MONASTIC IDENTITY OF CONSTANTINE THE PHILOSOPHER AND METHODIUS AND THE FIRST SLAVIC TRANSLATIONS OF ASCETIC TEXTS

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Abstract: ZOZUĽAK, Ján. *Monastic identity of Constantine the Philosopher and Methodius and the First Slavic Translations of Ascetic Texts.* Before their arrival in Great Moravia, the Thessalonian brothers from Thessaloniki Constantine and Methodius lived in the Polychron monastery at Bithynian Olympus, which belonged to the most prominent monastic centres of the Byzantine Empire in the 9th century. There, they became acquainted with the Byzantine Hesychastic tradition, which served as the foundation for their own work and which they passed down to their disciples. The relative shortness of Constantine and Methodius' stay in Great Moravia precluded the organizing of a monastic way of life in this territory. For this reason, Byzantine Hesychastic tradition only entered the Slavic cultural space with the help of their pupils, who transposed it to the Bulgarian Empire, where first monasteries appeared in the 10th century and became the centres of spiritual and cultural life. The first Slavic translations of ascetic texts *The Longer Responses* and *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* are directly linked to the period of establishing the monastic way of life in Bulgaria, on which Constantine and Methodius' disciples significantly participated. These texts would become the practical handbooks on ascetic way of life for monks. Byzantine monastic practice and ascetic tradition had a marked impact not only on monks, but also on pious laypeople, for whom ascetic texts became the models of virtuous life.

Keywords: *Constantine the Philosopher, Methodius, monasticism, asceticism, Hesychastic tradition, Byzantine Empire*

Introduction

In recent years, communication among European nations improved significantly. This situation leads Europe to a persistent search for its identity and for the direction of its future development. Identity crisis represents a highly topical phenomenon today. Various groups and individuals are trying to strengthen their identity to an extent that would allow them to overcome dangers posed by different and diverse influences. European integration brought closer many nations and brought forth a new coexistence of people from different cultures. A question remains, however, what are the baselines for formulating stances on life and society in the period of globalization, geopolitical upheaval and mass movements of people, with old diasporas being reconstructed and new ones arising. Old identities are being redefined while entirely new ones appear. Identity construction based on interaction of various cultures appears to be a highly relevant issue and is a focal point of interest today.

Thanks to the mission of Constantine the Philosopher and Methodius, Great Moravia became a cradle of Slavic writing and had a profound impact on both cultural and political development of the entire Slavic world, as well as on forming of a shared Slavic consciousness. This topic has been previously dealt with by multiple authors, who focused on different aspects of Slavic identity, as

was observed by Nora Malinovská (Malinovská 2021, 161). This paper aims to approach the lives of the Thessalonian brothers from a different angle, which has so far garnered only minimal attention in scientific circles – the topic of identity is approached here through the prism of monastic life, to which both brothers devoted themselves – Methodius already prior to the mission to Great Moravia, Constantine the Philosopher during his stay in Rome.

Emphasis is placed at first on the Central European region, which was influenced by Byzantine culture from 9th century CE through the Cyrillo-Methodian mission to Great Moravia. Subsequently, the emphasis shifts to South-Eastern Europe, where the activities initiated by the brothers were sustained by their disciples, who produced the first Slavic translations of Byzantine ascetic texts and established the conditions for dissemination of the Byzantine ascetic tradition.

Monastic life of Constantine the Philosopher and Methodius

Methodius had had a promising career, but was unhappy with his administrative duties. He was spiritually weary of earthly conflicts and his soul yearned for eternity. He thus resigned on his career and retreated to the Polychron monastery on Bithynian Olympus (Ὄλυμπος της Βιθυνίας), to replace the luxurious tunic of a governor for the humble robe of a monk. There, he practiced monastic obedience and studied writings.

Emperor Michael III and Patriarch Photios both held Methodius in high regard and tried to persuade him to take on the role of archbishop in an important province in need of active guidance, but humble Methodious refused such office. Emperor and patriarch appointed him – against his wishes – a hegumen of the Polychron monastery, where more than seventy monks resided at that time (Gonis 1985, 7).

Soon after, Methodius' younger brother Constantine found spiritual solace in the very same monastery, devoting himself exclusively to constant prayer and literary study (Gonis 1985, 6). He was tonsured only later, fifty days before his death, taking on the name Cyril (Život Konštantína-Cyrila [Life of Constantine-Cyril] 2013, ch. 18). Before his death at the age of forty-two on February 14, 869 and his burial on the right side of the altar in the Basilica of Saint Clement, he summoned Methodius and said to him: "*Behold, brother, the two of us have been yokemates, plowing the same furrow. Now my days are ending and I am falling on the field. Though you have great love for the mountain, still leave not your teachings for the mountain's sake, for you can sooner be saved through it*" (Život Metoda [Life of Methodius] 2013, ch. 7; English translation by Marvin Kantor).

