

# CHRISTIAN ASCETICS OF LATE ANTIQUITY AS A PHILOSOPHY AND ITS ECHO IN THE CULTURE OF OLD RUS' (11TH – 13TH CENTURIES)<sup>1</sup>

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DOI: 10.17846/CL.2021.14.1.39-47

**Abstract:** KROCZAK, Justyna. *Christian Ascetics of Late Antiquity as a Philosophy and Its Echo in the Culture of Old Rus' (11th – 13th Centuries)*. The article attempts to show, first, that within the context of Patristic heritage the Christian asceticism of Late Antiquity can be seen as a Christian philosophy (different from one of the classical Greek) and, second, that this philosophy has found a ground in the Old Rus'. The evidence is gathered from relevant fragments of works by the Fathers of the Eastern Church, mainly by Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom. The choice of these Fathers is motivated by two facts: their works had been better known than other sources in the Old Church Slavonic translations; their writings attest to the concept of ascetics as a philosophy of a kind distinct from its Classical ancient form. The Patristic ideal of a philosopher is compared with the life and works of Theodosius of the Caves, the quintessential Saint of the Old Rus' and Eastern Slavonic ideal of a virtuous person. Consulting the primary sources in Old Church Slavonic, the author suggests that Theodosius of the Caves does in fact confirm to the definition of a philosopher as offered by Gregory the Theologian.

**Keywords:** *Old Rus' (11th – 13th centuries), Gregory the Theologian, Saint Theodosius of the Caves, asceticism, Byzantine monastic tradition, medieval philosophy*

Despite abundance of brilliant specialists in the field of the Old Rus' culture its philosophic aspect is often either overlooked or considered too thankless for inquiry, though generally for good reasons. According to classical criteria, such as literary records or institutional framework, in the Old Rus' there was no philosophy to speak of, and any philosophic activity remained generally marginal, since there was no apparent social demand for it. However, there is some evidence that points to the existence of Christian philosophy in the Old Rus', at least to some measure.

The starting point here is the view of philosophy developed in the early Christian communities of Late Antiquity by the Fathers of the Eastern Church. The Patristic thought has added an intellectual component to religion, in a sense a dialogue with the ancient philosophy, and partial utilization of its doctrines (Ierodiakonu – Zografidas 2011, 853). In this process, the main role was played by the monasteries where both the ascetic practices of the Fathers of the Desert and theorizing mysticism of Christian writers and Fathers of the Church were kept alive. These writers included the thinkers of Catechetical School of Alexandria and The Gaza School, the Cappadocian Fathers and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. The theologians of the Late Antiquity have worked out a new view of philosophy that fused the ideas of Greek philosophy (Stoic, the broadly understood Neoplatonic tradition and Aristotelianism), Patristic thought and Judaism (Philo

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<sup>1</sup> The article is part of the research project financed by National Science Centre, Poland, decision number: DEC-2016/21/D/HS1/03396. Fragments of this text have been previously published in Polish as part of the Chapter 2 of my monograph *Kultura filozoficzna Dawnej Rusi* (Warszawa, 2020).

of Alexandria) (Ierodiakonu – Zografidas 2011, 852). Generally speaking, the philosophy was turned into reflections on Christian articles of faith expressed in the language of classical Greek philosophy, being an attempt to bridge the gap between Man and God not just in theory but also in practice. The Fathers of the Eastern Church draw on the riches of Greek philosophy without turning into philosophers in the pagan sense, while redefining the whole tradition of speculative discourse (S. Gregorii Theologi Oratio XXIX, PG 36, col. 76BC; St. Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 29 1894, chapter 2, Zozulak 2018, chapter 6). The questions they had been cogitating were how to live a virtuous life, what is the essence of philosophy, what should man strive for, and how to define God. Being essentially axiological in nature, these questions went beyond the practical needs of sermon, often falling into the realm of metaphysics, since defining God or (in Aristotelian tradition) the First Cause lies at the center of all metaphysical investigations. Thus, the Patristic inquiries implied an advanced competence in the matters of theory.

