Why Did the Polovtsian Khan Boniak Howl like a Wolf?

Oleksiy Tolochko

In the entry for 1097, the Rus' Primary Chronicle describes a strange and bizarre episode involving the Polovtsian khan Boniak. On the night before the battle with the Hungarians, so we are told, the khan performed some magic ritual of fortune-telling.

> ꙗко бы҇с полоунощи. и вставъ Бонѧкъ ѿѣха ѿ вои. и поча выти волчскы и волкъ ѿвисѧ ѥмоу. и начаша волци выти. мнози. Бонѧкъ же приѣхавъ повѣда Двдови. ꙗко побѣда ны҇н е҇с на Оугры заоутра

> At midnight Boniak arose and rode away from the troops. Straightway he began howling like a wolf, till first one and then many wolves answered him with their howls. Boniak then returned to camp and announced to David that on the morrow they would celebrate a victory over the Hungarians.[1]

As indeed they did. The next day a tiny band of three hundred Polovtsians massacred the vastly superior forces of the Hungarian king Koloman (who was said to have gathered a hundred thousand men). The victory was truly miraculous, and, as we are led to infer, owed as much to Boniak's strategic ruse as to his magic.

Khan Boniak—"godless, mangy, a predator"—is among the most colorful "Oriental" characters of the Primary Chronicle and figures prominently in any description of Rus'ian-Polovtsian encounters.[2] The episode in question is also noted in many scholarly accounts, yet commentaries

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[1] *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei* [hereafter *PSRL*], vol. 1, pt. 1 (Leningrad, 1926), cols. 270–71, and *PSRL*, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg, 1908), cols. 245–46. The translation cited here is that of Samuel Cross in "The Russian Primary Chronicle," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 12 (1930): 288.

[2] In Ukrainian scholarship he is prominent as a character in numerous popular legends studied, among others, by Mykhailo Drahomanov and Ivan Franko. See P. Kuzmichevsky [M. Drahomanov], "Sholudivyi Buniaka v ukrainskikh narodnykh skazaniiakh," *Kievskaia starina*, 1887, nos. 8: 676–713 and 10: 233–76; R. L. I., "K rasskazam o Sholudivom Boniake," *Kievkaia starina*, 1891, no. 8: 299–304; and Ivan Franko, "Vii, sholudyvyi Buniaka i Yuda Iskariotskyi," *Ukraina* 1, no. 1 (1907): 50–55.

on the nature of the khan's performance are scarce, probably because the story seems rather straightforward and unproblematic.

As early as the eighteenth century, Vasilii Tatishchev explained the episode as fortune-telling with the help of birds or animals, a "superstition" well known from ancient records.[3] Following in his footsteps, Nikolai Karamzin called it a "fortunate superstition," almost a trick that was meant to boost the troops' morale and proved effective.[4]

More recently Svetlana A. Pletneva, one of the principal authorities on the history and archaeology of the East European nomads, suggested that Boniak's strange behavior can be explained as a ritual intended to summon the help of his horde's totem, the wolf. She conjectured that the horde known in the chronicle as the "Burchevichi" may have taken its name from a totemic animal (*böri*, a wolf) and that Khan Boniak may have belonged to that horde. She further speculated that in Polovtsian society a khan was not only a military leader, but was also invested with the duties of a pagan priest. The meaning of the performance is then clear: "[Boniak] the khan and priest of the cult of the wolf-protector entreated a victory from wolves who, responding to him, foretold and ensured his success."[5] In a slightly different manner but developing a similar line of thought, Igor Kniazky treated our episode as proof of a deep cultural affinity between the Polovtsians of Eastern Europe and the Turks of old, with their supposed cult of the wolf so conspicuously manifested in Boniak's performance.[6]

Like many other episodes in the Primary Chronicle, this one, whatever its deep religious significance, is believed to have preserved genuine details of the nomads' divination practices. As in many other instances, however, what appears to be authentic and factual may be fictitious and invented. Chances are that Khan Boniak's wolflike howling is yet another cliché borrowed from the chronicle's literary sources.

