The Athonite Period in the Life of Saint Romylos of Vidin

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The main purpose of the present study is to enhance our knowledge about the Athonite period in the life of St. Romylos, a well-known saint of mixed origin—both Greek and Bulgarian—born in the Danubian town of Vidin and deceased in the Serbian monastery of Ravanica ca. 1385. Both the Greek and the Slavic version of his Vita refer to the period he spent on Athos interlacing popular hagiographical clichés with patristic sermons on the eternal value of the monastic virtues, yielding us no essential data about his participation in the cultural and philological life of the monastic peninsula. At this point, we are obliged to acknowledge that commonly accepted opinion on the chronological sequence of the Slavic and Greek variant of his Life has been established only in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

P. Syrku, the scholar who first discovered and published the Slavic text in 1900, based on a Serbian manuscript belonging to the Hilferding collection, was inclined to accept that it was not a translation but an original text composed directly in Slavic. However, in 1937 I. Dujčev identified a fragment of its Greek prototype and later a full copy of its text, which was preserved in the Athonite monastery of Dionysiou. In 1961 F. Halkin finally published the Greek life of St. Romylos using...

1. A comprehensive summary of the data concerning the biography of St. Romylos is published by Kl. Ivanova, Prostranno zitie na Romil Vidinski ot Grigorj Dobropisec, Stara bulgarska literatura IV. litetpani teorei, Sofia 1986, 656-658.


a manuscript kept in another Athonite foundation — the Monastery of Docheiariou. What is to be immediately remarked is that the Greek hagiological tradition connected with St. Romylos seems to be exclusively dependent upon Mount Athos and its libraries. This observation indicates that we must pay special attention and scrutinize in details the data pertaining to the Athonite period of his religious activity.

St. Romylos was definitely a specific, but neither very popular nor widely venerated saint. According to K. Ivanova, his cult is well attested only on Athos and in the region adjacent to the Monastery of Ravanica in Serbia, where he passed away. Being a follower of Gregory of Sinai and one of the founders of the well-known monastic centre at Paroria, in eastern Thrace, he was one of the most eminent and fervent supporters of the hesychast theological doctrine, as it was developed in the middle of the 14th century. However, he was compelled to escape to Athos shortly after the first Turkish depredations struck the monastic «desert» at Paroria in the early 1350s. What is of paramount importance to our survey is that the two versions of his Vita uniformly inform us that arriving on Athos he encountered persons who belonged to his own nationality: εξέρχεται τάχιστα τῶν ἐκείσε καὶ καταλαμβάνει τὸ Άνιόν ὅρος τοῦ Ἀθωνος, ἐν ὑδέ ὁ καὶ πολλοῖς ἁγίοις ἐν τούτῳ εὐρόν ὀικεῖόντων ὁμοτρόπων διαλαθεὶ καὶ μάλιστα τῶν ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου γένους, εἰς ὧν ὄντως διήγηται — ὁμιλεῖ ὁμηρικὸν ἅμα ὡς ηὔνυ οἱ γῆς ηὗ κἀκτορ αὐτοῦ ἔργα. Η ἡμέρα, ἡ διαπράξεις, ἡ σωτηρία — εἰς ὧν οἱ προσόντες ἅμα ἔνωσαν τὴν ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου γένους εἰς ὧν οἱ προσόντες ἅμα ἔνωσαν. What we have to determine in this case is the meaning of the phrase ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου γένους (ὡς καὶ ἔσω). The hagiographical tradition connected with St. Romylos makes it clear that his lay name, Raiko in the Greek and Rusko in the Slavic version of his Life, was purely Bulgarian, and emphasizes that he was half Greek half Bulgarian: καὶ ὁ μὲν πατὴρ 'Ῥωμαίος ἐν τῷ γένει, ἐκ δὲ τῶν Βουλγάρων ἦ μήτηρ (ὡς καὶ ἔσω). What we have to determine in this case is the meaning of the phrase ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου γένους (ὡς καὶ ἔσω). The hagiographical tradition connected with St. Romylos makes it clear that his lay name, Raiko in the Greek and Rusko in the Slavic version of his Life, was purely Bulgarian, and emphasizes that he was half Greek half Bulgarian: καὶ ὁ μὲν πατὴρ 'Ῥωμαίος ἐν τῷ γένει, ἐκ δὲ τῶν Βουλγάρων ἦ μήτηρ (ὡς καὶ ἔσω). What we have to determine in this case is the meaning of the phrase ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου γένους (ὡς καὶ ἔσω).

