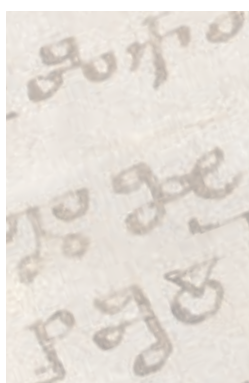
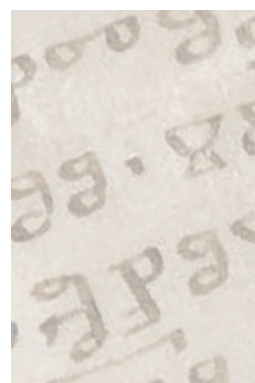
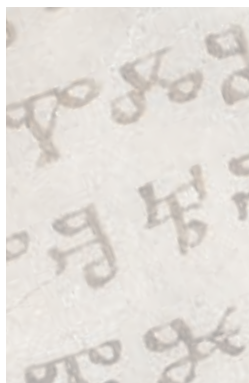


THE CYRIL AND METHODDIUS MISSION AND EUROPE

1150 Years Since the Arrival of the Thessaloniki Brothers in Great Moravia

Pavel Kouřil et al.





**VELKÁ
MORAVA**

1150 let křesťanství ve střední Evropě



Cyrl a Metoděj
1150 let

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The Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Brno

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CYRIL AND METHODIUS AMONG BYZANTINE MISSIONARIES: COMMON FEATURES AND UNIQUE QUALITY

Sergej A. Ivanov

When speaking of Cyril and Methodius's embassy, one must acknowledge its completely unique place in Byzantine history. Constantine firmly believed that all peoples were worthy of baptism; however, this does not mean that the concept of a "barbarian" had no relevance for him. The work of Methodius and his disciples in Moravia can be evaluated using the "Law for Judging the People". This was especially the case regarding the rules for marriage, and became one of the reasons for the ultimate failure of Cyril and Methodius' entire endeavour. Half a century later, while converting the Alans, the Byzantines used this experience. The Greeks had apparently learned a great deal from their "Latin" rivals in Bulgaria and Moravia.

Key words: Byzantium, Cyril and Methodius, Barbarians, Christian mission, Moravian mission, cultural snobbery, "Law for Judging the People", Christianisation of Alans

Speaking of missionaries, one should distinguish several different kinds of them: voluntary and occasional, state-sponsored and self-proclaimed, foreign and indigenous. If we turn to Byzantium we will see that the majority of those who are commonly labelled as its missionaries had no initial intention to become such. Take Nino the baptiser of the Georgians, or Kupharas who converted Boris of Bulgaria – they did not intend to become missionaries; take the "nine saints" who allegedly baptised Ethiopia – they were religious dissidents who emigrated from the Empire and could not count upon its support. Take Gregory the Illuminator of Armenia or Theophilus the Indian – they were delegated by the Empire, but they originally belonged to the world which they decided to christianise; of course they had problems of an ideological kind, but not of a cultural or civilisational nature. Baptisers like Justinian's general Tzitzas had no scruples of any kind: his threats to the Tzani went along with Christian preaching to them, and the construction of churches in their land – with the cutting down of forests there.¹ He is a highly typical governmental missionary backed by military force.

Of course, it is not appropriate to compare any of the above with Constantine and Methodius. They belong to the relatively small group of state-sponsored Rhomaioi who went to barbarian lands to teach Christianity in vernacular languages, with no political goal in mind. Obvious diplomatic interests, if not imperialist appetites, stood behind the activities of Byzantine missionaries such as Probus, the Christian emissary to the Huns, or Stephen of Surozh, who baptised the Khazars, or Hierotheus, Apostle to the Hungarians, or Euphemius, Apostle to the Pechenegs.

And still, Constantine and Methodius are not the only missionaries who travelled to distant countries. Let us remember Longinus, the Apostle to the Sudan, or two fictitious literary characters who may have had real-life prototypes: I mean St Gregentios, the preacher to Yemen, the hero of a vita, published not long ago,²

or the nameless "philosopher" from the Rus' Primary Chronicle. All three teachers were sent by central authorities and in all cases geopolitics played a minimal role, if at all.

