Authoring : *Kontogeorgis Dimitrios*
Translation : *Τσοκανή Άννα*
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Summary :

Small diocese under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople; its see until the middle of the 19th century was located in Silistria (Silistra) and later on in Tulcea. The relatively scant flock consisted of Bulgarians, Romanians and Greeks. From the late 1860s onwards, when the rivalry between Greeks and Bulgarians escalated, the diocese was essentially split, since the majority of the Bulgarians founded the exarchate diocese of Ruse-Drystra. In 1878, the area was annexed to Romania and the diocese ceased to be.

Other Names

Dristra, Dystra

Geographical Location

West coast of the Black Sea

Historical Region

Dobrudja (Dobrogea in Romanian)

Administrative Dependence

Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

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1. Introduction

The Drystra diocese is identified as the early Byzantine diocese of “Dorostolos”, located in Lower Moesia, i.e. the present day Dobrudja area.[1] Its see must have been the Danubian city of Silistria (Silistra) in northeastern Bulgaria. Since the 11th century onwards the Dorostolos diocese was called “Drystra” diocese, probably a corrupted Slavic pronunciation of its former name.[2]

2. The diocese of Drystra during the Ottoman period (15th-18th century)

The available information concerning the history of the diocese of Drystra during the first centuries following the Ottoman conquest in early 15th century are rather scarce and often somewhat hazy. However, the diocese was located in Silistria and had jurisdiction over the whole Dobrudja area, while the local metropolites had taken part in the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438.[3]

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the diocese of Drystra was closely involved with the princes of Wallachia and the principality’s ecclesiastical authorities, as is indicated by the fact that the prince (“hospodar”) of Wallachia Grigorios Gikas I (1660-1664, 1672-1673) built the diocese’s cathedral in Silistria, while the metropolitan of Drystra was often sent to Wallachia as exarch of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.[4]

The most prominent personage to become metropolitan in the diocese of Drystra was Ierotheos Komninos, a multifarious man who had studied in Italy, with a significant literary and publishing corpus of work.[5] Ierotheos in his letters often describes the poverty of his diocese and the torments Christians had to suffer because of the depredatory raids by Tatars, evidently originating from southern Russia and the Crimea.[6]

From 1806 onwards, when the metropolitan of Drystra fled to Bucharest due to the ongoing Russo-Turkish war, the diocese see remained vacant. Let it be noted that as early as the mid-18th century northern Dobrudja had been put under the jurisdiction of the

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bishop of Proilava (Brailov), located in Brăila; consequently, the significance of the diocese of Drystra had waned. Maybe that is the reason why the Ecumenical Patriarchate decided in 1813 to unify the dioceses of Brailov and Drystra.[7]

3. The history of the diocese of Drystra during the 19th century

The Peace Treaty of Adrianople (Edirne, September 2nd, 1829), which terminated the victorious for the Russians war over the Ottoman Empire, also determined the annexation of Brăila to the Wallachia principality. Subsequently, the diocese of Brailov ceased to be and the one in Drystra reappeared, located again in Silistria and with jurisdiction all over the Ottoman region of Dobrudja.[8]

The diocese of Drystra was an ecclesiastical province relevantly of small importance during the 19th century, ranking 45th in a total of 82 in 1885, while its financial status was also rather bad, since in 1825 it owed 73,500 piastres to the Ecumenical Patriarchate.[9] Furthermore, the Dobrudja region was scantly populated and the Christians, mainly Bulgarians and Romanians, as well as Greeks, inhabiting the few urban centres, had limited economic potential.[10] Some efforts appear to have been made after 1829 in order to reconstruct economically the province. Specifically, in the early 1840s the metropolitan of Drystra decided to add as his see Tulcea, as well as Silistria, obviously because of the financial growth of the former.[11]

However, the development of a strong movement scholarly and ecclesiastical circles for the establishment of an autonomous (outside the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate) Bulgarian Church led to a crisis in the relations between the “Great Church” and the Bulgarians. Already since the 1850s a Bulgarian national movement had surfaced in the Dobrudja region centered in Tulcea.[12] From the summer of 1860, many Bulgarian communities refused to acknowledge Dionysios, the patriarchal metropolitan who was of Greek origin; after the declaration of an autonomous Exarchate in 1870, the Bulgarian diocese of Ruse was established, where the diocese of Drystra, or rather where those of the dissenting communities, mainly Bulgarian, were icluded. The rivalry between the patriarchal and the exarchate diocese considering the approach made to Romanian Orthodox communities was harsh.

It appears, however, that most of the communities continued to acknowledge metropolites Dionysios, complaints notwithstanding that he was essentially indifferent to their problems. Furthermore, the Greeks of Constantinople, but also Greek diplomats, considered him an as obstacle for both the Greek Educational Associations taking action in the area and the prospect of collaborating with the Romanians.[13]

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1. The historical Dobrudja area is divided into two sections; the northern one, which is the largest and is part of Romania (Tulcea, Constanța districts) and the southern which is part of Bulgaria.

