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INTERPRETING LIVING WORLD IN LATE MEDIEVAL APOLOGETIC TEXTS: NATURE AND BODY IN THE SLAVONIC TRANSLATION OF JOHN VI KANTAKOUZENOS’ POLEMIC TEXTS AGAINST ISLAM

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Abstract. Written after his abdication from the Byzantine throne in 1354, the polemical discourses against Islam and in defence of Christianity by John VI Kantakouzenos (d.1382), were soon translated in the fourteenth-century Balkan Slavic milieu. Typically for the apologetic genre, they present an encyclopaedia of Byzantine theological views, in which exegesis plays an essential role as a technique of persuasion and refutation, and communicates Christian understanding of nature, animals and human body. Kantakouzenos does not invent the interpretations, but chooses them from the existing pool of Byzantine exegetic tradition. The paper¹ explores some of the ways in which these exegetic components were interpreted and presented by the Slavonic translator and later copyists.

Keywords: John VI Kantakouzenos’ polemical discourses against Islam; Slavonic translation of Kantakouzenos’ polemical discourses; exegesis; living world

Christian writers often used the representation of the living world in their interpretative *instrumentarium*. References to nature, animals and human body became mandatory elements of theological discourses, apologetic, homiletic and encomiastic literature. At that, as Ziolkowski and others have suggested, there was no single, uniformed Christian theological view on animals (and nature in general), with two prevailing approaches in the Middle Ages – one “anthropocentric, dismissive of animals” and the other “anthropomorphic and inclined to humanize” them (Ziolkowski, 1993, p. 32). However, these two views were not as conflicting, as they seem, and allowed the natural and animal imagery to function as a rhetoric, didactic devices in the context of the interpretation of the Old and New Testament.

Anthropologists and psychoanalyst had pointed out that real and imagined animals “stand for variety of symbolic expressions” (Volkan & Ast, 1997, p. 29). Christian culture complicated this usage by developing further levels in the

allegorical and symbolic meaning of the natural world (Friedmann, 1980; Clark & McMunn, 1989; Cohen, 2008; Kindschi & Hirsch, 2019; etc). Patristic authors produced a large reservoir of exegetic samples based on references to nature, which obtained almost canonical status and were used and reused throughout the Middle Ages. Here I am using the common understanding of exegesis as an interpretation and explanation, but also as a meaningful expansion of narrative which in itself is an elucidation of a given biblical passage.

In the process of translation and adaptation of the Byzantine cultural models and literary texts among the Orthodox Slavs, many of these standard exeges became known to Slavs and were subsequently used by the Slavonic bookmen in their original works. Slavonic writers very rarely produced new, original interpretations of this kind, but often explained further, simplified or expanded, and fruitfully reshaped the extant exegetic samples. A good illustration in this respect, which I discussed elsewhere, is the way in which in his sermon on Eliah, Gregory Tsamblak interprets the narrative of 3 Kings (17: 8 – 24) about the raven sent to feed the prophet in the desert. Following John Chrysostom (d.407) and Basil of Seleucia (d. btw. 458 – 468), he explains it as God's silent reproach to Eliah for acting with similar cruelty to his people as the raven who abandons his offsprings. Yet, Tsamblak expands the interpretation by elaborating a dramatic picture of the neglected little birds fed only through the God's and nature's mercy (Angusheva & Dimitrova, 2008, 392 – 395).

This very short article, however, focuses on a work translated in the Balkan Slavic milieu in the late fourteenth century, namely, Anti-Islamic disputations composed by John VI Kantakouzenos (d.1383) in four dialogues (*Apologiae*) and four sermons against the Prophet Muhammad (Migne, 1866b; Förstel, 2005). It discusses some of the Kantakouzenos' interpretations of the living world, analyses the way his Slavonic translator renders these passages, and examines what these interpretations bring to the Slavonic context. For this purpose, I will start with (1) a brief discussion on Kantakouzenos, his text and (2) its Slavonic translation, and will then (3) explore specific examples of nature-related descriptions and exeges in Kantakouzenos anti-Islamic discourses and their Slavonic renditions.

