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“EVERY EVIL PALES IN COMPARISON TO THOMAS’S WICKEDNESS”

THE PHYSICAL PUNISHMENTS AND TORTURE INFLECTED BY THOMAS PRELJUBOVIĆ, ACCORDING TO THE AUTHOR OF THE CHRONICLE OF IOANNINA¹

Abstract: The Chronicle of Ioannina is a 15th-century prose chronicle and represents the longest and most comprehensive preserved text about medieval Epirus. This source describes the tyrannical rule of Thomas Preljubović in Ioannina (1366/7–1384). According to the author of the Chronicle of Ioannina, Thomas Preljubović’s governance in this city is depicted as a time of fear and terror. The chronicler portrays numerous hardships and abuses suffered by the inhabitants of Ioannina with undisguised bitterness, often repeating the phrase, “*Every evil pales in comparison to Thomas’s wickedness*” thereby emphasizing the scale of the terror sown by Thomas Preljubović during his reign of terror, which lasted from 1366/1367 to 1384. Among the many atrocities attributed to Thomas Preljubović, the chronicler most frequently mentions imprisonment, enslavement, executions, as well as blinding, mutilation, hanging, quartering by horses, water torture, and other forms of punishment characteristic of the medieval period.

Keywords MeSH: Torture

Non MeSH: Corporal Punishment, Chronicle of Ioannina, Thomas Preljubović

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Introduction

The expansion of the Serbian state to the south, under the rule of King and Emperor Stefan Dušan, reached its peak with the conquest of Epirus (1347) and Thessaly (1348), bringing significant political and territorial changes to these regions. The Serbian ruler appointed his half-brother, Symeon (Sinisha) Palaiologos, as governor of Epirus and the military commander Preljub as governor of Thessaly. The death of Stefan Dušan in December 1355 was followed by turbulent events in this area: Preljub passed away shortly thereafter, while Symeon (Sinisha) Palaiologos succeeded in proclaiming himself emperor and establishing a small Greek-Serbian empire on the territories of Thessaly and extensive parts of Epirus in 1359/1360. [1 p242-246, 2 p567-568, 3 p573-577, 4 p872]

The inhabitants of Ioannina, Vagenetia, and the surrounding areas sent a delegation to Symeon (Sinisha) Palaiologos, requesting that he appoint them a new lord. In response, he sent his son-in-law, Thomas Preljubović, the son of Dušan's caesar Preljub and Irene. In 1366, Thomas Preljubović ceremonially entered Ioannina with Serbian troops. In the autumn of 1382, Thomas sent the abbot of the Ioannina monastery of Archimandriton, Gabriel, to Byzantium. Gabriel returned from Thessaloniki with the symbols of the despotic dignity, granted to Thomas by Manuel Palaiologos, the son and co-emperor of Byzantine Emperor John V Palaiologos. Thomas was awarded the title of despot not only due to his marital ties to the imperial Palaiologos family—being married to Maria Angelina, the daughter of Sinisha Palaiologos, who had since passed away—but also under the condition of recognizing the sovereignty of the Byzantine emperor. This arrangement was a means to secure the legitimacy of his rule in Ioannina. [5 p80, 6 p143-157, 7 p143-160]

After the assassination of Despot Thomas Preljubović on December 23, 1384, the Albanians laid siege to Ioannina. Monk Joasaph, the brother of Maria Angelina, after consulting with the city's prominent figures, offered authority over Ioannina to Esau Buondelmonti, a member of a distinguished Italian feudal family. The population of Ioannina welcomed their new lord on January 31, 1385. Esau married Maria Palaiologina, the widow of Thomas Preljubović. In 1385/1386, Esau Buondelmonti received the title of despot from the highest possible authority, Emperor John V Palaiologos in Constantinople, likely under the condition of recognizing Byzantine sovereignty. This act served to ensure the loyalty of Thomas's successor. After the death of his wife in 1394, Despot Esau married Irene, the daughter of Albanian lord John Spatas, in 1396. [5 p81-82]

