

# The Old Bulgarian Language: between Myth and Reality

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Geographic location

The Balkans: for the other populations in the region, there is a negative connotation or the connotation is nonexistent. It has a positive connotation for the Bulgarians. The denomination “Balkan countries” or “The Balkans” appeared during the Ottoman Empire.

At present, there is a stereotypical image of the Balkans: it is a historically charged region with excessive historical memory, and incompatible ethnic and religious identities.

The most accurate denomination in use is southeastern Europe. However, this continues to be a geopolitically charged category: there was an inheritance of the two ideologies after the fall of the iron curtain.

Bulgaria is located in southeastern Europe and consequently suffers from all of the stereotypes concerning the region and its history.

### 1.2 The myths

Holm Sundhaussen believes that one of the characteristics of Balkan mentality includes a propensity for myths. These cover, for instance, the myths from the pre-Ottoman period, which was considered to be a “golden” period, the myth of Ottoman domination, national rebirth, victimization, and the Kosovo-myth (cf. Todorova 2004:2).

According to Maria Todorova, the structure of the Balkan myths does not differ much from the myths from Western Europe. For example: the “golden” myth of antiquity, the myth of Rome in Italian national ideology, and the myth of the battle of Poitiers. In Holm Sundhaussen’s thought, what distinguishes our myths is a cluster of characteristics that clearly determines their profile. Sundhaussen believes the character of myths to be relatively stable in time and he carries out a static analysis. Todorova argues that as myths are transmitted through education and other cultural and political processes, they become active and have a certain effect in very distinct periods. Generally, a collective investment in memory seems to be more significant in periods of acceleration of history, quick and radical social changes, or identity issues. During the past two centuries, southeastern Europe has lived political and ideological turns that have been cruel and implied transformations in terms of identity. Historical memory becomes a powerful tool for explanation and mobilization. It is one of the objective attributes of the ethnic group or nation, as well as language, territory, economy, state, social structure and culture (cf. Todorova 2004:2).

## 2. The myth

According to René Girard, the founding myth offers the impression that there are enigmas that should be deciphered. The enigma is essential and cannot be avoided. Contemporary theories react to the omnipresence of fiction, which was a characteristic trend in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The imperative of fiction is rejected, and what must be detected is the real. The myth is a transfiguration of a real drama. Durkheim speaks about an extremely powerful cause that confers to reality [certain] aspects that correspond to it and [other] aspects that don't (cf. Girard 2002:1).

Reality becomes mythical, as is known, for historical, political, social, cultural and psychological reasons.

## 3. The Old Bulgarian Language

### 3.1 The Cyrillic alphabet

The Cyrillic alphabet was created at the beginning of the second half of the 9th century by Cyril and Methodius, two aristocratic brothers who occupied high positions in the Byzantine court. The exact year is 855 AD as marked by Greek and Bulgarian sources (Chernorizets Hrabar).

In 866 AD, the alphabet and translations of sacred texts are published in the territory of the Bulgarian Kingdom by three disciples of Cyril and Methodius, namely Kliment, Naum and Angelary. The royal court and King Boris I himself sheltered the three disciples. They provided them with financial means and authorized the construction of monasteries and schools to teach the new writing. Translation centers were also established in Bulgarian (Slavonic) to translate the sacred texts from Greek.

Thus begins an intensive creation of schools, of learning the new writing and translation of religious texts and books.

In 893 AD, after the alphabetization of large part of the Bulgarian people, and after the rewriting of several sacred books into Cyrillic, King Boris I declares that the Cyrillic alphabet and the new writing are the official language of the State and Church during a national Meeting (most powerful institution in medieval Bulgaria).

During the 10<sup>th</sup> century, missionaries introduced the Cyrillic alphabet in Russia and Serbian counties.

The scarce information regarding the life of the two brothers and the silence of historians and chroniclers from that distant time has led, according to Bogidar Dimitrov, to two myths in Bulgarian thought. The first, created by Church historians, sustains the religious and missionary nature of the motives that led the two scholars to create the Cyrillic alphabet: give the Slavic people a writing that would allow them to better understand the prayers and liturgies and easily adopt Christianity. The second myth, created by secular historians, affirms the political nature of the two brothers' work: put an end to the three language dogma (Hebrew, ancient Greek and Latin) admitted by the Roman Church to celebrate God. The aim

would be to consolidate the Church of Constantinople and Byzantine power by evangelizing the Slavic people from Great Moravia through a written language that corresponded to the spoken one (cf. Dimitrov 2005:6).