(1) The time of John VI Kantakouzenos as a regent for the future ruler John V Palaiologos, and as an emperor (1347 – 1354), was one of the most dramatic periods in the history of Byzantium – a disastrous civil war, a Genoese siege, Black Death claiming the lives of many, including that of the emperor's younger son, Serbian attacks, and the Ottoman army plundering of Thracian lands (Maksimović, 1966; Nicol, 1993). The emperor presided over two Church councils (of 1348 and of 1351) and secured the victory of the supporters of Hesychasm crucial not only for Byzantine culture, but for the entire Orthodox Christian world. In 1354 he was forced to abdicate from the throne. Retiring to a monastery, he took a monastic vow, and the name Ioasaph. It was at that time that he produced his historical

and polemic works, among which the above mentioned four treatises debating the Islam in defence of Christianity (*Apologiae*) and four discourses on the Prophet Muhammad (Migne, 1866ab)². Klaus-Peter Todt (1991) lists ca 50 Greek copies of the texts. The four sermons and the disputations have also been edited and commented upon since the 16th century starting with Oporinus edition of 1543. Written in the conventions of the apologetic genre, they present a compendium of Byzantine theological and dogmatic views, in which exegesis plays an essential role as a technique of persuasion and refutation, while at the same communicates Christian understanding of nature and body (be it human or animal). The author employs the entire range of exegetic techniques from an explanation and symbolic interpretation to glossing and expansion of the biblical narrative. The aim of the works was not the presentation of living world, but the defence of the Christian doctrine. The presentations, the intricacies in story of the Creation, the descriptions of animals and human body in these texts serve mainly to refute reproaches to Christian dogma and to assert its validity. In doing so, John VI Kantakouzenos, too, follows closely patristic tradition and rarely offers original, additional interpretation. As Marco Fanelli correctly suggests Kantakouzenos expands the argumentation and provides further knowledge of Qur'anic text (2024, pp. 112 – 121). In his works Kantakouzenos drew on the established set of questions used by earlier Byzantine polemicists debating the Islam, but while still an emperor he also commissioned to Demetrios Kydones (d.1398) a translation from Latin into Greek of Refutation of the Qur'an (*Confutatio alcorani*) written about 1300 by the Dominican monk Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (d.1320). Kantakouzenos owes many of the discussions on the Qur'an, the history of the Islam and the life of Muhammad to Riccoldo's work. It will be, however, very difficult to see any particular innovation or transformation in the genre of these texts as Fanelli suggests (2024, p. 102), as the former emperor is very much in debt of the Byzantine polemical tradition, which he digests and amalgamates, but does not change or remodel, especially when it comes to Christian doctrinal points and the structuring of the polemics.

(2) By the end of fourteenth-century Kantakouzenos' apologetic texts have already been translated in the Balkan Slavic milieu. The translation was probably produced in one of the monasteries of Mount Athos as Prokhorov has previously (1997, p. 39) suggested. There are at least four copies containing all the eight anti-Islamic works: Codex Slav. 34 from Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna from the fourteenth century; Manuscript No 25 Museum Şchei, from Braşov, mid fifteenth century³; Manuscript I/152, Synodal Library Bucharest, from the sixteenth century; and Manuscript Gaster 2082 from John Rylands Library in Manchester produced in 1591. The quotations in the articles are from latter manuscript (cf. the description in Cleminson, 1988, pp. 205 – 206). There is also a sixteenth-century Nomocanon, kept now in Romanian Academy of sciences in which contains excerpts of these and the other polemical works by Kantakouzenos, suggesting that

they have been used for preaching. It is not at all surprising that, although the translation was probably produced in Athos, at least three of these manuscripts originated from the lands of Wallachia and Moldova given the strong political presence of the members of the Kantakouzenos' family in these areas.

What is specific about this translation? In the first place, it is its genre. The genre of theological disputation has not been particularly popular among the Orthodox Slavs, and thus the choice to translate these texts already signals a shift in the taste and the cultural competence of the audience and of the reception of the Byzantine culture in the fourteenth and early fifteenth century in the Balkan Slavic context. The fact that Kantakouzenos' texts were translated relatively soon after they have been written also points at changes in the reception practices, as in the previous centuries the Slavonic translators privileged Byzantine texts written some centuries earlier over the works of their contemporaries.

C. J. G. Turner remarked that "the translation is so literal that it becomes virtually incomprehensible" (Turner, 1973). In fact, it follows so called new Athonite-Turnovo principles of a word for a word rendition of the Greek text. Yet the newly translated texts were not obsolete. As is well known the translation techniques changed several times in the Balkan Slavic milieu to reflect deeper transformations of the ideological and educational strategies in Balkan cultures. The artificiality of the language of these new translations became a norm to the extent that Slavic (and in particular Bulgarian and Serbian) authors started to emulate and use it for their original works. In the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries in the Balkans these translations were undoubtedly used and appreciated as the educated religious elites were aware of the principle on which the translations were based and were expecting nothing less. These texts continued to be in use in the Balkans after 1500, and even if the bookmen did not entirely comprehend them, they did not find them indecipherable either.

