

PLANTS IN EXEGESIS: DIFFICULTIES IN MEDIEVAL SLAVONIC TRANSLATIONS OF JOHN CHRYSOSTOM AND THEODORET OF CYRRHUS

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Abstract. This study examines how medieval South Slavonic translators rendered Greek botanical terminology into Old Church Slavonic (Old Bulgarian) and how their choices varied. Early translations from the 9th – 11th centuries tended to be contextual and flexible, while 14th – 15th-century translators preferred greater lexical and grammatical precision, frequently adopting Greek loanwords. Using different translations of the commentaries to the *Song of Songs* and of John Chrysostom’s *De statuis* as case studies, the article illustrates how botanical terms were interpreted differently according to the translators’ strategies and skill. Particular attention is given to plant names whose interpretation depended on theological commentaries, especially in late catena translations, where loanwords were introduced, but sometimes explanatory synonyms were added for clarity. These examples highlight the translators’ efforts to render Greek sources faithfully while remaining comprehensible to Slavic readership.

Keywords: hermeneutics; biblical commentaries; plants; translations of the Bible; Old Church Slavonic translations from Greek

1. The translators of Greek texts into Old Church Slavonic (Old Bulgarian literary language) faced the challenge to render not only Christian terms but also cultural lexis typical of antique and medieval Mediterranean world. A significant part of the scientific and theological knowledge was out of reach of the general public. The audience of these texts was mainly the educated clergy and members of the royal court. Nevertheless, it was important that certain authors and works were available in translation not only for the needs of the aristocracy and the church, but also for providing prestige to Slavonic literature and for supporting the Christian worldview. Both biblical and exegetical texts abound in Near Eastern and Mediterranean *realia*, including designations of plants, and they were interpreted in a symbolic and spiritual manner, often through etymological approach (Moldenke

& Moldenke, 2002; Musselman, 2007). There was not one single way of rendering specific, abstract, or unfamiliar notions. Different authors and translators had different approaches.¹ Some of the new words enhanced permanently the Slavonic vocabulary, whereas others were short-lived and were replaced by synonyms. Generally speaking, the translations from the earlier period (ninth–eleventh century) were more contextual, they preferred using synonyms, which could better render the nuances of the Greek terms. The translations in the fourteenth – early fifteenth century aimed at greater precision and often mirrored Greek grammatical and lexical structures.

The goal of this article is to discuss the reception of botanical designations in South Slavonic milieu with examples from two works translated in different periods: the commentary of Theodoret of Cyrrihus on the *Song of Songs* (henceforth **Ct**) in juxtaposition with the two earlier translations of this Old Testament book, and John Chrysostom's homilies *On the Statues* in two translations.

2. Three medieval translations of the Song of Songs made from Greek are known to us: a) **Cant**₁, an early translation without commentaries made, in all likelihood, at the end of the ninth century; b) **Cant**₂, an early translation of a catena with commentaries of the biblical verses, made presumably in tenth-century Bulgaria; the catena contains commentaries by Philo of Carpasia, Hippolyte of Rome, Gregory of Nyssa, and others; and c) **Cant**₃, an early fifteenth-century translation of another catena with commentaries, known as Catena B₂ (C 81, Typus B in CPG IV (1980): 222 – 224), made by Konstantin Kostenečki in Serbian court or by a certain monk (Gavriil?) on Mount Athos. It contains the commentaries by Theodoret of Cyrrihus (393 – 458/466), by the so-called Three Fathers: a compilation of the commentaries by Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335 – after 394), Nylus of Sinai (ca. 345 – ca. 430), and Maxim the Confessor (ca. 580 – 662), and the exegetical poem by Michael Psellus (1018 – after 1078).²

In contrast to the two **earlier** translations of this biblical book, the **later** translation of the catena version exploits more Greek loanwords to denote plants. There are different reasons for this choice of the later translator, including the perception of some lexemes as terms or a sense for their specific connotations in Greek. Another reason could be the polysemic character of such lexemes: sometimes theological interpretations in catena B₂ differ because they are based on different meanings of botanical designations. In what follows, examples of *ad hoc* borrowed Greek lexemes in the translation of catena B₂ will be given in comparison with the choices of the two earlier translators.

