

CULTURAL CONTACTS BETWEEN BYZANTIUM AND THE ROMAN GERMANIC EMPIRE IN THE TIME OF METHODIUS

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I believe that the history of the first Bulgarian kingdom, likewise as what we know of Methodius's life, offer us a vision of the relations between the Byzantine and Roman Germanic empires (above all its eastern kingdom) that is of great use in understanding a whole series of cultural data. The one I wish to illustrate here is the following: how a series of literary motives, and particularly the fable, passed from Greek Byzantine literature to Western Latin literature.

During the time when thanks to Cyril and Methodius the national Bulgarian language was created as a literary vehicle, there were only two cultures: the Greek culture of Byzantium and the Latin culture of Rome and the Germanic empire. By taking advantage of a series of political circumstances, such as the confrontation of Byzantium and the West and, within this, of the Germanic empire and Rome, the Bulgarians managed not only to create an independent nation but also to create an autonomous Christian Church and a national culture. This therefore took place in a series of events where contacts between these two rival worlds were constant. Although these were most often contacts of a hostile nature, they did not prevent a close relationship between the two. And this relationship explains the passing of Greek literary elements to the West.

Until the year 1200 A.D. approximately, i. e. until the era of the Frank conquest of Byzantium, the direction of cultural exchange followed that of the Byzantine influence on the West. Later, this direction was reversed. In the 9th century, the century of Cyril and Methodius, one must of course postulate the former direction. The West had very little influence on Byzantine culture; very little, too, on Bulgarian culture, despite the fact that Prince Boris occasionally approached Rome or Louis II to counteract the Byzantine influence, and despite the fact that Cyril and Methodius had to negotiate with Rome.

All this concerns the following: the influence of Byzantium on Latin Europe between the 9th and 11th centuries is generally considered as minimum. All manners of explanation and subterfuge are sought to interpret coincidences in the field of literature, whilst the clearest and most direct explanation is left aside: that of Byzantine influence. This is strange, for in the field of art, from Romanesque capitals to tissues and sumptuous objects, the Eastern influence over the West, via Byzantium, is undeniable.

I have come across this problem in the course of my studies on the history of the fable, a subject I have been concerned with for a long time and to which I have dedicated my *Historia de la Fabula Greco-Latina*, after a series of previous papers. The first volume of this work appeared in Madrid in 1979 and the second (on the collections of fables in the Imperial Roman and medieval eras) also in Madrid in 1985. The third and last volume is forthcoming. In this work I have put forward and I hope demonstrated that a series of fable themes which are to be found both in Byzantium and in Latin Europe (and, at times, in Romanic and Germanic literatures) came to the latter precisely through Byzantium. They were at times ancient Greek fables or fables of Eastern origin (Indian, Persian or Arabic) which infiltrated Byzantium, as I suggest, by its eastern frontier which until 1071 extended as far as the Euphrates.

Now, there is opposition to this thesis, as if the frontier between Byzantium and the Germanic Empire were watertight or as if there had been no contacts across it. Thus, for example, in a study by Fritz Peter Knapp ("Von der antiken Fabel zum lateinischen Tierepos des Mittelalters") in the *Entrétiens* of the Fondation Hardt in Geneva in the summer of 1983, which were organized by me and dedicated precisely to the theme of the fable. This study may be read in its final publication¹ as likewise the subsequent debate on the subject.

I had actually suggested this influence not only in the case of isolated fables we find in the Latin West of the 9th century, but also in that of the animal epic which evolved there as from the 11th century (the *Eobasis Captivi*, the *Ysengrimus*, the *Speculum Stultorum*) and in the fables of the collections, plus those which appeared as examples (in the *Archpriest of Hita* in the 14th century). I have in fact shown that at that time new fables (such as "*The Eagle and the Arrow*") or versions of fables (as in "*The Lion's Share*" or "*The Ass and the Lion*") appeared in which the Latin West followed the Byzantine models which in turn followed the ancient Greek fables and by no means the Latin tradition of Phaedrus, Avianus and Romulus. I have also shown that fables of eastern origin appeared which came from the *Pañcatantra* or from the *Sendebār* (for example, that of "*The Lion, the Ass and the Fox*" or "*The Wolf that Learned to Read*") which could only have come to the West through Byzantium.