The Fathers of the Church viewed philosophy as ‘the love of wisdom’, although the last component of this phrase has to be understood as ascetics, namely as striving for purity of one’s soul that opens one towards the true wisdom, that is, towards God. Gregory of Nyssa used words ὁ τῆς σοφίας ἐρασθεὶς i.e. “he who is enamoured of wisdom” (S. Gregorii Nysseni De virginitate, PG 46, 400C; St. Gregory of Nyssa 1893, chapter 20), to describe Jesus, who was seen as the very ideal of such wisdom. The ascetic’s life purpose was to realize this ideal.

At the turn of the third and fourth century asceticism had been elevated to the rank of philosophy, being recognized as such due to the efforts of “Philosophizing” Church Fathers – John Chrysostom, the Three Cappadocians, and Athanasius the Great – despite the fact that at the time it took mainly a negative form of seemingly non-intellectualized practical spirituality that promoted techniques of body mortification. However, according to the testimonies of theorists of asceticism and of the ascetics themselves (e.g. *Apophthegmata Patrum*), the sense of asceticism is exhausted neither by the manifestation of one’s mastery over the body and contempt for it, nor by an overt profession of a simplified version of Platonic dualism. This sense is closer to training oneself to feel “beauty and goodness”, because perception and contemplation of the external world’s beauty is an integral part of the inner life of an ascetic.

The fact that such a worldview had been accepted by the educated part of society in the Old Rus’ is indicated, first, by the translated literary works available there between the 11th and the 13th centuries, and second, by the country’s own original writings. The monastic literature available in the Old Rus’ facilitated a spread of devotion towards asceticism. The monastic tradition of asceticism of the Christian East expressed, for example, in the *Sinai Patericon*, i.e. *Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschus (11th century GIM sin. 551), had an extremely strong impact on the countries in the orbit of influence of the Eastern Roman Empire, that is, on the Slavs of Bulgaria, Serbia and Rus’. The said influence consisted primarily in adoption of some elements of Byzantine culture and fitting them to the developmental stage of these countries (Tachiaos 2005, 184).

From the 11th century onward, Byzantine ascetic literature, along with liturgical texts, penetrated into Rus’ and shaped a new philosophical outlook. In this regard, two preserved manuscripts demand our attention: The thirteen orations by Gregory the Theologian from the 11th century and Златоуруй (*the Golden Stream*) by John Chrysostom from the 12th century. They are stored in the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, the first under the number Q.p.I.16, the second – F.p.I.46.

Particularly noteworthy are *Funeral Oration on the Great St. Basil, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia*, Святааго Григория Богословца Нанзианьскааго, сътворено на погребение святааго Василиа (Budilovich 1875, ff. 19a-96a), the forty-third oration from Gregory the Theologian’s selection of orations, and his second oration *In Defence of His Flight to Pontus, and His Return, After His Ordination to the Priesthood, with an Exposition of the Character of the Priestly*

*Office*, Слово отъходъное бѣжания дѣля на море поньтъское (Budilovich 1875, ff. 162g-231d). We find there an original approach to Christian philosophy that amounts to a theory of asceticism, which had been the cardinal idea of Gregory the Theologian. He wrote in the forty-third Oration that during his stay in Athens together with Basil the Great he sought philosophy: “philosophy was our aim” (S. Gregorii Theologi Oratio XLIII, PG 36, col. 520; St. Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 43 1894, chapter 19)<sup>2</sup>. What philosophy meant to him? From Gregory’s reasoning several of its features can be inferred: it was “the most precious of possessions and titles” (S. Gregorii Theologi Oratio II, PG 35, col. 504; Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 2 1894, chapter 102), as well as a state of mind and a way of life, resting upon overcoming one’s body. From this perspective, philosophy was identified with the most perfect way of living, which contained two complementary parts making a whole in the most perfect harmony that man is able to achieve. These parts were *πρᾶξις* and *θεωρία*, *βίος θεωρητικός* and *βίος πρακτικός*<sup>3</sup>. Gregory the Theologian claimed that he knew the wisdom lovers who had found the golden mean in their lives, i.e. had reconciled *πρᾶξις* and *θεωρία*, arriving at a calm activity, an active calmness, *πρᾶξιν ἡσύχιον, ἡσύχιαν ἔμπρακτον* (S. Gregorii Theologi Oratio XXI PG 35, col. 1104). This attainment finally gives rise to a full understanding (in the sense of *gnosis*) of the meaning of the Gospels (Zarin 1907, 381-383). Such an ideal was realized by Athanasius the Great, Basil the Great and, according to Gregory of Nyssa, by Macrine the Younger (S. Gregorii Nysseni, *De vita S. Macrinae*, PG 46, col. 959-1000). The passions in their lives had been transformed into virtues, enabling them to attain an internal nobility and bestowing upon them the right to be called teachers of virtue. In this way Basil the Great had mastered all the virtues (he did not crave pleasures, he curbed the urges of his body, admired nature, remained unmarried, was humble, had the gift for eloquence and writing, and possessed a great intellect (Budilovich 1875, ff. 75r-76a; PG 36, col. 576-584A).