By "mountain" Constantine-Cyril means the monastery at Olympus, which he held dear for its remoteness from earthly commotion. The area's limited accessibility provided monks with perfect silence (ἡσυχία) for Hesychastic way of life and Jesus' prayer of heart – an ideal criterion for establishing monasteries and hesychasteries here since the fifth century. On the other hand, the blooming of monasteries here was significantly supported by geographic vicinity of Constantinople and Bithynia's well-developed road infrastructure. These factors resulted in Bithynian Olympus becoming the most important monastic centre in the ninth-century Byzantine Empire (Menthon 2013) and being linked to the lives of many prominent personalities, including – in addition to Constantine the Philosopher and Methodius – also Theodore the Studite, and the patriarchs Tarasios and Nikephoros.

Constantine and Methodius adopted the Byzantine Hesychastic tradition at Polychron, developing it and bringing it with them to the territory of Great Moravia. Their short stay here, accompanied by many difficulties, did not allow for organizing a monastic way of life in Great Moravia. Later situation in Bulgaria was different, however. There, their students found favourable conditions and could continue the work initiated by Constantine and Methodius; it is therefore

understandable that the Byzantine Hesychastic tradition entered the Slavic cultural space and underwent further development only through their disciples, who transposed it to the territory of Bulgarian Empire, where first monasteries started appearing in the tenth century.

One of the first monasteries in Ohrid was established by the Archbishop of Ohrid, Clement, the disciple of the Thessalonian brothers. Clement's establishment of a monastery in Ohrid before he became an archbishop is reported by his biographer Theophylact (Milev 1966, 132-133; Kocev – Kondrla – Králik – Roubalová 2017, 89). Another monastery was established in the tenth century on the shores of Lake Ohrid by Naum, also a disciple of Constantine and Methodius, who previously resided in the already existing Patleina Monastery near Pliska, the capital of the First Bulgarian Empire (Grozdanov 1995, 7-36; Tachiaos 2006, 170).

Slavic translations of the Byzantine ascetic texts

Transposition of Byzantine values into Slavic cultural space through translated Greek writings contributed significantly to the shaping of the Slavic world and Slavic spiritual identity. In the tenth century, Basil the Great's work *The Longer Responses* (Ὅροι κατά πλάτος), dealing with monastic life, was translated into Old Bulgarian. Basil organized monasticism in Cappadocia and Pontus on the basis of his experience from monastic centres in Syria, Egypt, Palestine and Mesopotamia, and thus significantly contributed to the development of the structure of monastic life. He laid the theoretical foundations of monasticism and provided monks with direction in their spiritual self-improvement. Basil's texts found a perceptive audience in monks, since they are practical, teach temperate ascetic life and provide a remarkable balance of theory and practice – the two fundamental and inseparable pillars of spiritual life. In Christian tradition, theory means the knowledge of the revealed Divine truth, while practice is the personal experience of life in Christ.

Basil wrote his first ascetic text – Lesser Asketikon (Μικρόν Ασκητικόν) (Gribomont 1953, 109) in between 359 and 364, when he stayed in hermitage in Annesi. In one of his letters, Gregory the Theologian states that they both worked on "written legislation" (Teologos 1862, 29) of monasticism. This suggests that Gregory participated with Basil on the collection of rules for monastic life preserved in Rufinus' Latin translation titled *Asceticon Patruum* (Regula ad monachos 1864, 483-554). Several years later, Basil expanded this text and published it in two volumes. The first part, titled *The Longer Responses* (Ὅροι κατά πλάτος), contains 55 questions and responses. The second part, *The Shorter Responses* (Ὅροι κατ᾽ ἐπιτομήν), contained 287 questions and responses, with a later addition of 27 more from Caesarean codex (412A) (Karakolis 1973, 356-357), which, however, are not attributed to Basil (Papadopoulos 1990, 396).

Information on virtues and practical focus of these works, which Basil supplemented by Biblical quotations, became a useful catechetical tool not only for monks, but also for lay Christians. This handbook provided monks with direction in ascesis (spiritual exercise) and clarified the aim, means, thresholds, and frames of their spiritual struggles. It does not contain any long-winded descriptions of deeper spiritual experience and states, nor exact definitions of degrees of spiritual life. First and foremost, Basil clarifies the liberation from the slavery to passions and works of the devil so that people can reach the Divine glory. Love of God, expressed in pure prayer, forms the basis and the impulse for this liberation. The pure state of prayer is the monk's greatest success, attainable through focusing of mind (ἀμετεώριστον νοῦν), that is, reaching apathy (ἀπάθεια) towards all that is material. In such a state, he lives entirely devoted to God and does not care about worldly matters.

