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A Survey of the Palimpsests among the Slavic Manuscripts of Mount Sinai

Abstract: Mainly due to the lack of raw material in the desert, palimpsests are a typical trait of manuscripts written in the Sinai. This applies in particular to the Glagolitic Old Slavonic codices and fragments in St Catherine's monastery, the majority of which were discovered in the New Finds of 1975. Not all of them have been closely examined yet, so the exact amount of Sinaitic Glagolitic manuscripts with undertexts remains open. Even so, together with a few dislocated Glagolitic specimens from Sinai kept today in St Petersburg and at the Vatican, their number should be no fewer than eight, including a multiple palimpsest in the so-called Medical Folia. Their demarcation and closer assessment suffer from the fact that usually the underlayers are so heavily washed out or erased that it is extremely difficult to discover more than such indications as multiple rulings, remnants of letters, and the like. So, we must content ourselves with figuring out the number of layers and the scripts and languages of the underlayers. In the present paper, we will discuss these traces in the context of a short overview.

1 Introduction

Due to the lack of raw material in the desert, palimpsests are a typical type of manuscripts written in the Sinai. This applies in particular to the Glagolitic Old Slavonic codices and fragments in St Catherine's monastery, the majority of which were discovered in the New Finds of 1975. Not all of them have been closely examined yet, so the exact number of Sinaitic Glagolitic manuscripts with undertexts remains open. Even so, together with a few well-known dislocated Glagolitic manuscripts from Sinai kept today

Editors' note: Heinz Miklas sent in his paper and presentation for the workshop 'Removed and Rewritten: Palimpsests and Related Phenomena from a Cross-cultural Perspective II' on 4 July 2023, to be read by the organisers on his behalf. The draft of the present version was prepared by Jost Gippert from the supplied materials and approved by the author on 17 November 2023. Unfortunately, Miklas passed away in the night of 12–13 December 2023, and so did not see the final version of the paper, which Gippert elaborated according to his proposals. The editors decided to publish the paper in its present form, in its rather oral style and without a final conclusion, as the *opus postumum* of our much beloved colleague.

in the National Library of Russia (RNB) in St Petersburg (Q.I.64, the Oktoechos Palimpsest) and in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV) in Vatican City (Vat.slav. 3, the Gospel-Codex Assemanianus; see Fig. 1), their number should be no fewer than eight, including a triple palimpsest in the so-called Medical Folia (see 3.2 below). Their demarcation and closer assessment suffer from the fact that usually the underlayers are so heavily erased that it is extremely difficult to discover more than faint indications, such as multiple rulings, remnants of letters, and the like. So, we must content ourselves with figuring out the number of layers and the scripts and languages of the underlayers.



a



b

Figs 1a–b: Vatican City, BAV, Vat.slav. 3 (Codex Assemanianus), colour image: fol. 157^r; UV image: fol. 158^r; © Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City.

2 Survey

As far as we know today, the traces stem from up to twelve palimpsests:¹ two Glagolitic undertexts under a Cyrillic overtext (the Aprakos Palimpsest in Sinai,

¹ See the lists of Old Church Slavonic manuscripts and palimpsests in Miklas 2011, 50–52, and Miklas and Sadovski 2014, 1270–1271, to which at least the palimpsests in the Medical Folia (see 3.2 below) must now be added.

St Catherine's Monastery, slav. 39, fol. 45^r [see Fig. 2]² and the aforementioned Oktoechos Palimpsest);³ in addition, there are approximately eight under a Glagolitic overtext (in the new part of the Sinaitic Psalter, Sin. slav. NF 2; the main part of the Sinaitic Glagolitic Liturgiarius, Sin. slav. NF 5; the Medical Folia in Demetrius's Psalter, Sin. slav. NF 3; and, it seems, also Demetrius's Psalter itself [see Fig. 3], as well as in the Codex Assemanianus). Furthermore, we find one or two Latin undertexts, two most likely in Cyrillic but possibly in Greek, and one which cannot be identified.

