

***Ekphraseis* of Constantinople in Old Russian Literature**

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When we talk about cultural transmission, we should keep in mind that the recipient culture always makes its own choice of what to borrow from the donor culture; it decides in what order the selected elements will be picked, and most importantly how the borrowed material will be interpreted. Ancient Slavs, whose literature was 99 percent translations from Greek,¹ were very stringent and picky in selecting what they choose to translate. It is well known that they eagerly translated religious literature and were highly selective as far as secular literature was concerned. This is easy to understand if we consider the cultural context in which those translations were made. Of the secular genres the Slavs were primarily interested in those that were in conformity with the Christian world outlook, such as, for instance, Kosmas Indikopleustes' "Christian Topography" or Physiologos. Of some interest to the Slavs were "practical manuals" even those that were in conflict with the Christian dogma, such as fortune-telling books.

Within some genres the Slavs differentiated between acceptable and unacceptable kinds: for instance, antiquated history stylized after Thukydides was flatly rejected, whereas a more "democratic" genre of the world chronicle was very much to their liking and they eagerly translated it. Slavs showed no interest whatsoever in love romance, but they translated a heroic epic about Digenis Akrites and the tales about Alexander the Great. Slavs were especially picky when it came to secular rhetoric. Of all this pool, they translated only two or three pieces, while didactic poetry, epigrams, *progymnasmata*, poetic epitaph, enkomia and other genres, were left unheeded by Slav literati. From this perspective, it is clear that the genre of ekphrasis could hardly have an attraction to the Slavs.

When yesterday's "barbarians" rendered a Greek author, they displayed amazing consistency in the way they sorted out his works, and always to the detriment of ekphrasis. For instance, from Photios they picked his epistle to Boris-Michael, but not his homilies on the renovation of St. Sophia or on the Church of Mother of God in Pharos. From John Eugenikos they chose his *Threnos* over Constantinople,² but not his

¹ S. SOBOLEVSKII, *Древнерусская переводная литература*, St. Petersburg 1892-1893, 5.

² It was included in the collections of eschatological character, cf. N. МЕШЧЕРСКИЙ, «Рыдание» Иоанна Евзеника и его древнерусский перевод, *Византийский Временник* 7 (1957) 79.

numerous ekphraseis of cities or icons; from John Geometres – his *Paradise* but not his ekphrasis of Stoudios basilica; from Leo the Sixth – the prophesies ascribed to him, but not the praise to Constantinople churches that he really wrote.

Ekphrasis is strictly intellectual and rationalistic, highly esthetic and culture-centric sub-genre. Even as Byzantines adjusted it for the glorification of Christian art, it still bore an irremovable trace of the literary taste of Antiquity. Not that the Slavs were blind to the esthetic as such: according to the Russian Primary Chronicle, the envoys from Kiev were deeply impressed by the beauty of St. Sophia and exclaimed: „We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth.“³ So impressed indeed that, according to the Russian Primary Chronicle, this esthetic influence was the key argument for the final choice of faith by Rus'. Yet, they remained indifferent to this beauty when it was described in an ekphrasis: there never emerged Slavic versions of either Paul Silentarius, or Procopius of Caesarea, or Michael of Thessaloniki with their ornate eulogies of St. Sophia. Though other great monuments of Constantinople must have also produced deep artistic impression on the Old Russian pilgrims, still this impression failed to push Rus' literati to translate the ekphraseis by Constantine of Rhodos or Nikolas Mesarites, Gregory Pachymeres, Constantine Manasses or Manuel Chrysoloras. The Slavs arguably would not accepted a literature per-se, a literature which did not serve any “extraneous” purpose.