Since the fourth century, Basil's *Asketikon* found widespread application and quickly gained foothold. In the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, it became the basic handbook for monks

and the most studied ascetic text. It was published by Theodore the Studite, who based his monastic order on it. It also found audience in the Western part of the Roman Empire, when Rufinus translated its first version. Augustine, Benedict of Nursia, Columbanus, and others were greatly influenced by Basil the Great in their ascetic writings and setting down internal orders for monasteries (Papadopoulos 1999, 58).

The Ladder of Divine Ascent by John Climacus

Slavic translations of Byzantine texts served specific purposes. Another text directly relevant to the period of establishing monastic life in Bulgaria, on which Constantine and Methodius' disciples participated significantly, is *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Κλίμαξ, or Climax) by John Climacus. It became a practical manual of ascetic way of life for monks and played a decisive role in this early stage of monasticism formation in Bulgarian context, mainly due to its practical contents, which helped in founding the first monasteries that would gradually become the centres of spiritual and cultural life.

It is indubitable that Methodius, as a Polychron monk, came into contact not only with the rules postulated by Basil the Great, but also with the treatise of John Climacus *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, which originated in Sinai and had much earlier extended its influence from the Sinai monastery to become well-known in the entire Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. This is true also for other Slavic monks (Tachiaos 2001, 33-37) that came from that same monastery, including Cyril, who spent some time there (Život Konštantína-Cyrila [Life of Constantine-Cyril] 2013, ch. 7). In addition, Photios, the Patriarch of Constantinople, with whom both brothers were in contact, wrote a commentary to *The Ladder* (Hofmann 1941, 523-524) – a testament to the importance of this text in the ninth century.

Constantine and Methodius provided Slavs with script and helped them become acquainted with the Eastern Christian tradition, but there is no testament supporting the claim that they translated *The Ladder* into Slavic. There surely were other Christian writings that required translation for the needs of newly-baptized Slavs. Thus, had the Thessalonian brothers translated *The Ladder* among the first texts, it would likely not had the desired effect – the understanding of this ascetic treatise requires the knowledge of preparatory stages to monastic spiritual life and Slavs had not reached the understanding necessary to comprehend and practically apply the advice for monks included therein.

Life of Methodius inconclusively states that Methodius translated "the Books of the Fathers" (Život Metoda [Life of Methodius] 2013, ch. 15), but does not inform which were targeted for translation specifically. If he did in fact translate a book talking about ancient monks in the East, as some scholars believe, it would most likely be *Leimon* (Λειμών, also known as *Spiritual Meadow* in English translation), written at the beginning of the seventh century by John Moschus (Migne 1860, 2852-3112), who lived as a monk on Mount Sinai for ten years. In such case, the work translated by Methodius would bring us closer to the Sinai monastic tradition (Nikolova 1980, 17-26).

In addition to its content focus, *The Ladder* is also an important source of valuable historical reports passed down otherwise only orally, as well as recountals of Sinai monasticism, cenobitic monasticism in Egypt, Asia Minor and Pontus (Ignatios 1992, 7), which John Climacus knew well. He systematically records thought primarily on cenobitic monasticism, but also hermetic way of life based on his own personal knowledge and spiritual experience. He sorted these thoughts in a manner to show the way to moral perfection. In relation to Jacob's Ladder (Gen 28, 11-12), the

author himself states: "*The holy virtues are like Jacob's ladder, [...] leading from one to another, bear him who chooses them up to Heaven*" (Sinaitis, 1992, 166).

The idea that the rungs of Jacob's Ladder represent virtues can be also seen in Gregory the Theologian, who, in his eulogy to Basil the Great, says: "*I extol the ladder of Jacob, [...]. But I still more extol Basil for the ladder which he did not merely see, but which he ascended by successive steps towards excellence*" (Teologos 1858, 592).

The Ladder became the manual of spiritual and ascetic life. Its value dwells primarily in the fact that it contains precious material on ascetic experience that the author compiled and connected with his own experience. John Climacus describes the information on his experience and perfectly connects the theoretical teachings with their practical application; this is why Basil Tatakis calls *The Ladder* "*the masterpiece of Eastern asceticism of the seventh century*" (Tatakis 1977, 66) and Sacharov states that "*the author of Climax was considered a first-class authority in the East for centuries*" (Sofronios 1996, 87).

