

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN BULGARIA DURING THE MIDDLE CENTURIES

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Abstract: This text is a public lecture given by the author at the University of Tallinn (Estonia) on September 24, 2022. The author’s main thesis is that theological education in Bulgaria during the Middle Ages closely mirrored Byzantine theological education. However, there is a notable distinction between the Bulgarian and Byzantine contexts. In Byzantium, the memory and knowledge of ancient cultural, philosophical, and scientific heritage were actively preserved. This was not the case in Bulgaria, where theological education was at the center of the missionary interest of the Church of Constantinople and served as the primary source of cultural patterns based on texts. This situation significantly influenced the development of Bulgarian written culture and the evolution of the Bulgarian language over the centuries.

Keywords: *Medieval Education, Byzantium, Bulgaria, Old Slavic Translations, Theological Education, Medieval Translations, History of Education*

The influence of Byzantium

Bulgaria is mentioned as an independent state by Byzantine historians as early as the 7th century. Its Christianization by the Church of Constantinople took place in the 9th century, while its education history began in parallel with the adoption of Christianity by the Bulgarian nobility. The truth is that the local Thracian, Greek and Illyrian population who resided from the Late Antiquity on the territory of today’s Bulgaria had been Christianized as early as the 4th and 5th centuries. However, the state of Bulgaria was founded by a pagan military aristocracy of steppe tribes, who

came to the Danube plain in the 7th century, therefore the Bulgarian state was ruled by pagans in the first two centuries of its history. Hence, our subject appears at first sight to be vast, for it should cover a period of time of seven centuries. Nevertheless, we will see that things are not so disheartening. The reason is that the history of theological education in Bulgaria it followed the established models of Constantinople and did not present anything particularly innovative. It was, as we shall see, primarily a missionary oriented educational model.

Therefore, let's begin this journey in the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, Constantinople - "the eye of the whole world", as its inhabitants often call it.

In 330, Emperor Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire for economic and political reasons here, on the border between Europe and Asia. The city was convenient to function as a center for the entire administrative structure of the empire. It carried within itself the spirit of the great Hellenistic centers of the Eastern Mediterranean, but at the same time it continued the state tradition of Rome itself – the first capital.

The peculiar synthesis between the Hellenistic cultural tradition and the institutional culture of Latin Rome produced what we now call Byzantium. In Byzantium, the education of the elite was at a high level. The main subjects of study were Ancient Greek philosophers, ancient literature, history, medicine, astronomy, law. Usually, in private or municipal schools, one started with grammar, went through rhetoric and completed his studies with philosophy. The latter, of course, involved also questions of natural science. In the following centuries, with the spread of Christianity in all strata of the population, this educational model did not change much. We encounter it again with some changes centuries later. Children from the families of the new Bulgarian aristocracy, residing in the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, also received such an education in the 9th century.

I'm sure some of you will ask, "And where is the theology here? Where are the theological disciplines? Where are the biblical studies or systematic theology?" The answer is: there are none. Yes, in Constantinople, in the great Patriarchal school or in the new school in the 9th century at the palace, called Magna Aura (Μαγναύρα), as well as in other schools for the children of the elite, theology is not studied, but nevertheless in Magna

Aura there were 24 departments dedicated to the study of Homer. There was also another higher school: “Museion of Law” in the monastery of St. George, which its mission was to educate lawyers for the needs of the state. It seems that this school has been in operation since the time of Emperor Justinian. Most of the other schools are located in the Halkopratia neighborhood and were privately funded. In general, education was associated mostly to classical antiquity, but not with Christianity. Outside Constantinople, there were higher schools until the 6th century in Athens and also in Beirut and Antioch, etc.¹

