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The cult of saints-healers – an alternative and opposition to the official medicine in medieval Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

Medieval Bulgarian medicine from the IX-XV c. was characterized by the low occurrence of medical services, by their inaccessibility, as well as by the widespread disappointment in learned physicians. This led to the search for alternative healing practices. Different means and methods were developed for filling up the deficit of healthcare services:

- Self-treatment and self-proclaimed healers,
- Healing through sacred objects,
- Faith in saints and their relics.

Evidence of the existence of a Bulgarian tradition of healing practices can be found in the considerable number of medical medieval works of utilitarian application, such as manuals, intended to be used by both – healers and patients.

Pagan practices of worshipping magic items were transformed into the worship of objects of religious function – the cross, the Scriptures, holy water, holy oil, icons, etc., to which miraculous healing and saving powers were attributed.

The cult of saints is highly utilitarian and focuses on the meeting of health care needs. Thus a parallel between self-proclaimed healers and saints was drawn, as saints were also believed to have been able to cure the faithful through God's power. This cult has two aspects:

- their supernatural powers, which the Saints had while still alive and
- the miracles, associated with their relics.

In the primitive medieval health care system, primary medical practice was not entrusted to the medical professionals, but to the saints-healers and their relics. Seeking assistance and treatment from them was also a way to deny scientific medicine.

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European medicine has its roots in the pagan societies of Ancient Greece and Rome, and combines science with ethics and deontology. Its natural continuation is the medicine of Byzantium, which, based on the achievements of the old schools and the accumulated experience, as well as the new findings, developed the clinical practice, pharmacology and pharmacognosy. There it does not only build upon ancient medical science, but also adds to it the concept of Christian charity.

Medicine in Medieval Bulgaria

Because of the fact that from the VIII century onwards Bulgarians were neighbors and often subjects of Byzantium, they entered in a continually deepening cultural interaction with the Empire, in a cultural diffusion, which not later than in the XII century combined them in a single cultural community.¹ Byzantine influence can be seen in every aspect of medieval Bulgarian culture, including the development of medicine. That influence is the main reason why the ancient achievements accepted by Byzantine medicine also found their way in the old Bulgarian medical science of the IX–XV c. period.

John Exarch's *Shestodnev* from the end of the IX century is an example of the good knowledge of the Byzantine and Medieval Literature in Medieval Bulgaria. His broad knowledge of many ancient scientific authorities, many of whom are doctors² far exceeds his main source – Basil the Great's *Shestodnev*. Since most of the names cited were not present in the source, it is obvious that they had been drawn from other Byzantine authors. The description of the human body had been derived from Aristotle's *Animal History*, based on a Byzantine compilation, put together by the monk Meletius. John Exarch added to it his own thoughts, quoted Plato, mentioned the famous Hellenistic doctor Alkmey Krotonidis of VI BC.³

The old Bulgarian translation of the Byzantine compilation Galen's *Reflections on the Teachings of Hippocrates*, is another example of the penetration of antique scientific models in Medieval Bulgaria.⁴ A huge number of references to ancient and medieval doctors can be found in the *Hilandar Medical Code*.⁵

Worship of ancient art and values, and their reception in the Christianized culture of the Byzantine community manifested in the inclusion of many eminent authori-

¹ Dmitrij Obolenski, *Vizantijskata obshtnost*, Sofia 2001, p. 361- 386

² Joan Exarch, *Schestodnev*, Sofia 2000

³ Čvetan Krăstanov and Ivan Dujchev, *Estestvoznaniето v Srednovekovna Bălgaria (sbornik s istoricheski izvori)*, Sofia 1954, p.571