Torture and Corporal Punishment

The concept of torture is not easy to define, and it is crucial to understand that there is no clear boundary between torture and punishment. Since the dawn of civilization, it has been customary for societies and states to attempt to justify torture by categorizing it as punishment, thereby denying that any form of torture is being

employed. Any act involving cruelty, suffering, or pain inflicted upon an individual, under any circumstances and for any purpose—whether or not the punishment concludes with that act or is followed by the deprivation of life—constitutes torture. From a theoretical standpoint, however, these two concepts differ. Torture involves the infliction of severe physical or psychological pain or suffering for the purpose of extracting information or coercing a confession. It is typically carried out by a public official or another person vested with authority. As such, both the innocent and the guilty could be subjected to torture. Corporal punishment, on the other hand, entails the infliction of physical pain as a penalty for a crime or offense. Forms of corporal punishment include whipping, beating, branding, maiming, and blinding, which, at least in theory, were carried out on convicted individuals whose guilt had been proven. Death, by itself, when intentionally caused, is often not classified as a form of physical torture. However, torture is deemed to exist when acts involving unwarranted suffering or pain precede death. Psychological or mental torture includes imprisonment, given that the living conditions in medieval dungeons were far from humane, even by the standards of that era. [8 p1-4, 9 p9-11, 10 p31-36]

Virtually every European state employed torture to extract confessions of guilt in criminal trials, adhering to the principle embodied in ancient Roman law. Initially, the entire question of procedure was in a highly ambiguous state, but over time, as human ingenuity contributed to the variety of methods applied, specific rules and regulations were established and enforced with considerable thoroughness. The perceived success of torture was the primary reason for its development and proliferation. The ancient Roman principle that it should be used only in cases where evidence strongly pointed to the guilt of the accused, with their confession being the sole missing element, was largely ignored. Mere suspicion of complicity in a crime became a sufficient pretext for the application of torture. [8 p61-63]

Legislation, as a means of maintaining order, stability, and peace in medieval states, along with certain provisions of customary law, prescribed corporal punishments in specific cases. The purpose of these punishments was to deter the commission of criminal acts. In Byzantium, corporal punishments were stipulated in the *Farmer's Law* and the *Soldier's Law*. With the enactment of the legal codex *Ecloga*, various corporal punishments were prescribed for certain offenses, such as whipping, branding, and the shaving of hair and beards, as well as mutilation by cutting off hands, noses, tongues, or genitals. These punishments generally served as substitutes for the death penalty, which had been prescribed for the same offenses under Justinian's legislation. However, the death penalty remained the ultimate punishment for the most severe crimes. Legal codices such as *Procheiron* and *Basilika*, authored during the reign of the Macedonian dynasty emperors Basil I (867–886) and his son Leo VI (886–912), formally abolished the amputation of hands and feet through specific provisions. Yet, this reform was not consistently enforced. For instance, the amputation of hands was prescribed within the

same chapter of *Procheiron* that prohibited such punishments. [11 p265, 672, 12 p1725, 13 p235-236, 14 p216-240]

The first significant step in the adoption of Byzantine law in Serbia was taken by the first Serbian Archbishop, Sava Nemanjić, around 1220, with the compilation of a legal codex known as *Zakonopravilo*, the Serbian adaptation of the *Nomocanon*. Its 55th chapter, titled *Zakon gradski* ("The Urban Law"), is a translation of the *Procheiron*. This chapter prescribes corporal punishments such as flogging, exile, the cutting off of the tongue or nose, shaving, and execution. [15 p93, 16 p446-448, 17 p5] It is possible that the *Farmer's Law* was at least partially known in the Serbian state at the beginning of the 14th century. The medieval Serbian translation of this legal monument is preserved in a Hilandar manuscript dating from the fourth decade of the 15th century. [18 p15-16, 19 p15] This manuscript also contains provisions prescribing corporal punishments. [20 p290-291]