One shouldn't assume from the above, however, that not a single Byzantine ekphrasis of Constantinople made its way to the Old Russian literature. When the ekphrastic “nature” of a text is kept in the shadow, due to some misattribution, it may be translated as a piece belonging to a different category. To cite an example I would point out a poetic ekphrasis of the Pantokrator monastery, written in the 12th century, highly ornate and fully meeting the rules of the genre (in 2006 Wolfram HÖRANDNER⁴ attracted the attention to this poorly known work). This purely rhetorical, poetic text somehow ended up in a Byzantine manuscript which contained the Synaxarion of Constantinople and was perceived by a Slavic bookman as a hagiographic piece. This was how this work (or, rather the nonsensical text that it became in the translation) found itself in the Old Russian Prolog⁵ and later in the Great Menaea of metropolitan Makarios.

Should we identify with Constantinople the descriptions of heavenly palaces that occur in the texts written in the imperial capital?

³ D. Likhachev (ed.), *Повесть временных лет*, Moscow 1996, 49.

⁴ W. HÖRANDNER, *Zur Beschreibung von Kunstwerken in der byzantinischen Dichtung – am Beispiel des Gedichts auf das Pantokratorkloster in Konstantinopel*, in: *Die poetische Ekphrasis von Kunstwerken. Eine literarische Tradition der Großdichtung in Antike, Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, Wien 2006, 203-219.

⁵ G. РЕТКОВ, *Стишията Пролог в старата българска, сръбска и руска литература*, Plovdiv 2000, 449-452.

I tend to give a positive answer to this question. For instance, in describing his trip to heaven, Gregory, the hagiographer of Basil the Younger, repeatedly compares what he sees there with his home city. As he walks up the stairs to heaven, he imagines that this is the steep slope of Blachernae,⁶ and he says that the saints' adobes are similar in size to Constantinople.⁷ A striking example of ekphrasis, and a highly exquisite at that, is found in the hagiographic "Vision of Cosmas"⁸ written in mid-tenth century. True, the hero of this narrative is an abbot in one of monasteries in Bithynia, but the story has it that he had earlier served as the chamberlain for Emperor Alexander and thus had spent most of his life in Constantinople.

"We went to a city of indescribable beauty. Its walls were built of twelve courses each of different stone, and its gates were of gold and silver. Within the gates we found a golden pavement, golden houses, golden seats. The city was filled with a strange light and a sweet smell, but as we traversed it, we did not encounter a single man or beast or bird. At the edge of the town we came to a wonderful palace, and we entered a hall as broad as a stone's throw. From one end to the other stretched a table of porphyry round which many guests were reclining. A spiral staircase situated at one end of the hall, led to an internal balcony. Two eunuchs, resplendent as lightning, appeared at this balcony and they said to my companions: let him also recline at the table. I was shown a place while the eunuchs departed to another chamber that appeared to be beyond the balcony."⁹

C. MANGO emphasises that "Cosmas' service as a chamberlain may account for the vividness of his vision of the heavenly palace. The great hall or triclinium, the cubacula, the spiral staircase (kochlias), the balcony (heliakon), the table of porphyry, the attendant eunuchs – all these were familiar features of the imperial palace".¹⁰ It can be added that even the dead whom the hero encounters in the heavenly palace are partly his old colleagues from imperial service. Therefore, it would probably not be an overstretch to suggest that in his Bithynian backwaters Cosmas was dreaming about the real Constantinople luxury that he had left behind.

⁶ G. Vilinskii (ed.), *Житие Василия Новаго*, Т. 2, Odessa 1911, 754. Cf. Т. РЕНТКОВСКАЯ, *Житие Василия Нового в Древней Руси: проблемы оригинала и перевода*, *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta, Seria 9 (Filologiya)* 2004, N 1, 89.

⁷ G. VILINSKII (ed.), *Житие Василия Новаго*, 778-779. This applies also to the Life of Niphon of Constantiana: A. RYSTENKO (ed.), *Матеріали з історії візантійсько-слов'янської літератури та мови*, Odessa 1928, 62-63 cf. 291-293; 178, cf. 374; 180, cf. 375.

⁸ C. ANGELIDI, *La version longue de la vision du moine Cosmas*, *Analecta Bollandiana* 101 (1983) 96-97.