“Well, where were bishops, priests, monks trained then?” – somebody would ask. The answer is: “In the Church or in the monastery.” Theological education takes place in ecclesiastical or monastery schools under the guidance of educated monks who carry this task by the order of the bishop or the abbot of the monastery. We are talking, of course, not about the modern system of theological disciplines, but about a much freer curriculum. It is, of course, defined by the study of biblical texts, especially the more difficult to understand, and is based on the context of worship; the Liturgy itself is studied, which in fact is constantly being developed, while various new elements are constantly added to it in the form of poems, which are written based on the pattern of ancient metrical steps. Here I would like to mention the amazing poetry of St. John Damascene on the *Akathistos Hymn* of the Virgin Mary, written in an archaic iambic meter similar to the poetry of Alcaeus and Sappho. Something similar can be said about the hymnography of Roman Melodos, Joannes Kukuzeles and others. Canon law was also studied in Constantinople. We are talking about a lot of canon law. The city was known for its incredibly well-prepared lawyers. In fact, in the history of the Eastern Roman Empire, there were three legal reforms, within which a perfect convergence between secular law and ecclesiastical canons was carried out, without, however, violating the secular state system. This is a unique achievement in the history of humanity. Undoubtedly no one would undertake such an experiment today, but it is worth noting. Moreover, the curriculum of the future educated bishops included the study of the works of famous Church Fathers, and, of course, there were

¹ See more in Cavallo, Guglielmo, *Lire à Byzance*, Paris: Belles lettres, 2006, pp. 11-21; also: Wilson, Nigel G. *Scholars of Byzantium*, London: Duckworth, 1983, 18-27.

no obligatory authors here, but still there were preferred ones. Undoubtedly these are the Cappadocian Fathers, the Corpus Dionysiacum, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus; very early on, John Chrysostom was considered as a model of oratorical mastery. His speeches were studied as models of eloquence and not by chance: John Chrysostom learned was educated in the school of Libanius in Antioch, he learned to write in the middle of the 4th century by studying the ancient Attic rhetorician Isocrates, known in antiquity as the “father of eloquence”.²

So it turns out that if any of you lived in Constantinople in the middle of the 9th century, and had rich parents, say middle-class magistrates or high-ranking military men, and perhaps doctors, you would know in detail Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; you would also be able to reason using the logical concepts of Aristotle, to know a great deal about the Peloponnesian wars from Thucydides and also have an adequate knowledge about the barbarian tribes due to the curious histories of Herodotus, but your knowledge on Christianity would be based rather on the liturgical annual cycle and would have been heavily influenced by the sermons of famous ecclesiastics during service. Actually, theology was a part of the everyday experience of society. Anyone could listen many times to the fine sermons of the Patriarch Photius of Constantinople in the Great Church of St. Sophia” or Patriarch Nicephorus. Let us note here that Patriarch Photius was, in fact, elevated to the patriarchate in a matter of days straight from the teaching chair at Magna Aura, a fact that infuriated the Pope in Rome. And then, as now, church leaders viewed university professors with suspicion and probably with envy.³

However, if anyone decided to devote himself to church ministry, for this purpose he would either attend his parish church, where the main activities were devoted to theology to one degree or another, or, the more common option was entering one of the numerous monasteries in or around the capital, maybe even further. There, during the early years novices were engaged in a lot of reading of the materials that we talked about above. A secular education was not required, but it could be very useful if the candi-

² See Rigo, A. *Byzantine Theology and its Philosophical Background*. Studies in Byzantine History and Civilization, 4. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2011.

³ See Treadgold, Warren, “Photius Before His Patriarchate”, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 53 (2002), 1–17.

date had studied at one of the city's rhetorical schools. The educational path of John Chrysostom and of his best friend Theodore of Mopsuestia in the 4th century – a very popular biblical commentator among modern biblical scholars – was similar. Thus, young people from the neighboring countries of Byzantium followed the same path, often being *foederati* of Byzantium. A great example was the ruler of Bulgaria, Symeon.⁴

Symeon's father, Prince Boris, whose godfather was the Byzantine Emperor Michael III, had a correspondence with Patriarch Photius, in which the scholar Patriarch advised the young prince in the style of ancient scholarship – both as a philosopher and as a Christian thinker – on how to rule his newly converted country. Of course, Photius remains faithful to the classical education in his lengthy letter to the prince, in fact he repeats a Pseudo-Isocrates' advice to Philip of Macedonia on the same subject. Well, of course, Photius did not know that the letter of Isocrates in question was actually Pseudo-Isocrates, written several centuries after the death of Philip himself – Alexander's father, nonetheless, I think Photius' gesture is important here. Prince Boris-Mihail had a similar correspondence with Pope Nicholas the 1st. I believe that these two texts, representing the instruction of spiritual guides to a ruler and advice on how to rule according to Christian moral rules, are the first educational texts on theology in Bulgarian history. Today, of course, some professor of political science would call them "political theology" or "contextual theology", but at their core they are spiritual instructions of a practical nature, accumulating the knowledge of the ancient world in synthesis with biblical wisdom.⁵

During the First Bulgarian Kingdom

So, let's go back to Symeon and his time. The First Bulgarian Empire ended in 1018-1019. However, monasteries continued to function there, where young monks dedicated to the service of God were trained in the Bulgarian dialect of Slavonic language. They actually used the books writ-

⁴ See Bobčev, Stepan. "Bulgaria under Tsar Simeon: II." *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 8, No. 22 (Jun., 1929), pp. 99-119.

