ILARION OF TĂRNNOVO AND THE RENAISSANCE IN BULGARIA DURING THE FIRST DECADES OF THE 19th CENTURY

The Bulgarian Renaissance, which began with the composition and publication of the Slavo-Bulgarian History of Paisij Hilendarski (1762) lasted for about one hundred years, up until 1860. The second half of this period (1829-1860) is characterised on the one hand by pronounced Russian influence, and on the other by the effort to break away from Greek cultural influences\(^1\). In the framework of this effort, the Greek clergy collectively received the defamations of the Bulgarian nationalists who found allies not only in the Russian Panslavists but also in the Jesuit religious of the Papal Church. These latter organised a special society to slander the Oecumenical Patriarchate, hoping to attract the Bulgarians to Roman Catholicism\(^2\). Thus numerous charges were fabricated against the Greek clergy to justify the effort to break with the Oecumenical Patriarchate and form a national Church\(^3\). Not excluded from these charges was the learned and judicious Metropolitan of Tăr­novo, Ilarion Sinaitis the Cretan, who presided over the diocese of Tăr­novo from 1821 to 1838, with a break in his pastorship from 1827 to 1830\(^4\).

\(^1\) D. Petropoulos, Πνευματικές σχέσεις 'Ελλήνων και Βουλγάρων τῶν 18\(^{ου}\) αιώνα [Intellectual relations between Greeks and Bulgarians during the nineteenth century], Athens 1954 and Thessaloniki 1968 (photocopied reproduction), p. 6.
\(^2\) Chrysostomos Papadopoulos, Η 'Εκκλησία τῆς Βουλγαρίας [The Church of Bulgaria], Athens 1957, p. 57 et seq.
\(^3\) M. Gedeon has collected the accusations from Bulgarian documents. He has summarised them into ten and in brief compares and refutes them. Έγγραφα πατριαρχικά και συνοδικά περί τού Βουλγαρικού Ζητήματος [Patriarchal and synodic documents relating to the Bulgarian question], Constantinople 1908, pp. 35-53.
\(^4\) Details of Ilarion's life and activity in the period before his ascent to the metropolitan throne of Tăr­novo: see V. Sphyroeras, «Ιλαρίων Σιναϊτῆς ο Κρήτης (1765-1838) καὶ οἱ δύο ἐπιστολές του περί τῆς μεταφράσεως τῶν Ἅγιων Γραφῶν [«Ilarion Sinaitis the Cretan (1765?-1838) and his two letters concerning the translation of the Holy Scriptures», 'Επιστημονική 'Επετηρίς Φιλοσοφικής Σχολής Πανεπιστημίου 'Αθηνών 20 (1970), 225-310. A biography of Ilarion is being prepared by the English historian Richard Clogg, see the above, p. 226, note 4. For Ilarion's activity as Metropolitan of Tăr­novo see the study by Iv. Snegarov, Tăr­novski mitropoliti v tursko vreme, Sofia 1935, pp. 236-243. In addition Iv. Snegarov's study, Istoričeski vesti za tăr­novskata mitropolija, Sofia 1943, contains the synodic documents of Ilarion's first election, his reinstatement to the Metropolis of Tăr­novo, as well as

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The charge that Metropolitan Ilarion burnt the patriarchal library of Tarnovo that contained the written legacies of ancient Bulgarian literature is one that is well-known to those interested in the history of the Bulgarian Renaissance. This accusation—the product of the prevailing fanaticism during the period of national awakening—very soon aroused historians’ suspicions. Their views, in which they characterise the accusation as «a perverse historical fabrication», may be found in the specialised study of the Bulgarian historian Trifonov. This Bulgarian historian has finally demolished the myth. Among other things he discovered that written memorials of the Bulgarian past did not survive until Ilarion’s time, having been lost during the course of centuries.

Professor A. Tachiaos observes that the legend of the burning of the library was so widespread that it has even survived in Bulgarian popular song. It became so widely accepted in Bulgaria that it would have disappeared with difficulty had the scholar who exposed this accusation as groundless not been a Bulgarian.

The reason why historians have received with scepticism the charge of Ilarion’s burning of this library has been the latter’s reputation as one of the pioneers of the Bulgarian Renaissance, as is verified by written sources and the evidence of trustworthy witnesses.

The Metropolitan is depicted as a good shepherd who is primarily interested in the spiritual guidance and welfare of his flock, rising above any national or racial considerations.