5. IVANOVA, Prostranno žitje na Romil Vidinski, 657.
7. HALKIN, Un ermite des Balkans au XlVe siècle, 131, chapter 12, I, 29-33.
8. SYRKU, Žize prepodobnogo Romila, 20, chapter 19.
10. SYRKU, Žize prepodobnogo Romila, 3, chapter 2.
11. HALKIN, Un ermite des Balkans au XlVe siècle, 131, note 1.
στα τών ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου γένους may well refer to the Bulgarian monks of the Zographou Monastery11, but the text, both Greek and Slavic, contains no evidence of such a connection. On the contrary, it states that after a long wandering across the most desert places in the Holy Peninsula, Romylos finally took up residence near the Lavra of Saint Athanasios, at a locality called Melana: πολλούς τόινυν καὶ τὸ Ἅγιο Ὄρος μεταμείψας τόπους ὑστερον ἔρχεται καὶ εἰς τὸ πλησίον δρόσος τῆς ἱερᾶς Λαύρας, ὥσπερ καὶ Μελανά προσπρόφευται12 - οὐκ οὖν γέρον προσλαμβάνει ἅπασα πεπάλαιδεια προσεχθείν ἐκ χωράνδος γορδὶς εἰμινής λέιψεως. In a study we published in 1998 we embarked on an attempt to provide a comprehensive prosopographical catalogue of the Slavs attested in the traditionally Bulgarian Athonite monastery of Zographou14. As far as Romylos’ connection with this foundation was concerned, the result of our research was negative: we identified no data indicating that he had ever had any contacts with it. One can accept that this may well be due to the lack of documentary evidence elucidating St. Romylos’ stay on Athos, but let us not forget that his Vita yields us a real cornucopia of information about his activity as an anchorite in the vicinity of the Megiste Lavra15. As P. Devos proved in 1961, the Slavic Life of the saint slightly diverges from the Greek original, but all the basic points remain unchanged16. Romylos’ trips between Zagora and Paroria are described in abundant details, and the same is valid about his sojourn on Athos. It is, therefore, rather improbable that Romylos’ disciple and biographer, Gregory the Calligrapher, might have deliberately omitted to mention the contacts of his spiritual father with the Monastery of Zographou, if there were any.

At this point we must stress that in the very beginning of the twentieth century, the Serbian scholar Lj. Stojanović identified in a Slavic manuscript of the National Library in Paris an inscription stating that the codex was copied in a district situated under the summit of Mount Athos and named Κακὴ Πλάξ by the scribe Dionysios, who was residing there with his spiritual father, Theoktistos, and the monks Simon and Thomas. The most intriguing element in the whole inscription is that Dionysios mentions as a commissioner of the copy a person described as «our father and lord

12. HALKIN, Un ermite des Balkans au XVe siècle, 132, chapter 12, 1. 41-44.
The inscription contains no date, but its implication is that Theoktistos, Dionysios, Simon, and Thomas were living in the desolated southern part of the Atho-
nite peninsula, close to its highest summit, and were subordinated to the spiritual
jurisdiction of a certain Romylos, who had commissioned them to copy a Slavic
manuscript containing narrations about monastic deeds and feats. Thus, the
expression _νὸποιομ_ leaves no doubt that their abode must have been built not
far from the Monastery of Megiste Lavra and the 2033 metres high peak of Mount
Athos. For commissioning the reproduction of a Slavic manuscript the spiritual
superintendent of this small monastic establishment, Romylos, must have been
Slavic-speaking. The question we have to answer in this case is was he identical with
St. Romylos of Vidin, the hesychast anchorite residing at the locality Melana near
the Megiste Lavra?