⁵ See White, Despina Stratoudaki; Berrigan, Joseph R. *The Patriarch and the Prince: the letter of Patriarch Photios of Constantinople to Khan Boris of Bulgaria*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982.

ten and translated into Slavonic from Greek, precisely during the time of Prince Boris-Mikhail, his son Symeon and his grandson Tsar Peter. This was a period that in Bulgarian historiography is called the “Golden Age” of Bulgarian literature. Of course, the productivity of the Slavonic clergy in that era was also determined by the fact that the First Bulgarian kingdom covered quite large territories that did not completely coincide with modern Bulgaria. The Bulgarian kingdom at that time included the territories of today’s Serbia, North Macedonia, Romania, parts of Hungary, Moldova, Ukraine, while the southern part of modern Bulgaria was in Byzantium. This suggests that a fairly large percentage of the population was Slavic. Thus, for the needs of the Christian mission among the Slavs, led by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, a serious translation program from Greek to Slavonic language was taking place within this territory. From the translations made then, we can judge the education of the clergy serving in Bulgaria at that time.⁶

Here we see wonderful examples of the liturgical tradition of Constantinople in authors such as Theodore Studite (759-826), Clement the Studite (9th century) and Joseph the Hymnographer (813-886), strongly influenced by the hymnographers of the Holy Lands such as Cosmas of Maiuma (c. 7th-8th c.), John of Damascus (c. 7th-c. 8th c.), Andrew of Crete (675-740) and Theophanes the Branded (778- 845).

A significant part of the services for the major Christian Holidays had been translated, but it is likely that the Christian worship has been bilingual in Bulgaria for centuries both in Slavonic and in Greek. Probably the Greek original of the service was used, because some services for certain feasts remained untranslated. The translations of the lives of the saints were also part of the important educational activity of the Bulgarian medieval monks. As early as in the First Bulgarian Empire, parts of the Byzantine *Synaxaristes* – short lives used in the liturgy – were translated. Here, the Bulgarian translator has diversified their content because he has added rhetorical texts in honor of the given saints. This can be explained by the fact that these *encomiums* reveal details of the significance of the given saint

⁶ Petkov, K. *The Voices of Medieval Bulgaria, Seventh-Fifteenth Century: The Records of a Bygone Culture*, BRILL, 2008, 89; Nikolov, A. “The Perception of the Bulgarian Past in the Court of Preslav around 900 AD.” – In: Gjuzelev, V. and K. Petkov. *State and Church: Studies in Medieval Bulgaria and Byzantium*. American Research Center in Sofia, 2011, 157-171.

in the liturgical calendar. Thus, they acquire an entirely new educational value. Some of these are the extended lives of important saints such as St. Anthony, St. Pancratius of Tavromenia, the Life of St. John Chrysostom by George of Alexandria, the Lives of St. Niphon of Constantia, of St. Sava the Consecrated, of St. Theodore of Edessa, of St. Theodore the Studite and of St. Paul of Thebes. Excerpts from the lives of St. Theodora of Alexandria and St. Xenophon were preserved in Tsar Symeon's *Anthology*, and excerpts from the lives of St. Codratus and St. Thecla were found in Russian manuscripts from the 11th century but the same translations appear to be produced in Bulgaria in 10th of 11th century. Scholars believe that they were made in the Preslav school. There are also preserved parts of the Life of St. Mary of Egypt from the Medieval Bulgaria. The rhetorical prose is represented by translated festal homilies of John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil of Caesarea. To them were added translations later of works by Gregory of Nyssa, John Damascene and Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople.⁷