⁹ The translation is taken from: C. MANGO, *Byzantium. The Empire of New Rome*, New York 1980, 152-153.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

Since this text was included in the Constantinopolitan Synaxarion (this cluster of copies was designated by H. DELEHAYE as M¹¹), the Slavs translated it twice: first time in Bulgaria, second in Serbia,¹² and quite soon it began its own independent life in Old Russian literature. However, the imagery structure of ekphrasis is badly distorted in both translations. The Slavic literati omit many technical terms pertaining to the masonry: *peri teichos harmonia kai sunthesis, stoichoi peri teichos, hekaste de touton kyklon idion apartizousa, euarmostian kai sympexin*, etc. The translators failed to understand such words as “*dapeda*” and “Roman marble”, *kochlias* and *heliakon*.¹³ Generally speaking, unless you consult the Greek original it is impossible to understand what those translations say.

Maybe Slavic literati tried to avoid ekphraseis because they were not familiar with special architectural terminology? Nevertheless, making such a suggestion would be to fully misunderstand the psychology of the medieval translators. The problem is that the Slavs had poor knowledge of the intricate terms used by Byzantine theologians, but they eagerly translated them notwithstanding. Many Slavic translations from Greek are totally incomprehensible from today’s standpoint, yet they were copied century after century as some sacral abracadabra.¹⁴

Another acceptable genre through which a translated ekphrasis could make its way into Old Russian literature was historical compendium. The story of Justinian’s reign, as narrated in the 2nd version of the so called *Ellinskij Letopisets*, ‘Hellenic Chronicle’, includes the Legend of the Construction of St. Sophia.¹⁵ G. DAGRON pointed to the ambivalent nature of this tale¹⁶. Indeed, it may bear similarity to other “aetiological” tales, to some extent it’s a guide-book and in many ways it is an ekphrasis, especially in the second half. And still, the Legend was translated in full, since it was categorized as belonging to the genre of historical literature.

Were any original ekphraseis created in the Slavic world? Let us now turn to another genre which is likely to resort to ekphraseis, that is travel guides. Foreign pilgrims were taken around Constantinople by Byzantine guides, and the texts of Old Russian Wanderings (*Khozhdenniia*) carry

¹¹ H. DELEHAYE (ed.), *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, Bruxelles 1902, 107-112.

¹² Т. ПЕНТКОВСКАЯ, *Видение монаха Козьмы в славянской традиции*, in: Письменность, литература и фольклор славянских народов. XIV Международный съезд славистов. Охрид, 10-16 сентября 2008 г. Доклады российской делегации, Moscow 2008, 127-129.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, 131-133.

¹⁴ D. M. BULANIN, *Древняя Русь, История русской переводной художественной литературы*, Т. 1, Köln – Weimar – Wien 1995, 23.

¹⁵ R. MARICHAL, *La construction de Sainte-Sophie de Constantinople dans l’Anonyme grec (X^e siècle?) et les versions vieux-russes*, *ByzSlav* 21 (1960) 238-243.

¹⁶ G. DAGRON, *Constantinople imaginaire. Etudes sur le recueil des «Patria»*, Paris 1984, 196.

down to us some fragments of the standard guided tours of those old days but we can also discern some vivid impressions and literary sketches of tourists themselves.

Of course the pilgrims were primarily interested in Christian relics, but they also expressed their admiration for the artistic beauty of churches. Thus, Stephen of Novgorod writes in his description of St. Sophia: "As you go from there into the sanctuary, there are very beautiful columns like jasper. Very beautiful purple stone columns which were brought from Rome stand there. They are multi-colored like jasper, and a person can see the image of his face in them as if in a mirror. ... Very beautiful smooth stone is called marble".¹⁷ While writing on the Church of the Holy Apostles, he observes: "Jesus' [column] is of green stone shot through with black. The other one, Peter's, is thin as a small log, very beautiful, with black and white [mixed] like clover".¹⁸ Or look how the Russian Anonymous pilgrim of 1390 describes the monastery of Mangana: "There is a great stone cup on a column in front of the church, and over the cup there is a lead-covered canopy; it is enclosed by columns with stone bars between them. The evangelists and apostles are carved on the bars, and the columns are carved too".¹⁹ Sometimes pilgrims described secular monuments as well:

"Constantine's Baths are near the wall, high up over the sea. Emperor Leo had water brought there and had a marvelously designed large stone cistern built... A large wooden barrel encircled with iron bands was placed in a corner of this baths with seven taps which supplied whatever kind of water anyone wanted. There was no charge for anyone washing (there) and he (Leo) even placed a stone statue of a man in another corner as a watchman to hold a bronze bow in his hand, and bronze arrows, so that if anyone attempted to exact a fee from someone, he would shoot the barrel so that there would be no more water from it. Alongside the barrel he built a lighthouse encircled with Latin glass, and it burned continuously day and night. Some people told me that this bath lasted three hundred years after Emperor Leo. People washed in it and the water never stopped flowing from this barrel, and the lighthouse continued to burn until the Franks began to charge a fee, and then this statue shot an arrow and hit the barrel. The barrel broke and the lighthouse went out."²⁰

This passage is a story with a plot, as befits any story told by guides, but at the same time we can discern some traits of an ekphrasis, although we cannot say if it had a Greek prototype.

Yet, traces of true originality can also be detected in the Old Russian Wanderings. This is how the anonymous pilgrim of 1390 describes the famous Justinian column in Augusteion square:

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30-32.

¹⁸ G. MAJESKA, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the 14th and 15th Centuries*, Washington 1984, 42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 366.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 243.

“As you leave the church of St. Sophia by the south doors, on the right-hand side is a tall stone column, and on the column is the Emperor Justinian on a horse. The emperor is bronze and the horse is bronze. In the left hand he holds a golden apple with a cross, and his right hand is stretched out toward the south. There are three pagan emperors opposite him, also bronze and on columns, kneeling before the Emperor Justinian and offering their cities into his hands. Thus spoke Emperor Justinian, “All the Saracen land is under my hand”.²¹

The narrative by Zosimas the Deacon written around 1423, being the last Old Russian Wandering to the Byzantine Constantinople, elaborates the theme of the mutual tension between Justinian and the statues of “pagan kings” around him and turns Justinian’s monolog into a dialog between him and these mysterious “kings”:

“In front of the doors of St.Sophia stands the column on which stands the Emperor Justinian on a horse; the horse is bronze and he himself is cast in bronze. Looking to the east, he holds his right hand outstretched, threatening the Saracene emperors. Opposite him stand Saracen emperors, bronze idols, holding tribute in their hands and saying to him, “Do not threaten us, lord; we will contend in your behalf”. In the other hand he holds something like a golden apple, and on the apple is a cross”.²²

On the one hand, we might discern here some hint at the ekphrasis of the same statue by Procopius: “And stretching forth his right hand toward the rising sun and spreading out his fingers, he commands the barbarians in that quarter to remain at home and to advance no further.”²³ Yet, on the other hand, neither Procopius not other sources say a single word about smaller statues accompanying the Justinian column. As C. MANGO admits, “I have long been intrigued by the reference to “three pagan kings”, (...) how is it that this striking arrangement is not mentioned in any description of the monument from Procopius onwards?”²⁴ Whether C. MANGO is right or wrong in seeing in the “Saracen kings” the Adoration of the Magi, one thing is clear: the dialog between the Augustaion statues or the interpretation of their relationship do not have a prototype in the rich collection of medieval guides of Constantinople, Greek, Latin, Arabic or Persian. This means that Zosimas the Deacon tried to dramatize the story he was told. In this case his Wandering would be the first attempt by an Old Russian bookman to produce an ekphrasis of statues. What we have here does not sound like a guidebook or a legend – it looks like a real true-born ekphrasis. Compare Philostratus:

²¹ Ibid., 134-136.

²² Ibid., 184.

²³ *The Buildings of Procopius* I.2.12. (trans. H. B. Dewing), London 1940, 35.

