The Perfect Ruler in the Art and Literature of Medieval Bulgaria

There is no surviving literary text of medieval Bulgaria that explicitly expresses the concept of the perfect ruler. Yet there are other sources, both verbal and visual, providing us with information on that issue. In this paper I try to present some of them, related to the image of the Bulgarian king Ivan Alexander (1331–1371). I focus on him mostly because the 14th century – an extremely important period in medieval Bulgarian culture – is still subject to unfinished research, scholarly discussion and re-assessment. On the other hand, Ivan Alexander is the only Bulgarian ruler whose images survived in great number. Chronologically, they cover almost the entire period of his relatively long and successful reign.

My long research on the king’s images in Bulgarian medieval art has naturally led me to the written depictions preserved in Old Bulgarian manuscripts, among which the most detailed is the one contained in the famous encomium of the king, part of the Sofia Psalter (1337). This is a short text, included in the manuscript of a Psalter ordered by Ivan Alexander and written in the monastery of Kouklen, which is now kept in the library of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (and hence is known as the Sofia Psalter). The encomium itself is interpolated after the psalms and the fifth song by Isaiah.

In his book Портрет у српскоj средновековноj книжевности (Kruševac 1971), George Trifunović writes about this portrait as follows:

* The main part of this paper was written during my stay in Munich and Berlin within an ‘Alexander von Humboldt’ Grant. I owe special thanks to Prof. Franz Tinnefeld of the Institut für Byzantinistik und Neogräzistik der Universität München and Prof. Diether Reinsch of Byzantinisch-Neugriechisches Seminar der Freien Universität Berlin, with whom I had the chance to discuss some of the issues addressed here. The following versions of this paper have already been published: Е. БАКАЛОВА, Портретът на Цар Иван Александър в Софийския песнивец: “реализъм” или компилация от топоси?, [in:] Словенско средновековно наследе. Зборник посвещен професору Ђорђу Трифуновићу, Београд 2002, p. 45–58; eadem, The Image of the Ideal Ruler in Medieval Bulgarian Literature and Art, [in:] Les cultes des saints guerriers et idéologie du pouvoir en Europe Centrale et orientale. Actes du colloque international 17 janvier 2004, New Europe College, ed. I. Biliarski, R. Păun, Bucarest 2007, p. 34–81.

1 For the newest research on this manuscript, together with all the preceding references, see Е. МУСАКОВА. Кодикологически особености на Песнивеца на цар Иван Александър, Pbg 26.2, 2002, p. 3–33.
First, I discuss the question of genre. It suffices to consider the treatise Περὶ ἐπισκεψιῶν by the famous sophist, orator and teacher of rhetoric, Menander of Laodicea (late 3rd – early 4th c.), in order to assure ourselves that our ‘encomium’ is constructed according to the precepts of the so-called βασιλικός λόγος (= a praise of the emperor).

I focus on this author, because his writings are used in the entire late Byzantine literature of praise and mostly in the so-called βασιλικός λόγος. According to Menander, any encomium of this kind: It will thus embrace a generally agreed amplification (αὐξησις) of the good things attaching to the emperor, but allows no ambivalent or disputed features, because of the extreme splendor of the person concerned6. After the proem, depending on the occasion, the author should deal briefly or in more detail with

2 Т.Трифуновић, Портрет у српској средњовековној књижевности, Крушевач 1971, p. 19.
3 К. Куве, Образ на Иван Александър в средновъзловската поезия, [in:] Българско средновъзловсково. Българо-советски сборник в чест на 70-годишнината на проф. И. Дуйчев, София 1980, p. 256.
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the emperor’s native land (πατρίς) and his family (γένος), as well as with the extraordinary circumstances of his birth (γέννησις). However, since Menander’s precepts vary, he notes: If neither his city nor his nation is conspicuously famous, you should omit this topic, and consider whether his family has prestige or not. If it has, work this up... What follows are the nature (φύσις), upbringing (ἀνατροφή) and attitudes of character (ἐπιτηδεύματα). This part should be separated from the emperor’s deeds (πράξεις), which are the main subject-matter of the author. You should divide – Menander continues – such actions’ into times of peace and times of war, and put war first, if the subject of your praise has distinction in this. And further on, he adds: Courage reveals an emperor more than do other virtues. If however, he has never fought a war (a rare circumstance), you have no choice but to proceed to peaceful topics.