St. Andrew of Crete was presented in a translation of his three homilies on the Assumption of our Lord, made by Clement of Ohrid. The Slavonic text was abridged, edited and adapted. Athanasius of Alexandria was presented with the four *Discourses against the Arians* – probably a work of the Preslav School. Ephraim the Syrian was also translated, but from a version of his writings that circulated in Byzantium. It was actually a translation made by Greek monks in the East who embellished the original text and presented St. Ephraim with a significantly more complex language and more elaborate thoughts than the recently found Syriac original. From this period were also the compilation work-translations of John the Exarch – *Hexaemeron* and *Heavens*. The book “Heavens” or *Theology* was a translation of “The Exposition of the Orthodox Faith”, the third part of the trilogy of John Damascene's *Source of Knowledge*, and it lacks certain parts of complex theological content, such as those that can be related to the *filioque* dispute. This became the main book on Dogmatics in that era, but from the 100 chapters, John the Exarch translated only 48. He did not

⁷ Ribolov, Sv. “Οι Μεταφράσεις τῶν Ἑλλήνων Πατέρων στό Α΄ Βουλγαρικό Βασίλειο”. – In: Δεληκάρη, Ἀγγελική, Ἡλίας Εὐαγγέλου, Κώνσταντίνος Νιχωρίτης, Οἱ Δρόμοι τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ Πνεύματος στόν Κόσμο τῶν Σλάβων. Κύριλλος καί Μεθόδιος, Ἡσυχασμός, Ἅγιον Ὅρος. Ἐταιρία Μακεδονικῶν Σπουδῶν, Θεσσαλονίκη 2020, 131-146.

translate the parts that treat various heresies, as well as the philosophical parts on the formation of human thinking – the book *Philosophical Chapters*, which is a commentary on Aristotle and would hardly have been comprehensible to the audience in the Bulgarian kingdom at that time. John the Exarch focused on the main dogmas of the Church – knowledge of God, Trinity, Christology, Spiritual forces, Antichrist, heaven and divine providence, Sacraments, natural science problems, cosmological and astronomical parts. John the Exarch also added six chapters from the writings of Theodoret of Cyrus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Epiphanius of Cyprus, while the whole the text had been quite adapted.

The same author composed the book *Hexaemeron*, which was based on a translation of the *Hexaemeron* of Basil the Caesarea, but it was combined with excerpts from John Philoponus' work "On the Creation of the World", Severian of Gabala "Six Sermons on the Creation of the World", Theodoret of Cyrus "On the matter and the world", Aristotle's *History of Animals* through the mediation of the monk Meletius' "On the Nature of Man" – a popular Byzantine altered version. There are also some analogies with Cosmas Indicopleustes' *Christian Topography*. The book is extensive and represents not only an introduction to the theology of creation, but is also related with a number of other topics of the Christian faith, introducing terminology from natural science and philosophical knowledge.⁸

During the same period, an interesting work attributed to the brother of Gregory of Nazianzus, Caesarius, was also translated. It is entitled *Four Dialogues of Caesarius*. It contains 220 questions and answers on dogmatic topics, in which a number of naturally scientific concepts were added. The main subject of the dialogue was the creation, while other issues were explained along with it – such as cosmography, geography, ethnography, astronomy, etc., and the author of the Greek original was very keen on astrological concepts. An excerpt from the *Book of Laws and Countries*, attributed to Bardaisan of Edesa, one of the earliest Syriac writers of the 3rd century, was also inserted in that work. In the later Slavonic tradition, the work was distributed as "Questions and Answers of Silvester and Antony".

The collection *Chrysostomica* (Zlatostruy), composed of compiled excerpts from John Chrysostom, as well as the *Teaching Gospel* of Constantine

⁸ *Ibid.*

of Preslav, composed of excerpts from interpretive writings of John Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria, organized according to Gospel themes, also dates from the same period. This is not accidental. In the Slavonic sources, there was a certain misunderstanding of the citation of Cyril, due to a lack of knowledge of the context of the dogmatic discussions of the 5th century. As a consequence, this collection was done in imitation of a Byzantine compiler.⁹

The only work from the 9th century, translated in this period of the development of Old Bulgarian literature, was the *Homily on the Palm Sunday* by Patriarch Photius. As a spiritual father of the first Christian ruler of the country this patriarch has a significant place in the medieval Bulgarian Christian education.