A unique place in the translated literature of Old Rus’ is occupied by John Chrysostom, who was considered a “teacher of the whole world” (Житие и терпѣние преподобнаго отца нашего Аврамья, BLDR 1997a, 39)<sup>4</sup>. Fragments of his works (or attributed to him) are the most common texts in well-known Old Rus’ manuscripts. Yevgeniya Granstrem has counted as many as two hundred and eighty-seven fragments of them (from eighty-two manuscripts of the period from 11th to 14th century) (Granstrem 1974, 186-187). According to the researcher, only six texts of those are full and authentic homilies of John Chrysostom<sup>5</sup>, the rest are short fragments, changed versions, transformations, interpretations, or misattributions belonging to another John (e.g. the Exarch, Climacus, Damascene). Works of John Chrysostom began to be translated into Old Slavonic as early as the 9th century, the selection of fragments was carried out by Bulgarian Tsar Simeon the Great himself, as is evidenced by the Prologus of the *Golden Stream*. In Rus’, in turn, the oldest manuscripts of the *Golden Stream* appeared in the 12th century, but fragments, e.g. *On Penance*, can be found already in *Izbornik of Svyatoslav* from 1076 (Изборник 1076, ff.235v-236v). In regard to the Christian philosophy of Rus’ we’d like to consider two homilies, the Second Homily *On Penance* (*De poenitentia*, Hom. II) and the Sixth Homily on the Book of Genesis (*In Genesim*, Hom. IV), as well as fragments from the Homily on the Gospel of St. Matthew

<sup>2</sup> In Old Slavonic прѣмѣдрость (Budilovich 1875, f. 39a).

<sup>3</sup> *βίος θεωρητικός* in its positive aspect meant contemplation and, in negative, mortification of the flesh; while *βίος πρακτικός* referred *inter alia* to activities in a community or in a literary field without being restricted to them alone.

<sup>4</sup> “Пишетъ бо о великомъ свѣтитѣли и учителя всего мира, о Златаустѣмъ Иоанѣ”.

<sup>5</sup> 1) Похвала мученику Фоке; 2) Слово о Адаме, як прежде вкушения древа разумного ведяще ли чт добро и что зло; 3) Вторая беседа о покаянии; 4) Слово о десяти девах, и о милостыне, и о покаянии, и о молитве; 5) Слово к иудеям, исказившим многих церковных; 6) Слово о праведном и блаженном Иове.

(In Matthaenum). In these works, John Chrysostom defined a true, spiritual philosophy ἡ φιλοσοφία ψυχῆ (S. Joannis Chrysostomi, De poenitentia PG 49, col. 302) as opposed to a superficial philosophy literally external, exoteric ἡ φιλοσοφία ἡ ἕξωθεν (S. Joannis Chrysostomi, In Matthaenum, hom. XXXIII PG 57, col. 392) The former was represented by the saints, the latter by pagan philosophers. A true love of wisdom takes place at the top of the mountains, i.e. in the hermitages of ascetics (S. Joannis Chrysostomi, In Matthaenum, hom. I PG 57, col. 20), whose lives were marked by the virtue of humility.