Metropolitan Ilarion lent inspiration and support to the great Bulgarian national apostle Neophytos, a monk of the Rila monastery his resignation in 1827, see pp. 31 et seq., 49, 50. See also Germanos, Metropolitan of Sardis, «Επισκοπικοί κατάλογοι τῶν ἐπαρχιῶν τῆς Βορείου Ῥώμης καὶ ἐν γένει τῆς Βουλγαρίας ἀπὸ τῆς ἀλώσεως καὶ ἐξῆς» [«Episcopal registers of the eparchies of Northern Thrace and of Bulgaria in general from the Fall of Constantinople onwards»] Θρακικά 8 (1937), 182-183.


2. Ibid. For the endurance of the myth in Bulgarian popular poetry, Professor A.-A. Tachiaos draws on the work of Chr. Vakarelski, Istoricheski pesni, Sofia 1961, pp. 480-481 (= Българско народно творчество III).
who, according to Jireček, is the patriarch of Bulgarian scholars and educators. The Metropolitan of Tarnovo chose Neophytos Rilski to translate the New Testament into the Modern Bulgarian language and to organize the first Bulgarian school in Gabrovo.

Arnaudov says that the reasons for Ilarion selecting Neophytos for this work are not known from written texts; the most probable reason, however, is that this experienced Metropolitan knew the monk from Rila personally and valued his abilities. And it is exactly this selection of the able Neophytos that shows the real interest of the Metropolitan in the spiritual rebirth of the Bulgarian nation. If his interest was diplomatic and superficial, as certain Bulgarian historians wish to present it through arbitrary interpretations of the evidence of the pioneers of the Bulgarian Renaissance, then a person of lesser ability would have been chosen. Thus he himself would be shown to be a supporter of the Bulgarian Renaissance while the Renaissance itself would have been obstructed by the impotence of the persons selected.

Ilarion's personal interest in Neophytos' task of translation may be ascertained from the latter's diary. In this Neophytos mentions the letter he received from the Metropolitan of Tarnovo and gives details on the progress of his translation during the year 1836.

In the Metropolitan's letter was enclosed another letter from the representative of the Bible Society, Benjamin Barker, who had an interest in Neophytos' translation. To assist Neophytos in his translation, Ilarion dispatched to him a Serbian text of the Bible, which was later followed by a Turkish one. Following the completion of his translation of the Bible, Neophytos forwarded it to Ilarion to look it over. The Metropolitan's protosyncellus sent Neophytos 2,250 piasters, apparently as a reward for his translation work. Metropolitan Ilarion also informs Neophytos of his impending trip to Smyrna, where he would also look after the printing of his translation.

3. See Arnaudov, Aprilov Život, dejnost, sâvremennici, Sofia 1935, p. 120, note 1.
4. The eulogies of Neophytos and Aprilov, for example, are considered to be rhetorical pronouncements. See M. Arnaudov, Neofit Xilendarski Bozveli, Sofia 1930, p. 332.
5. This was printed in Smyrna in 1840 with the note "with the attention and
Ilarion himself translated the New Testament into modern Greek, a task which won for him the criticism of the conservative prelates. In his reply to Metropolitan Mattheos of Kyzikos, one of his critics, Ilarion had this to say in defense of his translation: «The Church always seeks the benefit of the faithful and approves and accepts whatever contributes to their salvation, even if it may seem an innovation». The Catholic Church forbade the translation of the Bible into any language save Latin following the break with the Orthodox Church. The Roman pontiffs turned this prohibition into a principle in order to «keep the faithful ignorant of their ecclesiastical duties and thus trumpet everywhere their own ego and threaten the people with thundering excommunications»

Unlike the Church of Rome, the Eastern Orthodox Church, holding the translation of the Bible to be an edifying act, «has always looked after the benefit and enlightenment of Christians throughout its history by writing, translating and making use of many means. In accordance with this policy, the Eastern Church gave its blessing for the translation of the Bible into Persian, Arabic, Armenian, Slavonic and other languages». Ilarion was, therefore, by conviction in favor of the spiritual awakening and enlightenment of Christians, without national or racial discrimination, so that they might avoid committing any errors. His real interest in the Bulgarian Renaissance may also be deduced from his invocation of the Bulgarian people in his letters to the Orthodox Patriarch and his Synod on the value of the translation of the New Testament. The Bulgar Christians did not trust their priests but the Mt. Athos monks, who were often men «of this world, corrupt and greedy». «But when», writes the Metropolitan, «the holy books are easily understood by all, then the priest knows how to answer the Christians' questions and the latter are quite capable of reading the Holy Scriptures in their own language and thus may answer many of their own questions themselves without errings».

approval of the learned and all-wise Metropolitan of Târnovo, the Lord Ilarion». See Jord. Ivanov, Gräcko-bälgarski oinošeniya . . . , p. 169.