What we said so far, makes it clear that the author of the encomium of Ivan Alexander did not by himself finds it necessary to first depict the king’s external image and only then to focus on his deeds, as Kuev thinks, but he was obviously familiar with the principles of constructing a praise of this kind, as short as it may be. That the author’s admiration is first of all due to the king’s military success (K. Kuev) turns out to be an act of strictly following the compositional rules of that genre in Byzantine literature. Needless to say, our author has the particular advantage that Ivan Alexander really was victorious in war and he could “develop this in detail”. It is precisely here that what is specific about the king himself intrudes into the text without changing the system of pictorial means, as L. Graševa justly points out regarding oratory prose, in her preface to the above-mentioned book.

This interpretation is also confirmed by other elements of the text under discussion. For instance, Menander emphasizes that the emperor’s deeds should be spoken of as the four cardinal virtues: courage (ἀνδρεία), justice (δικαιοσύνη), temperance (σωφροσύνη), and wisdom (φρόνησις). Humanity (φιλανθρωπία) is another imperial virtue worth discussing. For this reason our text refers to Ivan Alexander not only as mighty in battle, but also as a “pious judge of orphans and widows” and comforter of his subjects (who ... once having the king shall return to his home in sorrow?).

Menander also prescribes a comparison of the king with Alexander the Great. In fact, at any moment (part) of the speech, the orator should use the method of com-

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7 Ibidem, p. 80–81.
8 Ibidem, p. 84–85.
9 Ibidem, p. 84–85.
10 K. Kyen, op. cit., p. 256.
11 Ibidem, p. 257.
12 Menander points at this as follows: You should also describe the emperor’s own battles, and incest him with all impressiveness and knowledge, as Homer does for Achilles, Hector and Ajax, see Menander Rhetor, op. cit., p. 86–87.
13 Л. Грашиха, Поглед към старобългарската ораторска проза, [in:] Стара българска литература..., p. 19.
14 Menander Rhetor, op. cit., p. 84–85.
parison (συγκρίσις) of the emperor with other great historical figures. Several times, Alexander the Great is suggested as a key figure of comparison: we compare a reign as a whole and in sum with another reign, e.g., the reign of Alexander with the present one\(^{15}\) (at one point, the king is named our second Alexander\(^{16}\)).

Menander’s rules of composing an epilogue to βασιλικός λόγος are also generally applied in one of the concluding passages of the encomium. The epilogue – Menander says – should be elaborated by having regard to the scope of the subject, representing the inhabitants greeting the governor: ‘We have come to meet you, all of us, in whole families, children, old men, adults, priestly clans, associations of public men, the common people, greeting you with joy, all welcoming thou with cries of praise, calling you our savior and fortress, our bright star’...\(^{17}\) The praise should conclude with a prayer for the emperor’s long reign, and then move on to his heirs\(^{18}\). So does our text: Look, all you young and old, and raise your flags in combats for the glorious King of Bulgaria. Come forth, now you patriarchs and bishops, monks and ascetics, judges, slaves and freemen, dignitaries and all the king’s men; and rejoice you with inexpressible joy... And further: Oh, Holy Trinity, save the Bulgarian King, protect and strengthen him, give him victory over his enemies and ... endow him with longevity.

Here it is worth recalling that rhetorical techniques of praising the emperor were implemented before the Christianization and, consequently, Menander’s rules were used by both pagan and Christian orators\(^{19}\). However, his encomiastic model was enriched and modified according to the needs of Christian propaganda. In the later Byzantine tradition, we find a new Christian layer of descriptive conventions. This “Christian discourse”, as A. Cameron calls it\(^{20}\), emphasizes the emperor’s piety, humanity and generosity. The most important new element is the link between the Christian ruler and Christ who announced him as his earthly minister. This ideal adds new comparisons with biblical and Christian rulers, mainly with David, Solomon and Constantine.

The new elements can be found as early as Constantine’s reign, for example in such an emblematic piece of Byzantine prose, as Constantine’s encomium by Eusebius of Caesarea delivered on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the reign of

\(^{15}\) Ibidem, p. 92–93.


\(^{17}\) Ibidem, p. 100–101.

\(^{18}\) Ibidem, p. 94–95.


