

Bulgarian culture and space in the religious context

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Abstract. In this contribution I apply the semiotic method of Juri Lotman to a specific physical location – a significant Bulgarian religious monastery, in order to elucidate the Bulgarian metahistorical tradition. Any process of communication with a religious text involves a complex relationship with the reader. A readership image hidden in the Bulgarian religious text has played a central role for many generations; therefore, in addition to analysing a physical location, the method of communication in the area of “cultural centrality” has also been examined. The discussion focuses on a specific metahistorical text, the *Testament of John of Rila*, and the ways in which it interacts with important geographical and cultural areas and their hidden dimensions of “semiotic spheres”. The *Testament* is a part of Bulgarian cultural legacy and its role in the area of the “extra-cultural” and “cultural periphery” is remarkable.

Keywords: geography; journey; hero; value; Orthodoxy; boundary; Tartu–Moscow School

Geography and geographical literature were utopian
in essence and every journey was like a pilgrimage.
(Lotman 1990: 172)

1. Introduction

When it comes to discussing geography and personal geographical journeys, we need the term ‘culture’. Exploring the overcrowded domain of semiotics of culture, I have encountered many theoretical ideas, such as those of Peeter Torop (1999), Peet Lepik (2008), Igor Chernov (1988), Mihaly Hoppal (1988), Clifford Geertz (1973), Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou (2014), etc. When Mihaly Hoppal discusses ethnosemiotics and its role in any cultural

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phenomena, he suggests that Lotman sees culture as a “hierarchical structure of the languages of culture” (Hoppal 1988: 22–23). According to his idea, we culturally store information, preserve shared memory, examine social behaviour through tradition. Hoppal proposes to find out how a culture becomes constant and might be considered a national culture. We live in a very complex society and Hoppal’s suggested process is challenging if we do not discuss the idea of religious and moral values. Referring to the semiotics of culture, the discussion “covers the entire field of cultural and social life” (Chernov 1988: 7–16).

In the *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures: As Applied to Slavic Texts* (Uspenskij *et al.* 2003), the scholars of the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics emphasize that we should delve deeper into culture and revise it both internally and externally. Seen from an internal point of view, culture appears to be a limited area with specific boundaries (or, specific levels of religiousness), in contrast to another area – the area of non-culture outside the boundaries. Cultural semioticians designate these two areas with the terms ‘information’ and ‘entropy’. Information is the area which is orderly from an internal point of view, while the other area – the disorderly one – is called entropy. Other terms have often been applied to this kind of opposition, such as ‘nature’/‘culture’. Additionally, scholars differentiate four spheres, one of which is non-semiotic, while the other three are semiotic. The non-semiotic sphere covers the area of the “extra-cultural” – the whole of what is completely unknown to the members of a certain society. The three semiotic spheres include: (1) the area of the ‘non-cultural’ – the entirety of what is known to the members of a certain society, but regarded as antagonistic to their own culture; (2) the area of the ‘cultural periphery’ that the members of the society regard as non-cultural when it comes to their own culture; and (3) the area of the ‘cultural centrality’, i.e. everything the members of a society consider a part of their culture and fundamental to their identity.

Taking into account the above, this contribution is organized as follows: firstly, there is a discussion of the Rila Monastery,² an important geographical and cultural place in Bulgaria; secondly, the circulation of a cultural text in Bulgarian Orthodoxy is discussed; thus, I shall revise the processes of communication between the addresser and the text (see Torop 1999: 14). Geographically speaking, the semiotic journey of the contribution encounters the Tartu–Moscow School’s statements concerning the research of the “extra-culturally” geographical space of religious and moral values. Taking the word in a wider sense, Bulgarian Orthodox geography deals with the hidden dimensions of the ‘three semiotic spheres’.

² Founded in the 10th century, the monastery has been on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1983.

including various cultural codes in the Orthodox sign systems for a descriptive analysis in a religious and moral sense, or, ethnographically speaking, for “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of religious literature in time and space.