⁴ *Stara Bălgarska Literatura*, Vol. V, *Estestvoznanie*, p. 516–525

⁵ Mincho Georgiev, *Ibid*, p. 20-21

ties on ancient thought, including doctors, in church painting. The portraits of Aristophanes, Diogenes, Socrates, Aristotle, Galen, Plato, Plutarch, Thucydides, Solon, Pythagoras, Homer, etc. were widely spread in the orthodox Byzantine world, including many locations in Bulgarian lands. Images of pagan sages can be seen in the frescoes in the refectory of Bachkovski Monastery, in the women's section of the Church of the Nativity of Christ in Arbanasi⁶, in the Boboshevo Monastery, etc. Although these frescoes mentioned are from a later period - XVII c., undoubtedly similar images, found in different places, independently of one another, are based on the centuries-old tradition in icon-painting models of the post-Byzantine world, which we cannot trace further back, because of the lack of earlier models. The inclusion of ancient philosophers, writers and scientists in church paintings is done in recognition of the significance of their activity, as well as their moral qualities. Their depiction with halos in many of those paintings puts them on an equal footing with the saints.

The establishment of Christianity also enriches the moral concept of medicine. The age's moral behest – love thy neighbor – was added to the ethical norms of the age of Hippocrates. It was this command to offer help to all who might need it, that turned into a catalyst for the development of medicine and healthcare.

Medical Care and Hospitals in Bulgaria

In harmony with the teachings of Christ to love one's neighbor, initially in Byzantium and then in other countries, a number of charity institutions arose – inns, orphanages, nursing homes, and poorhouses at the monasteries – where the homeless and ill people could find shelter and food. At a later point those facilities grew into hospitals, where inhabitants of the area received medical care⁷. The beginning of this tradition in charity activities and the building of hospitals and poorhouses is associated with the Bishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom.⁸

In Bulgaria, a few centuries later, we have only fragmentary data about the creation of inns, hospitals and poorhouses at some monasteries in the Byzantine fashion. Most reports do not allow for definite conclusions, but only conjecture. It is a widespread opinion that the earliest such institutions occurred at the Patleina Monastery near Preslav and at the St. Pantaleon Monastery near Ohrid.⁹ Such assumptions, however, are based more often on the name of the monastery patron St. Pantaleon

⁶ Ivan Dujchev, *Drevnoezicheski Misliteli i Pisateli v Starata Bălgarska Živopis*, Sofia 1978

⁷ Mincho Georgiev, *Ibid*, p. 145

⁸ prot. Georgi Florovski, *Iztochnite Otzi ot IVv*, Moskva, 1992, p. 312

⁹ *Istoria na Bălgarskata Srednovekovna Literatura*, edited by Anisava Miltenova, Sofia 2008, p. 222

– the saint-healer (wherefrom the name of the Patleina region has been derived) than on concrete archaeological evidence. The opinion (formulated half a century ago) about the existence of a hospital and orphanage in the area of Avradaka near Preslav in the IX–X c.¹⁰ today is considered to be untenable.¹¹

More detailed information on hospitals can be found in the Typicon of the Bachkovo Monastery from the XI c., wherefrom we learn that on cold days the three monastery inns provided food, shelter and warmth to all travelers and the poor. Also, ill people could stay for three or more days (if necessary) until they felt better.¹²

It is evident that the data concerning hospitals and organized health care in medieval Bulgaria is extremely scarce. This leads us to the conclusion that such events are rare and almost not present as a phenomenon in the life of Bulgarians from this period, and where found, they are often of Byzantine origin. This was the case with Bachkovo Monastery, founded by the Bakuriani brothers, Georgians at Byzantine service, at a time when the Bulgarian state did not exist and for nearly two centuries (1018-1195) was part of the Byzantine Empire.