The thesis that these fables came to Europe through Spain came up against unsurmountable obstacles. The *Disciplina Clericalis*, the work of the Aragonese Jew Pedro Alfonso, written about 1100, cannot be the source: on the one hand, most of the fables we refer to here are missing from it; on the other, the influence of the Byzantine fable on the West (whether of Greek or Eastern origin) is older and dates at least from the 9th century. Moreover, at the court of the Omeyyas in Cordova, Greek was not known, there are anecdotes that show this. But it is well known that Greek literature was translated into Arabic in Baghdad and that conversely, there were uninterrupted translations from Syriac and Arabic into Greek.

But let us return to Peter Knapp's paper, which is based above all on a study by K. Grubmüller², and another by W. Berschin³. In Knapp's paper, there is an attempt to minimize this influence, although he admits that it may have been greater in the 9th century, the one we are now concerned with, than at a later stage until the 12th century. For example, let us study a remarkable case, that of the fable of "*The Lion, the Wolf and the Fox*," in which the

¹ La Fable. Entrétiens sur l'Antiquité Classique XXX. Geneva, 1983.

² *Meister Esopus. Untersuchungen zu Geschichte und Funktion der Fabel im Mittelalter.* Zürich—München, 1977.

³ *Griechisch-Lateinisches Mittelalter. Von Hieronymus zu Nikolaus von Kues.* Bern—München, 1980.

fox manages to get the wolf flayed through his cunning ruses, so that, as he says, the sick lion may thus be cured.

This subject unknown in Antiquity appears in a fable from the final appendix of the Accursian Collection, the Byzantine collection of fables which is generally attributed, and I believe rightly so, to the 9th century. Now, this fable also appears in Latin in the St. Gall 889 manuscript of the 9th century; the subject then reappears in *Metrum Leonis* by Leo of Vercelli of the 10th century and in *Ecbasis Captivi* of the 11th. I have suggested that the Greek original was a model for the Latin one and I have backed my suggestion with a series of numerous cases in which, as I stated above, diverse Latin fables (or Romanic ones) from the medieval period came from Greek, Byzantine versions and not from ancient Latin ones where there were no such fables.

Yet this is not the general opinion. Knapp and the authors he follows think that the above mentioned codex, which among other things contains two more fables, depends on the cultural atmosphere portrayed in manuals in Greek and Latin such as *Hermeneumata Pseudo-Dositheana*, one of the books of which contains fables both in Greek and Latin. That is, that this was a scholarly tradition that came from Antiquity and that passed independently on to Byzantium and the West. And if there was certain Greek cultural tradition in the era of Charlemagne, above all under Johannes Scottus (Eruigena), it was an educational tradition that renewed the study of Antiquity.

This cannot be the whole truth, however. I have pointed out that the Greek tradition covers a series of fables that were always unknown in the Latin West. To give an example, I shall mention once again the fable of the lion's share.

Phaedrus's version and one by Romulus derived from him doubtless came from the traditional Greek one which later passed to Byzantium. In this fable the lion which hunts with three other animals shares out the prey himself and does so selfishly, so that he gets all. But this is a modification of the Greek original: here the ass shares out the prey equally so that he is killed by the lion and it is the fox then that shares out the prey to the lion's favour. When asked by the lion where he has learned to share out so well, the Fox replies: "the ass's misfortunes." Now, this is the source of the medieval versions, except that they (the *Ysengrimus* and the *Archpriest of Hita*) substitute the ass for the wolf. In this and many other cases it is certain that versions were known in the West that were popular in Byzantium in the 9th century; in fact the Western versions came, and this can be proved, from the Accursian Collection. One should categorically deny that these versions had appeared in the school-books that came from Antiquity.

