

Tursun Bey Lost in Translation: How a Popular Edition of *Târîh-i Ebû'l-Feth* Inspired a National Myth

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Summary

The Ottoman conquest of Bosnia (1463), an event of enormous historical importance, strengthened in the Balkans a new religion and a new civilization, and laid the foundation for the eventual formation of the one of the youngest European nations, the Bosniak one. However, its modern popular interpretations, often based on poor translations of selected historical sources, produced nationalistic myths strong enough to deafen the voice of historical science, as well as reason.

Keywords: Bosnia, Ottoman, Tursun Bey, pseudo-history, myth

1. Introduction

Unlike the so-called exact sciences, historiography has always been regarded as occupying a void space between science and literature, between research and storytelling or, to put it bluntly, between fact and fantasy. Indeed, the very Turkish word for history, *tarih*, derives from the Arabic stem *ʿ-r-kh* conveying a fairly romantic notion of a wistful affection for the past, the *maşdar* of the related 2nd augmented verbal form *taʿrîkh*, being a factitive with a meaning of putting recollections in a congruous order i.e. dating them. The first Turkish written accounts, like the Ottoman chapter of Ahmedî's *İskender-nâme*, *Âşık Paşazâde*, *İbn Kemâl*, *Oruç Rûhî*, *Bihîştî* or the anonymous 15th century chronicles as headings preferred the plural *tevârîh*, so the common title *Tevârîh-i Âl-i Osmân* did not mean *history of*, but rather *tales about* the Ottoman dynasty, immanently implying not an authoritative truth, but rather a personal relation on the persons and events described, very much alike the semantic field of the corresponding French word *histoire*. Probably never employed in this context, the common Middle Eastern tale-telling introductory locution *biri varmış, biri yokmuş* (Pers. *yakî bûd yakî na-bûd*, Coll. Ar. *hâ jît-ak*

mā jīt-ak) would be perfectly fitting.¹ In story-telling the amalgamation of myth and reality, history and literature is obvious, self-explanatory and self-justificatory. Herodotus, celebrated as the father of history, had never made an attempt to distinguish between the two, and had no scruples about blending stories of gods with stories of mortals. Only in the last two centuries, witnessing the ultimate alliance of history and ideology, which on its part claimed the ownership of the final and decisive truth, the historians assumed a responsibility to firmly separate mythology and historiography, making however their own myths based on available or selected historical sources. On the other side, the inability of history scholars to specify the boundaries of the field prevented them to protect their guild from amateurs and frauds, in contrast to e.g. physicians or engineers. The mass media, both print and audiovisual, have their own interest in introducing charlatans and myth-makers as serious scholars, so the balance is tending to change toward fantasy i.e. myth and pseudo-history. It is particularly true if a subject discussed treats a question of national importance, and absolutely true if the *logos* of history is confronted with the *mythos* as an authoritative pronouncement concerning the very origin of a nation.

There are not many historical events where history and myth intertwine to such an extent as the fall of the medieval kingdom of Bosnia under Ottoman rule in 1463. An event of enormous historical importance, definitively established in the Balkans a new religion and a new civilization, and laid the foundation for the eventual formation of the one of the youngest European nations – the Bosniak one,² tracing its origin to the sole event of 1463, as well as the gradual process of Islamicization of the country's Christian population, particularly strong in the 16th and 17th centuries. The mythological narrative evolved in the late 19th century and kept alive in popular historiography until nowadays, goes as follows: Medieval Bosnians were predominantly adherents of a Manichaeistic *Bogumil* creed, as such they were oppressed both by Catholic and Orthodox Christian Churches, and were desperately hoping for the Ottoman Sultan to come and free them. The last Bosnian king, Stephen Tomašević (1438-1463), was feared, hated and despised for his flirting with both churches, at times switching from one to the other, as well as for committing a patricide, namely poisoning his father, King Stephen Thomas (d. 1461). *Bogumil* faith allegedly having much in common with Islam, so the Bosnians converted to Islam en masse upon Mehmed Fatih's arrival, rejected to defend the country and its detested king.

¹ The similar semantical switch underwent the Turkish word for literature, *edebiyât*, originally denoting gentle, nice and proper behavior and way of life.