The Slavonic translator of Kantakouzenos' polemical works and the later copyists rarely omit passages or phrases of the original with three exceptions: (a) the number of synonyms used for rhetorical purposes in the Greek version are reduced in the translation to just one word, even when the Slavonic linguistic resources allow the rendition of more or all of them; (b) shortening of the long biblical quotations; (c) omission of some of the complex theological exegeses. The latter is particularly interesting and discloses the preferences and the level of theological knowledge of the translator and the audience. However, almost all the references to and interpretations of nature, animals, of human body, behaviour and emotions are preserved in the Slavonic version. There are also mistakes which result from either the literal translation, poor understanding of the original, or negligence of the later copyists (e.g. 'περὶ τοῦ νόμου καὶ ἔθνου' in Kantakouzenos' is rendered 'о законѣ и азъика').

(3) In some cases, however, the Slavonic rendition activates semantic layers related to the understanding of the living world which may not be extant, or so

apparent, in the Greek original. In a passage John Kantakouzenos refers to story from Deeds chapter 14:15 about the mission of the apostles Paul and Barnabas in Lycaonia, where after Paul had miraculously healed a lame man, the crowd decided to worship them as gods (Hermes and Zeus). In John Kantakouzenos' version the apostles say: Παῦσασθε τοῦ ἀτοπήματος, ὅτι καὶ ἡμεῖς ἄνθρωποι ὁμοιοπαθεῖς ὑμῖν ἐσμεν “Stop this **impropriety**, because we are people of the same passion as you” (Migne, 1866b, 664), translated as *прѣстѣнѣте ѿ βεσλωвѣсїа• іако ѡ ми члци подовѣсѣрастни вѣ ѣсли* (Gaster, 2082, 222v) “Stop the **dumbness** [literally: ‘a lack of speech/reason’ metaphorically ‘animality’ ‘stupidity’], because we are people of the same passion as you.” Even if the translator did not know the exact meaning of the word *ἀτόπημα* (impropriety), the story’s well-known content still enabled him to infer it and convey the message of the text. While the rendition of *ἀτόπημα* with *βεσλωвѣсїе* is not incorrect, it should be pointed here that there are other resources in the language which could be used to translate the word, and that the related adjective *βεσλωвѣсїнъ* usually renders *ἄλογος*. However, the word *βεσλωвѣсїнъ* doesn’t mean only the one lacking reason or speech, it also designates animals, living creatures, construed as a group different from the humans. The phrase ‘reason/speech/-lacking animals’ is used by Kantakouzenos and by the translator throughout the polemics and reflects a concept developed already in the early patristic tradition. The translation of this passage does not change the general meaning, although it still deviates from it, implying a specific division within the living world (between those entrusted by God with reason, and those lacking it).

The contrast between the human beings and the rest of the living world is an important lieu for the creation of both rhetorically charged statement and ethically motivated exegeses in Kantakouzenos’ works. Discussing the passions and the crucifixion of Christ in *Apologiae*, John Kantakouzenos resorts to a passage from Isaiah 1:3 (about the ox that knows its owner, and the donkey – its master’s crib, unlike the people of Israel who does not recognise the Messiah) to create a negative hyperbole and underline the sin of the chosen people. Following the biblical text, John Kantakouzenos paradoxically presents the animals as the bearers of the truth and wisdom in contrast to the humans. In this, as in many other earlier examples of the Byzantine theological discourse, the habitual positions of animals and humans in the Christian universe are paradoxically reversed to enhance the critical message of the text.

Neither the conventions of the polemic and apologetic genre, nor the purpose of Kantakouzenos’ work required a structured picture of the universe, unlike other forms of theological discourses such as, for instance, the *Haxamera* of Basil the Great (d.379) and subsequently of John the Exarch (late ninth – early tenth century). However, one can get a comprehensive idea of Christian cosmogony and anthropology from the interpretations scattered through the four *Apologies* and the four Sermons. In the first book of *Apologiae* Kantakouzenos paints a picture of God’s created world