In Rus', the philosophy of ascetics, as defined by Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom, had been introduced, maintained, and promoted with the key role played by two men: Anthony of the Caves and his outstanding pupil Theodosius of the Caves. The sources available to us, such as Theodosius' *Instructions* and his *Life*, the *Paterik of the Kievan Caves Monastery* and *The Primary Chronicle*, cover in some detail the life and work of Theodosius (and to a lesser extent of Anthony). On this basis, we can surmise that the figure of Theodosius was considered in Rus' both a model of human sainthood and a philosopher in the sense given by Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom. Nestor, the author of Theodosius' life, compared him to Anthony the Great, the father of monasticism from the 3rd century; this, besides being a great praise for Theodosius, may indicate that the *Life of Anthony the Great* by Athanasius the Great was known and read in the Kievan milieu (Helland 2008, 40; Litvinenko 2017, 79).

The lives of Theodosius and Anthony the Great are largely similar: both are typical of the hagiographic genre. Both Anthony and Theodosius had been trained by older monks, in the case of the former the names of his teachers remain unknown, in the case of the latter, it was Anthony of the Caves. However, in the anachoresis of Anthony the Great a stronger emphasis was placed on fighting temptations and the devil (S. Athanasii, Vita S. Antonii PG 26, col. 853-860C), while in the anachoresis of Theodosius on fighting those possessed by temptations or the devil. Both ascetics were respected and acknowledged by imperial as well as by priestly powers (S. Athanasii, Vita S. Antonii PG 26, col. 956). The newly initiated monks who had been aspiring to thread the arduous path of virtue had revered highly both of them. As a hegumen, Theodosius introduced to his monastery the strict discipline of "fasting, prayers with tears", i.e. the Studite Rule. Both were compared with learned philosophers. Anthony embarrassed the Greek sages by mocking, among other things, the Platonic teaching about the soul that fell from heaven (Phaedrus 245c-250a) (S. Athanasii Vita S. Antonii PG 26, col. 918). Nestor, in his turn, described Theodosius as "wiser than philosophers: "who will grasp God's mercy? It was not among the wise philosophers or city lords that God chose a shepherd and teacher for monks, but – be God's name praised for that – an unlearned turned out to be wiser than philosophers" (Житие преподобнааго отца нашего Феодосия игумена Печерьскаго, BLDR 1997, 354)<sup>6</sup>. According to this view, simplicity, faith, and piety marked by God's grace are ranked higher than philosopher's wisdom. The type of philosophy, with which Theodosius and Anthony was contrasted, can be equated with κενοδοξία, described by Gregory the Theologian, that is with vainglory, of which some half-trained and envious monks were guilty (S. Gregorii Theologi, Oratio II PG 35, col. 416). The philosophy of that ilk was common in the Old Rus', especially among the less educated clergy, e.g. in the case of Foma, an opponent of Klim Smoljatič (Послание, написано Климентом, митрополитом рускым Фомѣ, BLDR 1997b, 118). The opposite to this type of philosophy was "divine wisdom".

It is worth pointing out that the Greek word 'philosophy' appearing in the above-mentioned speeches of Gregory the Theologian (PG 35, col. 416, PG 35, col. 504), had been translated by

<sup>6</sup> "Къто исповѣсть милосърдие Божие! Се бо не избѣра отъ премудрыхъ философъ, ни отъ властелинъ градъ пастуха и учителя инокиимъ, нъ – да о семь прославиться имя Господне – яко грубъ сы и невѣжа премудрѣй философъ явися! О утаения тайно!"

a Slavonic bookman as премудрость (RNB Q.p.I.16, ff. 167, 223d), divine wisdom in contrast to human wisdom, which had been usually rendered as мудрость<sup>7</sup>. In this sense a philosopher was seen as a seeker of divine, not of human wisdom, that is, of something transcending the worldly life. Theodosius was looking for divine wisdom not only through negative asceticism, but also through action – πράξις; he inaugurated construction of a church and a library in his monastery, and thereby can be considered an organizer of religious life in the Old Kiev. We know that he was a polemicist, as well – he polemicized against Judaism for superiority of Christianity, and even spoke out on political topics – his opinion influenced the policy of the Grand Prince. Thus, he was not isolated from social life. The practical wisdom of Theodosius assured that he always succeeded over his opponents but had no enemies. He dared to speak out against Sviatoslav II Yaroslavich, who had unjustly occupied the fief of his brother Iziaslav. Theodosius for a long while publicly criticized the actions of Sviatoslav, who, despite his anger, restrained his desire for revenge and tried to resolve the situation to his own advantage. However, Theodosius remained adamant and kept criticizing Sviatoslav until he gave up his brother's fief.