2. See Janin, R., “Dorostorum”, in *Dictionnaire d’Histoire et de Géographie ecclésiastiques* 14 (Paris 1960), column 683-684. For the city also see Browning, R., “Dorostolon”, *Oxford Dictionnary of Byzantium* 1, p. 653.

3. See Mateescu, T., “Les Diocèses orthodoxes de la Dobroudja sous la domination ottomane”, *Balkan Studies* 13/1 (1972), p. 280.

4. Mateescu, T., “Les Diocèses orthodoxes de la Dobroudja sous la domination ottomane”, *Balkan Studies* 13/1 (1972), pp. 281-282, 284-287.

5. See Cicanci, O.,-Cernovodeanu, P., “Contribution à la connaissance de la biographie et de l’oeuvre de Jean Hierothée Comnène (1668-1719)”, *Balkan Studies* 12/1 (1971), pp. 143-186; Καραθανάσης, Α., *Οι Έλληνες λόγιοι στη Βλαχία (1670-1714)* (Θεσσαλονίκη 1982).

6. See Mateescu, T., “Les Diocèses orthodoxes de la Dobroudja sous la domination ottomane”, *Balkan Studies* 13/1 (1972), pp. 283-284.

7. See Mateescu, T., “Les Diocèses orthodoxes de la Dobroudja sous la domination ottomane”, *Balkan Studies* 13/1 (1972), pp. 287-288.

8. Mateescu, T., “Les Diocèses orthodoxes de la Dobroudja sous la domination ottomane”, *Balkan Studies* 13/1 (1972), p. 288. For the Peace Treaty of Adrianople see Jelavich, B., *Russia and the Formation of the Romanian National State, 1821-1878* (Cambridge 1984), pp. 29-31.

9. See Janin, R., “Drystra ou Dystra”, στο *Dictionnaire d’Histoire et de Géographie ecclésiastiques* 14 (Paris 1960), p. 826.

10. Details on the history of Dobrudja between the years 1829-1878 see Rădulescu, A.,-Bitoleanu, I., *Istoria Dobrogei* (Constanţa 1998), pp. 273-329.

11. Mateescu, T., “Les Diocèses orthodoxes de la Dobroudja sous la domination ottomane”, *Balkan Studies* 13/1 (1972), pp. 288-289 and Κουρελάρου, Β., *Οι Εκκλησίες των Ελληνικών Κοινοτήτων της Ρουμανίας τον ΙΘ’ αιώνα* (2006), p. 28.

12. See Ischirkoff, A., *Les Bulgares en Dobroudja. Aperçu historique et ethnographique* (Berne 1919), pp. 65-70.

13. See Κοντογεώργης, Δ.Μ., «Σύσταση και οργάνωση ελληνικών κοινοτήτων στη Ρουμανία. Η περίπτωση του Τζιούρτζιου και της Τούλτσεας (β΄ μισό του 19ου αιώνα)», *Μνήμων* 28 (2006-2007), pp. 224-228. Also see Mateescu, T. (επιμ.), *Documente privind istoria Dobrogei (1830-1877)* (Bucureşti 1975), pp. 280-283 and *Ιστορικό Αρχείο Υπουργείου Εξωτερικών Ελλάδος*, fol. 76/1ζ, Ε. Μαυρομμάτης, Υποπρόξενος Ισμαηλίου προς Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών, n. 354, 16 December 1872.

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Glossary :

Bulgarian issue

The Bulgarian struggle for ecclesiastical autonomy. Since the 1850’s the Bulgarians claimed the establishment of an autonomous church (exarchate) which would retain typical relationship with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The latter opposed to this movement as its role had been undermined. After long lasting negotiations and the failure of any attempt for reconciliation, an Ottoman firman promulgated in 1870 established the Bulgarian exarchate, although the Patriarchate declared the Exarchate schismatic. Naturally, the main character of the struggle of the Bulgarians for ecclesiastical independence was not religious. It was bounded to the Bulgarian nationalism emerged at that time and had clear political dimension (Bulgarian political independence).

Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438)

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Ecclesiastical Council assembled at both Italians cities Ferrara and Florence in 1438-1439 and decided the reunion of the Orthodox and Catholic Church. The Ecumenical Patriarchate didn't really accept the decisions of the Council and didn't never practise the reunion.

exarch

At the Byzantine ecclesiastical administration the exarch, from the 5th century onwards, was the head of an ecclesiastical province and later became another title of the Ecumenical Patriarch, certifying that he was the head prelate within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The office of exarch was abolished during the 6th century, although exarchs were metropolites or representatives of metropolites who supervised the ecclesiastical provinces or the ecclesiastical and monastic foundations. During the late 14th century as exarchs are referred the metropolites who were located at ancient dioceses and supervised all the ecclesiastical sees and the charitable institutions of the ecclesiastical province and later the authorized representatives of the Patriarch (patriarchal exarchs).

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