

HOW DO THE PEASANTS LIVE? THE CONFESSION OF A TYPICAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THEIRS FROM MACEDONIA IN THE END OF 1355¹

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That autumn, contrary to expectations, due to the bad weather during the summer – it was cold, it was rainy indeed, but there happened quite a miracle and the yield of grape was rich. The casks got full and the people happy. Holidays were coming, yet till March long winter



Medieval Balkan peasant working on the field. Miniature from 1346, kept in the Monastery of Vatoped.

months had to elapse – then would come the tax-collectors and it would be time for us to pay the taxes...The same happened in October, but then the harvest had been just gathered in and it was easier to pay then...If it was only for the tax on movables and property² –no problem, yet, besides, we had the tax on cattle³ and the *ofelia*⁴ and the tithes on wine, honey and cattle...We had some worries raising it – it would so happen that

the goat or the sheep would go into the wood or the monastery valley – a fine - then prove that you had no idea to whom it belonged – you always pay! And then some crack-brained lad would do away with some of them or would take fancy to a lassie from the other village – and then...you pay! Indeed quite a number from our village had fled to search for success far away, away ... and yet, whomever they get – he'll have a hard time of it. And so – the word is that Dragan from the village of Novo Selo – has gone clear to Dubrovnik, but the sentinels nabbed him and sent him back, but for edification of ours, the disobedient – as they call us – they slit his nose... God, tough times lie ahead of us – many villains have cropped up on the roads; indeed, the people have hardly anything to live on, I see, and yet it lies heavy on us – keep an eye on the roads, keep over the property, if you have nothing to do –yet there is a lot to do – I am supposed to work on the field and the vineyard of nobility for 109 days – as though I do not have my own. I do, indeed – and a vineyard and a small field and a

small garden – I grow cabbage and leek, and the fruit-trees need to take care of – I have olive-trees, quince-trees, pear-trees and cherry-



Miniature illustrating tax collecting
1136-1155, Monastery St.
Catherine, Sinai

trees, well, I also have an almond-tree, but it's only one...As far as the vineyard goes – hoe, pick, make efforts, charm the wine to be good, and then because of the tax-collectors sell it out – oh dear, earthly hardships... So, I've already told you about the cattle – those goats are so quick, my legs don't hold me any more to run after the goats, and my grandsons – they would become soldiers to flee to Dubrovnik, let them talk, but the goats need someone to run after them, to take

care of them... Now are coming holidays – there will be fairs – some merchants will come, and I will sell this or that... And if they go to rob some poor stranger

– you pay again – even the mayor has had a hard time of it – a man from Dubrovnik has been robbed – well, he is rich, the rumour has it – full of goods and money – and the tsar has made him pay; besides he has assigned him a task – to find the villain and to hang him – otherwise his head would go...- oh dear, tough times, I tell you – tough... On top of that some plague raged, the earth quaked two years ago, and those outlanders – well, Persians or Turks, I don't know – can't stop! The word is that the Byzantine – Cantacuzenus or Contancuzenus, whatever – has gathered them and now he cannot get rid of them – as if they are such fools to go – it is nice here, we have everything... Our tsar Stephan declined to give him money – he would build ships – well, but against whom – we still remember the



Byzantine's many cases of insidiousness ... It is even said that the pope, the one in Rome, trusted much more in our tsar to fight infidels and he titled him – the name is tough, but I remember it – captain against the Turks – but what can he do... Well, let me stop here, it's late already, if you want, come and will drink from this year's wine.

¹ This text is a make-believe story and makes no claim to reflect real events. Let us look at science “not seriously” for a moment and try to go back centuries ago in the world of the “little man”. For its production it has been made use of tax reports, preserved in the archives of Athos and published in the series Archives de l'Athos, I – XXI, Paris, 1937-2001; The Code issued by the Serbian ruler Stephan Dushan, published by N. Radoychih Законник цара Стефана Душана 1349 и 1354, Београд, 1960; the essays by some Byzantine historians such as John Cantacuzenus (Ioannes Cantacuzenus, Historiarum, vol. I-III, Bonnae, 1828-1832), Ducas (Ducas, Historia Turcobyzantina (1341-1462), ed. Vasile Grecu, București, 1958), etc.

² The so called *telos*

³ The so called *zevgaratikion*

⁴ An extra tax which probably was a percentage over the amount of the *telos*