2.1. **Example 1. ὄλυνθος Ct 2:13: пжпѣкѣ (пжпѣка) Cant**₁– цѣѣтѣ Cant₂– олинѣтѣ Cant₃

The word ὄλυνθος (ή συκῆ ἐξήνεγκεν ὄλυνθους αὐτῆς (LXX according to the edition of Rahlfs (2006) “the fig tree has put forth/ has developed/ has borne its *first/ young/ unripe/ early fruit*”) is used in the description of spring in the Song,

when the flowers have appeared, pruning time has come, the vines are in blossom, giving forth fragrance (Ct 2: 12 – 13). The word is polysemic in Greek and could mean the fruit of the fig tree (winter or summer, wild or cultivated)³ or sterile male inflorescence of the caprifig (LSJ). In accordance with the Hebrew text, this lexeme in the Septuagint is thought to mean unripe, winter fig fruit.⁴ The earliest translator of the Song rendered *ὄλυνθοι* with *пжпкы* (Alekseev, 1980, I, 12), a rare word in medieval Slavonic written sources, whose main form is reconstructed as *пжпъкъ* by Franz Miklošič (Miklosich, 1865) in the same verse of the Song (also Alekseev, 2002: *пжпъкъ*, Acc. Pl.) but it could be *пжпъка* too. The lexemes *рур*, *рорек*, *пънка* mean today ‘bud’ in South Slavic languages. The form without a suffix, *пжпъ*, is used as a counterpart of the same Greek word in medieval Slavonic manuscripts that are thought to contain the early Slavonic translation of the Apocalypse 6: 13 *ЗВѢЗДА СЪПАДЪ СЪ НЕБЕСЕ НА ЗЕМЛѢ ꙖКО СМОКОВЪНИЦА ОУПЪМѢТАЮЩИ ПЖПЪ СВОА ОУПЪ ВѢТРА ВЕЛИѢ ДВИЖИМА* (SJS, but with a reconstructed archaic orthography) for *ὡς συκῆ βάλλει τοὺς ὄλυνθους αὐτῆς ὑπὸ ἀνέμου μεγάλου σειομένη*. In this verse, it is considered to mean winter fig fruit which does not come to maturity but falls off in the spring (Thayer, 2002, p. 444). It remains unclear if the translator(s) of the two verses discussed had in mind an intertextual link between them (in his commentary of Apocalypse Andrew of Caesarea (d. 637) makes such a link, see Andrew of Caesarea, 2011, pp. 98 – 99) and if the Slavic word *пжпъ(къ)* had the meaning of unripe, green fruit, or rather it was chosen as the most appropriate counterpart of this Greek specific fruit designation for this context (if we judge from its etymology, a word with the root *пжп-* could mean convex, protuberant things, such as bud, pimple, and could render the meaning ‘small, unripe fruits’, and even ‘siconium’),⁵ a counterpart that corresponds to Christian interpretations too.

The earlier catena translation attests a contextual rendition of the verse: *СМОКЪ ИЗНЕСЕ ЦВѢТЪ СВОИ*. In the commentary to it, it is explained: *рѣжеде плоды цвѣтъ*. Alekseev (Alekseev, 2002, p. 80) thinks that this phrase refers to Gregory of Nyssa’s commentary (Gregorius Nyssenus, 1986, 156.155.8 – 9), but this sentence explains that *ὄλυνθος* is a form of a fruit that appears before the sweet and ripe fruit, that is a temporary fruit: *πρὸ τοῦ γλυκέος τε καὶ τελείου καρποῦ ὑπὸ τῆς συκῆς ἐν καρπῶν εἶδει προβαλλόμενον ὄλυνθος λέγεται* (Gregorius Nyssenus, 1986, p. 155). The word *цвѣтъ* remained in Ostroh Bible of 1581 and even in Church Slavonic (Elisabeth) Bible of 1751. It is true that both spring flowers of the trees and winter fig fruit are short-lived and therefore this translation choice corresponds well to Christian interpretations. For example, Theodoret compares the people who have not been baptized with *ὄλυνθοι* that fall from the tree and do not develop into ripe fruit, in contrast to those people who are baptized. Both *пжпкы* and *цвѣтъ* do not contradict this Christian interpretation, rather they well illustrate it, especially if an intertextual link to Apoc 6:13 is considered. The later translator, however, preferred the loanword *оливиѳы* to render this orchardists’ term, but he, in order