in which all the elements are linked together in a metaphorical “golden chain” which reaches heaven as each ring is connected to the next. The Slavonic translation renders here Greek κρίκος as белчюгъ (meaning ‘ring in a chain’ even in contemporary Moldavian). The author builds within the polemical discourse a consistent analogy explaining both nature and the human agency in it: According to the *Apologiae* the illumination originates from the sun, in the same way as the word (λόγος/ слово) comes from the mind (νοῦς/ оумь). Speaking of God’s creation John Kantakouzenos also demonstrates astronomical knowledge and describes the trajectory of the sun and the moon from East to West, turning it into an comparison between the nature and the human being. At the same time the author completely rejects the stories about the Prophet Muhammad, archangel Gabriel and the moon as “a childish myth.” Kantakouzenos’s text is also the first and the only place in which the name of Riccoldo da Monte di Croce appeared in the medieval Slavonic written culture. Up to the eighteenth century, the translation of Kantakouzenos’s four sermons against the Prophet Muhammad was possibly the only source on his life and deeds available for to the Balkan Orthodox Christian Slavs.

Further the reproduction in nature (“the fig tree produces figs, the olive – olives”) serves in Kantakouzenos’ argumentation as a proof for the unitary essence (the sameness) of God the Father and Christ. In Kantakouzenos’ exegesis animals may also provide a proof in support of a particular theological argument. In various places in the four *Apologiae* John Kantakouzenos defends the concept of immaculate conceptions. In one of these places, he refutes the view that it is impossible to conceive without a man by saying that those who question it, should tell us where the womb of the mosquito is placed and where its voice comes from, where the nape of the ant is, and where -- its heart. At that plethora of aetiological legends are presented in the text, including Talmudic legends on the creation of the boar and mouse from the elephant excrements, and the fox from the head of the lion in the Arch of Noah. This perhaps one of the rare instances in which this narrative is attested in a Slavonic witness.

Kantakouzenos’ interpretations may not be original, but he often expands them into complex exegetic chains. Interpreting the narrative of Moses and the Burning bush from Exodus 3:2 – 5 he repeats the traditional understanding and describes the Bush as a prefiguration of the Virgin – an image known to the Slavonic bookmen and used even in original Slavonic texts (e.g. sermons of Klement of Ochrid and Gregory Tsamblak). In some of these cases the lexical rendition in the Slavonic version betrays the knowledge of the earlier instances, especially with the view of the biblical quotes explained in the passage. Kantakouzenos not only interprets the symbolic meaning of almost every element in the story of the Burning bush, but also adds lesser-known explanation as to why Moses was commanded to put off his shoes at that place. Both the original and the translation present it not as a sign of reverence, but state that this is because Moses’ shoes were made of dead animal skin which has no place in the presence of living God.

Thus, the picture of the living world painted by Kantakouzenos' texts, though mostly traditional and unoriginal, offers hitherto unknown interpretations and narratives about the nature, as well as a richer selection of exegeses on the Holy Scripture, and adds to the Christian imagining of the human world for both Balkan Greeks and Slavs. In most of the cases the exegetic components in the original text were correctly rendered by its translator. The examples we discussed showed that the Slavonic bookmen sometimes cautiously limited the message of the original text, and offered a specific, but still adequate interpretation. Moreover, in the Ottoman dominated Balkans from the late fourteenth century onwards the texts equipped the Christian reader with a critical perspective to the Islam and were one of the first instances to offer him an insight into the Qur'anic narratives, sayings and Muslim traditions. The marginal glosses in some of the Slavonic manuscripts suggest that many passages, and especially those related to Christian understanding of the living world were employed in one form or another (in preaching, knowledge acquisition or in deliberations). The Slavonic translation of these works is a unique document of complex cross-cultural exchanges, combining Christian exegesis, Byzantine polemic discourse, Western Catholic account of the Qur'an (no matter how partial) shaped through Slavonic linguistic resources.

NOTES

1. As the XVII Congress of Slavic Studies was held in Paris, and the papers are kindly hosted by the Journal *Български език и литература*, let this short text be a humble tribute to the memory of V. Angusheva who loved Paris and G. Angushev who dedicated his work to psychology and education.
2. Alongside *Anti-Islamic disputations*, Kantakouzenos produced the *History of the Empire* (finished around 1369; Polemic work against Prochoros Kydones (1368 – 1369); Works in defence of Hesychasm and Transfiguration; Discussion with the papal legate Paul; and Disputation with a Jew, organized in 9 dialogues (in the 1360s – 1370s).
3. Electronically available at the Polemische Traktate gegen Mohammedaner und Juden (Last access 25 Aug 2025)

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