2. Rila Monastery revisited: Communication with the historical text as a process of movement

Geography becomes a kind of ethics.
(Lotman 1990: 171–172)

Over the centuries many scholars have visited the Rila Monastery library for academic research. The very first Slavic scholar who visited the library and studied the textual materials stored there was Victor Grigorovich³ in 1845. Practising the research method of cloistral life at the beginning of the 11th century in Orthodox Bulgaria, scholars have followed several lines of research, including reviewing the monastery’s very first hagiographic masterpieces that were authored and created by monks to venerate and worship the pivotal solitary person who had been treading the monastery lands before them. Because of the monastery’s status and geographical location on the Balkan Peninsula, an entire corpus of texts was written in the Rila Monastery during the Middle Ages. Some popular and anonymous texts, such as *Vitae of the Blessed Ioan Rilski*, and *The Holy Liturgy for the Dormition of the Righteous Ioan Rilski*, a *Hymnographic Cycle for the Saint*, show high respect for the hermit John of Rila, Protector⁴ of the Bulgarian people, Light of the town of Sredetz.⁵ Researchers of Bulgarian history and literature claim that the *Rila Gospel* of 1361 is the first textbook written in the monastery. The collection of historical documents is the most valuable monastery archive in Bulgaria, containing approximately 170 translated and original books of South Slavonic literature. The most informative medieval work is *The Rila Short Novel* by Vladislav the Grammarian, an example of 15th-century cultural heritage. This work describes the translation of the holy relics of St John of Rila in 1469. The editor of the novel, Vassil Kisselkov (1947) considered it one of the most comprehensive works of the age. The fact that the entire work deals with enumeration of places gives evidence to the significance of pilgrimage in the Medieval Bulgarian Orthodoxy.

³ Victor Ivanovich Grigorovich (1815–1876) was Slavic studies scholar in the Russian Empire; he also visited the Imperial University of Dorpat (Tartu).

⁴ Saint John of Rila, or, Saint Ioan Rilski, was the first Bulgarian hermit, who is considered the patron saint of Bulgaria.

⁵ The medieval name of the Bulgarian capital Sofia.

The eminent Greek scientist Alexandros-Faidon Lagopoulos has authored many studies in semiotics related to ‘geographical space’ (Lagopoulos 2014: 446–467). And, in our case, the discussion of travelling in Bulgarian Orthodox geographical space is impossible without the notion of the boundary. Therefore, we need a short revision of the concept of the boundary as a starting point of any communication. The idea of metahistorically revisiting the Rila Monastery reveals the individual and scholarly processes of communication (see Lotman 1990). Accepting that human language has been conceptualized on the basis of identities and differences, during this specific metahistorical process of communication some new multiple boundaries arise. Geographically, the Rila Monastery embodies a collective ideal, which has been organized through the traditional Orthodox veneration of St John of Rila. Pilgrimages represent the Bulgarian collective consciousness and involve Lotman’s concept of a specific type of “text-generator” (Lotman 1990: 36–37). Like all Bulgarian Orthodox places of pilgrimage, the monastery is an “extra-cultural” area where the collective consciousness is being continuously consecrated by the Orthodox Saint and his textual legacy.

In this area, there is a constant exchange of textual messages among the collective ideal, the Saint, and the visitors who need not include only pilgrims. Visitors approach the ideal pilgrim model through the mechanisms of the “text-generator”. A significant dimension of Bulgarian Orthodox religiosity has been observed in the monastery, where the text of religious language has been “adequately expressed” (see Lotman 1990: 37) in the language of contemporary visitors. All this has been well represented by the pattern of pilgrims, because the journeys undertaken to this geographical area of “the non-cultural” and “the cultural centrality” provide opportunities to walk in the footsteps of the ideal pilgrim.

Employing concepts of cultural semiotics, we can describe the geography of a sacred place as a cultural phenomenon embedded in specific codes and languages (Kozhukharov 2004). The significant role of multicodality lies in conveying cultural messages and social information through a variety of codes. Consequently, the culturally/devotedly motivated tourist will undergo a transformation and decode some specific religious/cultural practice. Moreover, when seen in Hoppal’s terms of language and music in a folk song, religious or not, such a journey puts into service Orthodox language and Orthodox music, simultaneously accompanied by Orthodox imagery. The multicodality enhances “the message transfer” (Hoppal 1988: 20) and provides cultural barriers during the process of analysing the multifaceted and multidimensional cultural and sacred performances. Thus, multicodality should be observed and the informational

symbolic systems should be analysed when they happen to express concepts such as ‘myth’, ‘hero’, ‘religious growth’, and ‘religiousness’. So, taking into account the *Testament of St John of Rila*, which concerns the contemporary understanding of pilgrimage as a sacred performance, we may state that the Rila Monastery interacts with all four spheres analysed by scholars of the Tartu–Moscow School.