Since the 9th century, the *Catechetical homilies* of Cyril of Jerusalem used to be read publicly in Bulgaria, consisting of 24 discourses – one pre-announcement homilies, 18 announcement homilies – for those preparing to receive baptism and 5 mystical homilies for the already baptized. The last ones comment on the sacraments of Baptism, Anointment and Eucharist. From the same early period dates the *Book on the Right Faith*, which was attributed to Constatine-Cyril himself, while the Greek original is a work of Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople. Perhaps it was very useful for the education of future clerics in Bulgaria.

Christian Creed texts with or without commentary were also circulated in the First Bulgarian Empire, but the most famous commentary on the Creed, was translated from Greek and it was a work Michael Syncellus from the 9th century. Similar to it was the collection *Questions and Answers Interpretation of the Gospel Parables*, which was known in two early translations, and represented a compilation of the writings of Athanasius of Alexandria and John Chrysostom. At the end of the collection, two small works were added - *Instruction against empty talk in prayer* and *Interpretation of the Lord's prayer*. The former is believed to be a translation from an unknown Greek original, and the latter a compilation of extracts from the 19th discourse of John Chrysostom.¹⁰

The book known as the *Arrangement of the Sacred Words*, which also

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

dates from that early era and was attributed to Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John the Theologian, was also a question-and-answer book. It was an introduction to the basics of Christian doctrines – concepts, biblical events and symbolic interpretation of biblical characters. It was not exactly a translation, but an adapted compilation with a strong authoritative element and a very early origin – probably its origin is even earlier dating to the mission of the byzantine preachers Cyril and Methodius in Central Europe. Nevertheless, it was perhaps a popular teaching book too in the medieval Bulgarian ecclesiastical schools.¹¹

Furthermore, in the 10th century were translated for educational purposes parts of the Byzantine book *Physiologist*. In the 11th century was translated a compilation of excerpts from Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, Tertullian, etc. also for educational purposes. The same can be also said about a part of the *Hexaemeron* of Eustatius of Antioch, quoted by Isidore of Pelusium in the *Discourse on the immortality of the soul*.

In the First Bulgarian kingdom, 7 *Patericons* or *Desert Fathers collections* were translated. These were: *Egyptian patericon*, which was composed in the 4th-5th century; *The Lausiatic History* of Palladius of Helenopolis from the 5th century; the *Alphabetic-Jerusalem Patericon*, finally completed by an unknown author in the 7th century; the *Scythian Patericon* from the 6th century; *Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschos from the 6th century, called in Slavonic studies also “The Sinai Patericon” and the *Roman Patericon* of Pope Gregory the 1st, composed in the late 6th century and translated into Greek in the 8th century. It is believed that the latter work had been translated already in Moravia by the disciples of Cyril and Methodius, as it was part of the Western ascetic tradition. The last translated patericon was the *Ladder* of John Climacus – 6-7th century. The translation was made in the second capital Preslav quite early in the 9th century. So, it was an important ascetic educational material for the young monks.

Among the Byzantine ascetic literature were also the collections “Pandects”, which also began to be translated early in Bulgaria – these are the *Pandects of monk Anthony*, of monk Nikon, etc. In this context there was also the *Exhortation of Ephrem the Syrian*, the *Rules of Basil of Caesarea*,

¹¹ *Ibid.*

the *Small Catechism of Theodore Studite*, the *Hecatonlogion* of Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople, a *collection of exhortations of Hesychius of Jerusalem*, excerpts from *Maximus the Confessor*, *Theodore of Edessa*, *Nilus of Sinai*, *Evagrius Ponticus*, as well as a number of lives of important desert fathers.

Most of these books, translated for the purposes of theological education into Medieval Slavonic, testify to something very important. They did not focus on the complex theological topics neither with the subtleties of dogma, the dialogue with the pre-Chalcedonians or with the Muslims, the refined aesthetic theological views of the Byzantine elite. No, they actually had a missionary character, they are introductions to the Christian faith. For example this can be seen very clearly from the selection of chapters from John Damascene's "Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," where the most difficult dogmatic topics have been omitted. Quite often the translations were adapted for the lower educational level of readers. Apart from this noticeably missing were various philosophical, logical and other questions, which are discussed exclusively in Byzantine educational literature, but which required a thorough knowledge of ancient civilization and literature. Obviously, the Bulgarian reader stood far away from it.¹²

In general, the selection of excerpts or entire works from the Byzantine literary theological repertoire corresponded to the missionary program of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the lands of the Bulgarian Empire at that time. This literature was tailored to the fact that some of the readers were new converts and others have practiced a kind of folk Christianity in the deep countryside around the Danube River. The entire repertoire of translations speaks precisely of this: the missionary nature of the work of the clergy sent from Constantinople with the aim of creating and training the Bulgarian clergy.