to make it clear for the readers, explained it with *прѣдѣплодїа, прѣдѣплодѣныѣ смоквице, прѣжде плодѣ سموквице*, newly coined words with clear meaning that corresponded well to the Christian interpretations.

2.2. There are several other cases in which the later translator preferred to use newly adapted Greek borrowings to denote specific plants' names, especially when the polysemy led to different theological interpretations put together in catena B₂:

Examples 2-3-4.

κύπρος Ct 4:12 'henna (*Lawsonia inermis*), henna-blossom, or camphor tree' for the Hebrew *kopher*: *цвѣтъ* 'bloom, blossom' Cant₁ – *κῦρη* Cant₃;

βότρυς τῆς κύπρου Ct 1:14 'a cluster of henna, flowering bunch'

гроздѣ цвѣта 'flowering cluster' Cant₁

грезнь зрѣлъ 'ripe, mature cluster' (according to the accompanying commentary, a tree from which myrrh is produced is viewed, probably *commiphora myrrha*: *то же дрѣво любимьци стругжемо даѣтъ плодѣ мюра*)

виниага кырскѣа/кыра 'a flowering cluster, bunch of *cypros*' Cant₃.⁶

Still, **κυπρισμός Ct 7:13[12]** 'bloom' is not rendered with a loanword in Cant₃, cf. ἤνθησεν ὁ κυπρισμός '(if) the blossom has bloomed' (trans. by J.C. Treat, NETS, 2007, p. 665): *процвѣте цвѣтникъ* Cant₃, similar to *процвѣлъ цвѣтъ* Cant₁. In his commentary, Theodoret explains the word *κυπρισμός* as τὸ ἄνθος 'flower', that is called "cyprisimos": ὅπερ ἐνταῦθα κυπρισμὸν προσηγόρευσεν. Here the translator used a loanword as a term, without morphological adaptation, and added a synonym: *κῆρῖσιμὸς ρέκше цвѣтникъ*.

2.3. In other sentences in the commentaries, the later translator uses newly adopted loanwords.

Example 5: δηλητήριον, τό (φάρμακον) 'poison': *дилитириѣ/дилитирионѣ* in the *Commentary* by Theodoret to **Ct 1:7[6]**. The later translator preferred a borrowing because the Greek etymon developed specific connotations in Greek. In Ct 1:7[6], the Bride expresses her fears that she might have become like one who socializes with other shepherds. Theodoret regards them as heretics, conspirators and destructors who give *δηλητήρια* to their flocks instead of nourishing grass. The adjective *δηλητήριος* 'destroying, killing' is opposed to *σωτήριος* 'saving'. In the second century, the grammarian Ptolemaeus discerned τὸ φάρμακον ἐπὶ ζωῆς (a medication that saves life) from τὸ δηλητήριον ἐπὶ θανάσιμου (a medication that kills, deadly poison) (ΕΛ 2010). The later translator of Catena B₂ keeps this Greek word as a term having specific connotations and he adds an explanation of the borrowing, as in other cases, according to the context. He explains *дилитиριѣа* as *пажити раждаючи метилъ* [pastures that produce fluke parasite] (this is the earliest attestation of the word *метилъ*).

3.1. In texts that are not purely exegetical but rely strongly on the authority of the Scripture, similar problems arise with the translation of biblical quotations.

In the next two examples from John Chrysostom's homilies *On the Statues*, the translators had to choose between remaining faithful to the source and providing an unambiguous meaning of obscure content.

