

RECENT DISCUSSIONS ABOUT “ONGLOS”

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The location of the territory settled by the Bulgars few years before 680 was long time disputed, because the sources are not very clear. We do not intend to give here a full report on this problem. The history of the researches could be found elsewhere¹. Our purpose is to comment some recent viewpoints expressed in the last years. Since 1982 when the Bulgarian archaeologist Rašo Rašev published a very comprehensive study about *Onglos*, other several works brought interesting ideas about the location of the *Onglos* and about the significance of the events occurred in 680.

The so-called *Onglos* recorded by Theophanes Confessor and Nikephor was a very good defended place, surrounded by rivers and marshes. The group led by Asparuch arrived in the *Onglos* short time before the war of 680. Some hoards hidden in Moldavia are showing the moments of their migration². According to Theophanes and Nikephor, the Bulgars appeared suddenly near the Danube. From the *Onglos*, they started the attacks against the Byzantine territories. The campaign of summer 680 against the Bulgars was a riposte to their inroad that reached Thrace in spring 680³. Both sources are suggesting that the *Onglos* was a small area, not a large geographical region. (Theophanes said that the *Onglos* was proper for the small number of people that remained after the wars). The “steep rocks” mentioned by Nikephor seem to be an invention, because Theophanes, who was better informed, did not record them⁴. It might be an allusion to the legendary Rhiphaei Mountains. Some unidentified “fortifications” (ὀχύρωμα) were included in the *Onglos*. Between *Onglos* and the Danube was a marshy zone. The rivers placed both sides of the *Onglos* are not named, but we know they were located north of the Danube. The translation of the passage from Theophanes made by P. Diaconu shows clearly this. (The word βορειοτέρους is accorded with ποταμούς, not with Δανουβίου)⁵. These rivers are not Dnieper and Dniester, because the Bulgars crossed them before they settled *Onglos*. We therefore should exclude the location of *Onglos* between Danube and Dnieper, which was sustained by some historians⁶.

Some researchers thought that the name *Onglos* comes from the Türkic word *agul / aul*, which means “court”, “enclosure”⁷, while others pointed out the likeness with the Slavic *onglu* (“corner”), which has the same meaning like the Turkish name *Bugeac* (the southeastern corner of Moldavia)⁸. However, Nikephor said that the word was a Bulgarian one⁹. This makes more suitable the etymology from the Türkic word *agul*.

From the relation of the fight between Constantine IV and Asparuch we know that the triumphant Bulgars left the *Onglos* and next crossed the Danube. Therefore, the *Onglos* was placed north of the Danube. However, some historians (especially Bulgarians) tried to locate it south of the river. It is true that the Armenian “Geography” ascribed to Moses Chorenatzi says that Asparuch drove away the Avars from the island of Peuce¹⁰. This source is late and confused. If we take word for word this information, we should locate the *Onglos* in the Danubian Delta. Because this is not possible, some researchers believed that the Armenian source concerns an island placed between the Sfântu Gheorghe branch and a disappeared branch of the Danube that started at Isaccea¹¹. Unfortunately, the geological and hydrological studies do not confirm this interesting

¹ Diaconu 1970, 326 – 327; Diaconu 1971, 191 – 193; Rašev 1982, 69 – 71; Hălcescu 1989, 339 – 341.

² Popović 1986, 129.

³ Gjuzelev 1984, 36 – 37.

⁴ Hălcescu 1989, 341.

⁵ Diaconu 1971, 191. See also Božilov 1975, 30 – 31.

⁶ Bănescu 1958, 433 – 434; Hălcescu 1989, 341.

⁷ Zlatarski 1938, 132; Fehér 1931, 24; Decei 1978, 42; Božilov 1975, 31.

⁸ Bănescu 1958, 433; Vulpe, Barnea 1968, 441; Fiedler 1992, 21.

⁹ Diaconu 1970, 327; Diaconu 1971, 194.

¹⁰ Decei 1978, 27, 41 – 42.