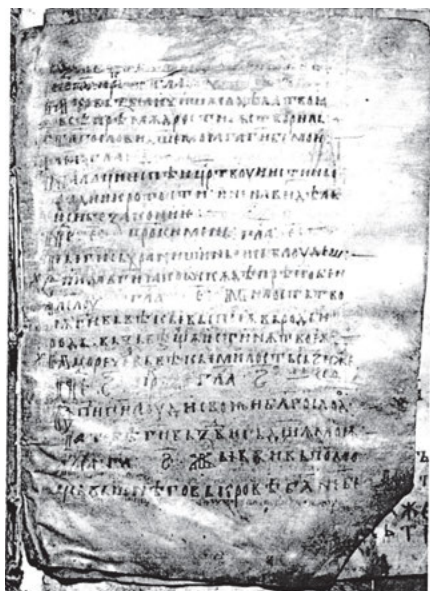


Fig. 2: Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, slav. 39 (Aprakos Palimpsest), fol. 45^r; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

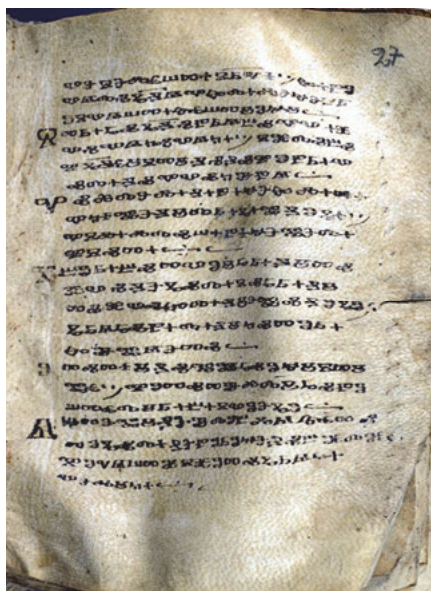


Fig. 3: Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, slav. 39 (Aprakos Palimpsest), fol. 45^r; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

2 Often called Fragmentum Glagoliticum or Fragmentum Sinaiticum; see Altbauer and Mareš 1980 and Schaeken and Birnbaum 1999, 104 (III.2.7).

3 St Petersburg, RNB, Q.I.64, fols 1^v, 2^r, 3^v, 5^v, 6^r, 7^v, 8^r; see Schaeken and Birnbaum 1999, 125 (IV.8).

3 Two examples

Let me now pick out two interesting examples, with which my work began: the so-called Sinaitic Missal (actually the main part of the Sinaitic Glagolitic Liturgiarium, Sin. slav. NF 5; see Fig. 4) and the Medical Folia, which Ioannis Tarnanidis – to whom we owe a valuable catalogue of the Slavonic finds – left without their own shelf number because they were found inlaid in the Psalter of Demetrius (Sin. slav. NF 3; see Fig. 5).

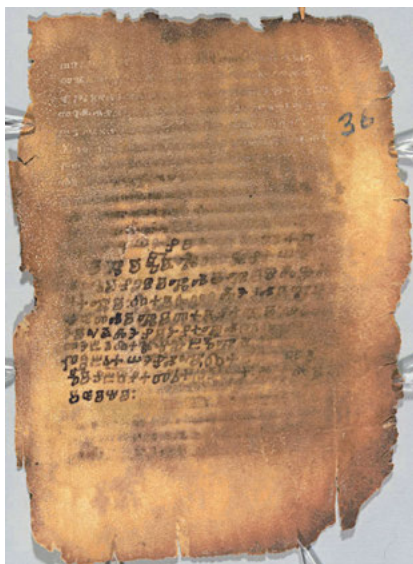


Fig. 4: Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 5 (Sinaitic Missal within the Sinaitic Glagolitic Liturgiarium), fol. 36[†]; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

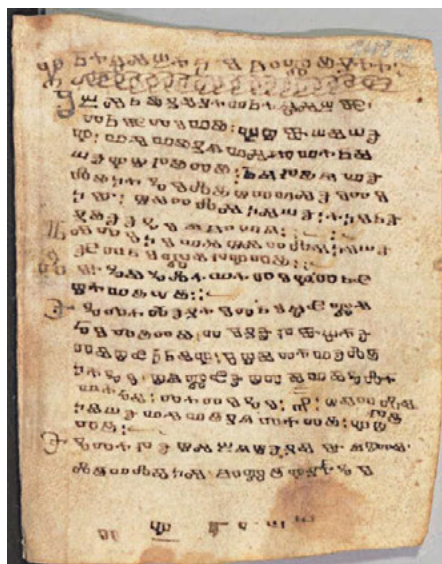


Fig. 5: Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 3 (Medical Folia), fol. 141a[†]; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

3.1 The Sinaitic Missal

At the time Tarnanidis started his work, in the early 1980s,⁴ this codex presented itself as a compact mass of barely visible sheets under a half-charred cover (Fig. 6).

