



Pope Nicholas I's Responses to the Bulgarians' Questions¹

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In the early Middle Ages, adopting Christianity did not only mean a change in religion for a newly converted people but also served as a prerequisite for being admitted to the community of the European peoples. Most historical sources reveal merely the outlines of the political background and the result of adopting Christianity, but they usually do not provide details of the process that takes place in the legal system, customs, or way of life of the peoples concerned.

The source entitled 'Pope Nicholas I's Responses to the Bulgarians' Questions' (*Responsa Nicolai Papae I. ad consulta Bulgarorum*), the translation of which with explanations and an introductory study is given into the readers' hands in the volume of Tamás Nótári – the author and editor of several monographs² and editions of sources³ on mediaeval legal history –, is of unprecedented significance in this respect.

The study and the translation reveal the following historical background. Bulgarian Prince Boris (852–889) was attracted to Christian religion, which was strengthened by several current political efforts: on the one hand, he intended to exert greater influence on the population through the clergy and wanted to use the church organization to drive the boyars back and thereby facilitate the fusion of native Slavs and the Bulgarians settled in the country.

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- 1 I. Miklós pápa válaszai a bolgárok kérdéseire (Pope Nicholas I's Responses to the Bulgarians' Questions). Editing, translation, annotations, and accompanying studies by Tamás Nótári. Szeged, Lectum Kiadó, 2015.
 - 2 Nótári, T.: A kora középkori bajor jogrendszer a Lex Baiuvariorum tükrében (The Early Mediaeval Bavarian Legal System in the Mirror of the Lex Baiuvariorum). Szeged 2014; Jog és társadalom a Lex Baiuvariorumban (Law and Society in the Lex Baiuvariorum). Szeged 2012; A salzburgi historiográfia kezdetei (The Beginnings of the Historiography in Salzburg). Szeged 2007; Law and Society in Lex Baiuvariorum. Passau 2014; Bavarian Historiography in Early Medieval Salzburg. Passau 2010; Show Trials and Lawsuits in Early-Medieval Bavaria. *Rechts geschichtliche Vorträge* 53. Budapest 2008.
 - 3 Nótári, T.: Lex Baiuvariorum. Szeged 2011; Források Salzburg kora középkori történetéből (Sources from the Early Medieval History of Salzburg). Szeged 2005; Notitia Arnonis – Epistola Theotmari. *Aetas* 2004/2. 72–95; Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum. *Aetas* 2000/3. 93–111; Gesta Hrodberti. In: *Classica – Mediaevalia – Neolatina*. Debrecen 2006. 131–146.

The prince adopted Christianity in 864 in Byzantium, in which he was given the name Mikhael. After that, he forwarded a letter to Photius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, in which he wanted to get answers to their practical questions concerning missionary work and church organization. Photius's response, however, was so much abstract and of high theological level that it did not give a satisfying answer to the ruler's questions. In turn, Boris turned to Pope Nicholas I (858–867) and sent him his letter⁴ through his delegates, containing his questions concerning the Christian religion. The questions of the Bulgarian mission addressed to the Pope were lost, but the Pope's response letter, the 'Responsa Nicolai Papae I. ad Consulta Bulgarorum', i.e. the Pope's answer written in the autumn of 866 has survived in full. In the volume, the translator first analyses the Patriarch's letter and then examines the Pope's letter more profoundly.

Although the questions put by the Bulgarians, the *consulta*, are lost, the author endeavours to deduce their content and structure from the Pope's answers.

The Pope's letter divides the responses into one hundred and six chapters; however, the structure of the answers makes it highly probable that the Prince's letter contained one hundred and fourteen questions, to which the Pope summed up his answers in one hundred and six chapters. The answers are disorderly in terms of topics, but this might be probably attributed to the fact that he followed the order of the questions and gave his answers in accordance with that.

In terms of topics, it is the answers that apply to Christian religion, its practice, the issue whether heathen customs can be incorporated into Christianity, law and order, and church organization that prevail. The answers from which we can indirectly obtain data about the ancient Bulgarian religion and way of life as well as law and order are especially interesting. For example, the text clearly reveals that polygamy was a generally accepted practice since otherwise they would not have asked the Pope whether it was possible for a man to have two wives at the same time. It was customary among the Bulgarians that before getting married the fiancé gave the fiancée gold and silver objects and other valuable goods as dowry. After her husband's death, a widow was not allowed to get married again; yet, it was a generally accepted practice that a man having become a widower could get married again. Serious punishment was imposed on a servant who ran away from the owner, if captured, and similarly on a slave who slandered his

4 See also Nótári, T.: De conversione Bulgarorum – On the Legal Background of the Conflict between Rome and Byzantium. *Zbornik Radova Pravni Fakultet* 43/1. 2009. 445–461; On Two Sources of the Early Bulgarian Christianity. *Chronica: Annual of the Institute of History University of Szeged* 6. 2007. 37–51; Róma és Bizánc missziós kísérletei a IX. századi Bulgáriában (Missionary Work of Rome and Byzantium in 9th-century Bulgaria). *Belvedere Meridionale* 17/1–2. 2005. 22–35; De Consultis Bulgarorum. *Collega* 6/5. 2002. 47–53; Adalékok a Responsa Nicolai Papae I. ad consulta Bulgarorum keletkezéstörténetéhez (Some Remarks on the Responsa Nicolai Papae I. ad consulta Bulgarorum). *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae Legal Studies* 4/2. 2015. 239–256; Some Remarks on the Responsa Nicolai Papae I. ad consulta Bulgarorum. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae Legal Studies* 4/1. 2015. 47–64.

master. It was also punishable if a free man fled from his homeland: the frontiers of the country were strictly guarded, and the border guard who made the escape possible was sentenced to death. Murderers of relatives, persons who killed their mate, and who were caught in the act of adultery with an alien woman suffered capital punishment. Involuntary homicide, theft, and kidnapping were sanctioned. Punishment was imposed on persons who castrated others, who brought false charges, and who gave deadly poison to others. Women who treated their husband badly, committed adultery, and slandered their husband were threatened with the punishment of abandonment. Revolt against the ruler was punished by death, which punishment was imposed not only on the perpetrators but also on their families.

In terms of historical aspects, it is important to point out that Prince Boris and his country eventually – in spite of the relations established with Rome, which looked promising – followed the Byzantine rite of Christianity. At the Constantinople Council of 869/70, Bulgaria was subjected to the authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the Prince expelled the missionaries of Rome from his country. Nevertheless, in spite of the Bulgarians not adopting Christianity of the Roman rite, the Pope's letter as a source is very important; one might say, it provides a snapshot-like and uniquely precious picture in the history of the changes in laws, customs, and way of life of a people that converts from heathenism to Christianity.

By Tamás Nótári's volume, the *Responsa* appears in Hungarian for the first time, and so this work provides access to an important source for researchers of not only church history and Slavonic studies but also of the history of law, religion, and way of life as well as for readers interested in these topics.