

## BOOK OF NATURE IN CROATIAN GLAGOLITIC *SERMONES DE SANCTIS*

Senior Research Assoc. **Andrea Radošević**  
*Old Church Slavonic Institute – Zagreb (Croatia)*

**Abstract.** One of the most important sources for researching the Book of Nature in the Croatian Glagolitic medieval literature are sermon collections. The chapters based on the Book of Nature are found in the *de sanctis* cycle of the four Glagolitic manuscripts from the 16th century (*Disipul A*, *Disipul B*, *Disipul C*, *Disipul D*). All the chapters were translated from the Latin sermon collection known as *Hortulus reginae*, which was written in the 15th century by German priest Magister Petrus Meffordis from Leipzig. His interpretation of the saint's biography is partly based on the development of analogies between selected parts of the respective hagiography and details from the Book of Nature inserted from various sources. The aim of the paper is to analyse his specific approach to linking the hagiographical and the natural, and also to examine the sources of the knowledge of nature transmitted in Glagolitic literature through the translation of texts from *Hortulus reginae*.

**Keywords:** Croatian Glagolitic sermons; Meffreth; Book of Nature; hagiography

### 1. Introduction

Sermons represent a valuable source for understanding the transmission of natural knowledge in Glagolitic community. The traces of medieval knowledge about nature are also found in treatises (such as the translation of *Fiore di Virtù* known as a *Cvijet kreposti*),<sup>1</sup> *Lucidarius* and animalistic exempla.<sup>2</sup> In Croatian Glagolitic literature not even short version of medieval bestiaries or *Physiologus* is preserved. To be more precisely, most of the Glagolitic animalistic exempla come from sermons and moral didactic texts (Kapetanović, 2004, p. 50; Zaradija Kiš, 2008, pp. 125 – 127).

The focus of this paper is put on the Croatian Glagolitic sermons translated from the Latin collection *Sermones 'Meffreth' de tempore et de sanctis sive Hortulus Reginae* which was compiled by the 15<sup>th</sup>-century German author Magister Petrus Meffordis (Meffreth) from Leipzig (Cruel, 1966).<sup>3</sup> They are kept in the four Glagolitic manuscripts from the 16<sup>th</sup> century called *Disipul* (*Disipul A*, 16<sup>th</sup> century; *Disipul B*, 1558; *Disipul C*, 1541; *Disipul D*, 1600) which mostly contain Croatian translation of the Latin sermon collection *Sermones Discipuli* written by other German author, Do-

minican Johannes Herolt (Štefanić, 1960, pp. 240–246; Štefanić, 1969, pp. 225–237; Radošević, 2015). All four manuscripts are written on Croatian with some traits of Croatian redaction of Old Church Slavonic. First three manuscripts (*Disipul A*, *Disipul B*, *Disipul C*) were written by priest Mihovil from Belgrad, while the latest one (*Disipul D*) was written by Ivan Brozović from Selce. The reception of Meffreth's sermons in Croatian literature has only recently been established (Radošević, 2022). It is known that parts of *Hortulus reginae* were also attested in other Slavic literatures (Korzo, 2024; Preobrazhenskaya, 2018; Belobrova, 1985).

Meffreth's sermons combine (pseudo-)etymological explanations, Christian iconography, and unexpected parallels between the hagiographical and natural worlds. According to *ars praedicandi* turning to the *Book of Nature* was one of the principle for teaching moral lessons, by making analogies with natural phenomena, explaining the properties of things etc. (see Wenzel, 2013, pp. 77–82). Properties of natural realm appear as a point of departure for the explication of major virtues of the saints, their character traits or the key parts of their *vita*. Every saint is compared to at least one natural species. Most of the time, passages on natural species come right after the Biblical pericope. These passages are usually compiled from different antic, early Christian and medieval sources on natural knowledge (Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*, Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, *Physiologus*, Ambrose's *Hexameron*, Isidore's of Seville *Etymologiae*, Bartholomew's of England *De proprietatibus rerum*, Vincent's of Beauvais *Speculum naturale*, Thomas of Cantimpré *Liber de natura rerum*, Albert the Great *De animalibus*), bestiaries, aviaries, lapidaries, although not all of them are always explicitly mentioned.