⁴ After his first orientation visit to the monastery, Tarnanidis began his practical work during his second visit in the summer of 1982. His catalogue (Tarnanidis 1988) became a milestone in the

Obviously, Tarnanidis was unable to describe much of this manuscript. Later, the Athenian restorer Basileios I. Peltikoglou disassembled the codex by soaking it in an alcohol solution and, as soon as the pages could be opened, placing it between blotting paper and smoothing the sheets under a printing press for several days (Fig. 7). The result was sobering: many leaves partly lost their black ink, which was now only visible as a whitish layer of powder (Fig. 8). This is how I saw the codex during my first visit to the monastery in 1996. It was clear that the investigation of the codex could not be done without the aid of computer-vision specialists, who would image it with a multispectral camera and improve the images with special software. But even with the naked eye, I could see that the codex was a palimpsest, the underlayer containing a Glagolitic text in a script that looked very similar to the upper text (Figs 9a–b).

Due to unfortunate circumstances, it took until 2006 to start a project allowing our group of philologists, computer-vision specialists, and material chemists to go to the Sinai and take multispectral photographs.⁵ Our colleagues took pride in improving these pictures using several methods (Figs 10a–c) so that we philologists had to compare new pictures again and again in stages (see Table 1). Based on these images, it immediately became clear that almost the entire manuscript is palimpsested. The continuous stratum is the Glagolitic one already mentioned; but now traces of other strata were discovered, which we cannot yet classify exactly. One is also Glagolitic, but the letters are bigger (Figs 11 a–c). Maybe they represent only headlines, but then one wonders why another hand made them? Later, some Cyrillic passages became visible on fol. 32^v. Unfortunately, we have not succeeded in deciphering the texts with the new pictures either, so we will leave it at these comments.

research of the *Slavica Sinaitica*, with its partly detailed descriptions of a total of forty-one manuscripts (without counting the *Medical Folia*) and an extensive image section.

5 The project, which was titled *The Sinaitic Glagolitic Sacramentary (Euchologium) Fragments* and kindly supported by the Austrian Science Foundation, ran from 2007 to 2011. Participants were philologists from the University of Vienna, Department of Slavonic Studies; chemists from the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and the Institute of Natural Sciences and Technology in the Arts; and computer vision specialists from the Vienna University of Technology, Computer Vision Lab.

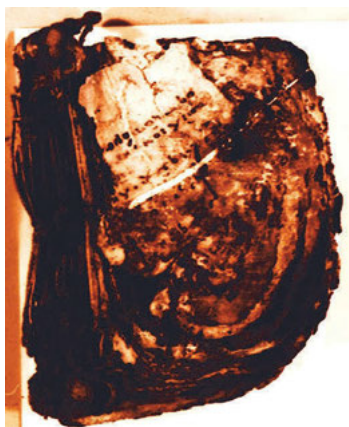


Fig. 6: St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 5 (Sinaitic Glagolitic Liturgiari-um): its state after the find;
© Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.



Fig. 7: St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 5 (Sinaitic Glagolitic Liturgiari-um): state after its restoration; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

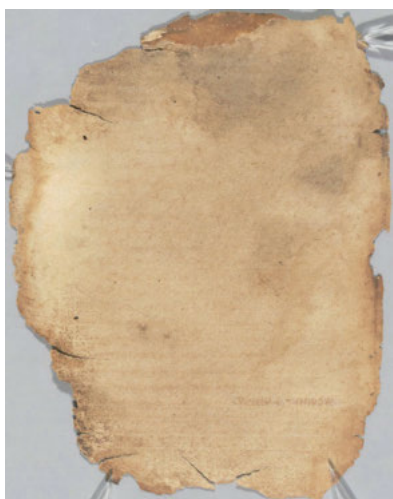
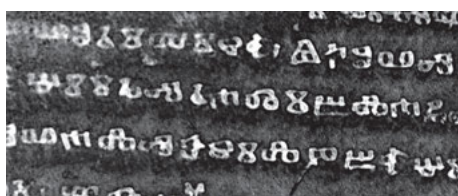
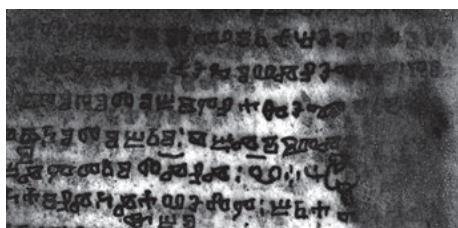


Fig. 8: St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 5 (Sinaitic Glagolitic Liturgiari-um), fol. 8', with lost ink;
© Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