\(^{20}\) I mean by it all the rhetorical strategies and manners of expression that take to be particularly characteristic of Christian writing, see A. Cameron, Christianity and Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse, Berkeley 1991, p. 5.
Constantinople’s founder21. From then on, these elements vary in the great number of encomia of the subsequent Byzantine emperors. Moreover, it is precisely Constantine who became an idealized archetype of the Christian ruler, a symbol of the emperor’s legitimacy and identity and a model for comparison22. From Tiberius to Michael VIII Palaeologus, who calls himself “a new Constantine”, most Byzantine emperors either took the name “Constantine” or called themselves “a new Constantine”. Recently, the well-known Byzantine scholar, Paul Magdalino, rightly titled a collection of papers “New Constantines. The Rhythm of imperial renewal in Byzantium 4th–13th c.”23

Thus Constantine not only became the standard image of Byzantine ideology, also shown in the specific genre of Fürstenspiegel24, but was also set as a model for the rulers of all other orthodox (or just Christian) kingdoms. It suffices to recall Patriarch Photius’ letter to the Bulgarian king Boris-Michael25.

This, let us say Christian, layer is undoubtedly present in our text; it simply imposes itself on Menander’s scheme. In the beginning the praise goes first to Christ who gave us a great leader and king of kings, the great Ivan Alexander, the most orthodox of all ... In the second part, after having compared the king with Alexander the Great, comes the comparison with Constantine: It seems to me that our king appeared as a new Constantine among all kings in faith and piety, heart and character, carrying with himself the victorious Cross as his scepter. By showing this herald he repelled and dispelled all opposing forces of pride. It is obvious that the main theme “worked out” in the encomium is the military success and the fortification of the kingdom, as a result of the king’s deeds (a theme considered essential by Menander, as well). The comparison with Alexander the Great allows him to emphasize his military force,

while the comparison with Constantine, allows him to give the main reason for his victories. Needless to say, the comparison of Ivan Alexander with Constantine is also attested in other texts and in the fine arts, for example in the ossuary of the Bačkovo monastery, where the king's image is juxtaposed to the images of Sts. Constantine and Helen\(^\text{26}\). In our text there are also other epithets and elements of praise, typical of the image of Byzantine emperors, such as the most orthodox, philanthropous, merciful (benevolent), etc.\(^\text{27}\)

Related to the same Christian layer (but only to some extent) is the conclusion of the text, particularly the so-called 'chaeretisms' (Rejoice! Rejoice!) They are obviously influenced by the Akathistos hymn for the Virgin and by the praises of some Saints, known in Old Bulgarian literature, as noted by Kuev\(^\text{28}\), as well as by an appeal to the Holy Trinity. As was said above, Menander prescribes that the epilogue should present the population praising the king. Besides, I note that the whole mise en scène of the exultant people, raising flags and singing victorious songs for the king, in fact representing all social classes, necessarily remind us of the adventus ceremony from Roman antiquity, preserved in the Middle Ages as a way of celebrating the triumphant return of the rulers (bishops and other holy persons, as well as holy relics). During this ceremony, the entire population – men, women, young and old, are greeting those who return with various gestures, acclaims and songs\(^\text{29}\).

Here I add a few words on the description of the king's appearance. The standard descriptions of an emperor's appearance in Byzantine encomiastic literature are “ruddy, affable and handsome”, inherited from the rhetorical model in antiquity\(^\text{30}\).

As Maciej Kokoszko notes, the adjective “ruddy”, describing the color of the emperor’s face refers to his healthy blood, according to the ancient authors, as well as Origenes\(^\text{31}\). For instance, Anna Comnena says that the facial skin of Alexius I expressed as misshapen and ill-proportioned\(^\text{35}\). (For instance, Anna Comnena says that


\[^\text{28}\] К. Кюев, op. cit., р. 258.


\[^\text{30}\] The ancient models of describing the ruler's appearance used by Byzantine authors are treated in detail by: M. Kokoszko, Descriptions of the personal appearance in John Malalas' chronicle, Łódź 1998 [= BL, 2] (with older literature).


\[^\text{32}\] Idem, Kanon portretowania w historiografii bizantyńskiej na przykładzie portretu Boemunda w Aleksjandzie Anny Komneny, AUL.FH 67, 2000, р. 70–71.
Different versions is part of the description of Roman emperors an Byzantine basileis in John Malalas' Chronicle. For example, Augustus is said to have good eyes. In George Skylitzes we find the expression full of goodness ascribed to emperor Valentinianus eyes and also good and grey-blue for Tiberius's eyes. Handsome is certainly related to the physique and proportions of the king's body, as the villains in the texts are described as misshapen and ill-proportioned. (For instance, Anna Commena says that the body of Boemund of Tarento was shaped according to Policletus' canon).