Meffreth's main principle was to surprise the recipient with his atypical associative approach to the different sources of natural knowledge. Although his sermones mainly follow the principle of *imitatio Christi* by presenting the virtues of the saints, the emphasis is put on the recognizability of the saints in the sense of highlighting their character traits. Here the natural world appears in a threefold role: as *memorandi*, *imitandi* and *admirandi* (Radošević, 2022). It is usually interpreted as a symbol of morality and metaphysical truths, in such a way that its physical characteristics, behaviors and the role it plays in everyday human life are mostly, but not always, moralized. In Meffreth's sermons the Book of Nature is not just mere medieval *sensus moralis*, but also a mirror, an incentive to find role models in so-called lower nature (Radošević, 2022, p. 114; Weisl, 2018). In his sermons, one natural species has a variety of symbolic meanings, while several species may emerge as emblems of the same term.

## **2. Croatian Glagolitic sermones de sanctis**

In the four glagolitic manuscripts passages from the Book of Nature appear most frequently in the introductions of sermons, but we also find them in the other parts

of the texts, depending on whether the particular text is a complete translation of sermon from *Hortulus reginae* or, which is much more common, it is a translation of Herolt's sermon with an introduction inserted from Meffreth. The allegorical interpretation of the natural world and its connection with the hagiographic themes is announced by following the expressions: *duhovno razumi se, znamenue se*.

Glagolitic sermons *de sanctis* represent a combination of the two most common ways of composing a hagiographical text: one in which the focus is on the narration of events from the lives of the saints, and the other primarily focused on their virtues. The connection between the natural and hagiographical motives, is often found in the interpretative etymology of the names of saints (St Peter, St Gregory the Great) as well as etymology of the names of a particular animals whose meaning is linked to a recognizable character trait of the saint (arabic etymology of word *phoenix* has parallels with the character trait of St Thomas the Apostle). Etymologies are mostly derived from Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* or Isidore's of Seville *Etymologies* (Baarda, 1992). These (pseudo-)etymologies in particular had a mnemonic function (Rydel, 2016, p. 291), associating saints with certain qualities and virtues that we also find in certain natural species: courage and boldness are common traits of the lion and St Stephen, while vigilance and fidelity are virtues that adorn St Gregory the Great with the two animal creatures: the dog and the crane (Radošević, 2022, p. 114). Unfortunately, due to some omissions of the etymological interpretation in all four Glagolitic manuscripts, the entry of a particular interpretation is sometimes unclear, such as the analogy to the singularity between St Thomas the Apostle and the phoenix (*D(u)hovn(i)m z(a)konom po fenikši razumi se b(la)ž(e)ni Toma ap(usto)l ere k(a)ko fenikša nima tovariša*, Disipul B, 119a / *Mystice per Phoenicem intelligitur B. Thomas Apostolus: recte enim sicut Phoenix est avis singularis, carens pari, et apud Arabes nascitur, vocatur Phoenix, id est, singularis, uti dicit Isidorus*), as well as analogy between St Gregory the Great and the dog (*T(a)ko po z(a)k(o)nu te beštie b(la)ž(e)ni Grg(u) r bil' e vele bdeč ere bdel' e sebi i B(og)u i čredi*, Disipul B, 135d / *Sic more illius animalis, B. Gregorius fuit valde vigilans. Ideo Gregorius in nostra lingua vigilans sonat, quia vigilavit sibi, Deo et gregi*).

An excellent illustration of Meffreth's intricate dependence on nature in interpreting the most notable virtues of saints is found in the *Sermon on Saint Gregory the Great* (*N(a) d(a)n s(ve)toga Grg(u)ra pape ispo(vednika)*, Disipul B, f. 134r – 136v; Disipul C, f. 22r – 26r; Disipul D, 119r – 121v). This *sermon de sanctis* is developed on analogies with natural phenomena that occupy different positions on the *scala natura*, starting with a phenomenon that comes from the lowest inanimate world of stones (*geraticen*), then with the motif from the slightly higher vegetable realm (*arbor inversa*), and finally with two animal species with higher rang (a dog as a representative of mammals and finally a crane from the world of birds). The fact that the bird (*crane*) appears last is likely consistent with the

medieval notion that birds were superior to other animal creatures, frequently not regarded as animals in a strict sense. Although the stones occupies the lowest rung they are „nonetheless part of the reciprocal linkages that bound all things together in this ontological chain (...) as well as they are a „part of a teleological cosmos connected with the divine in its essence“ (Robertson, 2012, p. 99).