The sacred place may be seen as a network of knowledge structures which visitors hold in their minds. These structures have gradually formed from the persons’ own experiences as well as from the knowledge they have acquired from other sources. The sacred place is, therefore, a creation where both the individual and the cultural experiences combine. A large part of this creation is cultural and transmitted to the visitors in the form of words. This occurs because every single experience goes through cultural structures that are largely based on language. Schematically speaking (see Lepik 2008: 48–49), the sacred place is a scene schema, embedding not only a visual scene but also odours, sounds, tastes, and a variety of individual sensations. The sacred place is a mental collection of elements that we expect to find *in situ*. Additionally, what helps describe the Bulgarian Orthodox sacred place is the well-known scholarly concept of the boundary. Reading Lotman, we acknowledge the complex individual *status quo* encircled by the boundary, as well as the multifaceted structure of the sacred site and its translation, composed of signs, texts and sign systems. In *Universe of the Mind*, Lotman (1990) explores the notion of ‘semiosphere’ to refer to elements that are necessary for signs and signifying action. Consequently, the proposed empirical ground causes the production, reception, and interpretation of new signs and texts. The semiosphere is the transcendental factor that explains how individual signs, sign systems, and communicative acts are possible. If the notion of the semiosphere refers to the transcendental factor that provides signification, Lotman’s “semiotic space” (Lotman 1990: 125; Lagopoulos, Boklund-Lagopoulou 2014) can be understood as an empirical notion referring to the ensemble of texts pertinent to the Bulgarian Orthodox culture and heritage.

In the process of sharing some cultural experiences by conceiving a variety of narratives, authentic and trustworthy affiliations are created among the group members. Narratives facilitate the existence of community life in the ‘three semiotic spheres’ (see p. 367 above). In Lotman’s work, there is an evocative quality which profoundly impacts the plot theory and practice. According to him, when we study the community life and a given narrative, the plot, described by Lotman, appears as a “powerful means”. As a result, in understanding the plot and its historical aspects, we are dealing with the semantic and syntagmatic interpretations (Lotman 1990: 170). Additionally, Lotman’s semiotic ideas are “powerful means” for studying the Bulgarian Orthodox tradition and culture that

are evident in the written historical texts. Any process of communication with those texts forms a complex relationship with the reader because the tenacity of the texts is due to persistence in the “symbolic faithful process” which is embodied in the essential context. Many Bulgarian theological narratives provide important information, they are “powerful means” of spreading Bulgarian Orthodox tradition and culture among generations of Orthodox Bulgarians, but the communication occurs only when individuals share a “common memory” and there is a “readership image hidden in the text” (Lotman 1990: 63–64).

3. A medieval man: a cultural hero, a text, and a saint

The former organizes the world of the listener, the latter adds something interesting to his or her knowledge of the world.
(Lotman 1990: 153)

Texts from the tenth century are routinely read as signifying something else than their literal meaning. Many texts are understood horizontally as signs of a previous social state expecting novel forms of interpretations, and vertically as insignia of scholarly points of view. Furthermore, we may examine those texts from some various assessment points, implicitly claiming that all texts from the Bulgarian Orthodox history, irrespective of their other qualities or topics, can be read with the cultural hero in mind, as well as *exteriorizing* and *emphasizing* the cultural hero’s philosophy and encouragement. This kind of rereading process comes closer to such research areas as sociolinguistics, social and cultural anthropology.