² For a reader non-familiar with the Balkan affairs: the word *Bosnian* applies to all Bosnian population, Christian, Muslim and Jewish, while the term *Bosniak*, once synonym of the word *Bosnian*, since the nineties applies exclusively to the Islamicized population of Bosnia. In recent years, the term *Bosniak* was extended to all Serbo-Croatian speaking Muslims of former Yugoslavia as far as Kosovo and North Macedonia even if ethnically and geographically distant and unrelated to Bosnia proper.

2. Patricide

The credit for the spread of the claim concerning the patricide allegedly committed by Stephen Tomašević belongs to the Ragusan Benedictine monk Mavro Orbini (1563-1614) and his widely read book *Il Regno degli Slavi*, published in 1601. Orbini inculpates the king for conspiracy with his uncle Radivoj, and eventually the murder of his father.

“These words and suggestions of the Hungarian kindled the heart of the young man, who by his nature was ambitious, so he accepted the proposal at once. King Thomas went to Croatia to fight in the area of Bjelaj, and after falling in bad for being indisposed, at night his son Stephen together with Radivoj attacked and strangled him, later spreading a rumor that he was suffocated by an old illness of him. For a time it was believed to be true, until a page of Radivoj revealed the fact to Catherine, the wife of the deceased king” (Orbini, 1601: 370).³

The earliest Western source from which Orbini could derive the information was Jörg von Nürnberg, a German gunsmith who in 1456 entered the service of Stephen Vukčić Kosača (1404-1466), the Grand Duke of Bosnia, four years later was taken captive by the Ottomans, and spent twenty years in their service, before managing to escape to Venice. In his book *Geschicht von der Turckey*, published in 1483, Jörg claims that King Thomas' brother, inspired by Matthias Corvinus (1443-1490), king of Hungary and Croatia, persuaded Prince Stephen Tomašević to transfer some castles to his uncle in return for his support in the patricide. The event infuriated the Ottoman Sultan who decided to raid Bosnia (Von Nürnberg, 1483: 3 v.).⁴ The historical evidences, however, do not support the claim, and they lead to a supposition that King Thomas died of an unspecified illness. According to documents preserved in the Archives of Dubrovnik, on 8th of June 1461, more than a month before Thomas' death, the king's envoy was received by Dubrovnik's Senate delivering the king's request for a physician. The request was granted, but the king died towards the end of July, and the physician returned to Dubrovnik (Ćorović, 1940: 540).⁵ The ar-

³ “Queste parole et offerte dell'Ungaro accesero l'animo del giovane, che naturalmente era ambizioso, in maniera ch'egli subitamente accettò il partito. Onde sendo andato il re Tomasc in Croatia a combattere la terra di Bielaj, e stando in letto al quanto indisposto, Stefano suo figliuolo con Radivoi l'assaltarono di notte, et strangolatolo diedero voce che era stato suffocato da un suo male antico. Il che fu creduto per un pezzo, fino che un paggio di Radivoi scoperse la cosa a Catharina, moglie del re morto.”

⁴ “Es begab sich das der konig von Bossna krigt wider den konig von vngeren do sprach des konigs von Bossna bruder zu seine son dein vatter ist vast ein alt man vn wil dich nit regiren lassen. Will du mir ettlich slosser schencken so wil ich den vatter vmb bringen.”

⁵ A very good survey of the available literature concerning the circumstances of the death of Stephen Thomas are presented in: Maslo, 2018.

cheological findings support the surmise. The remnants of King Thomas' skeleton, excavated in the family crypt at the castle of Bobovac, show that the fifty year old king suffered from an advanced stage of deforming spondylosis which made him virtually crippled (Anđelić, 1973: 82).

But, from where comes the wrong accusation? The only source for Jörg's claim, which was undoubtedly available to him during his twenty years long service for the Ottomans, was the Ottoman chronicler Tursun Bey, a contemporary and firsthand witness of the conquest of Bosnia, who in the sixteenth chapter of his *Târih-i Ebu'l-Feth* relates that among the reasons for Fatih's decision to break the peace agreement, next to his "futile" claims on the fortress of Smederevo (Semendire) and the title of Serbian *despot*, was the fact that Stephen Tomašević procured the throne by murdering his father.

