

WRITTEN CULTURE IN GREAT MORAVIA AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SLAV NATIONS*

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Anyone intimately familiar with early-medieval European analyst and chronicler works knows that those of Russian provenience are their worthy march, and, in many cases are well in advance. The best evidence is *Povest vremennykh let* (Story of Contemporary Times) - one of the best chronicles written in the Middle Ages both in Eastern and Western Europe. Its authors employed an enormous amount of cognitive material - from Nordic Scandinavian sagas up to sources originating in our country when the great Central-European political power - the Great Moravian Empire - was constituted. The author - or to be more precise, the authors - of the *Povest* knew that the Great Moravian rulers, Rastislav and Svätopluk (and these authors also include Pribina's son Kocel in this group) asked Emperor Michael III to send them a teacher who would explicate the word to the Scripture for them and that the Emperor convinced two brothers from present-day Thessalonica (the Slavs used to call it "Solún" for short) to take on the task. The authors of *Povest* also knew that Constantine created a Slavonic alphabet and translated the necessary Holy Books into the Slavonic language for Rastislav's needs. Finally, they knew about the superhuman struggles the Thessalonica brothers had to undergo to uphold and defend their creative activity and how they obtained papal approbation of their work.

Povest vremennykh let thus documents that as early as the 11th century or the early 12th century at the latest, the outstanding literary work created in Great Moravia - the biography of one of the Thessalonica brothers, Methodius - was already known in Russia. Critical scholarship has since brought evidence to light that this involves a work of immense documentary value, for the author who wrote Methodius' biography very soon after the death of his teacher, included in it not only the essential facts of the life of his brother Constantine, but also numerous papal deeds, correspondence between the Byzantine court and Great Moravia, and numerous events from the life of the ruler, Svätopluk, who was Methodius' contemporary and closest collaborator. The author of Methodius' biography was immensely well-informed and hence, was in all probability

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none other than the native Great Moravian noble, Gorazd, who had an outstanding command of Latin language and writing, as well as of the Slavonic language and of Constantine's invention: the Glagolitic. He was able to put all his knowledge to good use with a mature literary mastership, a sense of politics and the cultural atmosphere of the times in which he himself lived. Therefore Methodius desired that Gorazd become his successor in his Slavonic apostolic work.

Gorazd's literary product - the biography of his teacher *The Life of Methodius* - was written in the old Slavonic language in Great Moravia between 885 and 887. It was already the intellectual property of Russian scholars by the end of the 11th or early 12th century and responsibly addressed the beginnings of Christianity among the Slavs, as well as about the introduction of the Slavonic language into the cultural achievements of contemporary Europe. The European dimensions of the old Slavonic cultural activity are more than evident and convincing if we add the cultural endeavours of Bohemia and present-day Poland, Croatia, Bulgaria and former Yugoslavia (specifically in Macedonia) to it. It was an achievement that touched the very essence of a part of European culture and civilization.

Let us dwell on the most substantial element to which the information in *Povest vremennykh let* referred: under what circumstances, under whose initiative and, in general, how was this momentous step taken that led to a cultural revolution of the Slav world - to the birth of a writing, a cultural language and the foundations of a literature?

The mission sent from court of the Great Moravian ruler Rastislav to Byzantium was no fortuitous, adventurous act, but rather a diplomatic undertaking well thought-out to the smallest detail, with a definite purpose in view. Before turning to the Byzantine emperor, Rastislav had first sent a similar message to Pope Nicholas I, although he was well aware that the latter was closely bound to the Bavarian clergy by a strong link and thus could not satisfy the Great Moravian demand. That course of action had but one aim in view: to show that the Great Moravian ruler who had to wage war against the East-Frankish Empire almost every year did not bypass the diplomatic centre of the West-European world - the papal curia which was strongly dependent on Frankish military and political power for protection and defence - and consequently did not intend to be its enemy.

Sometime in autumn of 862, Rastislav's mission appeared at the Byzantine court - the second (and perhaps even the first) cultural centre of what was then known as Europe. The mission was well-acquainted with the protocol in force here and therefore submitted its request not only orally, but also in writing. Unfortunately, its exact text has not been preserved. However, we know its content from two sources. Two items unambiguously dominate it: 1. At the time of Rastislav's rule Great Moravia was already a Christian State; priests from "Wallachia, Greece and Germania" had been sharing in its Christianization for a long time; 2. The Great Moravian mission asked Byzantium for a bishop that would preach God's word in Moravia in the Slavonic language.