¹¹ Zlatarski 1938, 132 – 133.

idea¹². Another location, north of the Carasu valley, would be more suitable, because this valley was navigable during the ancient and early medieval times¹³. In this case, *Onglos* could be searched in the northern part of Dobrudja. However, we should remember that Theophanes speaks about some rivers placed north of the Danube; this excludes the identification of his Danube with the Carasu valley. The sources are indeed speaking about a North-Danubian territory.

Although a location south of the Danube does not accord with the sources, the *Onglos* was sometimes identified with the earthen wall system of Niculițel¹⁴. The shape of this fortification system indicates indeed its Türkic origin. The very scarce archaeological evidence shows only that the walls could be dated between the 5th and the 7th centuries¹⁵. However, the building of the wall by this group of Asparuch before 680 is not proved. One could suppose that another Türkic group made this ring-shaped fortification. The information recorded by Michael Syrus about the migration of the legendary hero Bulgarios who built a fortress for the Romans may concern the erection of this wall system. The events were anachronically placed in the time of Maurikios; we are thinking that the most probable date is during the Heraklios' reign¹⁶. The discovery of some gold and silver Byzantine coins issued by Heraklios, Constans II and Constantine IV in the surroundings of Niculițel suggests the existence of some local rulers payed by the Byzantins (see below).

Another idea expressed by the Bulgarian archaeologist R. Rašev is merely a fanciful one. In his opinion, the ring-shaped fortification of Niculițel was the centre of a great region settled and defended by the group of Asparuch before 680. He considers that this region – the *Onglos* – was bounded by the earthen wall from the southern Bessarabia and by the so-called “small earthen wall” from Dobrudja. The fortification system from Galați-Barboși was also included in this Bulgarian territory¹⁷. This opinion could be considered an expression of the nationalist tendency of some Bulgarian historians who are trying to transform Dobrudja in the genuine homeland of the present Bulgarian people. This extreme idea was accepted and resumed by D. I. Dimitrov and Uwe Fiedler¹⁸. P. Diaconu has already shown how wrong is this theory¹⁹.

A strange opinion was recently sustained by V. Gjuzev. He believes that the Bulgars preserved the fortification of Niculițel (the *Onglos*) as a residence of nomad type for cca. 50 years, even after their setting down near Varna. The camp of Niculițel was replaced – says Gjuzev – with that of Pliska, but after 737, when the latter became the main residence of the qagans²⁰. This is not possible, because the absence of the archaeological remains shows that the ring-shaped fortification from Niculițel was used for a very short time. It is not excluded that the Bulgars used the fortification of Niculițel after they occupied Dobrudja, but the *Onglos* attested by Theophanes and Nikephor was not there.

Škorpil believed that Theophanes recorded one *Onglos* at Barboși (north of the Danube), while Nikephor recorded another, at Niculițel²¹. This opinion was recently resumed by D. I. Dimitrov²². One could observe that Nikephor gives fewer details than Theophanes. We consider that both sources are speaking about the same fortification, but with small variations.

The arguments proposed for the location of the *Onglos* south of the Danube are not suitable. We can conclude that the *Onglos* must be searched only in the region north of the Danube. But where ?

According to the traditional opinion, the *Onglos* was the southern part of Moldavia, bounded by the rivers Siret or Prut and Dniester. The likeness *Bugeac/Onglos* played a significative role in this idea. The northern limit of the *Onglos* was sometimes identified with the Roman earthen wall built between Vadul lui Isac and Tatarbunar²³. From this point of view, the marshes recorded by the sources are the lakes placed beyond the northern bank of the Danube. A variant of this opinion considers that *Onglos* was only the small area

¹² Škorpil 1918, 113, 143 – 144; Fiedler 1992, 22.

¹³ Diaconu 1993, 298; Diaconu 1994, 360.

¹⁴ Zlatarski 1938, 132; Škorpil 1918, 109 – 152.

¹⁵ Madgearu 1997, 183 – 185 with previous bibliography.

¹⁶ Madgearu 1997, 184.

¹⁷ Rašev 1982, 76 – 79.

¹⁸ Dimitrov 1985, 119; Dimitrov 1987, 185 – 192; Fiedler 1992, 22 – 24 and footnote 246 for other references.

¹⁹ Diaconu 1993, 297 – 298.

²⁰ Gjuzev 1991, 84. In his previous study (1984), V. Gjuzev accepted the location of *Onglos* between Dniester and Prut.