Physicians and People's Disappointment in Them

As for the learned physicians, as well as the medical practice in medieval Bulgaria, the lack of written sources does not allow for extensive comments. We only have a few names who could be classified as physicians of Bulgarian origin. These are Eustathius the doctor, who lived in Meglen in XI-XII c.¹³ and Basil the Physician, a Bogomil preacher, whose profession can be deduced from his name, and about whom a number of Byzantine authors wrote.¹⁴, as well as the Synodicon of Tsar Boril of 1211.¹⁵ Hodja Bulgar, who was famous in the Arabian Caliphate in the XII c.,¹⁶ should not be included in this list because he originates from Volga Bulgaria.¹⁷

¹⁰ Nikolaj Mavrodinov, *Starobalgarskoto Izkustvo* 1959, p. 187–190; Neli Chaneva-Dechevska, *Čärkvi i Manastiri ot Veliki Praslav*, Sofia 1980, p. 128–135

¹¹ Totju Totev, *Novi Nabljudenija i Danni za Oblika na Grazhdanskata Architectura prez Parvoto Bylgarsko Tzarstvo*, <http://preslav.shu.bg/webs/Deinost/archive/TOM1/T.%20Totev.pdf>

¹² *Typicon Bacuriani*, GIBI VII, p. 58

¹³ Ivan Dujchev, "Prinosi kám Srednovekovnata Bálgarska Istorija" in *Godišnik na Plovdivskata Narodna Biblioteka i Muzej 1937-1939*, 1940

¹⁴ Ioahannes Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, GIBI VII, *Izvori za Bálgarskata Istorija*, p. 205. Anna Komnene, *Alexias*, Berlin. New York 2001. XV 8, 3-10, p. 540–542

¹⁵ *The Synodicon of Tsar Boril*, edited and translated by Ivan Bozhilov, Anna-Maria Totomanova and Ivan Bilyarski, Sofia 2010., p. 304

¹⁶ Petar Koledarov, 1974, p. 66–69

¹⁷ G. M. Davletschina, *Volzhskaja Bulgarija: Duchovnjaja Kultura (Domongolskij Period, X - nach. XIII vv.)*, Kazan, 1990 River. 172

But there were also physicians of foreign origin, working in Bulgaria. John Petritzi, a famous Georgian physician and philosopher, spent some time in Bachkovo Monastery.¹⁸ Theodorites, a monk and physician from Constantinople, lived in the capital city of Veliko Tarnovo in the XIV c., as evidenced in the Passional of St. Theodosius of Tarnovo.¹⁹

In the IX c. John Exarch stated in his aforementioned treatise on the structure of the human body that knowledge of organs and body parts was of a special character and therefore it should have been left to the physicians.²⁰ This shows that even in this early period in history the importance of the medical profession and its inherent specific knowledge and skills were recognized. But did people practicing the medical profession in medieval Bulgaria have the necessary professional and moral qualities? In most cases we come across evidence of inappropriate, unprofessional and sometimes unethical practices by physicians. The common character in literature of an ill man spending his entire wealth on doctors and not finding relief is most probably based on real events – patients of various complaints must have been treated by ineffective and avaricious physicians.

Both Byzantine and Bulgarian hagiographic literature after the X c. is full of examples of unfortunate patients, victimized by greedy and incompetent physicians, consuming their entire wealth and not achieving the desired results. Kekaumenos, a Byzantine author from the XI c., expressed genuine dislike of physicians, who he considered charlatans, because of their habit to prolong the treatment long enough, so as to take all of the patient's money. The author, therefore, advises his readers to avoid physicians and utilize methods of self-treatment instead.²¹ In Bulgaria we find the same motif in Theophylact of Ohrid (XI - XII century.) He tells the story of a woman, who "...spent most of her fortune on physicians, but having found their treatment to be weaker than her pain, decided to resort to free treatment. She used the relics of the saints instead..."²² Euthymius of Tarnovo (the end of the XIV c.) wrote of a woman, who "...was the victim of a terrible suffering. Her breasts were corroded by the severe illness and even though she spent too much of her wealth on physicians, she found no relief."²³

From the sources cited one could conclude that the learned physician was a marginal figure, who had little presence in the life of the medieval Bulgarians, or pro-

¹⁸ Mincho Georgiev, *Ibid*, p. 145

¹⁹ Prostranno Zhitie na Teodosij Tärnovski ot Patriarch Kalist, SBL Vol. IV, p. 452