In this sermon four natural spieces are used as a symbols of two virtues of Gregory the Great: humility and vigilance. Gregory's humility as the peak of all the virtues is interpreted through the comparsion with stone *geraticen* and *arbor inversa*. The analogy with nature begins with the passage on stone *geraticen*, here attributed to sixteenth book of Bartholomeus Anglicus *De proprietatibus rerum* (LiberXVI. *De lapidibus et metallis/De Geratice*. Capitulum LII).

*Meštar v kn(i)g(a)h od Naturi gov(o)ri od' nikoga kamena čast'na ki se zove Eratikon koga moč tako se is'kuša ako t(ê)lo č(lovê)ka medom pomaže se, i stavi se muham, ako e ondi ta kamen' muhe biže od nega i ne naškode t(ê)lu. I tako e tu moč ima ki ga pri sebi nosi da čini č(lovê)ka draga i prieta, Disipul B, 134r // Magister libro proprietatum 16. ait de quodam lapide pretioso Geraticon nuncupato huius virtus sic probatur. Si corpus hominis melle inungitur, et muscis exponitur, si lapis ille est praesens corpus illud intactum remanet. Muscae mox fugient, et corpus eius non corrumpent. De lapide hoc dicitur in lapidario, quod gestatus, hominem reddit dilectum, et amabilem atquam gratum, Hortulus reginae).*

The power of the stone *geraticen* was tested by smearing a person with honey and exposing them to flies. It was believed that a person who possessed the stone would avoid the flies' attack on their body, or that possession of the stone would make them more pleasing.<sup>4</sup> Allegorical interpretation of the stone is further expanded by Augustine's sentences on humilty. The qualities of *geraticen* which occupies the lowest position of the *scala naturae* is quite well compared with Gregory's the Great recognizable attribute which he retained even throughout his most illustrious period. Being anointed with the honey of praise and high esteem, he was untouched by the flies of pride since he possessed true humility:

*Duhovno po tom kamenu zn(a)m(e)niva poniznost ka e vele častna. Po Ag(ustin)u poniznost e(st) vele častna i gl(a)va vs(e)h dobrot'. I tada se pravo iskusi ako ka hv(a)la i čast č(lovê)ku kaže se tr č(lovê)k zaničue kaže poniznost. To se zna od s(ve)toga Grg(u)ra ki biše pomazan medom' hvale teškoe trpel i bižal i ostal est netaknen' od muh'. Ere piše se: ne hv(a)li č(lovê)ka v živote. Takoe se zna da e imel pravu poniznost ere ako bi e ne imel muhe slatke hv(a)le (tašče slave) nega bi ujidale. Zato e bil priet B(og)u i lûblen ciča poniznosti. Avgu(stin) ništ(a)r ne čini nas priet'nih B(og)u k(a)ko poniznost ka vlče k sebi b(o)žū milost, Disipul B, 134b.*

Other allegory of humility is *arbor inversa*,<sup>5</sup> a classical trope very popular among Renaissance theologians from the vegetable world, a deeply rooted tree that cannot be uprooted by the winds of pride. It is introduced by Isidore of Seville's sentence and further elaborated on Aristotle's analogy between the *arbor inversa* and a man,

and finally by Bernard of Clairvaux statement on the importance of being humble.