²¹ Škorpil 1918, 145 – 152.

²² Dimitrov 1987, 187.

²³ Fehér 1931, 9 – 12; Ferenczi 1936, 268 – 270; Decei 1978, 41 – 42; Bănescu 1958, 433 – 440; Vulpe, Barnea 1968, 441; Gjuzev 1984, 35 – 36; Hălcescu 1989, 339 – 351.

between the mouths of the rivers Siret and Prut²⁴. In this case, the *Onglos* was confined by the Roman earthen wall built between Șerbești and Tulucești with the purpose to defend the camp of Barboși.

Petre Diaconu denied this traditional point of view into a study published in 1970 and in other further works²⁵. He supposes that the Bulgars crossed the Danube most probable by Durostorum. According to P. Diaconu, the *Onglos* was located in the southern Wallachia, somewhere near Durostorum. His main argument is the hiding of two treasures in Oltenia, during the Bulgar invasion. The treasures are: the hoard of Priseaca, Olt County (ended with silver coins issued in 674 – 681) and the treasure from Coșoveni (composed from a curved fibula and three earrings). P. Diaconu remarked that no such hoards were found in Dobruja and that nothing proves a troubled situation in Dobruja around 680.

Costel Chiriac, who pointed out the significance of the hoards found in Oltenia for this theory, defended the location in Wallachia proposed by P. Diaconu. He considers that the hiding of the hoards of hexagrams issued by Constans II and Constantine IV (Priseaca, Drăgășani and Vârtopu) was caused by an offensive led by the Bulgars toward Oltenia and perhaps toward Transylvania²⁶.

The hypothesis sustained by Petre Diaconu since 1970 was recently resumed by Florin Curta with new and interesting arguments. In his remarkable study about the significance of the coin hoards hidden during the 6th – 7th centuries in the South-Eastern Europe, F. Curta emphasized the idea that the Priseaca and Coșoveni hoards were in fact gifts for the Bulgars, sent by Constantine IV when they were still settled in the *Onglos*. His aim was the securing of the northern Byzantine frontier during the wars against the Arabs. The location of the *Onglos* in Wallachia would be supported by the discovery of a seal of Constantine IV at Durostorum. F. Curta considers that Durostorum was the main point implied in the military operations against Asparuch²⁷. The seal found at Durostorum proves the existence of some Byzantine military or civilian officials, and not the physical presence of the emperor in this city. The letter was sent by Constantine IV from another place. It is very likely that the imperial letter was sent during the anti-Bulgarian campaign, but this does not prove that the main war theatre was located in the neighbourhood, as believes our colleague F. Curta.

The supporters of the "Wallachian" theory did not try to locate the fortified place recorded by both sources. They gave no alternative for a place like Barboși or Niculițel. Any attempt to locate the *Onglos* must identify the fortifications used by the Bulgars.

One could observe that the principal idea of F. Curta is that the Bulgars were allies of the emperor Constantine IV before they started the inroads against the south-Danubian regions. He believes that Constantine IV tried to establish friendly relations with Asparuch and Kuber in view that both Bulgar branches will become a shield against the Avars.

An alliance between the Bulgars and the Byzantine Empire was previously supposed by A. Petre (who believed that the ring-shaped fortification of Niculițel was built in these circumstances)²⁸. In fact, there is no proof for this assertion in the literary sources.

The location of the *Onglos* in Wallachia is based on the supposed relation between the invasion of the Bulgars and the treasures hidden in Oltenia and at Stejanovci. This argument must be carefully examined.

The curved fibula from Coșoveni is a piece from in the first half of the 7th century, while the earrings from this treasure could be dated around the mid the 7th century²⁹. We think that the Coșoveni treasure has no signification for the events occurred around 680, because it represents most probable the inventory of a grave. However, it is not possible to establish a firm date around 680 for the findings of Coșoveni. The Priseaca hoard could be a silversmith treasure³⁰, like that of Stejanovci. Although we could admit that the coins arrived in *Barbaricum* as gifts for a chieftain, we could suppose that their master gave the coins to a silversmith with the purpose to use the silver as material for jewels. Therefore, the date of the hiding could be a bit later than 681. The hiding in 680 is possible, but not certain. As like as the hoard of Stejanovci invoked by V. Popović³¹ and F. Curta, the Priseaca hoard is too far from the region involved in the conflict, even if we admit that Constantine IV crossed the Danube by Durostorum.

