Notes on the cult of the fifteen Tiberioupolitan martyrs in medieval Bulgaria

The cult of the fifteen Tiberioupolitan martyrs is one of the most intriguing cults in medieval Bulgaria. There are, however, a lot of questions about this cult, some of which I will address in this paper.

The earliest evidence of the cult at our disposal is their mention in the Evangelarium Assemani (late 10th – early 11th C.), at 29th August. Only three of the martyrs are listed in this entry and the place of their martyrdom has already been located in Stroumitsa. In the next manuscript which mentions them, the Liber Savvae (11th C.), they are again related to Stroumitsa, albeit venerated on another date – 28th November. This is also the case in a later document – the so-called Ohridski apostol (12th C.).

A very important source for this cult is the well-known Life of Clement of Ohrid by Theophylact of Ohrid – called: The martyrdom of the fifteen Tiberioupolitan martyrs (late 11th or early 12th C.). The following points are of interest: first, the evidence by Theophylact as to where their martyrdom took place, where their cult was initially founded and when this event occurred. The answer to the last question is

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2 И.И. Срезневский, Древние славянские памятники юсоваго письма, Санкт-Петербург 1868, p. 6, 84; К. Куве, Съдбата на старобългарската ръкописна книга през вековете, София 1986, p. 194.


clear, as the author dates the event during the reign of Emperor Julian the Apostate. The topography of the cult, on the other hand, is more problematic. Already in N 12, immediately after the long preface, Theophylact asserts without any clear reference to the previous text: *In Macedonia, Theodoulos and Tatianos, pious and inspired men, broke into a pagan temple at night and destroyed the images*. There is nothing unusual in this evidence, except for the note by P. Gauthier who, following an idea by K. Jireček, sustains that Theophylact moved the tale of the martyrdom of the Saints from Asia Minor to the Balkan Peninsula, taking the ethnonym Makedonios as toponym. According to the French scholar, Theophylact used a tale by the church historian Socrates about three martyrs named Makedonios, Theodoulos and Tatianos who suffered in the town of Myra (Phrygia, Asia Minor).6

Then Theophylact continues with his tale of the fate of the other martyrs. Once again, the events take place in Asia Minor – in Nicaea, where some of them resided (Timothy, Comasiois, Eusebios and Theodor) but left for Thessalonike due to their persecution. Soon after they moved to Tiberioupolis, (...) *which lies north of Thessalonike, at the borders of Illyrian lands*.2

This vague account is followed by details about the martyrs’ deeds. Of interest for us is the evidence that Timothy became bishop of Tiberioupolis, while Theodor, also a bishop, though of an unknown place, participated in the first Catholic Council of Nicaea (325 AD) as one of the 318 Theophoric Fathers. This evidence is usually taken as a hagiographic myth.3

Further on, when listing the names of the other martyrs (Peter, John, Sergios, Theodor, Nikephoros, Basil, Thomas, Hierotheos, Daniel, Chariton), Theophylact discusses their martyrdom in Tiberioupolis, where they died on 28th November and were buried, each in their own casket bearing his name.10 This account is followed by the tale of the invasion by a people called Omvri, said to have come from the south (sic!), who demolished Tiberioupolis. The caskets with the saints’ relics remained beneath the ruins of the church-temple and were then forgotten11.

Let us now set aside the evidence of the arrival of the Bulgarians, their baptizing etc., which is of no interest for us here. I go on to discuss the very discovery of the relics, dated back to the reign of khan Boris I the Baptist (852–889), when the relics proved miraculous. The ruler ordered a special temple to be built for them in the Bishopry of Bregalnitsa. This was carried out by Taridin, the local Comes. Although this is important as hagiographic evidence, I would rather emphasize the question posed by prof. Y. Ivanov, namely, why the relics needed to be moved to another place instead of repairing the old church or just building a new one in its place?12 It seems that the reason was not that Tiberioupolis no longer existed. On the contrary, the source mentions that the town not only survived but that its inhabitants were opposed to the removal of the relics. For this reason, only three of the caskets were actually moved (those of Timothy, Comasiois and Eusebios) and placed in a specially built church-temple on the 28th of August.13 During the reign of tsar Symeon the relics of two more martyrs (Socrates and Theodor) were placed in the same temple.14 Further on and without going into detail, Theophylact talks about a monastery named after them.15

I shall not deal with the canons and liturgies for the martyrs but note in passing that the title of one of their masses, believed by its discoverer, T. Vukanović, to be a second version, says they suffered in *Тивериополи престолаголемомъ Странца*17. I discuss this below.