The homilies *On the Statues* were first translated in full in the 10th century in Preslav, and again in the 14th century on Mount Athos (Dimitrova, 2024). They are not specifically exegetical, unlike many of John Chrysostom's other homiletical series on various biblical books, but they provide interesting imagery from the natural world in metaphors, descriptions, and biblical quotations. As true representatives of the two main periods of Slavonic literacy, the early translation (hereafter **P**) is characterized by its archaic and flexible language, and the second one (hereafter **A**) demonstrates a more literal approach. Some of the words denoting plants in the text are the following: *ródon* 'rose' – **P** шипѣкъ / **A** розѣка; *ἴον* 'violet' – **P** ионѣ / **A** любичица; *κρίνον* 'lily' – **P**, **A** кринѣ; *ἐλαία* 'olive' – **P**, **A** маслина (and *ἔλαιον* 'olive-oil' – **P** масло дравѣно, дравѣномаслиѣ / **A** масло); *σταφύλη* 'grapes' – **P** грознѣ / **A** гроздѣ; *συκὴ* 'fig tree' – **P** смоква / **A** смоковница; *δρυμός* 'thicket' – **P** дравѣга / **A** дѣбрава, лѣгѣ; *νάπη* 'grove, glen' – **P** дѣбрава / **A** ждоль; *λειμών* 'meadow' – **P** цвѣтнильникѣ, зима (understood as *χειμών), пристанициѣ (understood as *λιμήν) / **A** садѣ, рани; *παράδεισος* 'garden' – **P** овоцнѣни оградѣ / **A** рани, and others.

3.2. Two biblical quotations give the opportunity for a deeper look into the translation and understanding of less familiar notions.

Example 6: σκοπός Hosea 9:10 'guardian, watchman; first fruit'

– translation **P** (10th c.): стражецѣ на смовкви ('watchman on the fig-tree');

– translation **A** (14th c.): смоква на смоковници ('fig on the fig-tree').

The first example contains the same image of an early fig as the one discussed above, but with a different corresponding term. The quotation is from Hosea 9:10: "Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors." Ὡς σταφυλὴν ἐν ἐρήμῳ εὗρον τὸν Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ὡς σκοπὸν ἐν (τῆ) συκῇ πρῶτον εἶδον πατέρας αὐτῶν – **P** аки грознѣ вѣрѣтѣ в пѣстыни илѣ, и аки стражецѣ на смовкви рани видѣхѣ отѣца ихѣ. The word σκοπός means 'guardian, watchman', but in this and other verses it denotes the early fruit of the fig tree. The Preslav translation of the homilies *On the statues* **P** follows the standard rendition in the early Slavonic translations as стражецѣ на смовкви, which corresponds faithfully to the Greek text. It stands very close to the full Preslav translation of this biblical book, cf.: акы грознѣ въ пѣстыни вѣрѣтохѣ израилѣ, и акы стражѣ на смоковници раннѣ, видѣхѣ отѣца ихѣ.⁸ This metaphorical use has apparently posed problems to the understanding of the passage even in the Greek tradition, and in some manuscripts the word σκοπός 'guardian' was sometimes replaced with καρπός 'fruit', as attested in the variant readings to this verse in the Septuagint. The second Slavonic translation of the homilies **A** also preferred an explicit rendition: смовкву на смоковници 'fig on the fig tree', translating σκοπός as смовква 'fig'.

Example 7: τερέβινθος Isaiah 1:30 ‘terebinth, *Pistacia Terebinthus*’

- translation P (10th c.): **ПѢРВѢННѢ** (loanword);
- translation A (14th c.): **ПѢРВѢННѢ**;
- earliest translation of Isaiah (Prophetologion / Parimejnik, 9th c.): **ПѢРВЪ**, **ПЪРНИѢ** (loanword);
- Preslav translation of Isaiah with commentaries (10th c.): **ЦЕРЪ** (*Quercus cerris*).