"Although its king was giving a huge amount to the imperial treasury as per capita taxation, and had a vassal agreement with the Sublime Porte, this scoundrel acquired the throne by marrying the daughter of the decrepit Despot, and unfoundedly claimed the possession of the fortress of Smederevo, and so delayed the conquest, together with other acts of breaking the agreement. Moreover, this wrong-doer became king by killing his father. The betrayal of the dues to the father deprived him of the right to the rule" (Tursun Beg, 1986).⁶

I have no reason to doubt that Tursun was the one who invented the whole episode concerning the patricide, which was in full accord with the usual practice of Ottoman chroniclers, who had never seen the holy war or any pragmatic political reason as sufficient for breaking a peace agreement, and were regularly producing a real or invented evidence of enemy's moral corruption, and presenting the Ottoman Sultan as an agent of God's justice and the assault as a deserved vengeance for disobeying the divine order.

3. Bosnian Bogumils

Although the origin of the legend about the betrayal and the mass conversion of the adherents of the Bosnian Church upon the Ottoman raid of 1463 could be traced back to the report of the papal legate to Stephen Tomašević's court, Nicholas of Modruš (1427-1480) (Hrkać, 1976), it was for the first time launched into the historical debate in the 19th century by a pan-Slavic oriented Croatian cleric Franjo Rački (1828-1894) (Rački, 1869), and later accepted by Bosnian nationalist

⁶ "Ve anun kırıl ger çi be-resm-i cizye hazîne-i âmireye mübâlağa mâl verirdi ve dergâh-i felek-iştibâha nisbet 'ahdi vardı ammâ despot-i fertût kızı kayd-ı zevciyyetle ol bed-bahtın tahtında bulunmağın kal'e-i Semendire üzerinde da'vâ-yı bâtil edüp despot kızının mülkidir deyü fethinin te'hirine ve tesvîfine sebeb oldı ve nice âsâr-ı naks-ı 'ahd izhâr etdi. Bir dahi bu ki ol müdbir-i bed-fi'âl bu cihetden ki atasın öldürüp kırıl olmışdı. Hıyânet-i 'ükûk-ı übüvvet hukûk-ı riyâsetden ana nasîb komamışdı."

intellectuals like Mehmed-beg Kapetanović Ljubušak (1839-1902), and Safvet-beg Bašagić (1870-1934). The theory received the first serious blow after the first publication based on the earliest Ottoman tax register for Bosnia, dated 1468/1469, documenting that no mass conversion whatsoever happened in the 15th century, and that at the time of composing the register, two decades after the conquest, Islamicization was less than 2% (Aličić, 2008). The historical sources also refuted the claim concerning the betrayal and the easy fall of the Bosnian state. Tursun Bey as a firsthand witness, offers a lengthy descriptions of fierce fighting against Bosnian soldiers, and numerous suicides committed by Bosnian women and children in order to avoid being captured.

“They advanced stage by stage, sometimes through a plateau, sometimes through a mountain pass, and after about two months they tied the troops on the land’s frontier. The advancing troops of the victorious army reached the fortress of Bobovac, being an outpost of the country. A great battle and a strange fight was fought between the two sides. At the end, after all these resistance and steadiness, and before the arrival of the Ruler of the world, with the help of Allah, the sultan’s slaves conquered the fortress shattering it like the morning breeze shatters a rosebud. After the rumor of the disastrous defeat reached the ears of the unbelievers the keys of many fortresses, including the one of Visoko, were handed over. The country was divided in districts and provinces, and accepted to pay the tribute. Some unbelievers persisted in disobedience trusting in their strength of resistance, and the difficulty of the terrain, and waited in ambushes hidden among steep rocks, but how long an ambush can resist an army whom fortresses could not resist? [...] As an example, there was a kind of ambush built on the slope of a high mountain, where they had built a path in the shape of stairs, allowing passage only one by one, and in the middle of the rock there was a hiding place in a cave, and another one in a deep one or two miles wide valley, one side being an abyss, the other steep rocky land, which does not allow a passage neither during the day nor the night. There was also a kind of natural fortress of rocks, reaching heaven, with the broad area on the top and an abyss all around, needing no towers and ramparts, having only a tiny path tighter than the heart of a miserable man. In every such steep place and unreachable mountains the wicked unbelievers of the region were gathered, taking a cursed devil as leader and persevered in attempt to resist the victorious army. [...] The most bizarre battle took place at the entry of a cave where the Muslim soldiers went on to victory fighting not only