Such rules of presenting the emperor's appearance are typical of other Byzantine authors as well. As Michael Psellus says, the encomium should present that which adorns the hero's soul, which adds beauty to his physique given to him by origin and illumination from above. These requirements regarding the description of the emperor's appearance are also valid for other genres. For example, in his Chronography, Psellus talks of Basil II as merciless, stubborn, energetic, suspicious of all and ruthless, but when speaking about his appearance, he keeps to the encomiastic standard and follows the ancient traditions, despite his earlier assertions. Moreover this inconsistency is pointed out by the author himself who begins his description of the emperor's appearance as follows:

So much for his character. As for his personal appearance it betrayed the natural nobility of the man, for his eyes were light-blue and fiery, the eye-brows not overhanging nor sullen, not yet extended in one straight line, like a woman's, but well-arched and indicative of his pride. The eyes were neither deep-set (a sign of knavishness and cunning), but they shone with brilliance that was manly.

Where are the emperor's vivid, individual traits?

Further on in our text we see the most discussed attributes of king Ivan Alexander: with bent knees and a straight walk. The difficulty results from the fact that they lie between the description of the king's appearance and his moral virtues. For the two subsequent determinations looking sweetly with eyes on everyone and ineffable pious judge for orphans and widows certainly refer to the important attributes benevolence, humanity and justice examined above. Here I shall only

33 Idem, Descriptions of the personal appearance..., p. 89.
36 Idem, Kanon portretowania..., p. 65.
40 The Chronographia of Michael Psellus..., p. 27.
note in passing that in my view they also refer to the king’s moral virtues. The bent knees which unambiguously remind us of the so-called proskynesis – the act of prostrating before Christ, emphasize the king’s piety. I assume that here we find a Greek loan translation in Bulgarian към тягата ми пръс тог патера (For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ).

In the Bulgarian translation it runs: Затова прекланям колене пред Отеца на Господа нашего Иисуса Христа... This meaning is confirmed by the commentaries on that passage in St. Paul. For instance, we read in Origenes:

[Τούτου χαρίν κάμπτω τά γόνατά μου πρός τὸν πατέρα. Ωριγένης φησί] τὸ κάμπτειν τὰ γόωατα σύμβολον ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐν τῷ ἑαυτῷ. Συμμαρτυρεῖ διὰ τοῦτο πάσης ἐκκλησίας ἰδιώς δὲ καὶ τὰ κατακθόνια ψυχαὶ, πρὸς τούτου οὐδὲ τὰς ἀπηλλαγμένας τοῦ σώματος ψυχὰς.

"[Origenes says]: Bending your knees symbolizes another kind of genuflecting, in submission to God and admission of His power. The apostle uses this expression to say that each knee should be bent in the name of Christ, of all those in heaven, on earth and in the underworld. On the other hand, we are used to saying, that those in heaven and those in the underworld have no bodies to kneel with, as well as the souls which became separated from their earthly bodies."

From here on this expression occurs in many other texts as an exact quotation or periphrasis of St. Paul and is often related to, or replaced by, the Greek verb προσκυνέω which has a similar meaning.43

41 Origenes, Fragmenta ex commentariis in epistulam ad Ephesios, sect. 15, 1-7 (Ephe. 3, 14). Texts cited after Thesaurus Linguae Graecae.
42 I thank Anna Lazarova for translating this passage from Greek to Bulgarian.
43 See, for example, the following texts:


"[Athenasius says]: The bent knees symbolizes another kind of genuflecting, in submission to God and admission of His power. The apostle uses this expression to say that each knee should be bent in the name of Christ, of all those in heaven, on earth and in the underworld. On the other hand, we are used to saying, that those in heaven and those in the underworld have no bodies to kneel with, as well as the souls which became separated from their earthly bodies."

Epiphanius, Panarion (56 Adversus haereses), vol. III, p. 274, 19-28: ἣ δὲ ἔκκλησια πεπίστευκεν ὅτι Θεός οὐ μόνον ἐστὶ κτιστής κτισμάτων (τοῦτο γάρ Ἰουδαίων καὶ Ἐλλήνων ἐπίστανται), ἀλλ᾽ ὁτι καὶ πατὴρ ἐστὶ μονογενός, οὐ μόνον τὴν κτησιτεχνήν ἔχων ἐνέργειαν, ἀλλ᾽ ὁς κτήτος νοεῖται, ἀλλ᾽ ἐπιδίωξι και μονογενεῖς γεννητικῆς, καθ᾽ ἐπὶ πατήρ μονογενεὺς ἐνομαζότα, τοῦτο γάρ πανευρισκόμεν ἀοράτος ἐπὶ γῆς ἐνομαζότα, διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν ἐν οὐρανῷ κατοικήσας τὸν Χριστόν. . .
As for the straight walk which indisputably derives from the Greek ὀρθοποδέω ('to walk straight or in the right way'), it always refers to the notion of how the king should behave. I only give two examples. The first is taken from St. Paul’s epistle to the Galatians, 2, 14: ἀλλ’ ἐπεὶ διὸ οὐκ ὀρθοποδοῦσιν πρὸς τὴν ἣλθείην τοῦ εὐαγγελίου (But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel...). Another version of this expression in Greek is ὀρθά βαδίζειν. We find it in a homily on Mathew’s gospel by St. John Chrysostom: Οὐ γὰρ σύτω γενναίας καὶ νεανικῆς ἥστι ψυχῆς ὀρθά βαδίζειν καὶ δίδου τρέχειν...