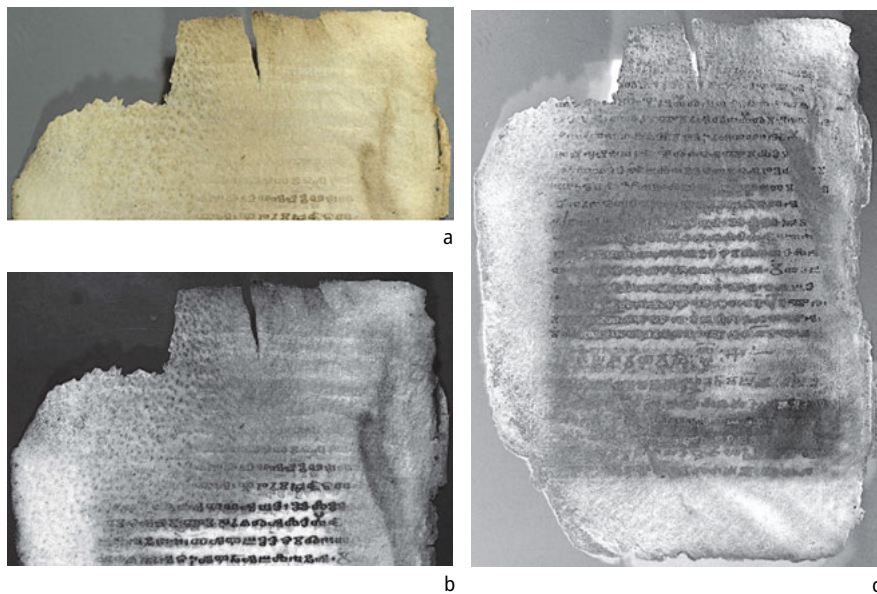


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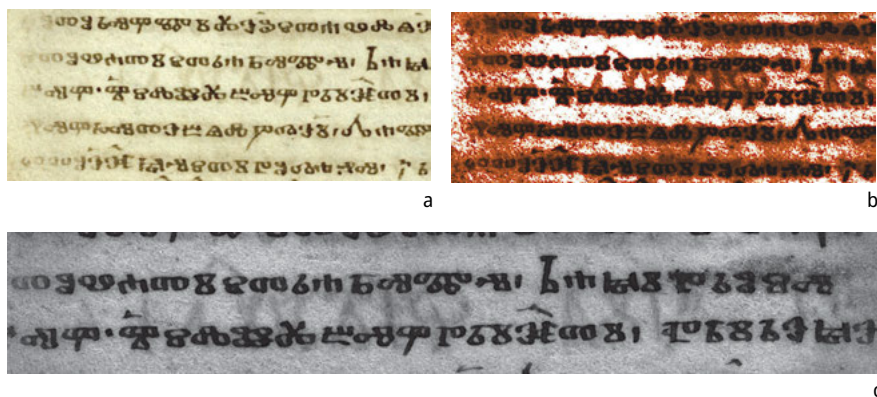


b

Figs 9a-b: St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 5 (Sinaitic Glagolitic Liturgiari-um), fol. 43': upper and lower text contrasted;
© Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.



Figs 10a–c: St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 5 (Sinaitic Glagolitic Liturgiariu), fol. 42' showing several results of improvement; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.



Figs 11a–c: St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 5 (Sinaitic Glagolitic Liturgiariu), fol. 24' with second palimpsest layer; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

Together, we had a close look at the page on various screens and from various angles. And, indeed, we became aware of different ruling lines that crossed each other, such that there must once have been three ruling systems (Fig. 12). Consequently, we started searching for letters within these systems. The first to be discovered were the following Latin words, written in Carolingian majuscules and minuscules: *STE ecle*, for *S(anc)t(a)e ec(c)l(esia)e* (Fig. 13). Then, within a different system, we saw a few Glagolitic letters, unfortunately not combined, and finally, again in another system, the traces of an undertext which looked Cyrillic but might in fact have been in Greek majuscules (Figs 14a–b). So we had detected a triple palimpsest here.