sword to sword, but hair to hair and beard to beard. During the fight Muslims and unbelievers were embracing each other, and falling together down the abyss. In the air one could see two men falling down embraced in a strange figure, or a severed leg or head or other part of the body flurrying and disappearing. During the plunder and looting after the final victory many unbelievers, men and women, boys and girls, by their own will committed suicide jumping down the abyss in order to avoid being caught by the Turks” (Tursun Beg, 1978).⁷

Moreover, the assertions of alleged similarities between dualistic Manichaean beliefs and a strictly monotheistic religion like Islam are not only baseless but also ridiculous.

The *Bogumil* theory suffered its final demise in 1975, after the publishing of the influential related study of John Fine (Fine, 1975). Today, it is generally abandoned even in Bosnia, with notable exception of some lone romantic pseudo-historians and their acolytes.⁸

4. Did the Bosnians Hate Their King?

In particular during the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and its aftermath, the Turkish academia was confronted with an intensified interest in Bosnian history, and unsurprisingly, with the inflation of self-styled Balkan experts. Almost universally,

⁷ “Menzil be-menzil, gâh yaylak ve gâh sehl-kar’ merâhil etdiler. Takrîben iki ayda visâk-ı zafer-ittifâk serhad-i memleket üzere kuruldu. Mukaddime-i ceş-i zafer-bahş çün kal’e-i Boboç’a ki talî’a-i memleket-i Bosna’dır üzerine geldiler. Tarafeynden ceng-i ’azim ve harb-i ’acib oldu. Âhar bunca metânet ve menâ’atla pâdişâh-i ’âlem-temâşâsına gelmeden bi-’avnillâh bendegân-i şâhinşâh darb-i destle bâd-i sabâ gonca-ı gannâc cebîni feth eder gibi kal’eyi feth etdiler. Bu sît-i mehâbet ve kahr çün esmâ’-ı kefereye yetişdi kal’e-i Visoka’nın dahi niçe kal’elerin kilidleri karşu geldi. Nevâhiler ile il olup cizyeye mutî’ oldılar. Bazı küffâr-ı ehl-i bevvar ki kuvvet-i men’e ve su’ûbet-i emkineye i’timâd edüp ’isyâna ısrâr etdiler, sarp yerlerde beceneler oldılar ammâ şol ’askere ki kal’eler dövüş vermez becene anlara niçeye dek duruş vere. [...] Meselâ bir nevi’ becene vardı ki bir yüce dâğ eteğinde yalın kayadır üsti aşâğasına havâle ve iki yanında arkuru bir nerdebân-şekil yol etmişler ki bir bir çıkılır ve ol kayanın ortasında bir vâsî’ in vardı mağâradan ’ibâretdir ve bir nevi’ becene ki cibâl-i râsiyât arasında bir vâdî-i ’amîk ki hemân bir iki fersah mikdârı yolu vardır, tarafeyni üsti yalın kaya, aşâğısı uçurum çengelîstândır, teşâbük-i eşcârdan eshârda ve leyâlî ve nehârda bile mecâl güzâr bulunmaz. Ve bir nevi’ kal’e-i hudâyî ki bir kayadır, kulle-i feleğe direnmiş üsti vâsî’ sahn etrâfı uçurum, süver ve bürücdan müstağnî, hemân bir yolu var ki kalb-i le’imden azyak, bunun emsâli sarp yerlere ve hasîn dâğlara her birine bir nâhiyetin küffâr-i eşrârı mucsemi’ olup bir İblîs-i be’îs re’îs tutunup temerrüd ve ’inâd üzere ısrâr gösterüp ’asker-i zafer-rehberle mumâna’a ve mudâfa’a kasdın ederlerdi. [...] Ceng-i garîb şöyle vâki’ olurdu ki mağâra ağzında çün gâziler nev’-i zafer bulup kılıç kılıca beli saç saça sakal sakala olurlardı. Bu cenk arasında müslim ve kâfir kucaklaşu perrân olurlardı. Birez kucaklaşmış hava yüzünden gelürken iki şahıs garîb hey’etle gâh ayak gâhî baş yere düşüp a’zaları mütelâşi bel lâ şey olurdu. Nehb ve yağmâya zafer bulındıktan sonra hod çok kâfir ve kâfire ve gulmân ve cevârî ve etfâl Türk almasun deyü terk-i cân edüp kendüyi ihtiyârile perrân ederdi.”