The sense of the entire passage is the following: “It is not appropriate to such a noble but still youthful soul to walk straight (in the right way) and to run the whole way”. The second part clarifies this notion: “...(to walk straight) and despite numerous laurels and victories, the greatest temptation to the soul, to be capable of returning to the right way”.

The tradition we have followed so far and which we take to be related to our text, is undoubtedly a canon of approved topoi for praising the emperor (or king). But, as Paul Magdalino says, the frequency with which the emperor was praised made the imperial image a stereotype. Yet it also ensured that the stereotype was infinitely variable. I also quote L. Graševa who (long before Magdalino) writes in her preface to The Oratory Prose: Each canonic art, such as ceremonial eloquence in the Middle Ages, achieves its esthetic norms through an unlimited number of variations. For this reason we will not even find two completely identical imperial

Basilius, De baptismo libri duo, PG, vol. XXXI, col. 1561, 20–28:

Διὰ τούτων καὶ τῶν τοιούτων ὁ Κύριος τούς γενναθέντας ἐκ πνεύματος πνεύμα γενέσθαι λέγει. Συμμαρτυρεῖ δὲ ὁ Ἀπόστολος λέγων: «Τούτου χάριν κάμπτω τὰ γόνατά μου πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα τοῦ Κυρίου ἡμῶν. Ἄρνετος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ἐξ οὗ πάσα πατριὰ ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς ὀνομάζεται». Ἰαν δὴ ὡμῖν κατὰ τὸν πλοῦτον τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ, δυνατὲς κρατεῖνται διὰ τοῦ Γεννήματος αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν ἔσω ἄνθρωπον, κατοικῆσαι τὸν Χριστὸν.

Septuaginta, Paralipomenon I sive Chronicon I, 19, 1 – 21, 3:

καὶ Ζαλωμὼν τῷ υἱῷ μου δοῦς καρδίαν ἄγαθην ποιεῖν τὰς ἐντολὰς σου καὶ τὰ προστάγματά σου καὶ τα ἐπὶ τέλος ἅγαγεν τὴν κατασκαμνὴν τοῦ οἴκου σου. καὶ εἶπεν Δαυὶδ πάση τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐπεξέφερεν κύριον τὸν θεὸν ὑμῶν, καὶ ἤλεγχεν πάσα τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ κύριον τὸν θεὸν πατέρων αὐτῶν καὶ κάμψαντες τὰ γόνατα προσεκύνησαν τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ τῷ βασιλεί. καὶ ἠκούσαν Δαυὶδ τῷ κυρίῳ θυσίας καὶ ἀνήνεγκεν ὅλοκληρωματα τῷ θεῷ τῇ ἐπαύριον τῆς πρώτης ἡμέρας, μέσχους χιλίας, κρισίως χιλίας, ἄρνας χιλίας καὶ τὰς σπονδὰς αὐτῶν καὶ θυσίας εἰς πλήσιον παντὶ τῷ ἦρασθι. Basi...
encomia, since none of them strictly follows Menander’s rules. What Byzantine encomiasts and the Bulgarian author of king Ivan Alexander’s praise derive from Menander and other sources is not an applied model, but a sum of structuring principles, motives and techniques which can vary innumerable. As Magdalino says, a successful encomium is the one that renews the old topoi through a skilled use of the hyperboles and comparisons.\textsuperscript{47} I think that this is the case of king Ivan Alexander’s praise in the Sofia psalter.

