

ILARION OF TÄRNOVO 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 influences¹. 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 Catholicism². Thus numerous charges were fabricated against the Greek clergy to justify the effort to break with the Oecumenical Patriarchate and form a national Church³. Not excluded from these charges was the learned and judicious Metropolitan of Tärnovo, Ilarion Sinaïtis the Cretan, who presided over the diocese of Tärnovo from 1821 to 1838, with a break in his pastorship from 1827 to 1830⁴.

1. D. Petropoulos, *Πνευματικές σχέσεις 'Ελλήνων καὶ Βουλγάρων τὸν 19' αἰώνα* [*Intellectual relations between Greeks and Bulgarians during the nineteenth century*], Athens 1954 and Thessaloniki 1968 (photocopied reproduction), p. 6.

2. Chrysostomos Papadopoulos, *'Η Ἐκκλησία 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. *Ἐγγράφα πατριαρχικά καὶ συνοδικὰ περὶ τοῦ Βουλγαρικοῦ 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 Tärnovo: see V. Sphyroeras, «Ἰλαρίων Σιναΐτης ὁ Κρήτης (1765?-1838) καὶ αἱ δύο ἐπιστολαὶ τοῦ περὶ τῆς μεταφράσεως τῶν Ἁγίων Γραφῶν» [*Ilarion Sinaïtis the Cretan (1765?-1838) and his two letters concerning the translation of the Holy Scriptures*], *Ἐπιστημονικὴ Ἑπετηρίς Φιλοσοφικῆς Σχολῆς Πανεπιστημίου Ἀθηνῶν* 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 Tärnovo see the study by Iv. Snegarov, *Tärnovski mitropoliti v tursko vreme*, Sofia 1935, pp. 236-243. In addition Iv. Snegarov's study, *Istoričeski vesti za tärnovskata mitropolija*, Sofia 1943, contains the synodic documents of Ilarion's first election, his reinstatement to the Metropolis of Tärnovo, as well as

The charge that Metropolitan Ilarion burnt the patriarchal library of Tŕrnovo 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 centuries¹.

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 Bulgarian².

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, «Ἐπισκοπικοὶ κατάλογοι τῶν ἐπαρχιῶν τῆς Βορείου Θράκης 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.

1. J. Trifonov, «Predanieto za izgorena starobŕlgarska biblioteka v Tŕrnovo», in *Spisanie na Bŕlgarskata Akademija na naukite* XIV (1917), klon istoriko-filologičen i filosofsko-obštstven 8, 1-42. See also I. Ivanov, «Grŕčko-bŕlgarski otnošeniya predi cŕrkovnata borba», in *Sbornik v čest na profecor L. Miletič*, Sofia 1912. See also James F. Clarke, *Ilarion of Tirnovo in the light of historical criticism*, Sofia 1969. A.-A. Tachiaos, «Ἡ Ἐθνικὴ ἀφύπνισις τῶν Βουλγάρων καὶ ἡ ἐμφάνισις βουλγαρικῆς ἐθνικῆς κινήσεως ἐν Μακεδονίᾳ [The National Awakening of the Bulgarians and the appearance of the Bulgarian national movement in Macedonia]», N°. 28 in the series *Μακεδονικὴ Λαϊκὴ Βιβλιοθήκη*, Thessaloniki 1974, p. 14

2. *Ibid.* For the endurance of the myth in Bulgarian popular poetry, Professor A.-A. Tachiaos draws on the work of Chr. Vakarelski, *Istoričeski pesni*, Sofia 1961, pp. 480-481 (= Bŕlgarsko narodno tvorčestvo III).

who, according to Jireček, is the patriarch of Bulgarian scholars and educators¹. The Metropolitan of Tărnovo chose Neophytos Rilski to translate the New Testament into the Modern Bulgarian language and to organize the first Bulgarian school in Gabrovo².

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 abilities³. 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 Renaissance⁴, 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 Tărnovo 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 translation⁵.

1. See Al. Hajek, *Bulgarien unter der Türkenherrschaft*, Berlin-Leipzig 1925, p. 138. D. Petropoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 10, note 2.

2. See Char. Papastathis, «Ἡ ἱδρυσις τοῦ πρώτου βουλγαρικοῦ σχολείου» [«The foundation of the first Bulgarian school»], *Καθημερινή* (25-9-1963).

3. See Arnaudov, *Aprilov Život, dejnost, savremennici*, 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»¹.

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 erring»².

approval of the learned and all-wise Metropolitan of Tárnovo, the Lord Ilarion». See Jord. Ivanov, *Grăcko-bălgarski otnošenija* . . . , p. 169.