These two myths appeared for geopolitical reasons, taking into account the strength of Greek national doctrine, and for ideological reasons, having Soviet hegemony in view. These two myths persist today in political thought and cultured discourse because of the inertia of society, education, and historians.

What are the historical facts?

### **Social and ethnic origin**

The saint brothers were born in Thessaloniki, into the family of a high-ranking civil servant who was second in the administration of the second largest city of the Byzantium.

Their mother, named Maria, was Bulgarian according to hagiographic writings. The father, called Lev (Leoncius), was Greek. In one of Cyril's hagiographic writings, it states that his ancestors were from an aristocratic family that was close to the king, khan, but that was forced to immigrate to Byzantium because of their Christian faith. At that period only Bulgaria had khan, as well as aristocratic families of Christian faith.

Consequently, as Bogidar Dimitrov affirms, one can admit that the two scholars who created the Cyrillic alphabet are Bulgarian by ethnic origin as they are from an ancient Bulgarian family that found refuge in Byzantium after political battles in Bulgaria during the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Dimitrov 2005:6).

### **Analysis of the officially confirmed dates**

King (khan) Boris I took the throne in 852 AD. A considerable number of the Bulgarian people (with a Slavic ethnic majority and a Proto-Bulgarian ethnic minority) had been Christianized. Therefore, the people spoke Bulgarian (Slavic language with Proto-Bulgarian elements), while the Holy Scriptures and liturgies were in Greek. The official adoption of Christianity became a necessity to consolidate the kingdom's legislative system and its place in Christian Europe.

In 855 AD the alphabet was created and translations were made.

In 863 AD the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Emperor officially recognized the Slavic alphabet and the sacred books in Slavonic.

In 863 AD King Boris I was officially baptized and Christianity was proclaimed as the kingdom's official religion.

In 869 AD in Rome, at the "Santa Maria Maggiore" church, Pope Adrian II gave a solemn blessing of the Cyrillic alphabet and liturgical texts in Slavonic for political reasons. Thus, the new alphabet and liturgical books are recognized by the two legislative centers of Medieval Europe, Constantinople and Rome. Never again will the Church of Constantinople or the Church of Rome allow liturgies in the spoken language of a people.

**Logical question:** why did King Boris I receive the disciples of Cyril and Methodius with such honor and organize such an extensive campaign to create schools, alphabetize the population and translate the liturgical texts?

**Bogidar Dimitrov's hypothesis (2005:6)**

King Boris I elaborated a strategic plan of great historic value for the future of Bulgaria. The aim of this plan was to implement Christianity and guarantee the independence of the future church. Now the monarch knew quite well that a Bulgarian church could not exist and be independent from Constantinople without the liturgies and sacred books being in a language that was spoken and understood by its people, but also recognized by the Byzantine patriarch and the Pope. Consequently, the logical hypothesis is that King Boris I asked the two scholars of Slavic origin, Cyril and Methodius, to create a writing that corresponded to the spoken language of the majority of the Bulgarian people. Hence, there was a compromise between the king and the two brothers who had an extremely secretive mission that was out of reach of the byzantine authorities. That is why no chronicler of that time mentioned their great work. When the alphabet was officially recognized by the byzantine patriarch (for political and hegemonic reasons), Christianity was proclaimed as Bulgaria's official religion. Many years later, the liturgies continued in Greek for strategic and political reasons, but no obstacle could prevent the spread of the new writing and celebration of God in Slavonic. In the meanwhile, Cyril passed away unexpectedly and that is why his disciples arrived in Bulgaria afterwards (in 886 AD) and developed the work of alphabetization and translation of great historic value.

Thus an important collection of mainly religious texts were written in Slavonic. They would later reach Russia and the existing Serbian counties during that period.