During the reign of King and Emperor Stefan Dušan (1331–1355), there was a notable expansion of the system of corporal punishments. In his *Code of Laws* from 1349 and 1353/1354, he closely aligned with the Byzantine penal system, incorporating a wide range of corporal punishments. [21 p463, 22 p313-314] These included branding, flogging, exile, amputation of hands, noses, or ears, burning of hair and beards, hanging, blinding, execution, gouging of eyes, and imprisonment. [20 p292-296]

The Chronicle of Ioannina on the Cruelty of Thomas Preljubović

The *Chronicle of Ioannina* is a 15th-century prose chronicle originally misattributed to the fictitious authors "Komnenos and Proklos". Written around 1440, it stands as the most extensive and comprehensive preserved text about medieval Epirus. The chronicle vividly portrays the tyrannical rule of Thomas Preljubović in Ioannina (1366/7–1384), emphasizing his cruelty and the chronicler's evident hostility toward him. The second part of the chronicle focuses on Thomas's widow, Maria Angelina, and her marriage in 1385 to the Florentine Esau Buondelmonti, who ruled Ioannina until 1408 or 1411. It also provides valuable information on the settlement of Serbs and Albanians in Epirus during this period. The chronicle concludes with the year 1399; however, the Oxford manuscript includes additional entries extending to 1417/18. There is also a folk version of the chronicle, written in the 18th century, which ends with the death of Thomas Preljubović. This important historical source offers a unique and detailed insight into the social, political, and demographic changes in medieval Epirus. [11 p445] Since this is a piece of local chronicle, it provides unique information about the rule of Thomas Preljubović in Ioannina—details that cannot be found in any other source. Precisely for that reason, it must be approached with caution and understood as inherently one-sided. Yet its accounts are so vivid and so rich in detail that, in the absence of alternative testimony, they cannot be disregarded. They unquestionably merit concise presentation, all

the more so because the chronicler himself does not record a single piece of evidence that might justify, or even suggest, a more favorable view of Thomas's governance of the city.

According to the author of the *Chronicle of Ioannina*, the period of Thomas Preljubović's rule in this city is depicted as a time of fear and horror. The chronicler vividly portrays numerous hardships and abuses endured by the inhabitants of Ioannina with undisguised bitterness, often repeating the phrase, "*Every evil pales in comparison to Thomas's wickedness.*" This expression underscores the extent of the terror that Thomas Preljubović unleashed during his reign of tyranny, which lasted from 1366/1367 to 1384. In addition to the brutal corporal punishments he imposed, Thomas Preljubović is accused of other misdeeds. [23 p160-161]

His notoriety for cruelty was so great that the chronicle records: "Among his household, who were honorable Serbs, some fled secretly, while others, unable to endure his maddened cruelty, abandoned him openly." This testimony highlights not only the suffering of the city's residents but also the alienation and defection of his own followers due to his unrelenting savagery. [24 p81, 25 p244-245]

The chronicler notes that Thomas initially won over the inhabitants of Ioannina through cunning, but soon after revealed his true nature. His first victim was the Church, whose property he unlawfully seized. He then imposed various taxes, levies, and forced labor, surrounding himself with dishonorable individuals. Because of these malicious tongues, he became estranged even from his wife, Angelina, whom the chronicler praises highly. "The deeds he carried out in secret cannot even be spoken of by man. He disregarded the sacred boundaries of his ancestors and became an apostate." [24 p80-86, 25 p244-253]

Many victims of Thomas Preljubović's wrath endured enslavement, blinding, or both. "That Apsaras cunningly slandered his nephew, Nikephoros Vatalas, and Despot Thomas had his eyes gouged out. He then sent him, along with his parents and other relatives, into exile. (...) Shortly thereafter, a great and deadly plague appeared in the town of Ioannina. This plague was not ordinary or simple but can be said to have poured out the intensity of Thomas's great evil in the year 1368."² [24 p82-83, 25 p246-247]