As Ivan Dujčev demonstrated long ago, wolflike howling—λυκηθμὸς—is a well-established motif in Byzantine authors' depictions of nomadic peoples. The nomads howl like wolves before attacking or in communicating among themselves. In the *Dialogs* of Pseudo-Caesarius, which date from the mid-sixth century, the Slavs communicate in this fashion (ren-

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[3] Vasilii Tatishchev, *Istoriia rossiiskaia*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Adept, 1995), 254.

[4] Nikolai Karamzin, *Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskogo*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), 80.

[5] S. A. Pletneva, *Polovtsy* (Moscow: Nauka, 1990), 102. However, the etymology of the "Burchevichi" that Pletneva accepted is spurious. For other possible variants, see Nikolai A. Baskakov, *Tiurkskaia leksika v "Slove o polku Igoreve"* (Moscow: Nauka, 1985), 78.

[6] I. O. Kniazky, *Rus' i step* (Moscow: RNF, 1996), 43.

dered in the Slavonic translation as **влъческыи въюще себе възываютъ**).[7] According to the tenth-century Byzantine lexicon entitled "Suidas" (Ditch), the Avars produced wolflike howling while attacking, as was their custom.[8] Earlier Petr Lavrov noted that in the Slavonic translation of the *Questions and Responses* of Sylvester and Anthony, the expression τη λύκων ώρογη is rendered as *вълчьскы выюще*,[9] which is very close to what we have in the chronicle (**Боняк҃ъ ... почѧ въıти волчьскы**).

While it is doubtful that the chronicler was familiar with the texts Lavrov and Dujčev cited, there is a "Byzantine" source, almost certainly utilized in the Primary Chronicle, that develops the same theme of the nomads' wolflike howling. It is the *Vita Constantini* (*VC*), whose eighth chapter relates that when Constantine traveled to the land of the Khazars, he was attacked by the Hungarians, "who were howling like wolves" (**нападоша на нь оугри. ꙗко и вълческы воюще. Хотѧ и оубити**).[10]

Although **въıти волчьскы** in the Primary Chronicle looks like a direct quotation from *VC* (**вълческы воюще**), no textual connection has ever been established between the story of Khan Boniak and that episode of *VC*. Hence an association between them would seem rather farfetched. Yet there is one detail that links both accounts and may have led the chronicler to associate them. Both accounts deal with the Hungarians, to whom special attention was paid in the Primary Chronicle. Elsewhere I have tried to show that the same episode (or, rather, its immediate continuation in *VC*, chap. 9) led to an error in the "geographical introduction" to the Primary Chronicle: the Carpathian Mountains (called "Hungarian" in the chronicle) are identified as the Caucasian Mountains, where the Hungarians lived according to *VC*.[11] Thus the passage in *VC*

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[7] John Geometres, a Byzantine author of the tenth century, described "Scythes" (either Bulgarians or the Rus') in one of his epigrams as barking in doglike fashion See Mikhail Bibikov, "Rus' v vizantiiskoi diplomatii: Dogovory Rusi s Grekami," *Drevniaia Rus': Voprosy medievistiki,* 2005, no.1: 13.

[8] I. Dujčev, "Les témoignages de Pseudo-Césaire sur les Slaves," *Slavia Antiqua* 4 (1953): 193; and idem, "Kŭm tŭlkuvaneto na prostranite zhitiia na Kiril i Metodiia," in *Khiliada i sto godini slavianska pisemnost, 863–1963: Sbornik v chest na Kiril i Metodii* (Sofia: Bŭlgarski khudozhnik, 1963), 115–16. Until recently the title "Suidas" was taken to be the name of the author: see Mikhail V. Bibikov, *Byzantinorossica: Svod vizantiiskikh svidetelstv o Rusi*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Yazyki slavianskoi kultury, 2004), 447.

[9] Petro Lavrov, *Kyrylo ta Metodii v davno-slovianskomu pysmenstvi* (Kyiv: Ukrainska akademiia nauk, 1928), 85.

[10] P. A. Lavrov, *Materialy po istorii vozniknoveniia drevneishei slavianskoi pismennosti*, Trudy Slavianskoi komissii, vol. 1 (Leningrad: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1930), 13.

[11] Aleksei Tolochko, "Ob istochnike odnoi oshibki v geograficheskom vvedenii 'Povesti vremennykh let,'" *Drevniaia Rus'* (Moscow), 2007, no. 3: 107–109.

that includes the "Hungarians, who were howling like wolves" had indeed previously attracted the chronicler's attention.

