

SHORT REVIEW

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for the PhD thesis of **Plamena Georgieva Kostova**,
for the award of the educational and academic degree of ‘doctor’, Professional field 2.1. Philology, Bulgarian literature (Old Bulgarian literature)

on the topic of

DORMITION OF ST. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN (BGH 916) IN SOUTH SLAVIC TRADITION. TEXT AND CONTEXT
(УСПЕНИЕТО НА СВ. ЙОАН БОГОСЛОВ (ВНГ 916) В ЮЖНОСЛАВЯНСКАТА ТРАДИЦИЯ. ТЕКСТ И КОНТЕКСТ)

Plamena Kostova's dissertation is dedicated to a topic that is always important in Slavic medieval studies – a study of the literary features and the manuscript tradition of a translated hagiographic work related to the Old Bulgarian literary heritage – the so-called *Dormition of St. John the Theologian* (BHBS 224–226: 1). The importance of the topic is determined by the opportunity it gives to add new evidence of the appearance and distribution of texts, the translations of which appeared during the First Bulgarian Kingdom as part of liturgical literature, and later penetrated among the rest of the peoples of Slavia Orthodoxa.

The aim of the dissertation, as formulated by the author, is the study of the manuscript tradition and the literary features of the *Dormition of St. John the Theologian* in comparison with the published Greek text of the work. The main tasks set in the introduction are ambitious: establishing the history of the text according to the transcripts included in the South Slavic calendar compositions; tracing the differences and similarities between them in terms of language, as well as in terms of content, in comparison with the Greek original; identifying biblical quotations and references; analyzing the texts in view of their literary features and in relation to the cultural-historical environment that caused the emergence of the *Dormition of St. John the Theologian* and its translation into the Slavic language; outlining of basic ideas about the poetics of the work and its relationship as a type of narrative with other literary forms that existed in pre-Christian culture.

The structure of the dissertation work is determined by the set goals and tasks and by the peculiarities of the research subject and is well balanced. The study was developed in a volume of 196 pages, which includes an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The texts of the particular recensions with variant readings have been edited to it as appendices.

I must say right away that after the initial discussion, Plamena Kostova's dissertation has been significantly revised. It can be seen that many of the comments and recommendations that were made have been taken into account and the work is now in a better shape, although there is still room for improvement.

In the short introduction (p. 3–6), the author presents the subject of the research, the goals, the tasks and the methodology chosen by her and makes a brief overview of the content of the chapters in the work.

The first chapter (pp. 7–17) is dedicated to the cult of St. John the Theologian, to whom the work is dedicated. An overview is made of the places in the Bible where he is mentioned, as well as in some early Christian and later authors, and the known biographical information about him, gleaned from New Testament and hagiographical sources, is presented. Further, the author dwells on the memory of the apostle, reflected in church calendars – both Byzantine and Slavic. There are three short subchapters with separate titles, in which the texts dedicated to John the Theologian in the Byzantine and Slavic traditions are presented. The account is a bit chaotic and there is no summary of the information presented. In the third part, where the synaxar lives of John the Theologian are briefly mentioned, it should be pointed out – and this is very important for the Slavic manuscript tradition of the work – that in the composition of the Tarnovo recension of the Verse Prologue there is a second, Middle Bulgarian translation of *The Dormition*, published by M. Spasova (2015), especially since her article is cited. As for the copies of the work in the damaskini, it should be emphasized that they contain a New Bulgarian translation.

The second chapter of the dissertation (pp. 18–59) is devoted to the content and structure of *The Dormition*. At the beginning of the chapter, a synopsis of the text is placed, divided into episodes with separate numbering, after which the "history of the text" and the main studies on it are traced. It is a retelling of part of T. Zahn's research and the article on John the Theologian in the Pravoslavnaia Encyclopedia. Unfortunately, the presentation is rather superficial, and the generalizations made do not say much. Not mentioned is that the earliest copy is in a Serbian fragment dating from the late 12th – early 13th century, as well as the fact that a text of *The Dormition* is preserved in a Glagolitic fragment from the 13th century, which is important for dating of the translation.

Three parts follow, two of which examine the spread of the work in the Byzantine and the Slavic traditions, and the third analyzes the structure. The Byzantine manuscripts containing *The Dormition* are listed chronologically, with information about them taken from A. Ehrhard's catalog. A good impression is made by the fact that the author has everywhere checked the manuscripts with the Pinakes database. The Slavic copies are presented in the same way, with their beginnings and endings cited; here the information is taken from the catalog of Kl. Ivanova *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Balcano-Slavica*. The summary at the end of this part contains some valuable observations, but it is also too short, and the last paragraphs repeat the questions already discussed about the character of the Byzantine menologies and the Slavic cheti-menaia. Conclusions such as "The narrative is of the pre-metaphrastic type and is also placed in collections in which the texts are extracted from the cheti-menaia" are unacceptable, especially since nowhere above has the character of the text as "pre-metaphrastic" been commented on.

The third part of the chapter contains an analysis of the structure of the text, which is based on the scheme of Kr. Stanchev of the hagiographic works. Although she cites it

unnecessarily extensively, Pl. Kostova successfully applies the scheme to the text of *The Dormition* and finds that an introduction, a postbiographical part and a conclusion are missing; she explains this with the early emergence of the text, before the reform of Symeon Metaphrastes, who introduced strict formal requirements for hagiographic works. Here too, however, there are redundant repetitions of things already said, as well as unspecified expressions such as "In summary, we can say that the fable section occupies a central place in the text", etc.