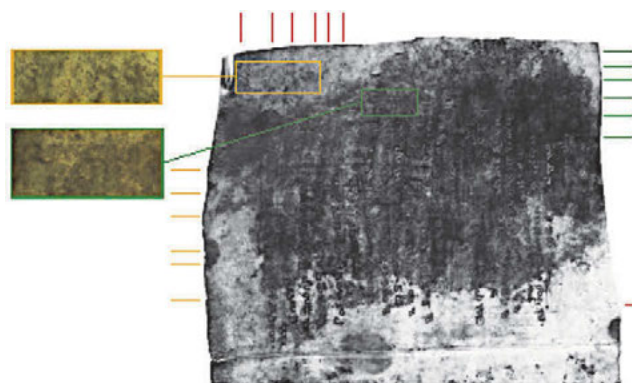
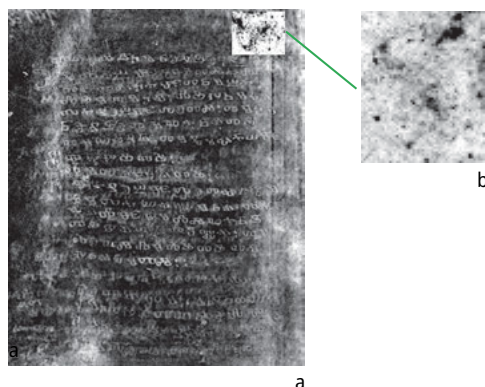
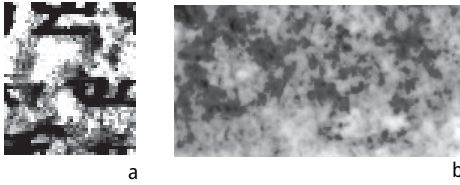


Fig. 13: Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 3 (Medical Folia), with different ruling systems; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.



Figs 14a–b: Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 3 (Medical Folia), fol. 141a^v, enhanced, with Latin undertext; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

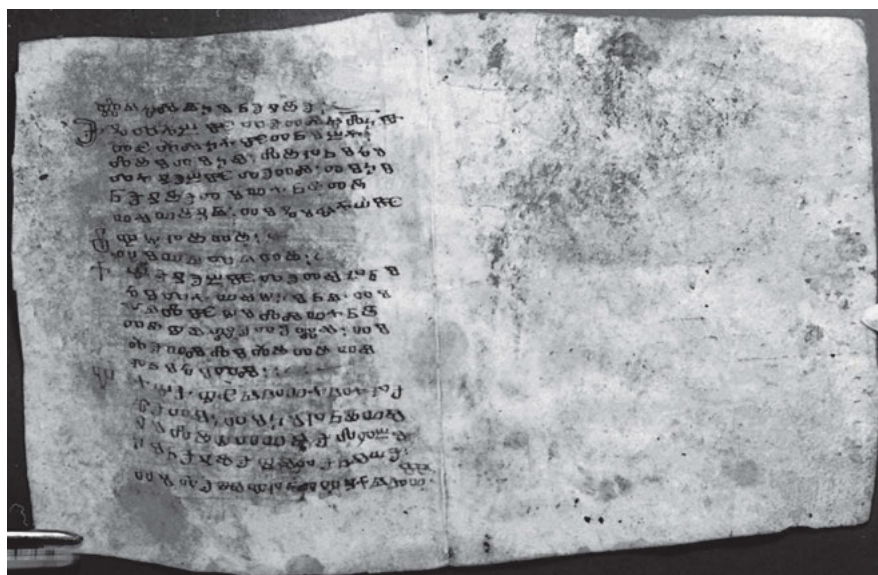


Figs 15a–b: Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 3 (Medical Folia), Cyrillic or Greek and Glagolitic undertexts; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

But that was not the whole story yet. A few days later, I noticed certain indented lines that had nothing to do with the lines of text but must have formed an iconic image. Following the lines closely revealed, in all probability, a male figure with a helmet, a spear, and a further attribute on the other side, possibly a shield (Figs 15a–b). This, of course, matches Archangel Michael. I must confess that, some days before writing this down, I tried to follow the lines again but did not succeed in seeing an image. This probably has to do with the screen of my PocketBook, my older eyes, and other negative factors – so I must believe what I saw in 2009.

Less clearly, but nevertheless clear enough, I discovered similar traces on the opposite side of the bifolium. There, it seems, the image of the Mother of God had been drawn, most likely in the pose of the so-called Eleousa. Of course, this impression is just an assumption, aroused by my fantasy, and must by no means be taken for granted.

The image of the archangel gave ground for a new interpretation. In the beginning, I had thought that *S(anc)t(a)e ec(c)l(esia)e* represented the incipit of a liturgical text, but my searches produced only two such texts, which by no means could have stood in this context. However, it could have been the incipit of the caption of the adjacent picture of the archangel, running in vertical order, such as: *S(anc)t(a)e ec(c)l(esia)e archistratega archangelus Michael*, derived from the phrase *SANCTAE ecclesiae miles / protector / princeps gloriosissimae caelestis militiae, sanctus Michael Archangelus / SANCTAE ecclesiae archistratega archangelus Michael*.



a



b



c

Figs 16a–c: Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, slav. NF 3 (Medical Folia), fol. 141a^v + f, with remnants of images discernible; © Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

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