II

As noted above, Ivan Alexander is the Bulgarian ruler of whom we possess the greatest number of portraits. Here I consider two of them:

1. The earliest of them are preserved among the illuminations of the chronicle by Constantine Manasses (Vatican Library, cod. Slavo 2), dated to 1344–1345\textsuperscript{48}. In the middle of f.1, Ivan Alexander is depicted on a red subpaedaneum with an angel above him who places a second crown on his head. Christ is standing on the king’s right side half-turned toward him, carrying a scroll in his hand. On his other side is the chronicle’s author, Constantine Manasses. According to Hans Belting, the Byzantine text of the chronicle did not contain such an illumination and the Bulgarian illustrator used the chrysobouls of Byzantine emperors as a pattern without applying it directly. The fact that Christ is moved from the center and ‘demoted’ to the king’s entourage excludes in itself the usage of a ready-made Byzantine pattern\textsuperscript{49}. Ivan Dujčev claims that the model of the Byzantine emperor Manuel I Comnenus was used as a pattern for the first illumination, since the chronicle was written in his time\textsuperscript{50}. However, I think that there was no Byzantine pattern comparing the Bulgarian king and king David as equals. This is also the conclusion drawn by Ivan Božilov who devotes a special research to the relation between the text and the illumination in Manasses’ chronicle: 

\begin{quote}
...the miniature illuminates the addition or, to be more precise, the replacement of the Greek text by a Bulgarian one on f. 91v; it mentions Ivan Alexander who is also depicted on the illumination. The fact that the Greek text names Manuel I Comnenus does not auto-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} P. Magdalino, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 418.


\textsuperscript{50} I. Dujčev, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 32.
matically imply that there existed a Byzantine manuscript depicting the emperor.\(^51\) For this reason the illumination remains unique.

It is important to note that almost all recent research on the illumination in the Manasses chronicle draw the conclusion that no illuminated Byzantine manuscripts were used as a pattern for the Bulgarian one. Ivan Božilov is categorical on this:

the unknown authors produced a new book, differing from both the Greek (additions and titles) and the Bulgarian models, as well as from the Synodos and the Toulcha manuscripts (the Trojan parable and 79 illuminations); a new book designed for decorating the king's library, for the enjoyment of the members of the royal family and for offering the king's heirs a way into humanity's past – as it was seen by Constantine Manasses and as reworked by the anonymous Bulgarian authors\(^52\).

Even the less-categorical scholars think that the problem of the origin of the illuminations in the Vatican's Manasses Chronicle still remains unsolved\(^53\).

2. Ivan Alexander's image on f. 91 is particularly interesting in regard to the notion of the perfect ruler. The Bulgarian king is depicted together with king David who blesses him, and an angel who gives him a spear symbolizing the divine origin of the king's power\(^54\). On David's scroll there is a part of Psalm 21 which praises the king's power. Christopher Walter says: *It is the beginning of Psalm 20(21), that which is illustrated by a coronation in the Bristol, Theodore and Barberini Psalters, and which is paraphrased in the prayer recited by the patriarch in the rite of coronation. There is no doubt that we have here two successive stages of the same scene: the angel brings the crown and Tsar John Alexander wears the crown.\(^55\)*

This iconographic formula is genuinely Byzantine, although we possess no similar composition in Byzantine art. In the illumination in Manasses' chronicle, Ivan Alexander's image is not only directly compared to the 'portrait' of the biblical king, but also depicts the Bulgarian king as equal to David. This is indisputably impudent, similar to the introductory illumination, as we noted\(^56\).

51 И. Божилов, Ватиканският Манасий (Cod. Vat. Slavo 2). Текст и миниатюра, ПИ 2, 1996, р. 11.
52 И. Божилов, op. cit., р. 12.
54 On that iconographic formula see В. ЂурИћ, Нови Исус Навин, Зог 14, 1983, р. 5–16.
56 On the other images of Ivan Alexander in this manuscript see: Е. Бакалова, Ктиторските портрети на цар Иван Александър като израз на политическата и религиозната идеология на епохата, ПИ 4, 1985, р. 45–57; eadem, Society and Art in Bulgaria in the 14th century, BBg 8, 1986, р. 23–32. Ср. T. Velmans, La Chronique illustrée de Constantine Manassès, [in:] Byzance,
Concerning the comparison with David, already Menander emphasizes that the orator should use the technique of comparison (συγκρίσις) between the emperor and other historical figures. Actually, the essential aspect of Byzantine ideology is the construction of lasting formulas of virtuous rulers based on standard models and metaphors. These formulas are constructed mainly by the technique of comparison which, as Henry Maguire points out, is the main instrument of Byzantine rhetoric. Although the comparison is widely used in laic and religious literature, the habit of comparison is very important for an understanding of Byzantine art, because it was especially applicable to visual media57.