As shown above, Theophylact’s *Vita* speaks of two church-temples named after the martyrs. The first was the one underneath which the caskets remained after the demolition of Tiberioupolis. However, he does not mention this when talking about their funeral: *The saints’ caskets remained buried together with the demolished temple in which they were placed (...)*18. Nothing further is mentioned about this church-temple. In N 37, Theophylact already talks about the other church – in the bishopry of Bregalnitsa:

Thus the rumour reached the Bulgarian King Michael. And he [...] ordered a special church-temple to be built for them in the bishopry of Bregalnitsa, which was accomplished [...].19

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5 И.Г. ИлИев, op. cit., p. 51.
7 И.Г. ИлИев, op. cit., p. 55.
8 Ibidem, p. 55.
9 Ibidem, p. 57.
10 Ibidem, p. 62.
11 Ibidem.
12 И. Иванов, Северна Македония, София 1906, p. 75.
13 И.Г. ИлИев, op. cit., p. 69.
14 Ibidem.
15 Ibidem, p. 77–78.
17 Т. Vukanović, op. cit., p. 55.
18 И.Г. ИлИев, op. cit., p. 62.
19 Ibidem, p. 69.
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The attempts at identifying the two churches began long ago. Already in the 1920’s the Serbian scholar J. Tatić recognized the Stroumitsa church-temple in an area known as the fifteen saints, in the local oral tradition.

In the seventies, archeological excavations were carried out on that site, which led to interesting results. The archaeologists discovered the narthex, the northern nave and the annex of the south-eastern side of a decussate church-temple, three paleobyzantine brick-graves in the nave and the narthex with remains of a fresque added later, on which the fifteen Tiberioupolitan martyrs are depicted; a part of the oldest floor of the early Christian basilica with the northern stylobates and a part of the central apse. According to the archaeologists, D. Kotso and P. Milkovic-Pepek, the discovery of the northern stylobates and part of the oldest apse with a floor of mortar and part of the central apse, shows that the upper decussate, probably five-vaulted, church is built on top of a significantly older three-vaulted basilica containing three graves. The relation between the early Christian basilica and the three graves within is not quite clear. The archaeologists assume that they were built after the demolition of the early Christian basilica and assign their construction to the early Byzantine period (6th – 8th C.). According to the two authors, it can be asserted with certainty that the early Christian basilica and the newly discovered central brick vault are not primarily related to the cult of the martyrs. They claim that this cult was moved to Stroumitsa from Asia Minor by emigrants (7th and 8th C.). In addition, and this is very important, the fresque with the fifteen martyrs in the central vault is added later to the construction of the vault, together with the decussate church-temple. Besides, they categorically relate the building of the decussate church with the cult of the martyrs by claiming that this place is related to the cult after the construction of the central vault within the building.

Hence the question of dating these fresques becomes very important. Similar images can be traced back to the later 9th and early 10th centuries, including ceramic icons from the monastery in the area of Touzlulaka in Preslav. For this reason, the fresques belonging to the church are dated at that period. The decus-

21 Ibidem, p. 77–78.
22 Ж. Татић, Два остатка византијске архитектуре у Стругачком крају, ГСНД 3, 1928, p. 83.
and five in the lower areas. In this lower area only two images are preserved (one of them in part), in the middle area only the lower part of the first three images is destroyed while the heads are preserved. The images in the upper area have remained intact. These images are recognized with the help of the text by Theophylact of Ohrid. The first image in the upper area is probably Timothy, because the represented figure is a bishop; the second and the third are, respectively, Comasios and Eusebios, while the fourth figure is the other bishop – Theodor. As is well-known, these four are the first who moved from Nicaea to Tiberiopolis. The next group comprises partly or completely destroyed images that are hard to recognize, although Ts. Grozdanov claims that the last saint in the third area is Thomas because he is depicted as a deacon. Ultimately, the author supports the dating suggested by the archaeologists D. Kotso and P. Milkovic-Pepek (late 9th – early 10th C.), based on a stylistic analysis of the frescoes, agreeing with them that these portraits are inspired by the classical base of the renewed Byzantine art from the late 9th or the early 10th C.

Aleksova’s hypothesis would seem convincing if the other archaeologists had not concluded that the central vault within the church-temple initially belonged to the early Christian basilica which is unrelated to the cult of the martyrs and it was only in the 9th and 10th C. that this vault was related to it, together with the newly built decussate church. Ts. Grozdanov does not comment on this at all, only noting in passing that he needed more proof.