On the basis of the listed claims, it is clear that the work of John Climacus holds a particularly important position in the Christian writing due to its content, focused on the monastic way of life. It served predominantly in monasteries as a handbook of spiritual and ascetic life. For this reason, it was expected in the Christian East that *The Ladder* be read by every novice before deciding to receive tonsure (Tachiaos 2006, 167).

The Ladder became a suitable guide to personal ascesis also among lay people wishing for a higher level of spiritual life and thus found many admirers in all eras and became one of the most popular spiritual texts not only for monks, but also for the general public. Moreover, reassurance that a man (monk or otherwise), through sustained spiritual struggle and ascetic effort, can ascend the thirty rungs of spiritual ladder and reach perfection, represents an attractive invitation to spiritual struggle, the goal of which is mysterious unification with Jesus Christ (Tachiaos 2006, 167). This motif was met with a positive response among readers in Slavic cultural space, though it is not known when Slavs first came into contact with this text and how its spread through Slavic cultures started.

The oldest Slavic manuscript that also includes *The Ladder* (translated as Лѣствица into Slavic) is a Russian one form the twelfth century, which shows evident South Slavic – particularly Bulgarian – linguistic markers, which suggests the existence of an earlier Bulgarian translation (Consolidated catalog 1984, 104-105). Antonios-Aimilios Tachiaos notes that, in accordance with this earliest testimony to manuscript tradition, it would be erroneous to claim that the earliest translation of *The Ladder* into Old Bulgarian dates to the twelfth century (Tachiaos 2006, 170). The likeliest explanation is that the earliest Slavic manuscript including this text dates to the tenth or eleventh century and was produced in the Preslav literary school (Mostrova 1991, 70). On the basis of these facts, we have to favour the conclusion that the first Slavic translation of *The Ladder* was produced in the Bulgarian cultural context, in which many translations of Byzantine texts started being produced with the adoption of Christianity and subsequently greatly influenced society.

A more detailed linguistic research of Slavic terminology used in the Slavic translations originating in the period close to the activities of Constantine and Methodius could lead us to the traces of terminology used in *The Ladder* (Tachiaos 2006, 168). Hesychastic terms silence – ἡσυχία – безмлъвиѥ (Old Slavonic Dictionary 1994, 80) and spiritual watchfulness – νῆψις – трѣзвениѥ (Old Slavonic Dictionary 1994, 706) can be observed already in oldest Slavic texts, dating back to the period close to Constantine and Methodius.

Conclusion

The further away we move from Cyrillo-Methodic period to search for the traces of the first Slavic translations of ascetic texts by Basil the Great and John Climacus in the South Slavic tradition, the more evident are the relations and influence these texts had on the monastic life – at first in Bulgaria and later in Kievan Rus', where the first Russian cenobitic monastery, Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, was founded in the eleventh century and where hegumen Theodosius employed the Studite Monastery typikon (Tachiaos 2006, 452; Poppe 2011). The Studite Monastery in Constantinople was also a literary centre of the Greek-Slavic cooperation, where Byzantine writings were transcribed and translated from Greek into Slavic languages (Tachiaos 2006, 177). Through this route, Byzantine monastic practice and ascetic tradition started to permeate into Russian context and influenced not only monks, but also pious laypeople, for whom ascetic texts became the models of virtuous life.

Similarly, in Serbian context, Saint Sava Nemanjic organized a cenobitic monastery Hilandar on the Holy Mountain Athos, where he employed his own typikon. He used the typikons of Theotokos Euergetis Monastery in Constantinople and of the Saint Sabbas the Sanctified in Palestine as its bases. He likely chose the Theotokos Euergetis Monastery typikon, established in the eleventh century in Constantinople, to provide a higher esteem for the Serbian monastery at the Holy Mountain. By using the Holy Lavra of Saint Sabbas typikon, he transposed the tradition of this ancient monastery and connected the Serbian monastic practice with the sixth-century Palestinian monastic tradition (Grujić 1936, 279-312). After a long stay at Athos, he visited Constantinople and returned to Serbia, where he organized monastic life in Studenica Monastery, using the Theotokos Euergetis typikon.

At Hilandar, the Byzantine method of monastic life has been cultivated for centuries and the Byzantine spiritual values are still upheld today. In Middle Ages, a scriptorium was located there, and the monastery became the most important Serbian literary centre, where translations of biographies, hagiographies, celebratory, liturgical and other texts were produced.

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