In what language did Byzantine missionaries address their flock? The answer is obvious in those cases when the preachers themselves were of "barbaric" origin, like, say, Wulfilas the Goth. But did the Greek missionaries learn barbarian languages? It is easier to answer these questions in connection with the heretical churches, which actively carried out missions beyond the boundaries of the Empire. Thus we know that the Syrian Simeon of Bet Arsham, the Monophysitic enlightener of the Sarcens, would begin speaking in any language on the third day.³ Ahudemme, the Syrian preacher of Monophysitism, greatly feared the difficulties of the Arabic language.⁴ Western missionaries always tried to learn the local dialect quickly and to preach in it.⁵ The problem of cultural snobbery did not exist for the Copts either. The Vita of Pachomius relates how a monk hesitated to confess to the saint using a translator. He then prayed, and three hours later some sort of "papery missive" flew down from the sky. After reading it, Pachomius immediately began speaking in all languages. Yet the Greek sources are almost completely silent regarding the linguistic skills of Byzantine preachers. Nicephorus, the Metropolitan of Kiev, informed the Kievans that he was not endowed with "the gift of language". The disdain toward barbarian languages had been inherited by the Byzantines from the ancient Romans and Greeks who, as we know, did not consider it necessary to learn them either. Let us not forget that the very word "barbarian" is onomatopoeic, conveying the contempt of a "cultured" person toward foreign speech.

3 JOHN OF EPHEBUS, *Life of Simeon the Bishop*, ed. Ernest Walter Brooks, *Patrologia Orientalis* 17.1, Paris 1923, p. 155, cf. Alphonse MINGANA, *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East*, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9/2, 1925, pp. 363, 365.

4 *Histoire de Mar Ahoudemeh, apôtre des Arabes de Mésopotamie*, ed. François Nau, *Patrologia Orientalis* 3.1, Paris 1909, p. 22.

5 I. auf der MAUR, *Missionarische Tätigkeit der Benediktiner im Frühmittelalter*, *Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktiner-Ordens und seiner Zweige* 92, pp. 121, 123.

1 Procopius, *Bella* I, 15, 24–25 (*Procopii Caesariensis Opera omnia*, 1–2, ed. Jacob Haury, Lipsiae 1963, vol. I, p. 78).

2 *Life and Works of Saint Gregentios, Archbishop of Taphar*, *Millennium Studies* 7, ed. Albrecht Berger, Berlin – New York 2006.

So, can we say that Constantine the Philosopher, with his outstanding linguistic curiosity and a rare gift for languages, was an exception? No. We can find a couple of parallels. Theodore of Edessa was also endowed with linguistic capabilities; his *Vita* states that “he conversed fluently in Greek, and in Syrian, and in Ishmaelite, and in Persian as well”.⁶ But he lived outside the Empire and was a subject of the Caliphs. Also worth mentioning is the Bosphoran Bishop Kolymbadios who figured in Epiphanius’ composition about the Apostle Andrew. This hierarch, who lived in the 9th century, knew ten languages.⁷ Whether Kolymbadios truly was a polyglot is not important; what is significant is that he considered it necessary to boast before Epiphanius, and did so in a “missionary” context. Kolymbadios, who lived at the very edge of the Byzantine oikoumene, was clearly proud of the fact that he addressed the barbarians in their own language. Moreover, the hierarch probably mentioned his own multilingualism in answer to the particular interest Epiphanius had demonstrated in Andrew’s “apostolic inheritance”. So, Constantine was not completely alone, but belonged to a tiniest minority among Byzantine imperial missionaries.

Speaking of Cyril and Methodius’ embassy, one must acknowledge its completely unique place in Byzantine history. The brothers can be viewed as representatives of the most “internationalist” wing of the Byzantine cultural elite. Constantine firmly believed that all peoples were worthy of baptism and that all languages were created equal by God; however, this does not mean that the concept of a “barbarian” had no relevance for him. The single text that was clearly composed from the words of Constantine himself, a Latin letter of Anastasius Bibliothecarius (as transmitted by Metrophanes of Smyrna), presents barbarians in an utterly stereotypical way. In the area near Cherson, Constantine attempted to learn where the grave of Clement of Rome was located, “but since all of the residents there were newcomers from various barbarian tribes rather than locals, and in general were cruel robbers (*immo vero saevi latrunculi*), they insisted they did not know what he was talking about”.⁸ To the unbiased eye, there is nothing criminal in the local pagan population (especially since they were newcomers) not knowing about some Christian relics buried nobody knew when or where; in this context the appellation “robbers” has no basis besides general distaste. The fact that Constantine conversed with the barbarians all the same conveniently distinguished the “philosopher” from the Bishop of Cherson, who received him and who, along with the townspeople, “seemed not so much citizens of the city as inmates of a jail, since they did not dare to venture out beyond the walls”.⁹ The humour of the passage quoted clearly conveys the tone of Constantine; he himself was not afraid of barbarians, but he nevertheless shared the common distaste towards them. The “apostle to the Slavs” assumed, as did every Byzantine, an a priori category of “barbarianism”, and all the more so did the Imperial government assume this premise in general.

6 *Žitie iže vo svjatyh otca našeho Feodora*, archiepiskopa ědesskogo, ed. Ivan Pomjalovskij, Sankt-Peterburg 1892, p. 84.