1. Ilarion's answer to bishop Mattheos of Kyzikos is given in V. Sphyroeras «'Ιλαρίων Σιναΐτης ô Κρής», see p.123, note 4, 225-310. See especially pp. 296, 298-299, chapters 28 and 31.

2. Πρὸς τὸν Παναγιώτατον, θεότατον καὶ τρισέβαστόν μοι Δεσπότην, τὸν Οἰκουμενικὸν Πατριάρχην κόρον κόρων Ἀνάμον καὶ τὴν περὶ κότον λεπάν τὸν σεβασμότατον ἄγιον Γερόντων δικαίωμα, περὶ τῆς διαθήκης τῆς Τυπογραφίας καὶ τῆς εἰς τοὺς ἐκδική-
The collaboration of Ilarion with Neophytos Rilski did not finish with the translation of the New Testament but also extended to the organization and consolidation of the foundations of Bulgarian education. The well-known Bulgarian Hellenist and merchant of Odessa, Aprilov, at the head of many other Bulgarian patriots, decided to found a Bulgarian school in his native town, Gabrovo. Aware of Ilarion’s positive attitude towards the intellectual awakening of the Bulgarian people, Aprilov asked him to choose the appropriate scholar to head the new school. The Metropolitan promptly chose Neophytos whom he sent over to Bucharest to familiarize himself with the latest educational processes before assuming his duties as headmaster in Gabrovo. Ilarion himself attended the foundation-laying ceremony of the school to which he also contributed funds. He made frequent visits to the school site to check on its building progress and aspired to its becoming a high school. It is for this very reason that he did not extend Neophytos his permission to move to Kazanlik, whose inhabitants had invited him to head their own school. Moreover, he had Neophytos write Bulgarian texts and a Bulgarian grammar to facilitate his educational task1.

The Bulgarian pioneers of the Renaissance, Aprilov and Neophytos Rilski, expressed themselves enthusiastically concerning Ilarion’s contribution to the awakening of the Bulgarian nation. Aprilov writes that Ilarion showed himself «a true shepherd, a man of intellect and great ability; even if he was not a Bulgarian, he was much concerned for the formation and education of the Bulgarians. The nation considered him a true father and grieved when another metropolitan was enthroned in his place. If the metropolitans sent to eparchies where Bulgarians were

1. See Iv. Snegarov, Târnovski mitropoliti ..., p. 243, note 3. M. Arnaudov, Neofit Xilendarski ..., p. 326. Jord. p. Iliev, «Târnovska eparchija v ĉárkovno-narodnata borba prez 19 vek», in 100 Godini ot učredjavaneto na balgarskata ekzarzidja, Sofia 1971, p. 120. M. Arnaudov, Aprilov život, dejnost ..., p. 298. Ilarion’s concern for the composition of a grammar by the three Bulgarians, so that it might be a base for the translation of the Holy Scriptures, is incorrectly understood by Evlogios Kourilas Lavriotis, who writes that Ilarion translated the Gospels into Bulgarian (Θεολογία, vol. 10, p. 236). This was correctly noticed by Snegarov, op. cit., p. 240, note 1. The same is true for Chr. Papadopoulos’ opinion that «Ilarion first accomplished the translation of the New Testament into the Bulgarian language and the drawing up of a grammar of this language (op. cit., p. 54); unless «accomplished» is taken to mean «was generally concerned with» rather than «worked out».
in the majority had had the virtues of this shepherd, the Bulgarians would not have desired anything more». Continuing, Aprilov mentions in addition that Ilarion, during the first period of his pastorship in Târnovo, invited three specialists in the Bulgarian language to draw up a Bulgarian grammar at his expense. However, his expulsion caused the successful progress of the Bulgarian awakening to come to a halt, and he adds, «See how the Greek bishops sent to Bulgaria cared for the formation of their flock! Ilarion was an exception and it is for this reason that the nation remembers him. May his memory be eternal».