Obviously this does not deny that the tradition of the study of Greek may not have been revived in Rome or in Grottaferrata or in St. Gall, a tradition proper to Latin Antiquity. It is merely to stress the fact that this could not have been the only source of the coincidences. Charlemagne had already had relations with Byzantium when he attempted to marry the Empress Irene in order to thus rebuild the universal empire as a continuation of the Roman one.

Moreover, the fact that in Charlemagne's era the fables appeared alien to the ancient Roman tradition⁴ corroborates this. I believe I have made the Byzantine (at times, in fact, Oriental) origin of some of them plausible.

What course of transmission was there, if it were not through the scholarly tradition which, strictly speaking, I have not considered plausible? Ob-

⁴ Cf. A d r a d o s, F. *Historia de la Fábula Greco-Latina*. II. Madrid, 1985, p. 606, as likewise D. S c h a l l e r's paper „Lateinische Tierdichtung in frühkarolingischer Zeit“, in „Das Tier in der Dichtung“, ed. Ute Schwab, Heidelberg, 1970, 91—127.

viously, in the case of a popular literature such as this, the course of transmission is in human contact itself, the same as in the case of the transmission of artistic motives mentioned above. The history of the relations between Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire in the 9th century, as well as the relations of both of them with Rome and the Roman Germanic Empire — a history which covers the travels of Bulgarian and Byzantine emissaries, papal legates, clergymen and missionaries, the interviews for the signing of treaties, even the imprisonments (such as that of Methodius by the Latin clergy) — offer us a view of a series of human relations which made possible the transmission of news, anecdotes, fables. This transmission logically started in Byzantium, the cultural power of the era, the heir to the oldest tradition, and it ended in the West. It is not that we are suggesting that the Bulgarians were the intermediary link, although they might have been on occasions. There is indeed the tale about the advice the dying Khan Kubrat gave to his sons: it is a Greek fable, "The Laborer's Sons" (H. 53). But what I am interested in is in pointing out that the history of the Bulgarian Kingdom in the 9th century represents an example, among others of course, of these Byzantino-Germanic relations which should be postulated to explain the passing on of cultural goods. Not everything was done through the schools and monasteries, I believe. Although many of these cultural goods ended up in them.

To finish with I wish to summarize some of the most well-known external data of the relations between the Byzantine and Germanic empires and the Bulgarian Kingdom in the era we are concerned with, relations which, I repeat, are not only an example to show that there was no watertight barrier to prevent the diffusion of literary and artistic culture in the 9th century (nor in the following centuries). The approach of those who uphold this theory is ahistorical. Of course, in order to demonstrate these cultural borrowings one must exemplify case by case. There is no doubt about this. But what one cannot do is set up an aprioristic veto to their possible existence.

I do not think it is necessary to stress how close the relations of the Bulgarian Kingdom and Byzantium were: suffice it to recall that Greek was the official language of both until it was substituted for Bulgarian, and that King Simeon, the promoter of the Bulgarian Golden Age, studied in Constantinople.⁵

Neither should I insist on the intimacy of Cyril-Constantine the Philosopher and his brother Methodius's relations with Byzantium, whether they were originally Slavized Greeks or, what seems more probable, Hellenized Slavs.⁶

Yet mention should be made of the relations of the Bulgarians and particularly of Cyril and Methodius with Rome and with the Germanic Empire.