In the third chapter, entitled "Narrative Features" (pp. 60–83), Pl. Kostova searches in the earlier written and oral tradition for the genre models followed by the author of *The Dormition*. At the beginning, she briefly conveys the theoretical statements in the works of Kr. Stanchev and N. Ingham, referring to the definition of the concept of 'genre' in medieval literature, which, however, do not lead it to any significant conclusions. More relevant is the author's approach to the work as a text that can formally be defined as an apocrypha, but functions as a saint's life and is included in official liturgical compositions. Here it would be appropriate to point out that there are a number of other similar texts included in the calendar collections, which are also not accepted as apocryphal (understood as some kind of "illegal" texts from the point of view of the Church), but are part of the church tradition and are used as statutory readings for the church feasts. Such are, for example, the *Protoevangelium* of James, the *Acts* of the other apostles Thomas, Philip, Matthew, etc., and that the term "apocrypha" has a relative value.

Later in this chapter Pl. Kostova analyzes *The Dormition of St. John the Theologian* as a narrative that inherited many of the features of the ancient novel (I do not accept the name 'romance' – I think it means something else). A comparative analysis of motifs in *The Dormition* and in Homer's *Odyssey* is a good idea, and the conclusion that the *Acts* of the Apostles know well the narrative model of the ancient novel is important. The second part of the chapter contains an analysis of the text from the point of view of the theory of Vl. Propp for the narrative structure of the fairy tales. The comparison leads the author to the conclusion that many of the motives of the tales can be found in the text of *The Dormition*, i.e. that it contains archaic elements, also characteristic of oral tradition. Unfortunately, the conclusion is too short and lacks commentary on the observations made.

The fourth chapter (pp. 84–117) is entitled "Basic Motifs", but it is actually an analysis of topoi, the common places used in the text, as well as "traversing motifs", which are essentially topoi as well. Of interest are those indicated by Pl. Kostova topoi and motifs in *The Dormition* that connect it with the earlier tradition and, above all, with the biblical canonical books.

In the fifth chapter (pp. 118–136), devoted to biblical quotations, the author indicates and analyzes both direct quotations and reminiscences. This part is weighed down by overly long explanations of the function of biblical quotations in medieval works. The analysis is not always thorough, the extensive citation of John Chrysostom cannot replace the research interpretation, which should focus on the specific function of the biblical quotations in a quasi-Gospel text.

The author devoted the last, sixth chapter (p. 137–188) to the textual features of the *Dormition of John the Theologian*, its translation and recensions. Here we would expect more

space to be devoted to the character of the translation. At the beginning, a part is presented concerning the theory of translation in the Old Bulgarian and Middle Bulgarian monuments, which, however, is too short and superficial, and is not connected to the specific translation of *The Dormition*. Of course, there is no need for the author to do an in-depth linguistic analysis of the text, but she could use the conclusions in the research of Iv. Dobrev, A.-M. Totomanova and others on the language of NBKM 1039, which she cited when presenting the manuscript. A comparison of selected excerpts from the text leads the author to the important conclusion that in all three recensions contain it is the same translation. Next, the individual recensions are compared on six points – title, rubrication (segmentation of the text), names, numerical designations, episodes and biblical quotations. I will not comment on how successful this selection of criteria for comparative analysis is, since the author does not always limit herself to them.

The textual analysis begins with Second recension (for the unconvincing reason that it is attested in only one copy), and its text is compared only with the transcripts of First recension – the Third recension, who knows why, is excluded from the comparison. As a result, it turns out that in most cases, indeed, the copy from the Second recension Deč 95 differs from the readings in the copies from the First recension and there are reasons to be specified as a separate group. It is interesting to observe that some episodes in it are expanded in comparison with the other Slavic copies and with the Greek text of Zahn, but this feature is not commented on. The analyzes of the copies of the First and of the Third recension follow, with the author distinguishing two groups of copies in the First recension, and in the text of the Third recension, according to her, there are reasons to speak of editorial interventions. The important conclusions she finally reaches are, that the tradition is relatively uniform and that the translation does not rest on the Greek text published by Zahn.

The conclusion of the paper (pp. 190-196) retells the conclusions of the particular chapters. In most cases these are interesting observations on the text and manuscript tradition of *The Dormition*, but unfortunately, as in the whole study, their interpretation is insufficient.

Finally, there is an Appendix (pp. 193-404), where the text of *The Dormition* is published according to all three recensions, and a list of cited literature.

As general weaknesses of the dissertation work, I would like to point out a certain chaotic presentation, repetition of things already said, redundant information about commonly known facts and phenomena, stylistic problems and numerous printing, punctuation and spelling errors in the text.

Among the positive qualities of the dissertation, it should be noted that in it, for the first time, an attempt is made to comprehensively analyze the Dormition of St. John the Theologian - an early Christian translated work that refers to apocryphal literature, but functions as a life and is placed in official liturgical compositions. The research contains interesting observations about the use of motifs inherited from Antiquity and oral creativity in the composition of the

text. Its textological analysis proves its distribution in South Slavic literature in three recensions, one of which is represented by two groups of copies. A valuable contribution is the publication of the original text in all recensions with variant readings.

The dissertation contains scholarly results that show that the Plamena Kostova has knowledge and professional skills for working with medieval manuscripts and scientific literature. She demonstrates qualities and ability to independently conduct scientific research. Due to the above, I give my **positive assessment** for the conducted research, presented in the dissertation work, and for the achieved results and contributions, and I propose to the honorable scientific jury **to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor"** to Plamena Georgieva Kostova.

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