Eusebius of Caesarea already calls Constantine the Great “new Moses”, but also “savior of the chosen people” and “new David”. Interestingly, not every Byzantine emperor is compared to David. We may note a specific tendency to compare the emperors of the Comnenian dynasty with those – Justinian and Heraclius – related to the most glorious times of the Eastern Roman empire58. Justinian was called “new David”, due to his building the St. Sofia cathedral, compared to the foundation of the Jerusalem temple59. An episode of Heraclius’ military campaigns strongly resembles the battle between David and Goliath. Byzantine historians report that during the war with the Persian ruler Chosroes (627), Heraclius fought with general Rhazatis and decapitates his rival just like the biblical king60. Stephen H. Wander finds another interesting proof of the comparison between emperor Heraclius’ victory over the Persian ruler and David’s victory over Goliath61. It is part of Fredegar’s chronicle, a Frankish author from Burgundy (7th c.) who describes the duel between Heraclius and Chosroes and calls the Byzantine emperor “a second David”.

According to Alexander Kazhdan, the imperial prestige of the Comnenoi is directly related to an unprecedented militarism62. Its most striking expression is to be found in the texts praising Manuel I Comnenus who, on Magdalino’s view, is the most celebrated of the Byzantine emperors63. He is regarded as a model of all David’s virtues, lacking no attributes of the latter’s reign. There are numerous and concrete comparisons between Basil I of the Macedonian dynasty and David recalling the emperor’s military success. But the comparison with David has fur-
the biblical king David, Basil replaces the hated emperor Michael III; similarly to David who, to redeem his bloody sin, lost his first-born son by Bathsheba but was later given a second son – “the wise Solomon”, Basil claimed that he lost his older son Constantine in 879 due to divine vengeance, and called his second son Leo “the wise”, although he did not much love him.  

In the 13th century, Michael VIII Palaeologus, protector of Constantinople, was praised as “new David”, just as David protected Jerusalem. In the encomia of Andronicus II, the comparison between Constantinople and Jerusalem remains, while the emperor is rather compared to Plato. As far as I know, the comparison with David almost disappears in the 14th century. Neither John Cantacuzenus nor John V Palaeologus, are compared to David, let alone an emperor like John VII Palaeologus, whose activity brought more damage than profit to the state.

It clearly follows that both the comparison with Alexander the Great in Ivan Alexander’s praise in the Sofia psalter and his comparison with David in the illumination in Manasses’ chronicle reflect the historical situation in the third decade of the 14th century.

As we noted above, the first ten years of Ivan Alexander’s reign (1331–1371) are a time of internal stability and successful military campaigns, due to which he is compared to the biblical king David. On 18th July 1331, he wins a great battle against the Roman army of Andronicus III Palaeologus and succeeds in taking back the territories lost earlier on. The treaty required the marriage of his first-born son and the Byzantine’s young daughter Maria, which took place soon after. At the same time, Ivan Alexander managed to improve the relations with Serbia, as in 1332 his sister Helen married the Serbian king Stephen Dušan. Ivan Božilov writes:

When adding to these two political successes the liquidation of Belaur’s rebellion in Vidin, it becomes clear that only a year after his coronation, Ivan Alexander kept full power in

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65 V. Stanković writes: Davidov primer je bio blizak svim carcima, koji su presto usvojili svojim sposobnostima, zahtevajući svoju tuga a ne krv, kao što je Solomom bio stali uniq a i takmača u svim graditeljskim podužimima cara – B. Станковић, Цариградски патријарси и цареви. Македонске династије, Београд 2003, p. 250.
66 J. Previale, Un panegirico inedito per Michele VIII Paleologo (Vat. gr. 1409, ff. 270 r.–275 v.), BZ 42, 1959, p. 11.
However, in the fourth decade of the 14th c., during the civil war in Byzantium, the Bulgarian king was inexplicably passive, while Stephen Dušan took control of almost all Macedonia and proclaimed himself “king of all Serbian, Greek and Bulgarian lands”. It is obvious that this is one of the reasons why there are no literary or visual encomia of the king’s reign from this period. In fact, the situation in Bulgaria already changed in the second half of Ivan Alexander’s reign. From the fifth decade of the 14th c. on, there are many Bulgarian translations of Byzantine texts related to theological disputes favoring hesychasm. We know that Ivan Alexander not only supported the monks of Paroria but, in his ecclesiastic policy, also followed the famous hesychast Theodosius – a disciple of Gregory Sinaiites and close to Callistus, patriarch of Constantinople. If we turn to the visual sources, we can notice that in the sixties, the king was no longer compared to David but to Constantine and Helen, as indicated by the narthex of the ossuary in Bachkovo monastery. The model patriarch Euthymius recommends to Ivan Šišman, Ivan Alexander’s heir, is that of Constantine the Great, as appears in his Encomium of Constantine and Helen.