Interpreting erroneously κανιμάζει as χαλλάντης, Lj. Stojanović was the first
who in 1903 suggested that the text was referring to St. Romylos of Vidin. The
first argument in favour of this suggestion derives from the very text of St.
Romylos’ _Life_. Being frequently disturbed by a plethora of monks attempting to
approach him and be edified by his spiritual instructions, shortly before leaving
Athos forever in 1371, the saint is said to have requested his spiritual son and later
biographer, Gregory, to find a place at the northern foot of Mount Athos lone and
solitary enough to become his next, more secluded abode: ἀπελθε, αδελφέ, εις τὰ
πρόποδα του ’Αθωνος εν τῷ βορεινφ μέρει και περισκοπήσας καλάς έρεύνησαι
εξερείν τόπον πεδινόν, ἵνα ἐκέπολε ποιήσω μου τήν κατοίκησιν. Analysing the
expression describing the location of St. Romylos’ new hermitage - _εις τὰ πρόποδα άσ-

17. Lj. STOJANOVIĆ, _Starī srpski zapisi i natpisi_, II, Beograd 1903, 408, no 4205. For a photographic
reproduction of the inscription, cf. T. Jovanović, Inventar srpskih cirilskih rukopisa Narodne Biblioteke
u Parizu, Arheografski prilozi 3, 1981, 306-308, Slave 8 (third quarter of the 14th century), i. 231r. See
also p. 325, pl. 6.

18. STOJANOVIĆ, _Starī srpski zapisi i natpisi_, II, 408. T. Jovanović (Inventar srpskih cirilskih rukopisa,
306-308) offers no comment on Romylos’ identity.

19. HALLEN, _Un ermite des Balkans au XIVe siècle_, chapter 21, l. 6-8.

one must acknowledge that it is essentially identical with the phrase ΠΌΑΛΩΛ used by the scribe Dionysios. However, the evidence provided by this coincidence may be compelling but yet not conclusive, so we must look for more arguments.

The location where the four Slavic-speaking disciples of kyr Romyllos resided is denoted with a purely Greek name—Κακή Πλάξ (HAΚΚΛΚΗΠΛΛ). As far as we are acquainted with the historical topography of the Holy Mountain, this place-name appears in no Greek documents or hagiographical texts pertaining to Mount Athos. This is, no doubt, rather strange an occurrence. Judging from the name, one can suggest that the hermitage of Κακή Πλάξ was probably identical with the minor Athonite foundation of Πλακάς. However, this identification is rather problematic because, as P. Chrestou argues, the Plakas Monastery is known to have been located at the Athonite capital of Karyai, i.e. far away from the foot of Mount Athos. It is mentioned for the first time in 1076, when its superior, Kosmas, signed an act of the protos Paul presently kept in the Monastery of Chilandar. It is rather interesting that the foundation of Plakas re-appears in the Athonite archives only after a total silence of nearly two centuries: in 1287 a certain Λάζαρος μοναχός τοῦ Πλακά is mentioned as a witness in a document of the Megiste Lavra. It is, thereby, clear that is was a third rank monastery of very restricted importance, which could have been easily reverted to the status of dependency of any major Athonite monastic establishment. This really occurred in 1347, when the Serbian tsar Stephen Dušan, who was then visiting Mount Athos in person, requested the protos of Athos, Niphon, to bequeath it to Chilandar. Dušan’s pressure resulted in serious contradictions between the Greek dignitaries in the Athonite authorities and the Serbs of Chilandar, who were by this time the dominant ethnic group in the Protaton, i.e. the self-government of the monastic peninsula. The contradiction was settled down only in 1375, when the protos Gerasimos was finally entitled by the representatives of the Greek monasteries accredited to the Protaton to ratify the