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

2. Πρὸς τὸν Παναγιώτατον, θειότατον καὶ τρισέβαστόν μοι Δεσπότην, τὸν Οἰκουμένην Πατριάρχην κύριον κύριον Ἀνθιμον καὶ τὴν περὶ αὐτὸν ἱερὰν τῶν σεβασμιωτάτων ἁγίων Γερόντων ὁμήγουριν, περὶ τῆς διαθέσεως τῆς Τυπογραφίας καὶ τῆς εἰς τύπους ἐκδό-

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 Bulgar patriots, decided to found a Bulgarian school in his native town, Gabrovo. Aware of Ilarion's positive attitude towards the intellectual awakening of the Bulgar 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

σως τῶν Ἱερῶν Γραφῶν», V. Sphyroeras, *op. cit.*, p. 266, line 564 et seq. See also Iv. Snegarov, *Tărnovski mitropoliti* . . . , p. 239, note 4.

1. See Iv. Snegarov, *Tărnovski mitropoliti* . . . , p. 243, note 3. M. Arnaudov, *Neofit Xilendarski* . . . , p. 326. Jord. p. Iliev, «Tărnovska eparchija v cārkovno-narodnata borba prez 19 vek», in *100 Godini ot učredjavaneto na bălgarskata ekzarxidja*, 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 Tărnovo, 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»¹. In addition Neophytos praises Ilarion calling him «a philosopher, a divine angelic soul, a holy man, light of the Orthodox Church, defender of the oppressed»².

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 Tărnovo's Bulgarian school and the construction in Tărnovo 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 Christ³. The documents addressed to the Bulgarians of his diocese were drawn up in Bulgarian⁴. He encouraged Vaskidovits to translate the New Testament⁵. He bought ten copies of a Bulgarian grammar from Christakis Pavlović to give to poor Bulgarian children⁶. Tărnovo'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 Hilandarinos and Ilarion, later Bishop of Loveč and Kioustentil. They were both regular contributors of Bulgarian books, having at their head the Exarch of All Bulgaria, the Greek Ilarion. They

1. Iv. Snegarov, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-242. M. Arnaudov, *Neofit Xilendarski...*, pp. 326-327, 331 also by Arnaudov, *Aprilov...*, p. 118.

2. Iv. Snegarov, *Tărnovski mitropoliti...*, p. 243, note 3. Arnaudov, *Aprilov...*, p. 298.

3. Jord. Ivanov, *Grăcko-bălgarski-otnošenija...*, p. 168. Iv. Snegarov, *Tărnovski mitropoliti...*, p. 242. In his study *Istoričeski vesti...*, p. 88, Snegarov compares the inscription to be found on the exterior of the church over the south door. The inscription runs thus: 'Ενῆργησε τὸν ὀρισμὸν Τορνόβου Ἰλαρίων, ἀνήγειρε δὲ τὸν ναὸν ζῆλος τῶν ἐντοπίων· ὁ ἅγιος Νικόλαος εἶθε νὰ μεσιτεύσῃ ὥστε ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν ἀπαντᾷ νὰ βραβεύσῃ.

4. Arnaudov, *Neofit...*, p. 327. I. Trifonov, *Predanieto za...*, p. 36.

5. M. Arnaudov, *op. cit.*, p. 138. I. Trifonov, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

6. M. Arnaudov, *op. cit.*, p. 266. Snegarov, *Tărnovski mitropoliti...*, p. 243, note 3.

tried to help the Bulgarian schools and Bulgarian literature. Ilarion had earlier had a Bulgarian chancellor¹.

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 righteous².

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»³. However, the motives of Ilarion's activities have been misunderstood. Arnautov 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 Bulgaria⁴. 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 ὧ λίθη τήν δε καλύπτεις κόνιν Ἰλαρίωνος Σινάϊτου τοῦ σοφοῦ τε Ἀρχιερέως Τορνόβ(ου) τήν δὲ αὐτοῦ ψυχὴν οὐποτε κρύψεις· λαβὼν γάρ αὐτὴν εἰς χεῖρας ὁ Δεσπότης ταῖς τῶν δικαίων συνηρίθμησε χορείαις.

3. Nikov, *Vazraždane na bŭlgarskijā narod. Cŭrkovno-nacionalni borbi i po-stiženija*, Sofia 1871, p. 77.

4. M. Arnautov, *Neofit Xilendarski . . .*, p. 139.

of the Gabrovo school headmaster and along with Neophytos praises the Metropolitan?¹ The opposition of Neophytos Bozveli, the monk Onoufrios and others to Ilarion is due to the fact that their personal interests were at stake².

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 Tărnovo for the second time is a testament to the appreciation and trust shown in him by the people of Tărnovo.

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 Tărnovo 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»³.

1. Iv. Snegarov., *op. cit.*, p. 243, note 3. M. Arnaudov, *op. cit.*, p. 236. Jord. p. Iliev *Tărnovska eparxija*. . . ., p. 120. M. Arnaudov, *Aprilov* . . ., p. 298.

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

3. Iv. Snegarov, *Tărnovski mitropoliti* . . ., p. 143, note 3.