.

In September 1993, the Bulgarian nation celebrated the 1,100th anniversary of these milestone events near the ruins of Simeon's capital. Preslav marbles vanished in lime furnaces during the five centuries of Turkish bondage. Preslav treasures have been plundered. Nevertheless, archaeologists have found artefacts that prove beyond doubt that Preslav the Great was a centre of a major new civilization, first among Slav cultural centres in the period.

Preslav the Great is also a major lesson in history. It is Bulgaria's contribution to European culture back in the distant Middle Ages.

This is the message which was hammered home by the assembled home and foreign dignitaries and luminaries. The long guest list, unshortened by the severe last-minute lack of funding, included senior Orthodox functionaries from a number of countries, the country's leading politicians and office holders, many scholars from a number of countries.

Whereas not subscribing to the recent vogue of forecasting a clash of civilizations, the speakers did underline heavily the contribution of the Bulgarian medieval state to the spread of Christian civilization beyond the hinterland of what was the Roman and the Eastern Roman (Byzantine)

Empires. Together with the Slavic - Cyrillic - alphabet, the Christian civilization spread from Vardar in Macedonia to Vladivostok. ♦