⁸ See e.g.: M. Imamović (1997); E. Imamović, (1998); Jalimam (1999).

a prominent place was allotted to Tursun Bey's assertion that "Bosnians hated their king and desperately waited for the arrival of the Ottomans, whose righteousness, liking for justice and moral excellence were worldwide renown and acknowledged." I have already stressed the importance of Tursun Bey as a firsthand witness, notwithstanding his deficiencies and limits. I also have to mention that Tursun Bey maintained an extremely conventional and ornate style, abundant with Arabic and Persian idioms and references, which rendered its narrative even in Latin transliteration almost incomprehensible for pop-up experts trained neither in *elsine-i selâse* nor in any Balkan language. So, instead of the very good transliterated edition of Mertol Tulum (Tursun Bey, 1977), the majority preferred a popular *sadeleştirilmiş* i.e. "abridged and simplified" edition of Ahmet Tezbaşar, published by the Tercüman newspaper in 1976 (Tursun Bey, 1976). The Turkish word *sadeleştirme* has at least three different meanings depending on context. None of them includes a notion of forgery, fabrication or manipulation. Still, this is exactly what the editor offered. In the chapter concerning the conquest of Bosnia some parts are, understandably, left out (including the two sentences on patricide), but strangely, some sentences which do not exist in the original text were ex post interpolated, among others a whole passage portraying the emotional attitude of Bosnians towards their king and approaching Ottomans:

"Moreover the internal situation of [Bosnian] state was rather bad, and its people did not like its ruler and administrators. As a result of Hungarian misdemeanor and oppression, not only the common folk but also the nobility strongly craved for Turkish rule. The order and comfort Turks bring to the places they rule concerning safety of life and property was widely known and famous. The victorious Ottoman sultan ordered the military campaign to Bosnia with the intent of calling its people to accept Islam, and to bring order there." (Tursun Bey, 1976: 97)⁹

I have already mentioned that mythology, compared with historiography has a much more compelling power. The Bosnians are neither the first nor the last nation having at least two parallelly existing histories, one made of facts, the other made of dreams. When being accused of a reckless fabrication of historical facts and mythologizing the past, a modern Bosnian pseudo-historian stated, with good reason, that he is only doing what his Serbian, Croatian, or Turkish counterparts had done some two hundred years ago (Imamović, 2001).

Aristotle argued that human imagination (in his case drama, especially tragedy) had, *sub specie aeternitatis*, a higher epistemological value than history, i.e. the actual truth, since it depicts not what *happened* by a haphazard decision of a whimsical

⁹ "Ayrıca memleketin iç durumu gayet kötü olup halk, hükûmeti ve idarecileri sevmezdi. Macarların zulüm ve baskıları neticesi yalnız halk değil, bazı asılzadeler bile şiddetle Türk idaresini istiyorlardı. Türklerin idareye getirdikleri düzen ve huzur, mal ve can emniyeti bakımından malûm ve meşhurdu. Muzaffer Osmanlı padişahı, İslâm'a davet etmek ve huzuru getirmek amacı ile Bosna üzerine sefer-i hümayûn buyurdu."

god, destiny, miracle or accident, but what *should happen* according to the eternal cosmic logic and the infallible law of justice. Historians are not disinterested, cold and dry notaries of the events, but those who present them in a form appealing to their respective communities' understanding of just, good, and beautiful, in accord with the ancient Arabic saying that the truth is expected from prophets, and the beauty is expected from poets. I would add, from historians too.

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