In this context, we should emphasize that the comparison between Ivan Alexander and king David in the illumination of Manasses’ chronicle (1344–1345) is one of the last comparisons of the 14th c. Resulting from the same historical situation, we have another short praise of Ivan Alexander in the Sofia psalter, the so-called Pesnivec, ordered by the king in 1337, as well as his comparison with Alexander the Great in the Encomium. Both artifacts – the illumination and the encomium – are created about the same time and are related to the same historical situation in this particular historical and ideological context. A little later, at the beginning of the fourth decade of the 14th c., the historical situation changes significantly and the ideas underlying these artifacts are no longer actual.

Abstract. The paper is an attempt to provide some information about the concept of the perfect ruler, as saved in the literature and the fine arts of the medieval Bulgaria, and which are related to the name of the king Ivan Alexander. The first part of the text is of theoretical character, showing how the ancient Greek literature presents the ideal ruler. The second one
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points out the characteristics of the portrayal of Ivan Alexander, as saved in both literary monuments (praises of the king in the Sofia psalter, so-called Pesnivec, 1337), and iconographical ones (a famous chronicle by Constantine Manasses, 1345–1346).

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Eulogy of the Bulgarian King Ivan Alexander in the Sofia Psalter of 1337

[...] For as we have gathered let us praise God and sing a solemn song to Christ, the King – crown-giver and Lord of us all who has given to us the great commander and King of Kings, the great Ivan Alexander, the most orthodox of all, ... and leader in war, and mighty in battles, gracious, benevolent, pink-cheeked, kind-sighted, handsome in appearance, with bent knees and upright walking, gazing sweetly over all, righteous beyond words, judge of orphans and widows. Hence I will say, who, among us, after having seen the King, would return grieving to his home? In his military might he seems to me like a second Alexander of ancient times. Like him [Ivan Alexander] from the very beginning [of his reign] took many cities with fortitude and courage. So as he appears before us, the great Ivan Alexander, ruling over all the Bulgarians, he, who has proven himself in difficult and hard battles; who has powerfully overcome the Greek King and when the latter was at a loss, he captured him and took the fortified towns: Nessebar72 and all of the Pomorie73 together with Romania, as well as Bdin and all of the lower Danube even to the Morava river. The rest of the towns and villages, countries and countryside fell at his feet. And having captured all his enemies, he triumphed over them establishing a solid silence in the Universe. It seems to me that this King appeared as a new Constantine among the Kings in his faith and piety, heart and character; having as scepter the triumphant Cross; when bearing and showing this standard he drove away and dismissed all resisting and arrogant forces... No other since the first [Bulgarian] kings seems to me equal to this great King Ivan Alexander, Glory and Praise of all Bulgarians. Look, all you young and old, and raise your flags in combat for the glorious King of Bulgaria. Come forth, now you patriarchs and bishops, monks and ascetics, judges, slaves and freemen, dignitaries and all the king's men; and rejoice you with inexpressible joy and render glory to the great King Christ our God, the wreath-giver and raise to him your victorious song: Oh, Holy Trinity; save the Bulgarian King, protect and strengthen him, give him victory over his enemies and ... endow him with longevity, O Lord of us all. For I, while weaving joyful praises, say: Rejoice, o King of the Bulgarians, King of Kings. Rejoice chosen by God, rejoice o merciful, Rejoice, o crowned by God! Rejoice guarded by God! Rejoice leader in war-times! Rejoice, intercessor of the faithful! Rejoice Bulgarian Glory and Praise! Rejoice King Alexander! Rejoice Ivan! Rejoice, together with your pious spouse, Queen Theodora! Rejoice, together with your sweet children – Michael King, and Asen, and Sratzimir and Asen! Rejoice, o, town of Tarnovo! Rejoice his towns and countries! Rejoice thee and rejoice again for that you have such a King! Let God strengthen them in their power and let God offer them heavenly Kingdom, and let him settle them in the palace of heaven for ever, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

translated from old Bulgarian by prof. Oleg Grabar, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton 1999

72 Messambria on the Black Sea.
73 The Black Sea coast.