The medieval thought-system of the Bulgarian sacred milieu metahistorically transforms fixedness into activeness. Consequently, if we want to epitomize Lotman’s expression that “geography came into being in particular historical circumstances” (Lotman 1990: 171), the Bulgarian Orthodox history and tradition constitute our specific case study with the cultural hero in mind. When it comes to discussing Bulgarian historical processes, we may notice the emerging importance of the early Bulgarian Orthodox religious geography. Historical documents reveal that St John of Rila is not only related to the Bulgarian culture and literature, but also to the monastery centres that are geographically situated in Athos, Greece, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine (Dobrev 2007). During the centuries, Bulgarian priesthood has venerated three revelations of St John of Rila: (1) his earthly life; (2) his textual representation in a hymnographic cycle; and (3) his life after death (Duijtchev 1990: 169–261).

3.1. Communication between the cultural hero and his testament

The earthly life of John the Hermit, initially studied as a cultural hero, can be described as evolving in space as “an elementary semiotic situation” (Lotman 1990: 153). As a result, his life becomes a textual legacy, organized in a vivid representation of his *Testament* after his death. The *Testament* is written by St John of Rila on the blessed date of 25 March, A.D. 941. This textual corpus can be read as a significant narrative movement in the geographical space of Rila Mountain, which explicitly organizes the activities of the cultural hero into several heroic steps: (1) communication of the hermit with the divine world which occurs in a desolate area of land, and (2) communication of the hermit with himself which acquires, to use Lotman’s (1990: 171) description, “a religious and moral significance”. Studying the geographical space in Russian medieval texts, Lotman provides some valuable interpretations of the syntactic structure of eternal heroic actions: “Movement in geographical space meant moving in the vertical scale of religious and moral values, the top of the scale being heaven, and the bottom hell” (Lotman 1990: 171–176). Applying them (see Lotman 1990: 175) to the *Testament*, we deal with all individual intentions, cultural challenges, and cultural achievements embedded in the heroic consciousness.

In studying St John of Rila’s achievements, any scholarly research examines the religious and moral value in particular geographical space. After his communication with God, the sinful hermit received the message and started writing: “I came into this wilderness of Rila [...] But the good Lord [...] did not abandon me [...] because every good gift and every perfect gift is from him”.⁶ The communication between God and John *epitomizes* the individual earthly footpath as metaphor. It stands for the divine instructions that are connotations for human life-span. The good life is a sacred conception and only God can direct human beings to pursue it. Thus, St John of Rila continued his writing and strongly advised his adherents to pay attention to the dictum of God: “I know, my beloved children in God, I know you very well [...] but fear not, for the Lord’s power is made perfect in weakness.” The process of communication with the divine life exemplifies the metaphorical conceptualization of *repenting is returning* to the inmost “cave” (Lotman 1990: 159). The hermit *recognizes* the profound and reflective benefit of the devotional transformation: “Together with the apostle I say: ‘I am in travail again until Christ be formed in you.’ I beg you and make you swear on the dread name of God not to violate or abandon anything after my

⁶ For more detailed testimony, see the whole text: *Testament of John of Rila*, translated by Ilija Ilijev, http://www.pravoslavieto.com/docs/eng/Testament_of_John_of_Rila.htm, accessed on 5 July 2022.

death, but everything I have written let be carried out, as it is written [...]. Do not deviate either to the right, or to the left, but walk along the royal road.” To live in a praiseworthy and trustworthy way is to make essential steps towards God’s Grace. The sense of a praiseworthy imperative can be observed when God communicates with the hermit. As a consequence of this conversation, the hermit established a monastery for his disciples and adherents.

This pious motivation depends on the strength of the earthly character embedded in a narrative of thought processes and decisiveness. We discover St John of Rila situated in “the area of semiotic dynamism and of tension where new languages come into being” (Lotman 1990: 134). Following this metastructural self-description in the *Testament*, we can recognize some earthly and heavenly human journeys. These journeys allow us to identify two types of earthly travellers in the very system of the cultural encoding of society: one is in the divine space of morality and goes along with God’s instructions during the traveller’s earthly life; the other enjoys the idea of keeping up with the evil’s earthly geographical dimensions and consuming life. This medieval thought-system implies a spatial location of the oppositions “earth–heaven and earthly life–life hereafter” (Lotman 1990: 171–172).