*Od prvoga znati e da drivo s korenem tvrdo se drži zemle. Na to Iz(i)dor gov(o)-ri da drivo ko nima dobra koren'ê lah'ko se spade od vet'ra, da ko ima gluboko koren'e v'zem'li ne more se izdriti. D(u)hovno po Ar(i)š(totelu) gov(o)r(i) se drivo podvračeno ko ima koren'e zgora, a kite zdola č(lovê)k e(st). Zato ako nećeš biti zvržen vetrom' oholosti tribi e da gluboko koren' bude poniznos'iu ... K(a)ko drivo ko nima gluboko koren'ê ere retko se naide da visoko zras'te. T(a)ko niedan na visinu n(e)b(e)sku ne more priti ako nima koren'ê poniznosti. Brn(a)rd gov(o)ri po poniznosti prihaê se na visinu ere to e(st) put, a ne ini i ki prez' nega gre brže pade ner v'zide, Disipul B, 134bc.*

These two species from the lower natural realm serve as an introduction to the enumeration of the four instances in the live of Gregory the Great in which the aforementioned virtue of humility (*poniznost*) was most prominently demonstrated:

*Zato s(ve)ti Grg(u)r vele gluboko e imel koren'e v poniznosti. Ka se zna v živlen'i i v nauku ... V' besedi imel'e poniznost ere se e imenoval' sluga slug da sebe ne hv(a)leč da is(u)hrsta g(ospo)d(i)na n(a)š(e)go sluga ... Č(e)trto kaže se nega poniznost v nauku ere v kn(i)g(a)h negovih ima se s(ve)t(a)l nauk i dokli e živel ciča velike poniznosti ni se otel dati na znan'e i suprot drugim ni štimal vridnosti svojih, Disipul B, 134d – 135b.*

The second half of the sermon draws on the animal and bird realm (dog and crane), symbols of vigilance and fidelity, whose choice is likely tied to one of the etymologies of Gregory's name, in the meaning of 'vigilant, attentive' from the *Legenda Aurea* (*vel Gregorius in lingua nostra vigilans sonat*). These passages rely mainly on Bartholomew of England *De proprietatibus rerum*, and indirectly on the encyclopaedia of Vincent of Beauvais. The connection between the natural and hagiographical is implemented through the analogy of vigilance and fidelity. The use of these two animal motifs aims to allegorise the relationship of this church father to God on the one hand and to humanity on the other, based on the shared virtues. The analogy involving the dog is promptly succeeded by the comparison of St Gregory to the crane, that was a symbol of of loyalty and vigilance to safeguard the community from peril. The association of St Gregory's virtues with the attributes of the crane is likely influenced by Ambrose's *Hexameron* in which crane is described as an exemplar of a modest leader. The crane's distinctive posture of standing on one leg while grasping a stone with the other, which produces sound to alert other cranes in times of peril, serves as an analogy for Gregory the Great's connection to his papal role. Specifically, his act of holding and dropping stones symbolically illustrated the awakening of the faithful and served as a warning against the peril posed by pagans, while his posture of standing on one leg denoted a renunciation of earthly glory (Radošević, 2022, p. 120).

*Zato prilikue se b(la)ž(e)ni Grg(u)r k'čuvaru od'žer'êvi · Ar(i)š(totil) v'kn(i)g(a)h ·dž · (= 8) animalium' gov(o)ri od' život' nih' da kada bdi na straži stoi na ed'noi nogi a v' drugoi drži kamičac' ako zaspi tako mu spade kamičac na nogu i zbudi se i kriči i ostali se probude i od pogibeli se očuvaū · T(a)ko b(la)ž(e)ni Grg(u)r pomnivo e o*

*č'redi g(ospo)dni bdel'ere e stal samo na ednoi nogi kada e za s(ve)tu crikav skrbno  
providil · a drugu e gori držal' kada ni maril' za sl(a)vu sega s(ve)ta ere niedno že-  
lenie ni imel za imeti hv(a)lu od č(lovê)k, Disipul C, 25r.*

The conventional zoomorphic symbols of saints are infrequent in these sermons. The sole exception is the appearance of the eagle as a symbol of St John the Evangelist; nonetheless, an eagle appears alongside two other animals (ape, dog). In the sermon on St John the Evangelist (*Na sv. Ivana apostola i evanđelista*) the concept of love as the fundamental principle of his sacred life is elucidated through a comparison of three animal instances of parental love. The spiritual love symbolized by the eagle, which is tested by youth's prolonged gazing directly at the sun and which determines whether a youth can become a true member of the species, the motif found already in *Physiologus*, contrasts with the subjective feelings that dogs and apes have toward their offspring, which feelings represent an earthly love. The eagle's glance at the sun and its ascent to the heavens allegorically symbolize John's yearning for God and his pursuit of the heights of divine grace (Radošević, 2022, p. 118).