As a result, the work by the two brothers, which was organized and supported by the Bulgarian King Boris I, acquired the value of a historic mission in the Slavic world and Medieval Europe. It is this fact that originates in the emergence of several myths. The first two myths mentioned earlier devalue the work by the two scholars and the strategic vision held by King Boris I. However, in the collective imaginary of the Bulgarian people there is an overvaluation of those same facts. The mythical discourse that transmits this overvaluation is based on:

- the figures of Cyril and Methodius. Schools, libraries, and universities adopted the name "Saints Cyril and Methodius". In 1980, Pope John Paul II included the saint brothers Cyril and Methodius in the "Roman General Calendar" as "Patrons" of Europe, with public holidays in German-speaking countries.
- July 5<sup>th</sup> is a public holiday in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in homage to Cyril for having arrived in Great Moravia in 863 AD. May 24<sup>th</sup> is a public holiday in Bulgaria and Macedonia in honor of the two brothers.
- the Kingdom of Boris I, designated as the start of the golden age in Bulgarian culture;
- the splendor of medieval Bulgarian culture and its spread throughout the Slavic world;
- the Old Bulgarian language which served as a foundation for Slavic languages.

### 3.2 The Old Bulgarian language

The written form of the Old Bulgarian language came about between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is the official language of the Bulgarian Kingdom, founded in 681, which reunited the two ethnic groups, the Slavs from the southeast and the Proto-Bulgarians. According to historians, the formation of the Bulgarian nation is a long process that occurred between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. The predominance of the Slavic language became evident during this process. Today, only a few lexemes remain from Proto-Bulgarian. Therefore, it is essential not to confuse the Old Bulgarian language with Proto-Bulgarian. The former is a Slavic language that falls within the Indo-European languages, and the origin of the latter is still unknown: it is either a Turkic language, from the Altaic language family, which has spoken languages in western China, north of Siberia and Eastern Europe; or, according to more recent theories, it is an Iranian language from the Iranian language group that belongs to the Indo-European family (cf. Dicionário da Antiga Língua Búlgara 1999:5).

Thus, the Old Bulgarian language, which was spoken in the Bulgarian Kingdom of Asparukh and fixed in writing by the two scholars Cyril and Methodius, is a Slavic language (with Proto-Slavic origin) that includes some remains of Proto-Bulgarian.

The dialect from Thessaloniki in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century is also based on Old Bulgarian as the first written Slavic language.

Religious and secular literature written in Old Bulgarian provided the cultural foundation of the Slavic people in Medieval Europe. The Old Bulgarian language becomes the written language of all Slavic people. It is because of this international function, that we have the following designations: *Old Slavonic* and *Old Church Slavonic*.

The succeeding changes to the language between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries first affect the spoken language and later integrate the norm. Modifications have been recorded in the noun system (declinations gradually disappeared), adjectives, pronouns, participles, and the infinitive. The verb system has been more conservative. New characteristics appeared, such as: the article of nouns, the reduced form of subject pronouns, and the particle to form the future. In general, the evolution formed an analytic language with a complex system of prepositions.

During the Ottoman domain, Old Bulgarian and literature lost the function they had in the Slavic world. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Bulgarian language was influenced by Serbian and the liturgical language of the Russian Church (Old Church Russian) with the latter being considered the Russian variant of Old Bulgarian. The influence of the Old Church Russian became stronger after the appearance of several printed liturgical books. It is generally considered that contamination by Old Church Russian ends in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In this case, we can ask ourselves if Old Bulgarian is not a mythical language.

### 4. The Old Bulgarian Language Dictionary

*The two volume dictionary of the Old Bulgarian language* offers a negative response to our question: all of the words, which were taken from the oldest Slavic texts, exist in modern Bulgarian with the same or similar meaning.

The team of linguists from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences created a very important work for Slavic studies, and particularly the study of the history of the Bulgarian language.

The lexicon of the oldest written texts in Slavonic (Old Bulgarian) has always aroused interest in Slavic researchers. Miclochitch and Sreznevski wrote dictionaries and there is the excellent dictionary by the Czech Academy of Sciences as well.

How important is the dictionary by the Bulgarian Academy? Iskra Hristova-Chomova highlights the following points:

- bearing in mind the fact that the oldest texts were written in Old Bulgarian, Bulgarian linguists and lexicographers fulfilled their duties by surveying the lexical depth of these texts.
- the dictionary reveals the relationship between the lexicon of the old texts between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries and the lexicon in the modern Bulgarian language. It becomes evident that from all of the existing Slavic languages, the lexicon from modern Bulgarian is more similar to the lexicon of the first texts written in Cyrillic.
- the dictionary shows the dual semantic proximity of the Bulgarian language at the level of the cult language, especially regarding ecclesiastical vocabulary. One can also note that the old meaning of some lexemes disappears in the modern language, but continued in the dialects.
- the referred work also demonstrates that the saint disciples of Cyril and Methodius and the lettered men who followed, based themselves on the spoken Bulgarian language when they translated Greek ecclesiastical texts.
- an important specificity in this work, unlike other dictionaries of this type, is the attention given to participles that are used as nouns. According to Iskra Hristova-Chomova, the participles in Old Bulgarian have a specific status, especially in the translated texts, and it is incorrect to consider them as being part of the verb paradigm (Hristova-Chomova 2009:7).