As to the second church-temple (the one in Bregalnitsa), it is identified by Aleksova with the cathedral discovered in 1984 near Kroupishte on Bregalnitsa, in the area of Kale. Within it, in the annex at the right side of the altar there is a de- cussate martyrium which, according to the archaeologists, was designed for placing the martyrs’ relics. It is dated back to the mid-9th to early 10th C. and for this reason Aleksova assumes that this is precisely the church built on Boris’s orders where the relics of the Tiberiopolitan martyrs were placed on two occasions.

Thus we reach the important issue of identifying Tiberiopolis with today’s Stroumitsa, an issue which crucial for the cult. A significant amount of scholarly work has been done on it and I will only mention the main opinions. I begin with the second point made by Jireček is that the saints of Stroumitsa are mentioned only in books that originated in the diocese of the Ohridian archbishopry and could not be found elsewhere, say in Basil II’s Menologia or other Greek manuscripts. By pointing out that Theophylact’s Vita is the main source for identifying Tiberiopolis with Stroumitsa, Jireček lists the other texts in which this identification occurs, as in the so-called Τάξις τῶν Θρόνων τῆς πρώτης Ιουστινιανῆς, where a bishop Τιβεριουπόλεως ἤταν Στρουμίτης is mentioned. According to Jireček, this manuscript dates back to the late 12th C., around the time of the Bulgarian uprising in 1186. However, a slightly earlier list reports the episcopy simply as ἡ Στρούμιτζα which allows him to conclude that this list is at the origin of the tradition of the later Byzantine notitiae to identify Tiberiopolis with Stroumitsa. It is very important that Jireček relates the appearance of the name Tiberiopolis to Stroumitsa with the theory that the archbishopcy of Ohrid should be identified with Justiniana Prima which was founded around the second half of the 12th C., as is well-known. The other sources Jireček examines are the following:

- the inscription in the church Sv. Bogoroditsa Eleousa near Stroumitsa, made by the local bishop Manuel who calls himself ἐπίσκοπος Τιβεριουπόλεως dated back ca. 1080, although Jireček had some doubts about the dating;
- a manuscript fragment from the 14th C. by the name of some Kallinikos, who was μητροπολίτης Τιβεριουπόλεως;

Further discussing the identification of Tiberiopolis and Velika and Varna, the famous scholar concludes as follows:

This uncertainty shows by itself that all identifications are grounded on hypotheses only and even the medievalists considered them unlikely. The legend re-written by Theophylact deals with excavations in Stroumitsa, at the time of Boris I, when caskets with inscriptions were found. Added to this is another Life of Martyrs by an unknown author from the time of Emperor Julian I. Bishop Theodor, purported to be one of those who moved from

35 Κ. ΙΡΕΝΕΚ, op. cit., p. 246: ἐπίσκοπος Τιβεριουπόλεως.
38 К. ΙΡΕΝΕΚ, op. cit., p. 245.
40 L. PETIT, Le monastère de Notre Dame de Pite en Macedoine, ИРАИК 6, 1900, p. 6.
41 К. ΙΡΕΝΕΚ, op. cit., 246. This dating is confirmed by B. ДЖУРИЧ, Византийские фрески. Средневековая Сербия, Далмация, славянская Македония, Москва 2000, p. 31. On older opinions vide B. ДЖУРИЧ, op. cit., p. 331–333.
42 К. ΙΡΕΝΕΚ, op. cit., p. 246.
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In addition, V. Zlatarski thinks that Tiberioupolis and Stroumitsa were identified in the manuscripts as early as the 10th C., that is, before the towns of the archbishopry of Ohrid received their classical or transliterated names, along with their Old Bulgarian names. This identification began with the move of the relics to Stroumitsa, all details of the martyrs' cult being transferred from the demolished Tiberioupolis to the town of Stroumitsa, which had been flourishing as an important center since the early 10th C., when Tsar Symeon transformed it into a bishopry.

According to V. Zlatarski, the legend of the martyrs was written down in Old Bulgarian probably at the beginning of the 10th C. However, he emphasizes the fundamental role of Theophylact in importing the legend, as the latter seems to have artificially created the link between the Tiberioupolitan and the local Macedonian legends. For this purpose, the bishop is said to have presumed the existence of Tiberioupolis in Ancient Macedonia, as well as its identity with Stroumitsa. Thus he depicted the martyrs as moving from Nicaea to Macedonia, where they suffered martyrdom in the 4th C. and were forgotten due to the Avars' invasion in the 6th C.