²⁴ C. MANGO, *The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate*, DOP 54 (2000) 180-181.

“Apollo comes to Maia to demand back the cattle, but she does not believe him and thinks the god is talking nonsense. Would you learn what he is saying? For, from his expression he seems to me to be giving utterance, not merely to sounds, but to words; he looks as though he were about to say to Maia, “Your son whom you bore yesterday wrongs me; for the cattle in which I delight he has thrust into the earth, nor do I know where in the earth. Verily he shall perish and shall be thrust down deeper than the cattle.” But she merely marvels, and does not believe what he says.”²⁵

Imparting a meaning to the respective positioning of statues, interpreting their postures and imagining their dialogues – are the features of a classical ekphrasis, that Zosimas most likely used without any prior knowledge of the examples of this genre.

Another striking example of ekphrasis, and this time definitely original, is provided by a letter of Epiphanius the Wise, the famous Russian icon painter (died 1420). In his letter written 1415 to Cyril of Tver’ he spoke about how he addressed the renowned religious painter, Theophanes the Greek:

“Realizing he loves me, and does not despise me, I joined the shamelessness to my bravery and required the following: I beg your Wisdom to paint for me in colors the image of that large church of Saint Sophia in Constantinople, the one erected by the great emperor Justinian who competed with the wise Solomon. Some characters think that it, as it comes to its value and the size, is like the Moscow Kremlin in the inner city – so large is the span of its foundations, when you walk around it. If a stranger to it enters it, and wishes to go around without the guide, he is not able to find the exit, without losing himself, however he may be wise, owing to the multitude of piers and colonnades, entrances and downway stairs, passageways and corridors, various rooms, chapels, staircases, treasury vaults and crypts, partitions and additions, windows, pathways, doors, entrances and exits and massive stone pillars. Draw Justinian for me, as he was called, as he sits on the back of the horse and holds the copper apple in his hand, the apple said to be as big and voluminous as to be able to contain two buckets of water. I beg you to place all previously mentioned on page of the book for me, so that I can place it at the beginning of my book, and to, remembering your hand work and that church, imagine I am myself in Constantinople (...). Being a wise man, he answered wisely: It is impossible (...).”²⁶

Art historians have repeatedly paid heed to this text, and recently Ksenia MURATOVA pointed to its affinity with Byzantine ekphraseis.²⁷

²⁵ *Philostratus, Imagines*, I,26. Translated by A. Fairbanks, London 1960, 103.

²⁶ C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453: sources and documents*, Engelwood Cliffs 1986, 256-258.

²⁷ К. МURATOVA, *Образ храма Святой Софии Константинопольской в Послании Епифания Премудрого и средневековое искусство памяти*, in: *Византийский мир: искусство Константинополя и национальные традиции. К 2000-летию христианства. Памяти Ольги Ильиничны Подобедовой (1912–1999): Сб. статей / Отв. ред. М. А. Орлова*, Moscow 2005, 434.

Yet, unlike all the panegyrists who write about the great church, Epi-phanios describes St. Sophia as a magic palace, a labyrinth rather than a giant sunlit space. So, we infer that his eulogy is unrelated to the preceding tradition. What we see is an entirely independent, original ekphrasis.

Of course, it would be unwise to expect that a form cast by the Late Antique literature replete with cultural nostalgia²⁸ would be exactly reproduced by a young literature, such as that of the Old Rus'. Yet, if we imply in the word ekphrasis a less strict meaning, namely, an enthusiastic description adorned with special techniques and devoid of any plot characteristics, we could conclude that just before it expired, the centuries-old development of the Greek ekphrasis put out a shoot in Old Rus', where the genre got a new life in the New Age.

²⁸ Cf. N. V. BRAGINSKAYA, *Экфрасис как тип текста: (к проблеме структурной классификации)*, in: *Славянское и балканское языкознание. Карпато-восточно-славянские параллели. Структура балканского текста*. Изд. Т. М. Судник – Т. В. Цивьян, Moscow 1977, 259-283.