22. V. MOSS-Α. SOVRE, Dodatki h grckim listinam Hilandarja (Supplemente ad acta graeca Chilandarii), Ljubljana 1948, 15, No 1, I. 75. Cf. also Διονυσία ΠΑΠΑΧΡΥΣΆΝΘΟΥ, Ό αθωνικός μοναχι­σμός. 'Αρχές και οργάνωση, Athens 1992, 406 and note 293, where two other signatures of the same superior are commented.
Annexation of Plakas to Chilandar. The long dispute about the independent or subordinated status of this small monastery indicates that it was by no means a calm hermitage of the type St. Romylos was looking for. It is, therefore, certain that the monastic establishment of Κακή Πλάξ cannot be identified with the Monastery of Plakas, and it seems that no answer can be given to the question about the exact location of Κακή Πλάξ.

Unexpectedly, a Slavic text with title Сказание о святом афонском горн, which was composed in 1560 by the superior of the Russian Athonite monastery of Saint Panteleimon, Joachim, offers us a sudden solution to the problem: it states that Κακή Πλάξ was the name of the «second» torrential current near the Monastery of Saint Paul: ρίκλος Πολημίδε, which, however, does not carry spring water, but rather the long-staying snow on the northern slope of Athos. It can be thereby identified with the torrent of the precipitous ravine descending to the sea near the north wall of the Monastery of Saint Paul, which is known to have been re-


25. Arhimandrit LEONID (L. KAVELIN), Сказание о Святой Афонской горе: история русского Пантелеимонова монастыря Иоанна и его святогорских старцев, St. Petersburg 1882, 26 27.


27. KAVELIN, Сказание о Святой Афонской горе, 26.

28. As far as the torrent of Καλαθά is concerned, the opinion of G. Smyrnakis differs seriously, as he identifies it with a locality between the monasteries of Saint Paul and Dionysiou. Cf. G. ΣΜΥΡΝΆΚΗΣ, Το "Αγιον "Όρος, Athens 1903 (repr. Karyes in 1988), 608. Taking into consideration the fact that the map of R. Zwenger reflects the modern condition of the Athonite place names, we must acknowledge that every attempt to explain this discrepancy would be to no avail.
established and built anew in the 1360s and 70s by the son of the Serbian sebastokrator Branko Mladenović, Gerasimos Radonja, and the oikieos of the Byzantine emperor, Radoslav Sabia. Taking into consideration these data, one can securely conclude that few years before 1371, when St. Romylos finally left Athos scared by the Turkish pirate raids unleashed on the Holy Mountain after the defeat of Despot John Uglješa in the battle of Černomen, he had decided to take up residence in a small hermitage at the northern foot of the highest part of the Holy Mountain. Though situated in the vicinity of the recently restored Monastery of Saint Paul, the place obviously belonged to the Megiste Lavra and must have been close enough to Romylos’ initial residence at the Melana.

It is evident that, despite his intention to live without serious contacts with the other Athonites, St. Romylos was compelled to act as the spiritual instructor of a small, probably Bulgarian-speaking group of anchorites, presided by a certain Theoktistos and including at least three other monks—Dionysios, Simon, and Thomas. His relation with them must have been not only one of spiritual edifying, but also one of positive cultural influence, since it is clear that it was him who instigated the Bulgarian hermits to devote part of their time to copying popular monastic texts in Slavic.

Having elucidated some of the details referring to St. Romylos’ Athonite period, we must pay a special attention to the recent discovery by K. Ivanova and P. Matejic of a text, which is thought to have been written by him in person and comprises Rules Recommendable for Proper Monastic Behaviour —κανόνες τού τυπικού της σκήτης. One of the most important details concerning this compilation of spiritually edifying instructions is that it is preserved in a single copy presently kept in Chilandar’s library. The author is mentioned in its headpiece, στις σταυρος ρομυλος, and we must acknowledge that this is, in general lines, a repetition of the formula used by the monk Dionysios of Κακη Πλαξ.