As is noted in today's historiography, Zlatarski's hypothesis raises too many problems, although, paradoxically, it is still the basis of all subsequent reconstructions hostile to it. Recently, hypotheses dominate which, by contrast to the above-mentioned ones, claim that Tiberioupolis is a Macedonian town (in the contemporary political sense) and that Theophylact and his sources did not invent anything but correctly transmit the events.

The most important argument against Jireček – Zlatarski's hypothesis is the result of the archaeological excavations in Stroumitsa in the church-temple the fifteen Saints done by B. Aleksova, the main supporter of the continuity hypothesis. I should like to add a further point she made, namely that in Stroumitsa and the region, the cult of the forty martyrs was quite popular at that time.

The continuity hypothesis is also supported by Ts. Grozdanov, based on the recently discovered images of the saints in the church-temple. But he is troubled by certain question which he does not answer. First, he does not refute Jireček in any way, whom he elsewhere accuses of concocted criticism. Nor does he refute Zlatarski, whose hypothesis he ironically calls very subtle. It is important to note that Ts. Grozdanov, like all other supporters of this hypothesis, does not comment or pay attention to Ph. Papazoglou's and others' strong claim that no Macedonian

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43 Ibidem, p. 248.
44 L. Petit, op. cit., p. 95–96.
46 Й. Иванов, op. cit., p. 209.
47 В.Н. Златарски, Легенда за откриване на мощите на Тивериуполските мъченици, [in:]
town named Tiberioupolis was known in Antiquity and the Middle Ages before the 11th C. Ts. Grozdanov does not consider the results of the excavations published by T. Kotso and P. Milkovic-Pepek, nor does he mention the fact that the archeologists excavated 16 or 19 vaults (but not 15) in the area martyr in Stroumitsa, to cite B. Aleksova, which is used for the continuity hypothesis.

There have been recent attempts at solving this problem. According to the Greek scholar A. Angelopoulos, the cult of the fifteen martyrs was wide-spread in the region of Stroumitsa and the name of the town where the relics were placed, did not change due to them but due to a historical factor – someone called Tiberius. In his view, a concrete proof of that is the preserved local name of the medieval site near Stroumitsa called Tiber’s mountain.

Considering all arguments, I think that Jireček’s hypothesis is the most likely. Today we know that there was no town in late-antique Macedonia named Tiberioupolis. It is also beyond any doubt that the earliest evidence of a Macedonian Tiberioupolis dates back to the 11th C. and refers to Stroumitsa. This convincingly shows that the identification Stroumitsa-Tiberioupolis was quite late. It first appeared in 1080. We should note, as contemporary historiography does, that in the first Chrysobull by Basil II, some 60 years before (1019) the bishop of Stroumitsa is listed only by its Bulgarian name. This means that the identification occurred sometime between 1019 and 1080, presumably on ecclesiastical grounds, as it is found only in some church manuscripts. After the above-mentioned Manuel, the founder of the church-temple Sv. Bogoroditsa Eleousa, also called ἐπόνυμος θεοφιλεύς this identification is confirmed by Theophylact in the late 11th – early 12th C., as well as in Ῥωμαίοι τῆς Θράκης Ιουστινιανῆς (late 12th C.), in a 1286 Mount Athos charter, and in a bishop’s notitia from the early 12th C. At the same time, the counter-examples of Stroumitsa listed under its Bulgarian name only, are a lot more, including Greek and ecclesiastic sources. Besides, today we cannot doubt that Theoktistos of Tiberioupolis, the priest who participated in the Council of Phocas, was indeed a bishop in Asia Minor.

Assuming that Tiberioupolis and Stroumitsa were identified at some point in the mid-11th C., we can now move to the other important questions: on what grounds was this identification made and why? As we have seen above, there are two historiographic hypotheses on this matter. One is advanced by Zlatarski and obviously does not work. Apart from other minor problems, in his view, the emigrants from Asia Minor who spent only three years (809–812) in their new settlements, in that short period succeeded in building a new town called Tiberioupolis, in importing the relics, re-burying them, building the new church and disseminating the cult among the local Christian population, to the extent that 50 years later this cult was embraced by the newly baptized Bulgarians and Slavs. This is obviously impossible and for this reason, the only probable explanation is Jireček’s – the identification was due to the cult of the martyrs in Stroumitsa.