²⁰ Joan Exarch, p. 263

²¹ A. P. Kajdan and Ann Wharton Epstein *Ibid.*, p. 178; Genadij Litavrin, *Sovetaj i rasskazaj Kekavmena*, Moskva 1972, p. 225

²² Theophylact of Ohrid, *Mächenichestvoto na 15-te Tiveriopulski Mächeniči.*, GIBI Vol. IX, p. 77

²³ Euthymius of Tarnovo. *Prostranno Žitie na Philotea Temniška*, SBL, Vol. IV, p. 208

vided no benefit to their health due to incompetence and greed. The disappointment with the medical profession, the insufficient availability of medical services, and their high price finally led to the search for alternative healing practices. Different means and methods were developed for filling up the deficit of healthcare services:

- Self-treatment and self-proclaimed healers,
- Healing through sacred objects,
- Faith in saints and their relics.

Self-treatment and Folk Medicine

The fragmentary and scarce information about physicians and medical care at clinics could be accepted as proof that in Medieval times people relied more on self-proclaimed healers to get help for their ailments, than on learned physicians. The healing practices of mediums, medicine-men and magicians, as opposed to officially sanctioned medicine, are a common theme in Old Bulgarian literature. In the X c. Cosmas the Priest urged his congregation not to trust the self-proclaimed healers, even if the latter were able to cast out demons and raise the dead.²⁴ In the Passional of Theodosius of Tarnovo we find an interesting description of practices of tree worshipping for the sake of healing.²⁵

Theophanes of Rila (XV c.) testifies to the common search for a cure from "magicians" and the widespread folk healing practices of pagan origin in the Late Middle Ages²⁶ In the XVII c. Joseph the Bearded wrote: "I have been to many lands, but I have never seen so many mediums and witches as in this Bulgarian land of ours."²⁷ Although the aforementioned work dates from a later period, it gives us an idea of the centuries-old Bulgarian folk healing practices.

Folk medicine (in its oral and written form) developed as an alternative to scientific medicine during the Middle Ages²⁸. The existence of a considerable number of Medieval works with utilitarian applications (used as guides) on the subject of medicine can be viewed as proof of the presence of a Bulgarian tradition of healing.

The documents of the old Bulgarian medical literature illustrate the different layers of medieval medical knowledge and its development over a long period of time.

²⁴ Cosmas the Priest, *Beseda protiv Bogomilite*, Sofia, 1998, p.87

²⁵ *Prostranno Zhitie na Teodosij Tǎrnovski ot Tǎrnovski Kalist*, SBL Vol. IV, p. 452

²⁶ Petǎr Dinekov, *Ibid.*, p. 433–434

²⁷ Donka Petkanova, *Ibid.*, p. 127

²⁸ Donka Petkanova, *Ibid.*, p. 123

Their large number and distribution is evidence of a widespread use of folk healing art. A combination of three components is mentioned therein: a strong pagan tradition, the Byzantine medical culture and the ancient understanding of calendar and astrological influences on human life and health, reflected therein, as expressed in *Menaion* and the later *Lunnitsi*²⁹ Some texts reflect the Byzantine model in a greater degree: "Medical Art for All Occasions", dietary works, etc. Traditional experience and knowledge prevails in other sources, for example the earliest copy of medical advice, retained in "The Psalter of Dimitri the Oltarnik" (old Bulgarian Glagolitic psalter from the X-XI c.) under the name of "The Remedies of St. Cosmas". It would be interesting to point out that the text has no Byzantine counterpart and contains advice for the treatment of different diseases: swelling, fever, mad dog or wolf bites, limb spraining or fracture, infected wounds, coughs, colds, skin problems and more.

The written sources of common medicine are the collections of prescriptions – the so called *Lekovnitsi* and apocryphal prayers³⁰. The *Lekovnitsi* represent a later recording (most of them date back to the XVII c. or later) of a centuries-old oral tradition of medical knowledge. In them we can find prescriptions, copied from much older Byzantine treatises. This is proof that some of them had been originally written in Byzantium and were then used for many centuries by Bulgarian healers. Alongside the names of ailments, herbs and food as cure, one can find incantations, magical formulas, and prayers in them. Their instructions and prescriptions had been practically tested, and their placement in collections of various content and utilitarian intended purpose proves that they were used as manuals, both by self-proclaimed healers and the very patients for the purposes of self-help and self-treatment.