The purpose of the Dictionary, as indicated by the authors, is as follows: to present, on the one hand, the complete semantic value of the lexical units and their use and combination capacity, and on the other, to show the lexical continuation from Old to Modern Bulgarian.

The lexicon organized by the Dictionary was taken from classic texts written in Old Bulgarian between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries or copied for the last time during that same period and thus conserved until our time.

However, there are no documents from the initial period of the implementation of the written Slavic language. The oldest copied manuscripts date back to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. In spite of the fact that they are posterior to the brothers' death, Slavic researchers believe these manuscripts essentially represent the language translated by these two scholars.

The number of handwritten sources and epigraphic inscriptions is 52. The classification of these sources is carried out according to the alphabet used, either Glagolitic or Cyrillic. In fact, during that period lettered men would use both alphabets. Later on all of the handwritten texts are published in Cyrillic.

The dictionary presents all of the words contained in the sources independently of their frequency. In this manner, it can be considered a thesaurus of the Old Bulgarian language.

The authors intend to propose a complete semantic analysis of each lexical unit despite the reduced number of sources and its unvaried thematic and functional character (Dicionário da Antiga Língua Búlgara 1999:5).

## 5. Between myth and reality

The facts that give origin to some mythical narratives, regarding the Old Bulgarian language, are as follows:

- the inexistence of original handwritten sources between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Due to several dramatic events in Bulgaria's history, the original written texts disappeared during the time of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Large part of the handwritten manuscripts, which were later printed, can only be found in libraries outside of Bulgaria.
- the reduced number of texts written in Old Bulgarian and its theme is not particularly varied. Large part of the religious and secular literature was destroyed during the wars and the periods of foreign dominance (Byzantine and Ottoman).
- the initial state of Proto-Bulgarian studies, or the inexistence of a well-founded theory about the language that was spoken by part of the aristocracy and the people.
- Bulgarian suffered and had its lexicon modified because of Byzantine Greek and later Russian influence.

The Old Bulgarian Language Dictionary is the first scientific response to all of the questions regarding the history of the Bulgarian language, both old and modern. However, many facts still await serious research that does not entail nationalist objectives and political and ideological interests.

The mythical discourse lies between two extremes:

- devaluation of the importance of the Old Bulgarian language. It is a relatively weak discourse that is supported by Soviet science and communist ideology and Greek nationalist ideas. The absence of studies in other languages from Bulgarian historians facilitates the depreciation of the role of Old Bulgarian.
- overvaluation of Old Bulgarian and the Bulgarian language in general. Cultured discourse, school manuals and literature contribute to the fixation of the relationship between language and identity in a collective conscience. During the most dramatic periods in history it was the Bulgarian language and culture that consolidated our national identity.

From the national Renaissance to today, Bulgarian literature has presented proof of the glorification of the language which originates in its mythical image in the collective conscience of Bulgarians.

In Paisij Hilendarski's work, titled *História Eslavo-búlgara* (1762) we find several references to the two saint brothers and their disciples. Paisij mentions the importance of the Slavic writings and the first liturgical books translated from Greek and Latin. He also highlights the

fact that Bulgarians were the first Slavs that wrote and read Old Bulgarian (called Slavonic during that period).

Petar Beron's work, titled "Abecedário do peixe" (1824) is the first school manual written in modern Bulgarian with the Old Church Slavonic alphabet. The author was conscious of the insufficient study of canonic books written in Old Bulgarian (Church Slavonic) and created his work which marked the beginning of modern secular education.

## 6. No conclusion

For several historical reasons, the collective conscience of the Bulgarian people sustains the conviction of the need to prove the importance of its language and culture. This fact permits overvaluation of the function of the Cyrillic alphabet, the Slavic writings and the spread of Old Bulgarian.

However, in the context of the great European family, the history of language and culture of small Bulgaria represents an example of resistance to linguistic and cultural hegemony by one or other nation: it neither isolates itself, nor assimilates to the other, but offers an openness and mutual respect to share a richness and diversity that advances the project of a European cultural identity, be it a utopian project or not.

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