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CYRIL PAVLIKIANOV

THE ATHONITE PERIOD IN THE LIFE OF SAINT ROMYLOS OF VIDIN

Dedicated to the memory of my unforgettable teacher, Nikos Oikonomides

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. 1385¹. 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 Slavic². 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 Dionysiou³. 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 žitie na Romil Vidinski ot Grigorij Dobropisec, *Stara bŭlgarska literatura. IV. žitiepisni tvorbi*, Sofia 1986, 656–658.

2. P. SYRKU, Monaxa Grigorija žitie prepodobnago Romila, *Pamjatniki drevnej pis'mennosti i iskusstva*, CXXXVI, St. Petersburg 1900, I-IV and XIV-XXXIII. Cf. also P. DEVOS, La version slave de la Vie de S. Romylos, *Byzantion* 31, 1961, 149-187.

3. I. DUJČEV, Un manuscrit grec de la Vie de St. Romile, *BSL* 7 1937-1938, 124-127; Id., Un manuscrit grec de la Vie de St. Romile, *Studia historico-philologica Serdicensia* II, Sofia 1940, 88-92; Id., Romano (Romilo, Romolo) anacoreta in Bulgaria, santo, *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* XI, 1969, 312-316.

a manuscript kept in another Athonite foundation –the Monastery of Docheiariou⁴. 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 away⁵. 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 1350s⁶. 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: ἐξέρχεται τάχιστα τῶν ἐκεῖσε καὶ καταλαμβάνει τὸ Ἅγιον Ὄρος τὸ τοῦ Ἁθωνος, ἐν ᾧ καὶ πολλοὺς ἀγίους ἐν τούτῳ εὐρῶν οἰκούντων ὁμοτρόπων δηλαδὴ καὶ μάλιστα τῶν ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου γένους, εἰς ὁδὸν σωτηρίας ὁδήγησεν⁷ – ѿногадѣже и мнѡгыѣ дѣше ѿ иже въ горѣ сѣи сѣтѣ живѡщѣиѣхъ единоправныхъ пачѣ пакѡ. и пачеже иже ѿ своего рода. на пѣть сѣсенѣа настави⁸. What we have to determine in this case is the meaning of the phrase ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου γένους (ѿ своего рода). 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 Ῥωμαῖος ἦν τὸ γένος, ἐκ δὲ τῶν Βουλγάρων ἡ μήτηρ⁹ (и ѡбѡ ѡцѣ грѣкѣ вѣше родомѣ. ѡ вѡлгарѣ же мати¹⁰). In this context, F. Halkin considered that the passage καὶ μάλι-

4. F. HALKIN, Un ermite des Balkans au XIVe siècle. La Vie grecque inédite de St. Romylos, *Byzantion* 31, 1961, 111-147.

5. IVANOVA, Prostranno žitie na Romil Vidinski, 657.

6. Cf. *ODB* III, 1812.

7. HALKIN, Un ermite des Balkans au XIVe siècle, 131, chapter 12, l. 29-33.

8. SYRKU, Žitie prepodobnago Romila, 20, chapter 19.

9. HALKIN, Un ermite des Balkans au XIVe siècle, 116, chapter 2, l. 7-8.

10. SYRKU, Žitie prepodobnago Romila, 3, chapter 2

11. HALKIN, Un ermite des Balkans au XIVe siècle, 131, note 1.

στα τῶν 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: πολλοὺς τοίνυν κἀν τῷ Ἁγίῳ Ὄρει μεταμείψας τόπους ὑστερον ἔρχεται καὶ εἰς τὸ πλησίον ὄρος τῆς ἱερᾶς Λαύρας, ὅπερ καὶ Μελανὰ προσηγόρευται¹² - мнѡгѡа вѣκѡуѣтѣ по сѣтѣи горѣ прѣмѣнивь мѣста послѣждеже прихѡдитъ въ ближнѡю горѣ сѣиенныє лѣвры. иже мелана мѣстнымъ званїемъ изначела нарече се¹³. 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 XIVe siècle, 132, chapter 12, l. 41-44.

13. SYRKU, Žitie prepodobnago Romila, 21, chapter 20.

14. Κ. ΠΑΥΛΙΚΙΑΝΩΦ, Οἱ Σλάβοι στὴν ἀθωνικὴ μονὴ Ζωγράφου, *Σύμμεικτα* 12 (1998), 109-139.

15. HALKIN, Un ermite des Balkans au XIVe siècle, 131-143, chapters 12-22; SYRKU, Žitie prepodobnago Romila, 20-32, chapters 19-32.