*Duhov'nim načinom H(rst) veče e lûbil Iv(a)na (evan)ġ(e)l(i)sta ki v priliki orla  
piše se i s'lnce b(o)ž(an)stva čis'to e gledal i glubinu tajnosti n(e)b(es)kih bole e  
videl nere ini uč(e)n(i)ki · Zato nega H(rst) od mnogih' skr'bi mimo inih ap(usto)l  
s'hranil e, Disipul B, 123r.*

The analogy between the natural and the hagiographical is not based on just one or two isolated characteristics of natural species, but on the comparison of many characteristics that come from different sources, from their basic properties to their use in daily life. The six properties of dove, mostly derived from the Bartolomew of England are explained allegorically and linked to the main details from the hagiography of St Peter, such as the dove's unique weeping-like song (Peter's cries), the quantity of tears he shed after repeatedly denying Jesus, as Meffreth believed that the cries of St Peter could only be compared to the sorrow in the song of a dove, the attraction of others to the dovecote (the encouragement of sinful souls to return to the holy church), and even his intense love for the Lord, which in the natural world corresponds to the dove's love for its parents. In addition to ornithological data, moral or allegorical interpretations, the passage about the dove also contains details about its medical and social uses from the agronomic (*Liber Ruralium Commodorum* written by Pietro de Crescenzi) and medical texts, *Viaticum* by Constatinus Africanus (Radošević, 2022, p. 124).

*Duhovno b(la)ž(e)ni P(e)t(a)r zove se Bariona, to se ilmači s(i)n goluba i pravo  
zn(a)m(e)nue se golub ere e meû inimi ap(usto)li dobro živlen'e imel i vsi su ga lûbili  
ere ih e učil dobro živeti (...) I tribi e zamiriti da golub ima .e.(=6) naturi ke se mogu  
b(la)ž(e)nomu P(e)tru pripodobiti (...) Drugo golub'e velike lûb've ere lûbi ot'ca i  
prež nega neče letiti. T(a)ko b(la)ž(e)ni P(e)t(a)r vele e lûbil g(ospo)d(i)na i za nega  
e vse ost(a)vil (...) Treto golub ima petie za plač' navlastito kada m'lade iz'g'nezda*

*zgubi ali tovariša · T(a)ko b(la)ž(e)ni P(e)t(a)r ča e zataêl' H(rst)a za pokoru plakal' se e, Disipul B, 144d – 145d.*

Furthermore, a natural phenomenon that primarily served as an allegory of a specific saint's virtues could acquire alternative interpretations by being associated not merely with the subject of the sermon (a particular aspect of saints *vita*), but predominantly with its audience. During the enumeration of the six properties of dove, Meffreth introduces the motif of *crazy doves* that refuse to enter the dovecote, symbolizing the sacred church (*kako maneni golubi nete priti v golubinac nere sidaû na drivo i gledaû na ku stran ote poletiti*). It is within this section of the text that the preacher briefly diverges from the prevailing *modus imitandi/admirandi*, issuing explicit warnings to the audience.

The context in which certain motifs from nature appear is sometimes surprising and somewhat unexpected. The connection between the phoenix (a bird without a mate) and St Thomas that is based on the motif of Thomas' isolation from the other apostles, which is caused by doubt as his most recognisable character trait, is indeed rather remarkable. Here the emphasis is not on narrating the events from Thomas' mission to India, but rather on the portrayal of his doubt. This is a teaching that was substantially expanded upon by St Gregory the Great's *Homilies*, on which Meffreth relies strongly. While the phoenix appeared in numerous mediaeval works as a symbol of Jesus Christ and the act of resurrection in general, due to the belief in his rebirth (Broek, 1972), the interpretation of its uniqueness and loneless from older bestiary descriptions appeared much more frequently from the Renaissance onwards (in Torquato Tasso *Gerusalemme liberata*). In glagolitic sermons phoenix functions as a dual symbol. Initially, it represents the apostle's status, which was influenced by a character trait, doubt. Subsequently, it represents the spiritual rebirth of St. Tomas after he has purged himself of all undesirable personality traits.