His prisons were also infamous, and it seems unlikely that anyone could leave them alive. "But Thomas could find no peace and continually tormented the town, later persecuting and exterminating the Albanians by every possible means. He filled the town with Albanians, gathered children around him, established prisons and cages, erected thorny enclosures, and devised every imaginable cruelty. (...) In 1374, a deadly plague struck the town of Arta, and Despot Peter Leosas perished. (...) In 1375, yet another deadly plague afflicted the town of Ioannina, during which Thomas's daughter Irene, the wife of John Leosas, passed away." [24 p84-85, 25 p250-251]

² Although the source itself dates events according to the Byzantine era, we have chosen to present the chronology in the Christian era for the sake of easier reference - an approach regarded as both customary and methodologically justified within established historical methodology.

The chronicler particularly emphasizes Thomas's duplicity and dishonesty as integral to his unrelenting cruelty: "A certain Huhulitsa imposed penalties on the prominent citizens of Ioannina whom Thomas had imprisoned. He held Manuel, the chief judge, locked in the city for two months, then released him, restored him to favor, and ultimately poisoned him. Constantine, the senior official, was kept chained in a cage for six years, had his eyes gouged out, and was sent to Vourssina, where he was subjected to punitive labor until his death and burial. Others were imprisoned in the city, their eyes were gouged out, and some were sold across the border." [24 p90, 25 p258-259]

The chronicler also informs us that Thomas Preljubović imprisoned and tortured people to extract personal gain or seize their property: "Even the most virtuous among the hieromonks, Kyr Isaiah, could not escape the greed of the Tyrant. Thomas, driven by avarice, imprisoned him in a cage as if he were a criminal. Pious men ransomed his eyes for 200 aspra, yet the tyrant gouged them out regardless and then sold Isaia." [24 p91, 25 p260-261] "Every evil pales in comparison to Thomas's wickedness (...) One of the honorable citizens, named Elias Klasa, invited him to be the godfather to his newborn child. Elias owned great wealth and possessions, which is why Thomas subjected him to cruel and merciless torture. He had water droplets drip onto Klasa's abdomen, burned his armpits with flaming torches,³ forced a knife into his mouth, and poured water mixed with ash down his throat. (...) The most ruthless murderer of men..." [24 p82, 25 p246-247] His reign of terror, according to the author of the *Chronicle of Ioannina*, became progressively worse over time. He was arrogant and oppressive towards individuals, but the source often speaks of victims in the plural: "And the stronger he grew, the more ruthless he became, for he continuously tormented the Albanians and mistreated and beat the people of Ioannina. [24 p91, 25 p260-261] (...) Some were slaughtered on wagons and buried, while others were imprisoned and subsequently sold off." [24 p86, 25 p252-253]

The chronicler particularly emphasizes the suffering inflicted upon the Albanians by Thomas: "At that time, Thomas gathered the more prominent Albanians in the city and distributed the rest among the nobles and the people, instructing them to sell them. Other Albanians, who found themselves on the island, were likewise divided among the populace and ordered to be sold. As for the Bulgarians and Vlachs who happened to be there, he commanded their noses to be cut off. Ioannina became a cauldron of blood, as in the times of the martyrs. Thus, Thomas tormented the Albanians and aspired to become and be called the 'slayer of Albanians.' Every evil pales in comparison to Thomas's wickedness (...) Thomas did not cease tormenting the Albanians; he hanged some from towers, mutilated others, and gouged out the eyes of some, sending them in a basket as a gift to Spatas." [24 p88-89, 25 p256-257, 26 p135, 27]

³ This method of torture closely resembles one of the trials by ordeal practices. Such trials were intended to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused. Trial by ordeal was practiced for centuries before being abolished by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. It was based on the belief that, if the accused were innocent, God would protect them from harm during the ordeal, such as enduring red-hot iron without sustaining injury. [28 p31-33, 58, 8 p227-229]