16. DEVOS, La version slave de la Vie de S. Romylos, 160-187.

kyr Romylos, the spiritual instructor»: **дѣланиѣ грѣшнѣ писа на какиплацѣ под аѡном. тѣже прѣбиваа съ щем моим квр ѳеоктистом и съ братїами моими сімоном и съ ѳомом по повѣлѣнїю ѡца и гїда нашего квр ромила, старца**¹⁷.

The inscription contains no date, but its implication is that Theoktistos, Dionysios, Simon, and Thomas were living in the desolated southern part of the Athos 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 **под аѡном** 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 **какиплацѣ** as **χαλκιδιцѣ**, Lj. Stojanović was the first who in 1903 suggested that the text was referring to St. Romylos of Vidin¹⁸. 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 spritual 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: *ἄπελθε, ἀδελφέ, εἰς τὰ πρόποδα τοῦ Ἄθωνος ἐν τῷ βορεινῷ μέρει καὶ περισκοπήσας καλῶς ἐρεῦνησαι εἰρεῖν τόπον πεδινόν, ἵν' ἐκεῖσε ποιήσω μου τὴν κατοίκησιν*¹⁹ – **поиди, брате, въ подгорїа аѡнскаа къ сѣвернѣи странѣ. и ѡсмотривь добрѣ, изыщи и оврѣци мѣсто равно яко да тамо шьд сътвориь севѣ селкнїе**²⁰. Analysing the expression describing the location of St. Romylos' new hermitage – *εἰς τὰ πρόπο-*

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

18. STOJANOVIĆ, *Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi*, II, 408; JOVANOVIĆ (*Inventar srpskih ćirilskih rukopisa*, 306–308) offers no comment on Romylos' identity.

19. HALKIN, *Un ermite des Balkans au XIVe siècle*, 142, chapter 21, l. 6–8.

20. SYRKU, *Žitie prepodobnago Romila*, 31, chapter 31.

δα τοῦ Ἁθωνος - ВЪ ПОДГОРІА АΘΩΝΣΚΑΑ - one must acknowledge that it is essentially identical with the phrase ΠΟΔ ΑΘΩΝΩΜ 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* Romylos resided is denoted with a purely Greek name—*Κακὴ Πλάξ* (НА ΚΑΚΗΠΛΑΪΞ). 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 *Κακὴ Πλάξ* was probably identical with the minor Athonite foundation of *Πλακᾶς*. 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 Athos²¹. 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 Chilandar²². 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 μοναχὸς τοῦ Πλακᾶ* is mentioned as a witness in a document of the Megiste Lavra²³. It is, thereby, clear that it 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

21. Π. ΧΡΗΣΤΟΥ, *Τὸ Ἅγιον Ὄρος. Ἀθωνικὴ πολιτεία. Ἱστορία-τέχνη-ζωή*, Athens 1987, 70.

22. V. MOŠIN-A. SOVRE, *Dodatki h grčkim listinam Hilandarja (Supplementa ad acta graeca Chilandarii)*, Ljubljana 1948, 15, No 1, l. 75. Cf. also Διονυσία ΠΑΠΑΧΡΥΣΑΝΘΟΥ, *Ὁ ἀθωνικὸς μοναχισμὸς. Ἀρχές καὶ ὀργάνωση*, Athens 1992, 406 and note 293, where two other signatures of the same superior are commented.

23. *Actes de Lavra II*, ed. A. GUILLOU, P. LEMERLE, N. SVORONOS and Denise PAPAΧΡΥΣΑΝΘΟΥ, Paris 1977, 49, No 79, l. 37.

annexation of Plakas to Chilandar²⁴. 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 *Κακὴ 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 *Κακὴ Πλάξ*.

Unexpectedly, a Slavic text with title **Сказаніе о свѣтѣи аѳонскѣи горѣ**, 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 *Κακὴ Πλάξ* was the name of the «second» torrential current near the Monastery of Saint Paul: **рѣка-жъ вторая, иже изходитъ отъ святыи верхъ и течеть въ море близъ свѣтаго павла, имать же сія рѣка мѣльницы, рыбы же не имать. имя жъ сѣи рѣкѣ по гречески какиплакъ, а по рѣсски зѣый камень**²⁵.