²⁴ Schafarik 1844, II, 163; Božilov 1975, 33 – 36; Dimitrov 1985, 119; Madgearu 1997, 181 – 185.

²⁵ Diaconu 1970, 330 – 333; Diaconu 1971, 197 – 199; Diaconu 1993, 297 – 298; Diaconu 1994, 359 – 361.

²⁶ Chiriac 1991, 375 – 376. See also Mitrea 1975, 124.

²⁷ Curta 1996, 114 – 116.

²⁸ Petre 1981, 563 – 564.

²⁹ Curta 1994, 250; Madgearu 1997, 46, 62.

³⁰ Butoi 1968, 102; Chiriac 1991, 375.

³¹ Popović 1986, 129. The place is near Sremska Mitrovica.

In fact, the treasures from Priseaca, Drăgășani, Vârtopu and Coșoveni belong to a group of findings which represents the testimony of a power centre located in Oltenia and dated in the first half of the 7th century. The late Roman fortified settlement from Răcari (located in the centre of this area) was used until the first half of the 7th century. This centre is defined by the concentration of several valuable objects: coins (stray-finds and hoards), curved fibulae, Byzantine buckles and star-shaped earrings. These objects were found in Oltenia and on the right bank of the Danube, in the zone of the Iron Gates³².

It seems more likely that the hexagrams from Oltenia were sent as tribute for a peripheral group of the Avar confederation. We could suppose that Byzantium tried to stimulate the centrifugal trends aroused after 626 inside the Avar qaganate. The hexagrams are present especially in the marginal areas like Oltenia. We already sustained in our Ph. D. dissertation that the gold and silver coins found in the northern Dobrudja and in the nearby areas are testifying Byzantine some payments for unknown local rulers, made during the period between Heraklios and Constantine IV³³. The hoard from Galați belongs to this group and it shows a long accumulation, which includes hexagrams from Heraklios (3), Constans II (4), and Constantine IV (5). This contradicts the idea of F. Curta, that this hoard (as like as those from Oltenia) was a gift sent by Constantine IV to Asparuch. The stipends were payed since Heraklios, most probable after 626, when began the decline of the Avar qaganate. It is known that Heraklios established an alliance with Kubrat in the same circumstances of the anti-Avar policy. The fortification of Niculițel was built perhaps by this group, as we can infer from the relation of Michael Syrus. We could even admit that these allies were of Bulgar origin, but they were not the men of Asparuch.

The same Byzantine policy is suggested by some 7th century Byzantine silver and gold coins and silver vessels discovered in far places like Zemiensky Vrbovok³⁴, Cuciurul Mare³⁵, Krylos³⁶ and Zotków³⁷. It seems that Heraklios started a policy of surrounding the Avar qaganate with several Slavic tribes allied with the Byzantine Empire. This explains the origin of the hoards found in Oltenia and in the regions east and north of the Avar qaganate.

The location in southern Bessarabia was denied because no coin hoards were hidden there around 680. In fact, the reason seems to be the wasting of this area several decades before. The last coins found in the southern Bessarabia are from Heraklios³⁸.

The single Bulgarian archaeological evidence at the Lower Danube before 680 seems to be the grave found at Bălteni, Buzău County. This grave was first ascribed to the 5th century, but a recent study showed that the gold tiara found there is dated in the 7th century. Its analogies in the North-Pontic steppes and at Varna are showing that the grave belonged to a Bulgar woman from the group of Asparuch³⁹. This is a very significant discovery, because it gives true data about the area where the Bulgar families are to be found. As a nomad people, the Bulgars needed pasture lands and salt for their cattle. It is known from other cases (Hungarians, Tartars) that the nomad tribes wandered up and down along the rivers' valleys with the purpose to acquire food for the cattle⁴⁰. We could suppose that the Bulgars that arrived near the bend of the Danube wandered along the Buzău valley and along other rivers. The *Onglos* was only the power centre of a larger territory dominated by

³² Madgearu 1997, 164 – 165. Curved fibulae: Coșoveni, Drănic, Kladovo, Korbovo, Orlea, Prahovo, Vela, Velesnica. Buckles: Balta Verde. Earrings: Maglavit, Priseaca. Coins: Almăj, Argetoaia, Cioroiul Nou, Craiova, Răcari. Coin hoards: Priseaca, Drăgășani, Vârtopu.