The above excerpts themselves, cited from the *Testament*, are similar to the concept of the boundary. The boundary gives an opportunity to discuss forms of renunciation. The dichotomy ‘earth–heaven’ is observed in the positive and negative connotations. For this case of the *Testament* – a narrative of thought processes and decisiveness, the positive connotations are important. The problematic case for the traveller, since he/she has been free to choose the path, is the process of understanding the importance of keeping the traditions. In keeping with the Orthodox traditions, the cultural movement in space is rewarded by the holy faith and the likeness of God. As walking along “the royal road”, the communication directs to the righteous life. Therefore, life is represented like an individual space, which is organized in terms of “iconic, topological and rhetorical universals” (Lepik 2008). It is human decisions that constitute a discussion on keeping the space organized.

In rereading the *Testament of John of Rila*, the figures, time and space become linearly relative. Religious images confirm individual rituals and the power of the hermit’s life is arranged in the self-confidence of divine revivification. Living as a monk does not mean leaving the fundamental component of being human at all. St John of Rila’s life is an example of appealing, gratifying, and heart-warming angelic presence in this world. According to him, God is the source of everything and a wisdom for good pathway, which is always the righteous one.

4. Conclusion

This contribution has reflected on Lotman's works and revealed how his ideas can be evoked as "powerful means" for discussing any geographical space with its hidden dimensions of religious and moral values. Studying the case of Rila Monastery, I found that this place is significantly embedded in the Bulgarian metahistorical tradition. Since geography and geographical literature are concepts of knowledge, in Lotman's terms, Bulgarian Orthodox geography deals with the 'three semiotic spheres' (see p. 367 above). Any process of communication with the religious text is a complex relationship with the reader, and for this reason I suggest that the readership image has played an important role for many Bulgarian generations throughout the centuries. The Bulgarian Orthodox imagery enhances "the message-transfer" and considers various aspects of the myth, the hero, religious growth, and religiousness. The *Testament of John of Rila* interacts with all four spheres analysed by scholars of the Tartu-Moscow School, and provides a contemporary understanding of Bulgarian culture and space in the religious context.

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La cultura y el espacio búlgaros en el contexto religioso

En esta contribución aplico el método semiótico de Juri Lotman (1990) a un lugar físico concreto: un importante monasterio religioso búlgaro, con el fin de dilucidar la tradición metahistórica búlgara. Todo proceso de comunicación con un texto religioso implica una compleja relación con el lector. La imagen del lector, oculta en el texto religioso búlgaro, ha desempeñado un papel central durante muchas generaciones; por ello, además de analizar un lugar físico, también se ha examinado el método de comunicación en el ámbito de la “centralidad cultural”. El debate se centra en un texto metahistórico concreto, el Testamento de Juan de Rila, y en las formas en que interactúa con importantes zonas geográficas y culturales y sus dimensiones ocultas de “esferas semióticas”. El Testamento forma parte del legado cultural búlgaro y su papel en el ámbito de lo “extracultural” y la “periferia cultural” es notable.

Bulgaaria kultuur ja ruum religioosset kontekstis

Käesolevas töös rakendan Juri Lotmani semiootilist meetodit, käsitledes üht konkreetset füüsilist paika: antud juhul olulist religioosset kloostrit Bulgaarias. Eesmärgiks on heita valgust Bulgaaria metaajaloolisele traditsioonile. Iga religioosse tekstiga suhtlemise protsess kujutab endast kompleksset suhet lugejaga. Bulgaaria religioosset tekstis kätketud lugejakuvand on mänginud keskset rolli paljude põlvkondade jaoks. Seetõttu uurin lisaks füüsilise koha analüüsile ka seda, kuidas toimub kommunikatsioon „kultuurilise keskme piirkonnas“. Selleks käsitletakse konkreetset metaajaloolist teksti, „Rila Johannese testamenti“, ja seda, kuidas see suhestub oluliste geograafiliste ja kultuuriliste alade ning nende varjatud „semiootiliste sfääride“ mõõtmega. „Testament“ on osa Bulgaaria kultuuripärandist ja selle roll „kultuurivälise“ ja „kultuurilise perifeeria“ vallas on märkimisväärne.