Byzantine diplomacy with one of the most learned men of the then Europe at its head - Photius - was faced with a very difficult task. In truth, until recently, not even scholars exactly understood Rastislav's mission. In the first place they did not believe that Great Moravia had been a Christian State for long. True, indices in the language existed - from sources such as the *Freisian Fragments* recorded in the 11th century. These intimated that missionaries who had worked on the Great Moravian territory before of Constantine and Methodius came, had translated the essential catechetical needs either from Italian or High German into the language of Western and Southern Slavs in order to bring them closer to the Slav population. However, the linguistic results remained hypothetical until, some forty years ago, when archaeologists succeeded in uncovering the foundations of stone-built Christian churches in Great Moravia. Architects have also endeavoured to answer - especially according to the style of the buildings - who built these simple little churches and monumental cathedrals. It has been shown that they were builders not only from the Bavarian - Germanic area, but also that numerous builders came from the area of present-day Dalmatia which was under Byzantine rule. In the light of all this we better understand the text of Rastislav's message, namely that sharing in the Christianization of his country were missionaries "from Wallachia, Greece and also Germania". The patriarchate of Aquileia and the Byzantine enclaves which at the time also included Venice, represented a civilizing circuit - together with the Germanic area - from which Christianity penetrated Great Moravia. Therefore, Rastislav's mission provided the Byzantine court with responsible and precise information.

Then what, in fact, did Rastislav and his court solicit from the Byzantine cultural and political centre? In order to answer this question we must first glance at the internal conditions which prevailed within the Great Moravian State. We know that at the time of Rastislav's rule, who had come to the throne with the help of the Frankish king, Louis the German, the Great Moravian State was under the full bondage of Frankish power. In spite of this, Rastislav's policy tended towards evident emancipatory goals. At the time, he strove for this with sword in hand. He pursued a series of devastating wars with the East-Frankish Empire in which the local population bled, but without any major success. He succeeded to include in his State a minor area of present-day south-eastern Slovakia and a bit of land on the right bank of the Danube (present-day Esztergom) in Hungary. That was lamentably little for him to consider himself successful on the throne. All his undertakings were nipped in the bud beforehand by what we might term today as "the fifth column" in the rear, which was represented by the German clergy who sided with their superiors in Salzburg and Passau. Rastislav and his court decided to get out of this predicament by establishing their own national Church within the State. That was the substance of his mission to the Byzantine court; that is why he asked for a bishop who had the power to organize such a Church.

Photius - Emperor Michael III's right hand - very soon understood the position of Great Moravia which at the given moment formed a buffer state in the vacuum of Central Europe. As a matter of fact, it spread between the Bulgarian State and the East-Frankish

Empire with whom the Bulgarians had already concluded treaties of alliance. At the same time, Bulgaria had been waging protracted wars with Byzantium. Thus, the astute statesman Photius very quickly judged that in Great Moravia he might find a useful ally against the Bulgarian State, one capable of pacifying his enemy in the west. At the same time he was ignorant of the standard of Great Moravian Christianity (about which even Frankish missionaries had expressed their view that it was still "rudis" - rough). Therefore, he sent no bishop to establish an independent province in Great Moravia as demanded, but chose two scholarly brothers and thus met great Rastislav's request at least in part. As a matter of fact, these men, like many of their contemporaries from Thessalonica, spoke not only Greek, but also the Slavonic language of the Macedonian Slavs. In addition, Constantine was a sensitive and scholarly European philologist who in the intended interests of the Byzantine administration, endeavoured to record the complicated Slavonic language in writing. The Byzantine court then entrusted him with the task, not only for the needs of the empire anymore, but also to meet the request of a friend and ally - the Great Moravian Rastislav - i.e. to bring to term his philosophical endeavours and to prepare not only an alphabet, but also a translation of the basic liturgical books which they would take to Great Moravia. We owe it to the geniality and linguistic talent of Constantine who in his childhood years - possibly from his mother - learned the Slavonic language and that the foundations he laid for the Slav cultural revolution were not amateur, but extremely qualified and highly professional. There is no doubt that this was a source of great worry and anxiety for him. He was tormented by the thought that with an inexact translation of the Scripture he would be guilty of heresy which, like the sting of a curse, hung over every intellectual in the Byzantine Empire. Hence, he also tried to resist the imperial court, but ultimately submitted. His authentic statement which his biographer recorded evidently comes from there: "Who can write a speech on water and win a heretic's name?"

