



Koutrigours and Outigours

Summary :

The main argument of the promoters of the thesis about the identity between the Bulgarians (Proto-Bulgarians) and the Koutrigours and Outigours is the supposition that all of them inhabited the same territory in the 6th c. According to the Byzantine chroniclers, the Bulgarians lived in the plains to the west and east of Dnieper down to Crimea, while the Koutrigours were located immediately to the west of Don, along the northwestern coast of the Azov Sea.

Date

6th-7th c.

Geographical Location

The northwestern and eastern coasts of the Azov Sea and the right bank of the river Don

1. Introduction

For a couple of decades the sources did not mention anything about the [Bulgarians](#) who remained in their homeland known as "Great Bulgaria" after the detachment of a considerable part of them that moved with the Huns to the West at the beginning of the 5th c. Many historians agree that the Turkic tribes of Koutrigours and Outigours who appeared in the Balkans between AD 530 and 558 were in fact Bulgarians, since they came from the area of the Azov Sea.¹ It must be noted, however, that none of the relevant sources referred to any of these two tribes as "Bulgarians". Furthermore, one lacks reliable archaeological evidence that might be related to the culture of the Koutrigours and Outigours.

2. The identity of the Bulgarians (Proto-Bulgarians) with Koutrigours and Outigours. Sources and studies

Already the contemporary historians, mostly Byzantines² and Syrians,³ dealt with the problem of the origin and ethnic identity of the Koutrigours and Outigours. The identification of the Koutrigours and the Outigours with the Bulgarians implied by those sources, however, is based only on geographical arguments.⁴ This opinion has been convincingly opposed by Al. Burmov who pointed out that in the list of the peoples provided by Zacharias Rhetor (ca. 569), the Bulgarians (Burgar) were noted as people different from the Koutrigours (Kurtargar).⁵ The Byzantine historian [Agathias](#) (before 582) mentions in his work that the Koutrigours lived immediately to the west of the river Don along the northwestern coast of the Azov Sea and were neighbors of the Hunnugours, who divided them from the Bulgars and Altziagirs. Agathias also adds that the Koutrigours and Outigours were crushed and disappeared later than the events he narrated about.⁶ The doom of the Koutrigours and the Outigours as already a fact was further noted by Menander Protector who covers the events that happened after AD 582.⁷ It seems, then, that the Koutrigours disappeared or became a rather insignificant tribe sometime in the second half of the 6th c., yet before AD 582.

The conflicting ethnonymic evidence for Boulgaroi (*Βούλγαροι*) in the Byzantine sources has been recently discussed by B. Simeonov. According to him, the names of Koutrigouri, Outigouroi, Onougouri, Ounnougouroi, Ounnogoundouroi, Ounogoundouroi, Kotragoi, and Kotraghoi must be viewed as ethno-linguistic terms.⁸



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3. Koutrigours

3.1. Attacks on Byzantium

One of the main arguments in support of the identification of the Koutrigours with the Bulgarians is the fact that attacks of the Koutrigours on Byzantium started immediately after the stop of the Bulgarian raids in the 530s.⁹ According to that argument, since the territories to the northeast of the Danube formed the starting point of both series of raids, the assailants must have been identical. However, the sources note only that in the proximity of the Bulgarian sites new people or tribe union appeared and started independent attacks against Byzantium. It might be that the Bulgarians also participated in those raids, but this does not necessarily mean that they were identical with the Koutrigours. One of the sources for those events is bishop Victor Tonnensis, who ascribed the raid of AD 558 to the Bulgarians.¹⁰ Two other contemporary historians, Agathias and [John Malalas](#), provide more reliable information about the same attack.¹¹ Agathias called the assailants "Koutrigours", while Malalas used the common tribe name of the [Huns](#). Perhaps groups of the Koutrigours might have been flowed into the Bulgarians due to the neighborhood and the close relations with them. However, the statement that the Koutrigours constituted the basis of the Bulgarian ethnos contradicts the sources.

3.2. Connections with the Avars and contacts with Byzantium

The appearance of both Bulgarians and Koutrigours among the peoples of the Avar tribe union in the 6th c. in Pannonia gave a reason to some modern scholars to claim identity of the Koutrigours with the Bulgarians and even more, to consider as Koutrigours those Bulgarians who looked for settling in Western Europe in the 7th c.¹²

Another group of scholars argue, with reference to [Theophanes the Confessor](#) and Patriarch Nicephoros, that the Kotrags who were related (ομόφυλοι / *omófuloi*) to the Ounnogoundours were also a part of the Bulgarian tribe union of Khan Kubrat. That circumstance provides additional ground for the identity between the Koutrigours and the Bulgarians.¹³ The name of the Koutrigours can be found in the sources in various forms, but it always kept its characteristic suffix *-gour*.¹⁴ In the name of the Kotrags, however, the suffix is missing, which makes very doubtful the identification between the name of the Kotrags and the Koutrigours. In fact, the Koutrigours acted as an independent people between AD 530 and 558. Soon after that, they became subjects of the Avars and were moved to the territory of the Avar Khaganate at the Middle Danube. In AD 551 a group of them (numbering 2000) settled in Thrace with the permission of Justinian I (re. 527-565), and already in AD 568 they acted as a Byzantine ally when 10000 Koutrigours were sent to devastate Dalmatia.¹⁵