It is well known that it was Prince Boris who once he had been converted to Christianity sent legates to Rome to ask for missionaries to be sent and to negotiate an autonomous Bulgarian Church; it is no less well known that pontifical legates were sent to Bulgaria with an affirmative reply: all this took place in 866.⁷

The continuation of the story is well known: Photius objects to the Latins, the Bulgarian Church once more becomes dependent on Constantinople in 873, albeit with autonomy. For their part, Cyril and Methodius frequently negotiate with Rome: they go there in 868 and manage to obtain Pope Hadrian's approval of their preaching in Great Moravia. In 880, Methodius once

⁵ For the byzantine influence on Bulgaria cf. R a m b a u d, A. L'empire grec au Xe siècle. Paris, 1970, p. 321.

⁶ Cf. M e c e v, K. De l'appartenance nationale des éducateurs slaves Cyrille et Méthode. — *Palaeobulgarica*, 6, 1982, No 3, 174—179.

⁷ Cf. D ö p m a n n, H.-D. Zum Streit zwischen Rom und Byzanz um die Christianisierung Bulgariens. — *Palaeobulgarica*, 5, 1981, No 1, 62—73.

more obtains this approval in Rome after Cyril's death which took place precisely there.

On the other hand, Cyril and Methodius's activity in Greater Moravia is inserted within the conflict between Byzantium and the Germanic Empire as they were trying to take over the Slavonic world. Their spreading of Christianity among the Slavs had started in the latter of these power centres from the dioceses of Regensburg, Passau and Salzburg. It is precisely in order to counteract this influence that Rostislav, the Moravian King, asked Michael III, the Byzantine Emperor, for missionaries; thus, in 863, Cyril and Methodius's work began, but it is thought that they had already begun their activities in Bulgaria.⁸

The history of the Slav-Germanic relations was complex: it covers the alliance of Louis II with the Bulgarians in 863 against Moravia; the alliance with Louis of Svatopluk, Rostislav's successor, which led to the persecution of Methodius by the Latin clergy; the expulsion of Methodius's disciples upon his death as they were persecuted by Wiching and the Latin clergy, after which they went back to Bulgaria; finally, the conquest of Moravia by the Frankish King Arnulf.

The Bulgarians cunningly look advantage of the differences between the Empire and Rome, not only of those both had with Byzantium (which took the side now of one, now of the other as when it rendered honours to Louis II in the Synod of 867 which ended by rupture with Rome after Photius's ex-communication in 863) It was Popes Nicholas I and Hadrian who supported them against the Germanic Latin clergy, although Stephen V ended by prohibiting Slavonic literature (albeit uselessly).

In fact, the Slav world was left divided: Moravia and Bohemia came within the sphere of the Germanic empire: Bulgaria, although closer to Byzantium, attained independence — partly thanks to her clever gaining of support from her Germanic enemies

This is no more than a minimum, partial portrait of the relations between the three powers during the 9th century. What is obvious is that there was constant communication, at times hostile, at others friendly. It is also obvious that this communication did not only include the exchange of documents and sacred writings, but also constant human relationships. Diverse knowledge, *objets d'art*, popular literature such as the fable were handed down or passed on by word of mouth; there was anything but incommunication. If there was this lack of incommunication in all senses between enemy powers like Byzantium and Bulgaria, albeit with peaceful interludes, how was there to be incommunication between two empires that intended each to inherit the Roman empire, but which constantly had to count upon each other?

In the intermediate area between both, the Slav peoples and cultures emerged. It is precisely the details of this process that show the constant relations between Byzantium and the Roman Empire, the Slavs taking advantage of the disagreements between both to create a new, third culture, the one expressed in the Bulgarian language, which as from 885 created the great Bulgarian literature, this being the year in which Methodius's disciples entered Bulgaria. Naturally, this is only a fragment of the picture of relations between the two cultural worlds, the Greek and the Latin, in the 9th century. Yet it is an important fragment that shows how wrong and chimerical is the idea of a radical separation between both worlds. The common ancient heritage was obviously reinforced by this relation, which was never interrupted. The example of the transmission of the fable is for its part merely that, an example. Yet I believe that it is also a highly significant example.

⁸ Cf. М е с е в, К. Op. cit.