Theodosius's authority was so revered that his spiritual advice and conversation was sought not only by the monks, but also by the members of political elite. In *A Letter to Prince Iziaslav*, whose devotion to Christianity Theodosius deeply valued, he raised practical and fundamental topics for Christian life, e.g.: what can or cannot be done on Sunday; when to fast; why Greek Orthodoxy is the only true interpretation of the Christian tradition in contrast to the Latin creed (which is a staple theme of Greek patristics besides the anti-Judaistic arguments<sup>8</sup>).

Theodosius referred to himself with such epithets as “unlearned”, “wretched”, “unread” (Житие преподобнаго отца нашего Феодосия игумена печерьскаго, BLDR 1997, 446)<sup>9</sup>. It seems, however, that this stylistic device was meant only to emphasize his humbleness: in all likelihood, Theodosius was versed in patristic literature, since, having<sup>10</sup> a “gift for God's word”, he knew well how to interpret it; we know also that his instructions were readily listened to by people. Unfortunately, the direct evidence regarding literary passion and erudition of Theodosius is scanty. His *Life* says: “In addition, he asked to be sent to a teacher to study the holy books, and so it was done. Soon he absorbed all the learning, so that everyone was amazed at his intelligence and his talents and how quickly he learned everything” (Житие преподобнаго отца нашего Феодосия игумена печерьскаго, BLDR 1997, 356)<sup>11</sup>. The hagiographer emphasizes the intellectual prowess

<sup>7</sup> Writing in *Oration II*, Gregory the Theologian chose the word σοφία to denote God's wisdom (PG 35, col. 429). The Slavic bookman translated this word as премудрость (RNB Q.p.I.16, f. 175 b). The word премудрость, as denoting God's wisdom, was actively used by John the Exarch in his *Hexameron*. (*Шестоднев* ff. 56, 42a, 241b, *Шестоднев Иоанна Экзарха Болгарского* 2001, 307, 354, 608).

This correlation was examined by Arleta Szulc (2001) using the example of *Psalter*. We have to keep in mind here that the opposition of премудрость and мудрость in the literature of Old Rus is somewhat contextual. In the homily *На възнесение господне* by Kirill of Turov, the author attributes to God мудрость, not премудрость (*Кюрила недостойнаго мниха слово на възнесение господне*, f. 36v; Yerminev 1958, 342).

<sup>8</sup> Theodosius in his basic stance was pro-Greek, as evidenced by his inviting Greek monks to the Cave Monastery (*Paterik*, Discourse 8), whereas Anthony in the earlier half of his life himself was a monk at Athos.

<sup>9</sup> “възмыслилъ еси, боголюбивый княже, въпрашати мене, некнижъна и худа о таковой вѣщи [...]”.

<sup>10</sup> Much like Abraham of Smolensk in later years: “О дарехъ слова Божия, данное отъ Бога преподобному Авраамію [...] Токмо почитати, но протолковати, яже мнозѣмъ не свѣдущимъ и отъ него сказаная всѣмъ разумѣти и слышачимъ” (Житие и терпѣние преподобнаго отца нашего Авраамья, BLDR 1997a, 36-38).

<sup>11</sup> “Къ симъ же и датися веля на учение божьствныхъ книгъ единому отъ учитель; якоже и створи.

of Theodosius and his disposition for reading. We do not know any further details regarding the books he asked for. Yet, we do know that in his preserved *Prayer* Theodosius mentions Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom and Nicholas of Mira (Молитва святого Феодосия Печерьскаго за вся крестьяны, BLDR 1997, 452).