*V Ekz(a)m(eron) v kn(i)g(a)h .v̇ (= 3) v k(a)p(itu)l .v̇ (= 3) gov(o)ri da fenikš e(st) ptica ka more živetu .i. (= 300) .h. ṁ. (= 660) l(e)t i veče i kada e h'kon'cu života t(a)ko učini sebi gnizdo od tamêna i mura i inih driv ka lipo diše. I kada se važge od puhan'e vetrov' tada gre na gnizdo i umre, i paki ožive . D(u)hovn(i)m z(a)konom po fenikši razumi se b(la)ž(e)ni Toma ap(usto)l ere k(a)ko fenikša nima tovariša t(a)ko b(la)ž(e)ni Toma meû vsimi ap(usto)li bil e v sum'ni, Disipul B, 119a.*

In addition to etymological and pseudoetymological interpretations of the names of saints and animals, there are also attempts to find a species in the natural world whose characteristics reflect several details from the lives of saints. The primary aim of such analogies, as the example of the comparison of the St James holy apostle with a swallow, was to contribute to a more complete recollection of important events from his life. The relationship of the swallow to its nest and its young can be interpreted as a kind of mental map that guides us through the work of St James, who opened the way to the Christian faith with his preaching, converted sinners, and drove away the wrath of men.

### 3. Conclusion

The Croatian translation of passages from the 15<sup>th</sup> century Latin sermon collection *Hortulus reginae* that is kept in four Glagolitic manuscripts (*Disipul A*, *Disipul B*, *Disipul C*, *Disipul D*) represent a valuable source of information on the reception of the knowledge about natural world in the Glagolitic community. In these medieval sermones *de sanctis* motives from the natural realm are used as symbols and allegories of divers parts of hagiographical narratives. The natural world functions as both a foundation for moral and allegorical interpretation and a basis for recounting significant events in a specific saint's life (virtues, postulates, character traits, main episodes). Consequently, these sermons enrich both Glagolitic corpus of texts about natural knowledge and corpus of saints' *vitae*.

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### NOTES

1. On Croatian Glagolitic *Cvijet kreposti*, see Gabrić-Bagarić, 2012; Zaradija Kiš, 2018; Šimić, Zaradija Kiš, 2020.
2. The term Glagolitic animalistic exempla was introduced by A. Zaradija Kiš, 2006. When it comes to sermon collections, she analysed animalistic exempla in the *Korizmenjak* (1508), Croatian translation of the Italian Lenten collection *Quaresimale volgare* written by Franciscan Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce, and also the latest printed book in the Senj Glagolitic printing house. See Zaradija Kiš, 2008; Zaradija Kiš, 2010.
3. According to Korzo (2024, p. 288), biographical notes on Petrus Meffordis are very limited. We only know that he was a priest in Meissen during the time of the bishop John the Fourth (Johannes Hoffmann von Schweidnitz, 1375 – 1451). There are now questions about whether the Meffreth was the compiler of *Hortulus reginae* at all, or the name Meffreth refers to the sermon collection's other name. Also some researchers reject the presumption that the compiler was a Dominican (Cruel, 1879, pp. 486 – 493; Schmidtke, p. 2010). More about Meffreth, see in Kaczor, 2022.
4. Similar explanation of *geraticen* is found in Albert the Great *Book of Minerals* (2. 2. 7): *The genuineness of the stone (gerachidem) may be tested in this way: while wearing the stone [a man] smears his whole body with honey and exposes [himself] to flies and wasps, and if they do not touch him, the stone is genuine; and if he lays aside the stone, at once flies and wasps fall upon the honey and suck it up. And they say that if the stone is held in the mouth it confers [the ability] to judge opinions and thoughts. And it is reported that the wearer is made agreeable and pleasing* (Albert Magnus, 1967). It is also

mentioned under similar names (*hieracited*, *gerachides*) in the Pliny's and Aristotle's work.

5. More about the allegory of *arbor inversa* during Renaissance, see in Chambers, 1961.

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✉ **Senior Research Assoc. Andrea Radošević**

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-8695-0573

Old Church Slavonic Institute

Demetrova 11 Zagreb (Croatia)

E-mail: aradosevic@stin.hr