All this considerable translation and writing activity was carried out in several monastic centers, of which much is known about two of them. The first and most important school was in the capital Preslav, within the framework of a large metropolitan monastery. Today we have a wealth of archaeological evidence from the site. It seems that even the building plan of the school imitated the great school in Constantinople. There was a sim-

¹² See *ibid.*

ilar school in the previous capital, Pliska, which functioned at the archbishop's residence.

From the excavations in recent years, we also have information about smaller monastery schools all over today's Northern Bulgaria, from the shores of the Black Sea to today's Serbia. An important school was at the monastery of St. Naum near Ohrid in present-day North Macedonia financed and cared for personally by Prince Boris-Mihail, who probably ended his life there as a monk. In the same region is the town Devol, where we also know that there was a similar but smaller school. Regarding the teaching method, it is clear that the Byzantine mutual teaching method was used. In this methodology the more advanced students were instructing the younger ones and thus greater productivity was obtained. On the top of the school was a διδάσκαλος or γραμματικός, and next in the hierarchy were older students who were teaching the youngest students, so called – μίσθιοι or ὑποδιδάσκαλοι. By the way, this method of teaching will be preserved in Christian schools in the Ottoman Empire until the 19th century.

During the Second Bulgarian Kingdom

In 1018, after long wars between Byzantium and the Bulgarian Kingdom, Emperor Basil the 2nd finally entered the new capital of Bulgaria Ohrid, and re-annexed the Bulgarian territories to the Byzantine Empire. Those of the aristocracy who survived were taken to Constantinople. Thus, First Bulgarian Empire was ended. In 1185, after the capture of Thessaloniki by the Crusaders and the beginning of internal conflicts in Constantinople, two Byzantine provincial military nobles of Bulgarian origin – Assen and Peter declared the independency of their domains from Byzantium in today's Northern Bulgaria. Therefore, they launched the Second Bulgarian kingdom with the town of Tyrnovo as its center. Until 1393, when it fell under Ottoman rule, the borders of the Second Bulgarian Empire had been changed several times, but its core remained in modern northern Bulgaria, the Danube plain and the Sofia plain - i.e. today's capital of modern Bulgaria.

Here we already have a fairly blossoming monastic education and culture. Of course, it is closely related to the Byzantine one. The literal style and taste was determined not only by Constantinople, but also by the al-

ready formed monastic community of Mount Athos, which was established as early as the 9th century with monks from the Holy Land and over time this monastic community became very influential. Most of the Bulgarian intellectuals were monks who originated from the large monasteries of the Balkan Peninsula and knew the Greek language really well. The monastic communities of the Kelifarevo monastery near the capital Tyrnovo, the monasteries around Sofia, the Rila monastery, the Bachkovo monastery, the monastery in Paroria in Thrace are great examples of this fact —in all of them there was an active translation activity from Greek, mostly of monastic ascetic authors, who were considered in that period for the pinnacle of education. Asceticism was considered the last educational phase both in Byzantium and in medieval Bulgaria. Here we see active writers such as Euthymius, Patriarch of Tyrnovo, Gregory Tsamblak, Konstantin Kostenechki and many others. The latter also lived near the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century and spent half his life in Belgrade, Serbia, thus considered nowadays a Serbian writer.¹³

In this period, we see, in addition to missionary introductory literature, other literary genres, such as the writings of Symeon Seth and Michael Pselus – Byzantine authors who were rather humanistic oriented and shared an interest in the Platonic tradition in Byzantium – a topic difficult to understand for the Bulgarian reader at that time. In the same period appeared in Bulgaria the work “Symposium” of Methodius of Olympus – a complex book in its original Greek. So the question is: What can we say about its Slavonic translation? It seems that there were already monks looking for something deeper in the Christian tradition, which was not defined by the catechetical genre. Nevertheless, such attempts remained very rare.¹⁴