4. The Outigours

As noted above, Agathias wrote that to the north of the Azov Sea and in the basin of Don lived various tribes, such as Koutrigours, Outigours, Oultizurs and Vourougounds and all of them were known under the name of the Huns.¹⁶ The name of the Outigours is usually drawn from Otur - gur < Otur - ogur > Oujti-vgouroi,¹⁷ which corresponds to the principles of the onomastics and the practice among the Hunno-Altai people. The first part of the name, according to B. Simeonov, stems out from the Hunno-Turkic numeral otur < otuz < ottuz [three, thirty]. In this case, the name of the Outigours must have had referred to the "three tribes" or the "thirty clans". Therefore, it seems that the correct form of the name is "Oturgurs", which is a native Hunno-Altai form, but not "Outigours" which is in fact a distorted and



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misspelled Byzantine form as "Oujtivgouroi".¹⁸

5. Archaeological evidence

The difficulties in the identification of the Koutrigours and the Outigours, in light of the above mentioned written sources, resulted in very disputable interpretations of some archaeological data as related to both tribes. Thus, some scholars ascribed the Pastirski culture to the Koutrigours,¹⁹ while others relate some cemeteries unearthed in East Priazovie and West Predkavkazie (e.g. Pashkovski and Yasenovopolyanski cemeteries) to the so-called "Kuban Bulgarians."²⁰

1. J. Marquart, *Die Chronologie der alttürkischen Inschriften* (Leipzig, 1898), p. 85; Gy. Moravczik, *Studia Byzantina* (Budapest, 1967), pp. 104-109; Sam. Kardoss-Szádeczky, "Zum historischen Hintergrund der ersten Inschrift des Reiterreliefs von Madara," *Acta of the Fifth Epigraphic Congress* (Rome, 1967), pp. 473-477.; М. И. Артамонов, *История хазар* (Leningrad, 1962), pp. 79-88 ; В. Т. Сиротенко, "Письменные свидетельства о булгарах IV-VII вв. в свете современных им исторических событий," in *Славяно-балканские исследования. Историография и источниковедение* (Moscow, 1972), pp. 195-218; Д. Ил. Димитров, *Прабългарите по Северното и Западното Черноморие (Към въпроса за тяхното присъствие и история в днешните руски земи и ролята им при образуването на българската държава)* (Varna, 1987); Ив. Божилов, Хр. Димитров, "Protobulgaria (Заметки по истории протоболгар до середины IX в.)," *Византинобългарика 9* (Sofia, 1995), pp. 7-62; В. Златарски, *История на българската държава през средните векове. I/1* (Sofia, 2007 reprint), pp. 33-83; Б. Симеонов, *Прабългарска ономастика* (Пловдив, 2008), pp. 81-85, 88.

2. Procopii Caesariensis, *Opera omnia. De bellis libris VIII*, rec. J. Haury, I-III. (Leipzig, 1905-1913), pp. 501,16-507,21; 508,1-19; 581,19-589,20.

3. Н. В. Пигулевская, *Сирийские источники по истории народов СССР* (Leningrad, 1941), p. 165.

4. В. Н. Златарски (2007), pp. 34, 89.

5. Ал. Бурмов, *Избрани произведения*, I (Sofia, 1968), pp. 33-39; Н. В. Пигулевская (1941), p. 81.

6. Agathias, *Historici graeci minores*, rec. L. Dindorf, II (Leipzig, 1871), pp. 365,1-4, 389-392.

7. Menander Protector *Excerpta de legationibus*, ed. C. De Boor (Berlin, 1903), pp. 170,1-171,4.

8. Despite the discrepancy in the written evidence about the Koutrigours, they have been generally considered a Hunnic or a Bulgarian tribe. According to B. Simeonov, both identifications can be considered correct since both the Bulgarians and the Koutrigours were related to the Huns for a long time, on one side, and the Koutrigours were part of Great Bulgaria, on the other. He points out on the variety in the form of the name of the Koutrigours as it appeared in the relevant sources. Thus, in addition to *koutrigouroi* already in the middle of the 6th c. one can find the form of *k. w. r. t. r. g. r.*, while the Armenian Geography of Moses of Choren notes that the people called *kurt* inhabited in the territories between the Pontos (i.e. the Black Sea) and the Bulgarians. These references in the source give a reason to accept the idea of J. Marquart that the initial form must have been *kourt-gouroi/kurt-gur/kurt-urgur*, rather than *koutrigouroi* in the form of which records a slight metathesis between *-ourt->-our*. According to B. Simeonov, the first part of the tribe name of the Koutrigours, *kourt* completely coincides with the name of Kubrat as it has been recorded in the Name List of the Bulgar Khans, *Kurt*. In the Hunno-Altai languages the word *kurt*, *qurt* means "wolf." Thus, *koutrigouroi / kurt- qurt* means the "kin of the wolf" or the "successors of the wolf." The suffix *-gur~ - gur* can be found in almost all the ethnonyms of the time period of Great Bulgaria, such as Koutrigouroi, Outigouroi, Onougouri, Ounnougouroi, Ounnogoundouroi, Ounogoundouroi and brings the meaning of a "tribe, kin." In this way, the tribe name of the Koutrigouroi can be read as "the men of the kin of the wolf" which completely corresponds to the totemic practice: Б. Симеонов (2008), p. 81-84. For an English translation of the Name List of the Bulgarian Khans, see *The Voices of Medieval Bulgaria, Seventh-Fifteenth Century. The Records of a Bygone Culture*, ed. K. Petkov (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), pp. 3-5.