The writing and polemical work of Theodosius seem to be somewhat of a side effect of his constant contemplation, and his perfecting of traditional Christian virtues. Thus, in his exhortation *On patience, love and fasting* Theodosius displayed his wisdom of a hegumen: he shows awareness that the monks had been faced with heavy tasks of overcoming their own deficiencies, fighting temptations of the devil and practicing virtues, yet he underscores that the effort is worth it, whereas laments are not. He addresses his confreres as “my beloved ones” and urges them not to succumb to human weakness. Laments and complaints lead to “leprosy of the soul” (Поучение слово къ келарю святого Феодосия, BLDR 1997, 444)<sup>12</sup>, which is worse than leprosy of the body, while humility and patience – to internal harmony and communion with God. Humility “decorates man”. A separate piece, *Instruction on Patience and Humility*, was dedicated to the virtues just mentioned (Святого Феодосия поучение о тръпени и о смиренни, BLDR 1997, 438-442). Theodosius identifies humility, submission, gentleness and awareness of one’s own vanity with wisdom, which is why a good monk and, generally speaking, every believer has the responsibility to strive for becoming a “rational sheep”, to obey (i.e. trust in the wisdom of) a shepherd-philosopher (hegumen), and at the same time to think in terms of another, supernatural reality. In the *Life of Theodosius* (as in the hagiography of Saint Abraham of Smolensk) the word разумъ or the phrase свѣтъ разума, meaning wisdom in the sense of internal knowledge, spiritual enlightenment, appears often. The cry: “give me wisdom illuminated by God’s grace”<sup>13</sup> (Житие и терпѣние преподобнаго отца нашего Аврамья, BLDR 1997а, 30) should be interpreted as a plea for religious inspiration. The Church Slavonic word разумъ is a multifaceted word. It translated the Greek nouns γνῶσις and σύνεσις (Sedakova 2005, 298; Pichkhadze 2011, 193-194, SS, 572-573). The former meant the knowledge that emerges as a result of research, inquiry as well as enlightenment; the latter referred to intellect, intelligence, understanding, or cognition. In the case of Theodosius, wisdom was associated with correct, virtuous behavior, moral intuition, whereas folly threatened to degrade personality. The cognitive and rational processes involve God; reason was seen as closely connected with morality, resulting thus in a distinct Christian version of ethical intellectualism.

Ascetic life of Theodosius can be regarded as a specific philosophy (Christianity in action), not in the sense of a discursive, intellectualized speculation, but as a way to sanctify one’s environment and self. This way had been perpetuated in daily life, not on a piece of paper. The philosophy was seen as a practice of wisdom, of striving for purity of body and soul. Asceticism, therefore, had fostered not so much obscurantism (Nikolsky 1913, 11-15; Sidorov 2011, 409), as μετάνοια, i.e. transformation of vices into virtues.

Theodosius considered himself, above all, an ascetic, a man of faith, a teacher of virtue, a spiritual authority, an educator, but in no case a philosopher in the speculative sense. His works lack metaphysical or mystical treatises (Fedotov 1959, 42), but he had developed a practical conception of “spiritual apprenticeship”. Without being an elaborated theory, rather a raw intuition, it had been nevertheless effected by Theodosius in his capacity as a hegumen. This intuition displays an awareness of the diversity of perspectives (pagan, Jewish) and provides

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И въскорѣ извече вся граматика, и якоже всѣмъ чюдитися о премудрости и разумѣ дѣтища и о скорѣмъ”.

<sup>12</sup> “Геезино прокажьство найдеть на тя, – не телесно, но душевно”.

<sup>13</sup> “дай же ми разумъ, просвѣщенъ Божию благодатью”.

a rationale for a particular worldview of Christian asceticism. This is why it can nonetheless be called a certain type of philosophical consciousness, cultivated within the ascetic tradition of Late Antiquity. As this consciousness set the standards of wise and virtuous behavior, the existence of a philosophy in the Old Rus' can be to the extent asserted.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- TODRL Труды Отдела древнерусской литературы. ред. Д. С. Лихачев. Москва – Ленинград.
- BLDR Библиотека литературы Древней Руси. ред. Д. С. Лихачева, Л. А. Дмитриева, А. А. Алексеева, Н. В. Поньрко. Санкт-Петербург.
- SS Старославянский словарь (по рукописям X-XI веков). Ред. Р.М Цейтлин и др. 1994. Москва
- PG Patrologiæ cursus completus. Series Græca. Patrologiæ Græcæ. Tomus CL. Jacques-Paul Minge (éd.). Paris 1857-1863.
- GIM sin Государственный Исторический Музей, синодалное собрание  
ff. folios (листы)
- RNB Российская национальная библиотека в Санкт-Петербурге



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