7 *Grečeskie predanija o sv. apostole Andree 1*, Žitija, ed. Jurij A. Vinogradov, Sankt-Peterburg 2005, p. 177, 311–312A.

8 Johann FRIEDRICH, *Ein Brief des Anastasius Bibliothecarius*, Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-philologischen und historischen Klasse, Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 3, 1892, p. 441.

9 IDEM, p. 440.

The work of Methodius and his disciples in Moravia can be evaluated using the *Vitae of Constantine-Cyril* and *Vitae of Clement of Ochrid*, as well as the legal document *Law for Judging the People*, which was composed with the Greeks’ assistance. These sources make it clear that the Greeks, despite being in Moravia without particular political support, from the outset presented demands to the barbarians as if addressing subjects of the Empire.

This was the case regarding the rules for marriage. It was forbidden to have more than one wife, forbidden to marry relatives of any degree, including through godparentage, and so on. Being himself a bearer of Byzantine church doctrine, the author of the Extended *Vita of Constantine* accuses “the Franks” of “not prohibiting [...] the creation of innumerable marriages” among the Moravians. And in the Greek-language Extended *Vita of Clement* the “Franks” are accused of indulging Prince “Sviatopolk” in his “abominable couplings”.¹⁰ Byzantine missionaries displayed a worthy admiration of fidelity to principles, making no distinction either between the elite and the common people or between neophytes and Byzantines.

The *Law for Judging the People* set the same penalties for violation of marital norms that existed in long-Christianised Byzantine society. All this could not but frighten the Slav elite away from the Greek clerics. This became one of the reasons for the ultimate failure of Cyril and Methodius’ entire endeavour.¹¹

Was this rigidity a unique feature of Methodius and his disciples? Let us compare it with what we read in the *Vita of Gregentios*. It became clear after its recent full publication that this mysterious document must be dated to the 10th century.¹² It is appropriate in such an instance also to examine the section of the document provisionally known as *The Laws of the Himyarites* with new eyes. This is not an original 6th century document, as many researchers used to believe, but a missionary utopia produced by the pen of a monk who to all appearances never left the boundaries of Constantinople. Nevertheless, this does not free us from the obligation to examine this text as a record of Byzantine missionary thought, albeit from a later date and albeit theoretical. The reader is immediately struck by the fact that the laws prescribe rules for the lives of new Arab converts that are far stricter than those that existed in the long-baptised Empire. Those who engage in premarital relations avoid punishment only by immediately consenting to be married. Prostitution is forbidden, and the keeping of a saloon is severely punished. Someone twice widowed must enter a monastery; even slaves must be married. As a whole the *Laws of the Himyarites* is a utopia, its goal being the creation of an ideal state. Maybe, the author’s ideals were not dissimilar from those of the Byzantine clergy in 9th century Moravia.

Can we say that the mission of Constantine and Methodius, being generally unsuccessful, was completely ignored by subsequent generations of Byzantine missionaries? No. We think that even their failure was of service to their

10 *Grčckite žitija na Kliment Ochridski*, ed. Alexander Milev, Sofija 1966, p. 90.

11 See Boris N. FLORJA, *Prinjatje christianstva v Velikoj Moravii, Ćechii i Pol’se*, in: Genadij G. Litavrin (red.), *Prinjatje christianstva narodami Central’noj i Jugo-Vostoĉnoj Evropy i krešćenie Rusi*, Moskva 1988, p. 128–130.

12 *Life and Works of Saint Gregentios*, ed. A. Berger, p. 100–109.

successors. Half a century later, while converting the Alans, the Byzantines used this experience: Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus himself took several bold steps: he dispatched missionaries to Alania from his inner circle (whereas Cyril and Methodius, for example, had had no church rank), kept watch over them and followed their activities (again in contrast to the indifference displayed by Constantinople toward the brothers from Thessalonica), and, most significantly, the Greeks softened their previous inflexible position regarding polygamy.¹³

The Thessalonian brothers, in spite of everything, remained representatives of their Empire; they may have been among its best, most talented and broad minded, but they were still its representatives, with all the pluses and minuses of this status. Only on his deathbed, taking the monastic habit, did Constantine proclaim that he was not the subject of the Emperor any more. Yet the Empire did not acknowledge the merits of the brothers. Not a single contemporary Greek source mentioned them with a single word.

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¹³ *Nicolai I Constantinopolitani patriarchae Epistolae*, ed. Romilly J. H. Jenkins – Leendert Gerrit Westerink, *CFHB* 6, Washington 1973, pp. 266.21–28; 278.5–11, 13–280.15, 21–25; 284.75–286.98; 314.10–22; 438.18–440.74.

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