Apocryphal prayers and incantations for protection against ailments were an exceptionally productive medieval genres which is yet another proof of their wide application. They first appeared from Byzantium in the X c. and remained in circulation until the XIX c. The first preserved healing prayers were included in the Breviary of Sinaia (XI c.), (also known as *Euchologium Sinaiticum*).³¹ Folklore incantation formulas turned into recovery prayers (with fixed texts), published in prayer books and have as their aim the attainment of magical healing.

²⁹ *Istoria na Bălgarskata Srednovekovna Literatura*, p. 223–224

³⁰ Donka Petkanova, *Ibid.*, p. 123

³¹ *Istoria na Bălgarskata Srednovekovna Literatura*, p. 224–225

Belief in the Healing Properties of Objects

Faith in the magic power of objects is indeed ancient and represents the materialization of an idea with contagious action and euchological intended purpose. The wearing of amulets and objects of apotropaic power has been a human trait from the dawn of mankind's struggle for survival and finding of our proper place in the universe. This belief and the associated ritual routine have their roots in pagan times, but they were later incorporated in Christianity and transformed into the honoring of a number of cult objects: the cross, the Scriptures, holy water, holy oil, icons, etc. They were seen not only as sacred religious objects, but were attributed miraculous healing and saving powers. The miraculous power of the cross was described in a number of medieval works, of which we will only mention here *The Saga of the Iron Cross*.³²

Literature has often been referred to as a mirror of reality, and therefore we could deduct from it that the Medieval Bulgarian sought healing and deliverance in everything that surrounded him/her, and was accessible in spacial and financial terms - signs, dreams, inanimate objects, relics of saints, etc.

The Cult of Saints-Healers

The trust in saints' assistance is the surest means of filling and addressing the shortage of health care in medieval Bulgaria. Starting with the reports about the earliest Bulgarian saints of the X c., such as St. Boris-Michael I, Prince of Bulgaria and Clement of Ohrid, and going further to the literary monuments of XVIII c., literature is replete with examples of the popular veneration and worship of saints, and miraculous healings as a reward for faith and repentance. The cult of saints is highly utilitarian and focuses on the meeting of health care needs. It has two aspects related to the two phases of their manifestation and the functions of saints:

- their supernatural powers and their capabilities, while they were alive,
- as well as the wonders, performed by their relics and tombs.

Both in folk beliefs, and in literary sources, there exist the examples of saints, who were considered capable of healing and resurrection practices, even within the period of their natural lives. In one of the passionals of John of Rila the following can be found: "And many resorted to him, bringing their sick. And having been cured, with the prayers of the saint, they headed back home."³³

³² Ancho Kalojanov, Maria Spasova and Todor Mollov, "Skazanie za Železnija Krăst" i Epochata na Čar Simeon, Veliko Tărnovo, 2007, p. 191– 211

³³ Proložhno Zhitie na Ivan Rilski ot Stishnija Prolog, SBL, Vol. IV, p. 133

Information contained in the hagiographic sources is often more specific than expected, and we can therefore deduce that such beliefs have originated as a result of the faith in the documentary truthfulness of the data and real magical abilities.

On the one hand, in the extraordinary and devout life of saints healing abilities were so common that they became a necessary and almost invariable sign of the initiation of saints. On the other hand, the emphasis on their sanctity and God's sanction in hagiography promotes common belief in their healing powers, thus almost completely displacing physicians from the healthcare focus. Religious reverence for the saints-healers, and the fact that common people sought help and treatment from them, ultimately resulted in the rejection of scientific medicine. In the countenance of saints such as John of Rila, Prohor Pčinjski, Joachim of Osogovo, Gabriel of Lesnovo, Philothea of Thrace (of Argesh), Petka of Tarnovo and others, there are collective features of the saint-healer and the self-proclaimed healer. The common understanding was that a healer (because of his compassionate and selfless work) is a companion of Christ. Thus a parallel between self-proclaimed healers and saints was drawn, as saints were also believed to have been able to cure the faithful through God's power.