An obvious role in this respect was also played by the tendency to render toponyms archaic, as evidenced during the Byzantine rule of Bulgarian lands. Historiographically, this process is usually related to the origin and develop-
ment of the view that the archbishopry of Ohrid is to be identified as Justiniana Prima.

Even if we accept Jireček's idea, however, there remains a further basic question: how did the cult arise in Stroumitsa? According to Ivanov this could have occurred through some local tradition related to other Christian martyrs. This is quite possible in the light of the wide-spread cult of the forty holy martyrs which was attested by Aleksova. However, it could be that this was not due to written tradition but to material facts, such as the discovered vaults, etc. In any case, the cult had already been established in Stroumitsa by the late 9th C. This is shown not only by Theophylact's evidence, but also by the images in the vaults which undoubtedly belong to this period.

This conclusion seems to contradict Theophylact's report of the relics' import under Boris I and Symeon. If the cult had originated in Stroumitsa, why did the kings have to move the relics to another place close by? This is a reasonable question and the answer is quite simple. When carefully reading Theophylact's Vita, we can see that they did not move the relics of all martyrs, but only of five of them (three under Boris and two under Symeon). Theophylact claims that the removal of the relics was impeded by the Tiberioupolitans' resistance but this account is obviously a hagiographic turn, because there is no mention of resistance during Symeon's reign and he still moved the relics of two other martyrs. All this shows that the Bulgarian rulers had no intention of moving all the relics but only to establish another center of their cult, where to place and venerate something quite valuable in the Middle Ages. This move could have resulted from the establishment of a new bishopry, especially if we assume that the big cult center on the Bregalnitsa, discovered by Aleksova, was really a bishopry. Moving some relics to a new location does not mean that the old center had diminished; there is both direct and indirect evidence that it continued to function. One such direct testimony is a charter by Stefan Dušan dated around 1348–1352 which announces a donation to the monastery of Saint Archangels near Prizren and mentions a church-temple in Stroumitsa named after the martyrs: И и киць црквь оу Отвоаници на или светихъ пятьдесете сь людми, и сь жаломь, и сь виногради.

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The earliest evidence of the cult is their mention in the Evangelarium Assemani (late 10th – early 11th C.), at 29th August, but only three of the martyrs are listed. Another important source for this cult is the well-known Life of Clement of Ohrid by Theophylact of Ohrid, called The martyrdom of the fifteen Tiberioupolitan martyrs (late 11th or early 12th C.). One of the most interesting evidences, however, is the very discovery of the relics, dated back to the reign of khan Boris I (852–889), when the relics proved miraculous.

According to the recent studies, the cult of the fifteen martyrs was wide-spread in the region of Stroumitsa and the name of the town where the relics were placed, did not change due to them but due to a historical factor – someone called Tiberius. On the other


67 Й. Иванов, Северна Македония..., p. 209.

68 Б. Алексова, Епископията на Брегалница..., p. 128; еadem, Брегалница – словенски църковен и просветно-културен център на Балканот, [in:] Климент Охридски и улогата на Охридската книжевна школа в развитието на словенската просвета, Скопие 1989.


70 К. Иренек, op. cit., p. 243; Ц. Грозданов, Портрети..., p. 137; Ц. Грозданов, Мисцицел, p. 15.

71 К. Иренек, op. cit., p. 248; Ц. Грозданов, Портрети..., p. 127; Н. Драгова, Старобългарските извори за житиято на Петнадесетте Тивериополски мъченици от Теофилакт Охридски, SB, 2, 1970, p. 111–112; П. Милкович-Пеpei, op. cit., p. 19. On the same page P. Milkovic-Repek says: Восстановяването на култа на св. 15 Тивериополски мъченици във времето на Климент Охридски, што се първужа и съ стилските оплаки на нивните представи о д о в а в р о в о Цариград (...). It is not clear which images of the saints in Constantinople the author has in mind.

72 Т. Вукановић, op. cit., p. 52–53; Г. Поп-Атанасов, op. cit., p. 100.
hand, however, no Greek manuscripts mention the martyrs, except those coming from the diocese of the Ohrid archbishopry. The facts shown above proves that the cult was imported soon after the baptizing of the Bulgarians.

Translated by Anita Kasabova

Димо Чешмеджиев
Пловдивски университет „Паисий Хилендарски“
Философско-исторически факултет
4000 Пловдив, ул. Костаки Пеев 21
Кирило-Методиевски научен център при БАН
1000 София, ул. Московска 13
dimoclio7@yahoo.com