9. В. Н. Златарски (2007), pp. 34-36.

10. Victoris Tonnennensis episcopi, *Chronica*, ed. T. Mommsen (MGH, Auct., XI, Berolini, 1893), p. 205,2-4 (a. 560).



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11. Agathias, *Historiarum libri V*. 14, pp. 365,1-376,10; Ioannis Malalae *Chronographia*, rec. L. Dindorf (Bonn, 1831), p. 490,6-12.
12. J. Moravcsik, „Zur Geschichte der Onoguren,“ *Ungarische Jahrbücher* 10 (Berlin, Leipzig, 1930), pp. 78-80.
13. Цв. Кристанов, “Към въпроса за етногенезиса на българския народ,” *Исторически преглед* 3 (1966), p. 47; М. И. Артамонов (1962), p. 167.
14. Б. Симеонов (2008), p. 81.
15. Procopii Caesariensis, *Opera omnia*, rec. J. Haury, I-III (Leipzig, 1905-1913), Book VIII, pp. 501-507, 508; 581-589; 635-637.
16. Agathias, *Historiarum libri V*, p. 365,1
17. G. Németh, “Körösi Csoma,” *Archivum* 1 (1920/1925), p. 155.
18. Б. Симеонов (2008), p. 88.
19. The area of Pastirski or Penkovka culture occupied the forest-steppe zone from the left tributaries of Dnieper to the river of Seret in the west: М. И. Артамонов, “Етническата принадлежност и историческото значение на пастирската култура,” *Археология* 3 (1969), pp. 1-8.
20. В. Б. Ковалевская, “Северокавказкие древности,” in *Стени Евразии в эпоху средневековья* (Археология СССР) (Moscow, 1981), p. 92; Д. Ил. Димитров (1987), pp. 86-90.

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Sources

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Quotations

Procopios on the origins of the Koutrigours and Outigours

Πάλαι μὲν Οὐννων, τῶν τότε Κιμμερίων καλουμένων, πολὺς τις ὄμιλος τὰ χωρία ταῦτα ἐνέμοντο, ὧν ἄρτι ἐμνήσθην, βασιλεὺς τε εἷς ἅπασιν ἐφειστήκει. καὶ ποτὲ τις αὐτῶν τὴν ἀρχὴν ἔσχεν, ᾧ δὴ παῖδες ἐγένοντο δύο, ἄτερος μὲν Οὐτίγουρ ὄνομα, Κουτρίγουρ δὲ ὁ ἕτερος. οἴπερ, ἐπειδὴ αὐτοῖν ὁ πατήρ τὸν βίον συνεμετρήσατο, τὴν τε ἀρχὴν ἄμφω ἐν σφίσιν αὐτοῖς διεδάσαντο καὶ τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν τοῖς ἀρχομένοις αὐτοῖς ἔδωσαν. οἱ μὲν γὰρ Οὐτίγουροι, οἱ δὲ Κουτρίγουροι καὶ ἐς ἐμὲ ὀνομάζονται. οὗτοι μὲν ἅπαντες τῆδε ᾤκητο, κοινὰ μὲν τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα ζύμπαντα ἔχοντες, οὐκ ἐπιμιγνύμενοι δὲ ἀνθρώποις, οἱ δὲ τῆς τε Λίμνης καὶ τῆς ἐνθένδε ἐκροῆς ἐς τὰ ἐπὶ θάτερα ἴδρυντο, ἐπεὶ οὔτε διέβαινόν ποτε τὰ ὕδατα ταῦτα οὔτε διαβατὰ εἶναι ὑπόπτειον, πρὸς τὰ εὐκολώτατα περίφοβοι ὄντες, τῷ μὴδὲ ἀποπειράσασθαι αὐτῶν πώποτε, ἀλλ' ἀμελέτητοι τῆς διαβάσεως παντάπασιν εἶναι.

Procopii Caesariensis, *Opera omnia*, vol. II: *De bellis libris VIII*.5.1-5, ed. J. Haury - G. Wirth (Leipzig 1963).