The cult of the relics of saints (a link between God and earthly life) emerged with the development of worship of the early saints. It demonstrates to the fullest the pragmatic nature of the faith in saints-healers. Relics are the most tangible and material basis of honoring those saints and touching them is considered to be the best guarantee for securing the desired results. It is not surprising that honoring the saints in medieval Bulgaria has utilitarian nature. It stems from the recent pagan past of the population. Until the adoption of Christianity in the IX c., people had sought deliverance in the touching of healing stones and magic items, and it is only natural to replace the object, but keep the mechanism of religious relations. As early as the second half of X c. the worship of saints was inextricably linked to the worship of their relics. Cosmas the Priest described the Bogomil heretics in the following way: "And by refusing to glorify the saints, they (the Bogomils) also reject God's miracles, perpetrated by their relics through the power of the Holy Spirit."³⁴ This quote could also serve as evidence of how wide spread relics were at the time. Evidence of the popularity of the practice to seek treatment and deliverance from all physical and mental suffering by turning to the relics of saints can be found in many literary works. Theophylact of Ohrid offers an extensive list of the miracles, completed by the imperishable relics of the martyrs of Tiveriopol.³⁵ Euthymius of Tarnovo provided evidence of the healing power of the relics of St. Philothea of Thrace

³⁴ Cosmas the Priest, *Ibid.*, p. 56

³⁵ Theophylact of Ohrid, *Ibid.*, p. 77

(of Argesh), which for him is an extension of the miraculous power, manifested by her in her lifetime.³⁶

Faith in the imperishable relics of saints characterizes not only the lower, but also the higher classes. In the XII c. George Skylitzes tells how Emperor Manuel I Komnenos and himself received healing from the relics of St. John of Rila: "...which wonder could not have been accomplished by Ipcratus's prohibition, or the recognition of Gallienus's reason."³⁷ In the text, as well as in many other hagiographic writings, authors contrasted the healing power of the holy relics and the achievements of learned medicine.

There were also examples of how the location of a tomb or relic storage was directly likened to a clinic and visiting them by the sick and infirm was similar to seeing the doctor.³⁸

Judging by source data early Christian religious life in Bulgaria had two centers - the church and the last home of the saints. This reminds us of the situation in Western Europe in the era of early Christianity, when churches were insufficient or even non-existent, and the centers of worship and prayer were the martyriums of the saints.³⁹ This explains why the collection of relics in the capital was turned into state policy by the Bulgarian rulers Samuil, Ivan Asen I, Kaloyan, Ivan Asen II. The significance of such events was so great that they become national celebrations, and their description was so widespread in literary works that it finally led to the emergence of a separate genre.

The cult of the saints in Medieval Bulgaria was not so much a religious affair, but an element of everyday life, and the utilitarian attitude toward their relics was the one that promoted worship for them. The medicine of Medieval Bulgaria was not very different from that of the pagan times. Pagan Bulgarians tried to heal themselves by amulets, magic stones and spells, while Christianity later substituted those with prayers for health, pilgrimage and sacred objects. People took care of their health at a very primitive level – even in traditional medical practices knowledge and professionalism were substituted for mysticism. The fundamental medical practice was attributed not to certified physicians, but to saints-healers and their relics.

³⁶ Euthymius of Tarnovo. *Ibid.*, p. 208–209, 215

³⁷ Ivan Dujchev, *Zavetăt na Sveti Ivan Rilski*. Sofia, 2000. p. 113

³⁸ *Kratko Žitie na Kliment Ohridski ot Dimităr Homatian* "in SBL, Vol. IV, p. 396

³⁹ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, Sofia 2000, p. 20