Cultural contacts between Chilandar and the Athonite desert to the south of the Megiste Lavra are attested prevailingly during the first half of the 17th century, their main center being the monastic establishment of St. Anna in the vicinity of the Monastery of Saint Paul. In 1627, a Slavic-speaking scribe named Michael is known to have copied a Menaion, presently belonging to Chilandar, in what is today the

skete of Saint Anna: ρως Νεμεσίθου Ληστάμα μητόρα, ονήματι αέτης άνδρος, πυστός σεβαστής αντικείμενος κρατώνα πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, ύπ. κακά σεβαστά μετά πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, πν σεβαστά κακά σεβαστά μετά πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, πν σεβαστά κακά σεβαστά μετά π

In 1642 another Slavic codex of Chilandar is said to have been copied by the priest-monk Anthony at the same place: πολλά καλλονεμονίαν αντικείμενο κρατώνα πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, Φωκά λεπτόν μετά πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, πυστός σεβαστής αντικείμενος κρατώνα πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, ύπ. κακά σεβαστά μετά πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, πν σεβαστά κακά σεβαστά μετά π

Ten years later, in 1652, an inscription in a Slavic manuscript containing the works of St. John Chrysostomos states that a priest-monk, whose name is again Anthony, had been commissioned by the superior of Chilandar, Victor, to copy the codex while residing in St. Anna: πολλά καλλονεμονίαν αντικείμενο κρατώνα πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, Φωκά λεπτόν μετά πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, πυστός σεβαστής αντικείμενος κρατώνα πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, ύπ. κακά σεβαστά μετά πν ἀγαθός διδασκάλιος, πν σεβαστά κακά σεβαστά μετά π

Analysing St. Romylos’ Rules and the passages of his Life referring to his Athonite period, one can easily figure out that their content is extremely similar; the two texts, despite the fact that they belong to two different literary genres, deal with the virtues required by the monastic life and how they must be cultivated. In the Rules, of course, the instruction is direct, while in the Life it is concealed behind a series of everyday events in which the saint is the moral protagonist. Being a commonplace in all the Byzantine hagiographical literature, in the case of St. Romylos’ Life this type of narration does not extol his own monastic feats or miracles, but underlines his care about the proper instruction of the younger monks. In other words, what St. Romylos’ biographer, the Athonite monk Gregory the Calligrapher, emphasizes, while describing his personal experience as a disciple of the saint on Mount Athos, is in fact a modified reproduction of the basic points of the only literary work ascribed to his spiritual father.

The dating of St. Romylos’ Rules, as proposed by their editors, includes only an uncertain terminus ante quem: «prior to the year 1385 (possibly 1376)» 34. Based on the data discussed above, one could reasonably suggest that the prototype of St.
Romylos' only known work was composed during his sojourn at the northern foot of Mount Athos' summit, presumably in the vicinity of the location Κακή Πλάξ and most probably between 1367 and 1371. According to the indirect evidence offered by the Slavic inscriptions cited above, its text must have been transferred to Chilandar thanks to the Slavic-speaking scribes established in the hermitages to the south of the Monastery of Saint Paul. Judging from the fact that their presence in this district reached its heyday during the first half of the 17th century, one may assume that it was then when the Rules of St. Romylos were bequeathed to the library of Chilandar.

Summarizing, one should stress that there are no data about St. Romylos' early literary activity on Athos. On the contrary, it seems quite plausible that only after retiring to the wilderness at the northern foot of the Holy Mountain the saint succeeded in reducing the number of his unwished visitors to a level enabling him to devote enough time not only to prayer, but also to composing spiritual instructions and encouraging the reproduction of Slavic religious books.