Using a good topographical map of Mount Athos²⁶, one can easily figure out that the superior of the Russian Monastery was counting the rivers from the south to the north. In this sequence, the first stream on the western coast of the Athonite peninsula, which Joachim connects with the Greek name Eleutherida²⁷, can be identified the so-called *Λάκκος τοῦ Καλαθᾶ*, which collects its waters from the western slope of Mount Athos' summit and is situated half a kilometre to the south of what is today the Monastery of Saint Paul²⁸. The torrent of *Κακὴ Πλάξ* must have therefore been the second river to the north, the one whose waters are fostered by 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-

24. Cf. *Actes de Chilandar* I. *Actes grecs*, ed. L. PETIT, *Viz. Vrem.* 17, 1911, Priloženie 1 (repr. Amsterdam 1975), 329-330, No 156, l. 1-37; ΧΡΗΣΤΟΥ, *Τὸ Ἅγιον Ὄρος*, 70 and note 187. For the general situation on Athos from 1345 to 1375 cf. D. KORAĆ, *Sveta gora pod srpskom vlašću*, *ZRVI* 31, 1992, 93-108.

25. Arhimandrit LEONID (L. KAVELIN), *Skazanie o Svjatoj Afonskoj gore igumena russkogo Pantelejmonova monastyrja Joakima i inyh svjatogorskih starcev*, St. Petersburg 1882, 26-27.

26. R. ZWERGER, *Wege am Athos*, Vienna 1990.

27. KAVELIN, *Skazanie o Svjatoj Afonskoj gore*, 26.

28. As far as the torrent of Καλαθᾶ 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. Γ. ΣΜΥΡΝΑΚΗΣ, *Τὸ Ἅγιον Ὄρος*, Athens 1903 (repr. Karyes in 1988), 608. Taking into consideration the fact that the map of R. Zwerger 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 *οἰκεῖος* of the Byzantine emperor, Radoslav Sabia²⁹. 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. Matejić of a text, which is thought to have been written by him in person and comprises *Rules Recommendable for Proper Monastic Behaviour* –*κανόνες τοῦ τυπικοῦ τῆς οὐκείτης* or *правила скитскаго оуставѣ*³⁰. 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, *сѣѣ старѣць ромиль*, and we must acknowledge that this is, in general lines, a repetition of the formula used by the monk Dionysios of *Κακὴ Πλάξ*.

Cultural contacts between Chilandar and the Athonite desert to the south of the Megiste Lavra are attested prevailing 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

29. Cf. G. SUBOTIĆ, *Obnova manastira Svetog Pavla u XIV veku*, *ZRVI* 22, 1983, 207-254.

30. KI. IVANOVA-P. MATEJIĆ, *An Unknown Work of St. Romil of Vidin (Ravanica)*, *Palaeobulgarica* 17/4, 1993, 3-15.

skete of Saint Anna: рѣка ненаоученнаго миѡхана ииѡка, написахъ лѣта зрѣе, мѣсеца августѣ, ии. въ светѣ аннѣ³¹. In 1642 another Slavic codex of Chilandar is said to have been copied by the priest-monk Anthony at the same place: прѣписа сѣю книгѣ многорѣшнѣи антонѣ кромонахъ въ горѣ аѡнцѣи, на мѣстѣ глаголюмъ светаа анна ... въ лѣто зрѣн³². 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: повелѣниемъ же и иждивениемъ ... квръ вѣктора кромонаха игѡмена и архимандрита, иже въ светѣи горѣ аѡнна, царьскыи и священныи славеносръбскои великыи лавры монастыра хиландара ... исписана бысть сѣа книга рѣкою смѣреннаго антѡнѣа иеромонаха, на мѣсто нарицаемо светаа анна, въ келѣю прѣображенѣа. въ лѣто вытѣа зрѣа³³.

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.

31. K. DMITRIEV PETKOVIĆ, *Obzor afonskih drevnostej, Priloženje k Vlmu tomu Zapisok Imperatorskoj akademii nauk*, St.-Petersburg 1865, 5; Lj. STOJANOVIĆ, *Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi*, IV, Sremski Karlovci 1923, 128, no 6676 (1131); D. BOGDANOVIĆ, *Katalog ćirilskih rukopisa manastira Hilandara*, Beograd 1978, no 251.

32. STOJANOVIĆ, *Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi*, 147, no 6797 (1355).

33. *Ibid.*, 161, no 6870 (1482); BOGDANOVIĆ, *Katalog ćirilskih rukopisa manastira Hilandara*, no 411.

34. Cf. IVANOVA-MATEJIĆ, *An Unknown Work of St. Romil*, 8.

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.