It is probably also not insignificant that the episode of 1097 is the first mention of the Hungarians after a large gap (the previous mention of them in the Primary Chronicle occurs in the entry for 943, in an account borrowed from the Byzantine chronicle of Georgios Hamartolos).[12] In fact this is the first mention that introduces the Hungarians into the actual history of Rus': previously, they figured only in "legendary" events. This is also the first episode in which the Hungarian king appears.[13]

There is a textual problem here, however. The episode involving Boniak occurs in the so-called "Tale of the Blinding of Vasylko," a separate work written by a certain Basil that was fully incorporated into the Primary Chronicle at some unspecified point during its compilation. Thus the chronicler who consulted the *vitae* of SS Constantine and Methodius and the author of the account of Boniak are believed to have been two different writers (and there is nothing in Vasilii's work to suggest that he knew *VC*). However, as has been noted many times, the "Tale of the Blinding of Vasylko" was the object of editorial incursions on the part of the chronicler following its incorporation, and our fragment may just be one such incursion. The episode involving Boniak, his divination, and ensuing victory over the Hungarians is flanked by identical phrases: it begins with Двдъ ... иде в Половцѣ. и оусрѣте и Бонакъ and ends with Двдъ повѣже в Половцѣ. и оусрѣте и Бонакъ,[14] which are usually telltale signs of an interpolation.

The 1090s mark some of the Kyivans' initial encounters with the Polovtsians, which were often disastrous for the Rus' princes. A "clash of civilizations" produced the image of savage, brutal, and primitive nomads as almost beastlike creatures. Contemporaries could probably have cited much evidence of that. Chances are that the most striking proof—Khan Boniak's wolflike howling—is nothing but a literary invention.

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[12] *PSRL* 1: 45.

[13] This factor may also have prompted the chronicler to recall *VC*. The only other text that features the Hungarian king is *Vita Methodii (VM)*. Lavrov (*Materialy*, 85) remarked that, from the hagiographic perspective, the episode in *VC*, chap. 8, should be linked with the story in *VM*, chap. 16, concerning the encounter with the Hungarian king. It has been established that *VM* was known and quoted by the author of the Primary Chronicle.

[14] *PSRL* 1: 270, 272.

In Defense of the Truth about the Indomitable Prior Augustyn Kordecki*

Zbigniew Wójcik

The 6 May 2001 issue of *Aneks* includes an article by Cezary Leżeński titled "Przeor Kordecki — bohater czy zdrajca" (Prior Kordecki—Hero or Traitor). When it was reprinted in *Angora*, no. 19/411, it bore the additional title "Bohaterską obronę Częstochowy wymyślił Sienkiewicz. Przeor Kordecki był zdrajcą" (Sienkiewicz Made Up the Heroic Defense of Częstochowa. Prior Kordecki Was a Traitor). Considering the author, my reading of this article caused me not only consternation but also great distress. After all, Leżeński is a veteran of the "Gray Columns" and of the Home Army, a member of Solidarity and, what is also immensely important, a knight of the "Order of the Smile," which knighthood, as is well known, is awarded by children. Unfortunately, *Amicus Plato, amicus Socrates, sed magis amica veritas*!

I am not one of those historians who believe that "one should not disturb sacred cows," for such "sacred cows" are often largely artificial. However, Leżeński had no grounds to suggest, much less claim, that the leader of the defense of the Jasna Góra Monastery was a traitor. Even Julian Marchlewski did not go so far as to make such a claim, although he did everything in his power not only to play down the defense of Jasna Góra in 1655 but also to revile it outright.[1] Marchlewski's attitude is hardly surprising given his political views: he subsequently led the Polish Provisional Revolutionary Committee and, in 1920, awaited the capture of Warsaw by the Red Army "at the parsonage in Wyszków."

In his article Leżeński repeatedly refers to the work of the outstanding scholar of the history of the Deluge and the defense of Częstochowa, my friend Dr. Adam Kersten (1930–80), a highly erudite, unusually critical

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[1] J. Marchlewski, "Z przeszłości paulinów częstochowskich," *Wolna Trybuna* (Warsaw), 1911, no. 1.