Conclusion

Based on the accounts of the *Chronicle of Ioannina* regarding the actions of Thomas Preljubović towards numerous individuals who suffered physical and mental abuse at his hands, we can conclude with a high degree of certainty that all these instances constitute torture. Regardless of the fact that many of the punishments inflicted on the victims are mentioned in Byzantine and, consequently, Serbian legislation for specific crimes, the chronicle itself provides no indication of what Thomas's victims were accused of or whether they underwent any form of judicial process. This is further corroborated by the fact that Thomas Preljubović himself met his end at the hands of his closest associates, who clearly could no longer endure his tyranny and likely feared for their own lives. As the chronicle records: "In the same year (1385), on the 23rd of December, on the eve of Thursday, at five hours of the night, Thomas was slain by his own bodyguards." [24 p64, 25 p262-263]

One instance where a semblance of a legal process is hinted at is when certain officials participated in the issuing of punishments. However, even in this case, there is no evidence of the guilt of the condemned, and the source itself notes that all of them were innocent: "Then the elders appear and condemn Ioannis, a Bulgar, to be thrown from a height, Theochares to be beheaded, Gastritsiotes to be torn apart by horses, and others to have their eyes gouged out, though they had committed no wrongdoing. Some were exiled, and others were thrown into prison. Fearing the tyrant and his servant Apsaras, some fled their homeland voluntarily." [22 p89, 25 p256-257] Of all the cruelties attributed to Thomas Preljubović, the most frequently mentioned in the chronicle are imprisonment, selling people into slavery, taking lives, blinding, mutilation, hanging, tearing apart by horses, and water torture – all practices characteristic of the Middle Ages.

Rezime

Janjinska hronika je prozna hronika iz 15. veka i predstavlja najduži je i najsadržajniji sačuvani tekst o srednjovekovnom Epiru. Ovaj izvor opisuje tiransku vladavinu Tome Preljubovića u Janjini (1366/7–1384). Prema rečima pisca Janjinske hronike, period uprave Tome Preljubovića u ovom epirskom gradu predstavljen je kao vreme straha i užasa. Hroničar slika brojne nedaće i zlostavljanja koje su stanovnici Janjine doživeli sa neskrivenim ogorčenjem često ponavljajući rečenicu „Svako je zlo malo naspram zla Tominog“, time naglašavajući razmere terora koje je Toma Preljubović seao za vreme svoje strahovlade koja je trajala od 1366/1367. do 1384. godine.

Na osnovu iskaza Janjinske hronike o postupcima Tome Preljubovića nad brojnim ličnostima koje su od njega propatile fizičko i mentalno nasilje, možemo sa velikom dozom sigurnosti da zaključimo da se u svim pomenutim slučajevima radilo isključivo o torturi. Bez obzira na činjenicu da se brojne kazne koje su izvršavane nad žrtvama pominju i u vizantijskom, a sledstveno tome i u srpskom zakonodavstvu za određenje zločine, u samoj hronici nema nikakvog pomena o tome zašta su Tomine žrtve bile optuživane, niti da je

nad njima sproveden bilo kakav sudski proces. Jedni slučaj gde se nazire nekakav pravni proces je kada su određene starešine učestvovalе u izricanju kazni. Mada ni u tom slučaju nema nikakvih svedočanstava o krivici osuđenih, а sam izvor beleži da su svi bili nevini. Od svih svireposti koje hroničar pripisuje Tomi Preljuboviću najčešće se spominje tamničenje, prodavanje u ropstvo, oduzimanje života, ali i oslepljivanje, sakaćenje, vešanje, rastrzavanje konjima, mučenje vodenim kapljama, sve karakteristične za srednji vek.

Ključne reči: mučenje, telesno kažnjavanje, hronika Janjine, Toma Preljubović

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