The second quotation is from Isaiah 1:30: “For you shall be like an **oak** whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water” ἔσονται γὰρ ὡς **τερέβινθος** ἀποβεβληκυῖα τὰ φύλλα καὶ ὡς παράδεισος ὕδωρ μὴ ἔχων. Both translations of the homilies use the loan-word **ПѢРВѢННѢ** ‘terebinth, *Pistacia Terebinthus*’ (Moldenke & Moldenke, 2002, pp. 178 – 179, pp. 193 – 199; Musselman, 2007, pp. 265 – 269). The same lexeme was used in the archaic translation of the Old Testament in the so-called *Parimejnik (Prophetologion)*. e.g. **ПѢРВЪ** in Grigorovich and **ПЪРНИѢ** in Zacharinski *Prophetologion* (see, e.g. SJS) However, in another early translation of this verse, the word **τερέβινθος** is rendered as **ЦЕРЪ** (*Quercus cerris*), and this is also the corresponding term in the Preslav translation of the commentary of St. Basil. The name of the tree **τερέβινθος** is mentioned several times in different books of the Old Testament, and is understood as a large deciduous tree, sometimes translated as ‘oak’. The two species have little in common in terms of taxonomy, and the context does not require strict botanical accuracy. The preference for the obscure borrowing **ПѢРВѢННѢ** in both translations indicates either influence from the earliest translation of the *Prophetologion*, or a close adherence to the Greek text of Chrysostom’s homilies.

In conclusion, translation of biblical verses means interpretation. Obscure and polysemantic terms posed challenges to the translators, who might be influenced by the context, by the existing earlier translations of the Scriptures, and sometimes by the commentary tradition. Thus, the later translator of the *Song of Songs* used more loanwords than the earlier ones because he was confronted with different interpretations of the same biblical verses in the catena and because he aspired to render correctly the Greek botanical terminology interpreted in a spiritual sense by Theodoret. Still, in order to make the interpretations understandable, he explained some of the loanwords. Facing the challenge to translate an etymological explanation as a method of exegesis, he was lead in his lexical choices from the context.

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NOTES

1. On techniques of medieval Slavonic translators, see, among others, Mincheva, 1985; Tasseva & Yovcheva, 2006; Ilieva, 2013; Hristova-Shomova, 2016
2. For an overview of the studies of these three medieval Slavonic versions of the Song, see Bruni, 2017 and Slavova, 2022, p. 31, pp. 38 – 40. In this paper, the examples from the two early translations are taken from the edition of Alekseev, 2002; the examples from the late translation of the catena from Dimitrova, 2012.
3. See, for instance, *edible fruit of the wild fig, summer or late fig* (LEH), *edible fruit of the wild fig* (Muraoka, 2009, p. 494); *edible fruit of the wild fig; sterile summer fruit of the cultivated fig* (LSJ).
4. Cf. M. Pope's translation from Hebrew *the fig ripens her fruits* (Pope, 1977, p. 365) and the following translations from Greek: *The fig-tree has put forth its young figs* (Brenton, 1851), *The fig-tree has put forth its figs* (J. C. Treat in NETS, 2007, 662); *Смоковница принесла ранние ягоды свои* (Jungerov, 1916).
5. On the etymology of ρῶρ>пъп, пъпка, see, for instance, BER VI: 61 – 65; the meaning of пѣпъ in Арос 6: 13 is formulated as *unripe fruit, unripe fig* in SJS, and as *bud, unopened flower, unripe fruit* in Sreznevskij III.
6. On the rendition of κῶπρος in medieval Slavonic manuscripts and on the meaning of *vinjaga*, see Minčeva, 1991.
7. Cf. also Nahum 3:12: “All your fortresses are like fig trees with first-ripe figs – if shaken they fall into the mouth of the eater.”
8. Zlatanova, 2022, 107. In the Old Church Slavonic translation of Theodoret's commentary, this particular phrase is not discussed, see e.g. MS Moscow, Russian State Library, fund 304/I, Sv. Troice-Sergieva Lavra, no. 89, f. 7r.

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