Ilarion’s positive actions for the rebirth of the Bulgarian nation were not limited only to those that have been mentioned. He took an interest in the foundation and functioning of Târnovo’s Bulgarian school and the construction in Târnovo of the Bulgarian church of St. Nicholas in 1836. He permitted services in Old Church Slavonic to be celebrated in this church, to which he also presented two icons —of St. Catherine and Christ. The documents addressed to the Bulgarians of his diocese were drawn up in Bulgarian. He encouraged Vaskidovits to translate the New Testament. He bought ten copies of a Bulgarian grammar from Christakis Pavlović to give to poor Bulgarian children. Târnovo’s diocesan building became the centre that gave new life to Bulgarian education; for here lived not only Ilarion but also his Bulgarian collaborators Neophytos Hilandarios and Ilarion, later Bishop of Loveč and Kiousentil. They were both regular contributors of Bulgarian books, having at their head the Exarch of All Bulgaria, the Greek Ilarion. They

tried to help the Bulgarian schools and Bulgarian literature. Ilarion had earlier had a Bulgarian chancellor.

The Bulgarians, in appreciation of these positive activities of Ilarion's which were not limited to this field placed a handsome marble tombstone on his grave and inscribed on it, in Greek and old Church Slavonic, an epigraph that is still to be seen today. In it the belief is expressed that the Almighty God has numbered the soul of the wise archbishop among those of His righteous.

The existing historical evidence is so great and so clear that historians unanimously agree on Ilarion's positive contributions towards the spiritual awakening of the Bulgars. Even professor Nikov, who is ill-disposed towards the Metropolitan, admits that Ilarion «paid careful attention to Bulgarian national and educational ambitions». However, the motives of Ilarion's activities have been misunderstood. Arnaudov observes that the refutation of the myth of the burning down of the library by Ilarion does not necessarily mean that the latter should be regarded as a friend of the Bulgarian Renaissance movement. He further claims that Ilarion followed a two-faced and hypocritical policy towards the Bulgars in order to consolidate the hold of Hellenism in Bulgaria. Thus the legend of the burning down of the library by the Metropolitan is replaced by the arbitrary explanation of his motives. Against this criticism, the impartial observer should note the following:

1. If Metropolitan Ilarion's interest in the Bulgarian Renaissance were not sincere, he would not have chosen the able Neophytos Rilski to translate the New Testament and organize the Gabrovo school. He would have assigned these tasks to someone of inferior ability so that he would pass as a friend of the Bulgars and also ensure the failure of his work.

2. The explanations of his motives are fabrications of a later period and do not fit into the historical background of Ilarion's activity. Could not Aprilov and Neophytos expose the Metropolitan's hypocrisy, assuming there were one? Why is it that Aprilov entrusts to Ilarion the choosing

1. I. Trifonov, op. cit., p. 36.
2. The epigraph was published by Snegarov, op. cit., p. 243, note 3 and runs thus: Μάτην ὁ λίθε τὴν ἐν καλύπτεις κόνιν 'Ιλαρίωνος Σιναίτου τοῦ σοφοῦ τοῦ 'Ἀρχιερέως Τορνόβου τὴν ἐν αὐτοῦ φωτὴν οὐπότε κρύψεις λαβὼν γάρ αὐτὴν εἰς χείρας ὁ Δεσπότης ταῖς τῶν δικαίων συνηρίθμησε χορεῖαις.
4. M. Arnaudov, Neofit Xilendarski..., p. 139.
of the Gabrovo school headmaster and along with Neophytoς praises the Metropolitan. The opposition of Neophytoς Bozveli, the monk Onoufrios and others to Ilarion is due to the fact that their personal interests were at stake.

3. The tombstone inscription testifies to Ilarion’s acceptance not only by his collaborators but by the people as well. If the people had thought that Ilarion was an enemy of the Bulgars, it is doubtful whether the inscription would have been preserved in the midst of a frenzy of anti-Hellenism. And the mere fact that Ilarion was enthusiastically received as the Metropolitan of Târnovo for the second time is a testament to the appreciation and trust shown in him by the people of Târnovo.

4. In the two documents addressed to Greeks, published by Sphyroeras, we notice that Ilarion stresses the need of the awakening of Christians regardless of national or racial origin. In particular he cites the mental level of the Bulgars and calls for their enlightenment. Now the question arises, why should Ilarion address himself to fellow countrymen in this manner on the alien Bulgars if his sentiments about them were not sincere?

In my opinion Ilarion’s stand on the Bulgarian Renaissance is best expressed by the always well-informed and objective late professor Snegarov. He knows and cites the uncomplimentary judgements of some historians on Ilarion. In conclusion, however, he has this to say: «In the end, no matter what the character of the Metropolitan of Târnovo has been, the Cretan prelate remains one of the chief pioneers of neo-Bulgarian education, best remembered for his lively participation in the life of the Gabrovo school and the translation of the New Testament into Bulgarian».

2. Both sought to become bishops and to this end they exploited the patriotism of the Bulgarians.