Moreover, what is more surprising is the complete translation of the so-called *Corpus Dionysiacum* – a collection of works known under the name of Dionysius Areopagite, but written somewhere in the 5th century. These texts are linked to each other and constitute a useful work in mystical

¹³ See Ribolov, Sv. “Μεταφράσεις Πατερικῶν Συγγραμμάτων στό Δεύτερο Βουλγαρικό Βασίλειο”. – In: Μαριαλένα Καραμούζη Νικόλαος Κουτσομπιάς Χριστίνα Μάρκου Αθανάσιος Στογιαννίδης (ἐπιμ.), ΣΛΑΒΙΚΗ ΚΑΙ ΒΑΛΚΑΝΙΚΗ ΟΡΘΟΔΟΞΙΑ ΑΦΙΕΡΩΜΑ ΣΤΟΝ ΚΑΘΗΓΗΤΗ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟ Γ. ΝΙΧΩΡΙΤΗ, ΕΚΔΟΤΙΚΟΣ ΟΙΚΟΣ Κ. & Μ. ΣΤΑΜΟΥΛΗ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗ 2024, 169-183.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

theology for Byzantine monks. Knowledge of the language of the philosophical tradition of Antiquity was mandatory in order for the reader to be able to understand the text even partially. In the 14th century, the collection was translated into Slavonic by the Monach Athos monk Isaias by order of the bishop of Serres. The goal was the composition to be used by the Slav monks of Mount Athos. The fact is that a literal translation did not aid to the deeper understanding of this work. In the same period the liturgical texts were also translated quite literally from Greek. The same can be said also about the biographical works of famous saints, excerpts from dogmatic prose and, of course, rhetorical works, again related to the great holidays of the year and the lives of famous saints from the Byzantine calendar.

The question of general literacy in the Middle Ages is controversial and different researchers have given different answers. What is clear is that universal literacy did not reign during the Second Bulgarian Empire. From graffiti found by archaeologists, we see that there was a partial literacy among some merchants and artisans. There was probably a higher degree of literacy in the state administration. According to the 78th canon of the Council of Trullo (692), it was obligatory for those receiving Baptism to pass through a course of training in the Christian faith. It seems that this was applied by the local bishops in medieval Bulgaria as well, but our information is only archaeological - from graffiti and inscriptions in various places related to the Church.¹⁵

During the Ottoman era

During the Ottoman era, theological literacy in Bulgaria in Slavonic language gradually declined, although it was not forgotten. Again, the Greek language came to the fore as the official language of the Christians in the empire. The schools of the Ecumenical Patriarchate functioned using only the Greek language until 1836, when Slavonic was reintroduced due to the pressure from the Russian authorities. The Patriarchate in Tyrnovo was abolished in 1404 with the death of Patriarch Euthymius, who was exiled by the Ottoman authorities to the Bachkovo Monastery in 1393 when the capital Tyrnovo was captured. The dioceses of the Patriarchate of Tyrno-

¹⁵ See *Ibid.*

vo were rejoined to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, while the monasteries in which Slavonic worship and learning were used gradually declined in the following centuries. In general, the Ottoman authorities were distrustful towards Christian education in any language, so few Christian schools remained in function within the empire until the 19th century.

Conclusion

From the scant information we have about theological education in Bulgaria during the Middle Ages, it is clear that it follows the Byzantine educational system, based on four educational degrees – 1) γραμματική, 2) ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία and 3) ῥητορική, at last – 4) φιλοσοφία, i.e. sciences and the four arts: ἀριθμητική, γεωμετρία, μουσική, ἀστρονομία. Theological education in the field of canon law, liturgy, biblical studies and the Church Fathers is a training with highly stressed practical aspects. Theology was studied as a higher spiritual practice, which, however, over time became more independent from the previous classical training. In Bulgaria, we see exactly that – purely Christian education, which lacks the ancient classical propaedeutics. Complex theological dialogues and disputes were absent from the curriculum, and more basic writings of a catechetical and practical character were included in it. As a whole, the sample texts translated from Greek in both the First and Second Bulgarian kingdom between the 9th and 14th century had rather a missionary value and we cannot consider them complex and sophisticated theological literature. The most important theological dialogues and discourses during the Middle Ages and the Ottoman Era belonged to the central church authority in Constantinople. The same is valid for the Ottoman era too.

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