To understand the initial stage of Great Moravian Slavs' cultural revolution, further questions have to be answered also: How and when did the Byzantine mission reach Great Moravia? What was the character of the mission in its new environment? To answer these questions, as we know, is not always simple for scholarship, and of late it seems as if it is getting increasingly complicated.

In the first place, it should be observed that the mission of Constantine and Methodius to Great Moravia was a consistent state-political undertaking of the highest diplomacy in the Europe of that time. Hence, it is quite clear that the Byzantines could not dispatch this military, diplomatic and cultural escort through the territory of the Bulgarian State with which they had waged cruel and relentless wars for years. This point is evidently a stumbling block to many researchers who neglect this elementary but fundamental fact and deduce irrelevant conclusions from it both for the destiny of Bulgarian as well as Russian Christianity and writings. The mission quite definitely set out along the most frequented road connecting Byzantium with its Italian possessions. It was an ancient Roman road - Via Egnatia - from Byzantium to Salonica and thence, running across the

territory of present-day southern Slavs, as far as Dyrhachia - near today's Croatian Dubrovnik. Such an overland route had everything such a weighty State mission and its participants could need: a hard road maintained since Roman times, relay stations for horses, caravan serais, a military escort - *conductus* - etc. At Dyrhachia the mission embarked on boats which took them across Adriatic to the garrisoned Byzantine province of Venice. From there a much frequented road ran right to the centre of the Great Moravian Empire - to present-day Bratislava - where, in addition, there was an ideal ford across the great Danube River. That, too, was in fact a centuries-old, well-groomed road that had been constructed ages earlier by the hands of slaves and Roman soldiers.

And thus, the distinguished mission from Byzantium that was to turn the wheel of the Slav's cultural history, may have been welcomed with bread and salt within the precincts of present-day Bratislava.

Space does not permit me here to describe in any detail the work of Constantine's and Methodius' mission in Great Moravia, or the struggle they waged with Europe for the recognition of Slavonic liturgical language, for inclusion of the Slavs among the cultural nations of the Europe. It might perhaps be relevant to recall Constantine's determined stand, when in a dispute about the trilingual restrictions, he proclaimed the most democratic, humanistic demand of modern society to be the right to one's own language. For the sun, as Constantine then said, shines equally on all.

At the time the Byzantine mission was active in Great Moravia, a programmed training institution was set up, which generated extensive literary work. Much of it was translation, particularly liturgical books, but much of it was also original, destined to serve the everyday needs of Great Moravian society. There were not only odes in honour of rulers and cultural personalities, but also legal literature controlling the course of the society. Methodius - after his brother's death - although himself as weakened old man, translated everything which he thought might serve to consolidate the Great Moravian State and its social stratification into the Slavonic language.

We all know that the Great Moravian era of Slavonic literature and literary culture ended in an unforeseen cataclysm. In the complex political, ideological and power struggles following Methodius' death, events took such a turn that his pupils and disciples were expelled. Some of them went to Bohemian province, some to Poland, some to present-day Bulgaria and some of them were bought by the Byzantines at slave markets in Venice. Byzantium was concerned about them. They reinforced the number of pupils whom Methodius had left there, together with Slav priests and books, when Methodius visited the court of Basil I (in 881) five years before his death. Evidently already in this time the project of a programmed Christianization of Russia was being born in Byzantine diplomatic circles, which as we know, ultimately proved successful. Byzantium with its Slavonic programme had been able, even before Methodius' pupils came to Russia, to enforce both the Slavonic language and also the fruits of the cultural endeavours of Western Slavs from the 9th century into its original, culturally prepared

and advanced Russian milieu. That is to say, if we look upon the product of literary production in Great Moravia from this viewpoint, we find advanced works not only of hagiographic character with a strong historical core, but also those from state, legal, homiletic - and of course the Christianizing - domains. We may not even forget today that Christianity as an ideology stands on the divide between a class and classless society and in such a position functions as a catalyst of progress of the time.

And what about the literature and writings that are so closely bound with the process of Christianization? I will reply by paraphrasing Constantine himself:

*For without books, naked are all nations...
Condemned to eternal torment as prey.*

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