³³ Madgearu 1997, 106 – 107, 145, 185. The hoards are the following: Galați (3 AR, 615 – 638, 4 AR, 647 – 659, 1 AR, 668 – 673, 4 AR, 674 – 681); Piuă Petrii (1 AR 641 – 668, 2 AR, 668 – 685), Valea Teilor (1 AR, 641 – 646, 1 AR, 668 – 673, from a lost hoard). Stray – finds: Istria (1 AV, 674 – 681), Niculițel (1 AR, 674 – 681), Tulcea (1 AV, 641 – 646), Dobrudja, passim (1 AV, 661 – 663). A recent discovery from Agighiol is published by Custurea 1998, 291 (1 AR, 668 – 669).

³⁴ Avenarius 1985, 1024 – 1025 supposed that this treasure represents a tribute payed by Byzantium for the Avars around 680. However, the date of the last hexagram (668 – 669) suggests a gift sent to an enemy of the Avars. (Peaceful relations between Byzantium and the Avars were established only in 678, after the great victory of Constantine IV against the Arabs).

³⁵ Noll 1974, 267 – 273.

³⁶ Kropotkin 1971, 65 – 71.

³⁷ Skowronek 1969, 128 – 129.

³⁸ Chiriac 1991, 377.

³⁹ Comșa 1989, 77 – 86. The grave found at Târgușor (Prahova County) was in its turn ascribed to the Bulgars, but its dating and ethnic origin are not clear. See Madgearu 1997, 152 – 153.

⁴⁰ Spinei 1990, 135 – 138.

the Bulgars. The highlands of the Buzău basin are rich in salt. In this way could be explained the discovery of Bălteni, located on the valley of the Buzău river, not too far from the bend of the Danube.

We continue to sustain the location of the *Onglos* in the corner between the mouths of the Siret and Prut rivers⁴¹. Theophanes mentioned these rivers without name as the limits of the *Onglos*. We can also take into account the Bârlad river. According to a study of historical geography, this river flowed until the Middle Ages directly into the Danube, between Siret and Prut⁴². The fortifications (ὄχυρωμα) could be identified with the relics of the Roman camp of Barboși, which was in its turn defended by an earthen wall placed between Șerbești and Tulucești⁴³. The stone fort has a surface of 5,25 ha and includes an earlier fortlet in the central part. A small *castellum* of 30 × 30 m was discovered east of the big camp. The geographical environment accords with the description given by the sources.

We have shown into a previous study that the zone around Barboși was offered by Justinianus to the Antae as a defended place against the Kutrigurs. (We tried to identify Turrus with this fortress)⁴⁴. As we have already observed with that occasion, the area between the rivers Siret and Prut had always a very important strategic value. In this zone the distance between the Carpathians and the Danube is the smallest one and the defence against the attacks from northeast is more easy. The fortress of Barboși was abandoned in the early 4th century, but we know that Justinianus thought that Turrus could be restored. This means that the precinct and the earthen wall were still well preserved. One century later, Asparuch found there perhaps a good defended area. The Bulgars did not built a camp. They used the existing Roman fortifications and they applied to them the Bulgarian name for "camp"⁴⁵.

The solution given by I. Božilov seems to be the best: the *Onglos* was the small area bounded by Siret, Prut and Danube.

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⁴¹ As we did in Madgearu 1997, 181 – 185.

⁴² Antonovici 1938, 44 – 52.

⁴³ The idea was first expressed by Schafarik 1844, II, 163 and it was developed by Božilov 1975, 33.

⁴⁴ Madgearu 1992, 203 – 208.

⁴⁵ Škorpil 1918, 146 – 147 remarked that Onglos was not a proper name, but a common noun (a camp surrounded by earthen walls).

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