

DOI 10.4467/25439561KSR.23.006.18983

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THE ENDURING VALUE
OF THE TESTIMONY OF FAITH
IN THE *STORY OF THE FORTY HOLY MARTYRS
OF SEBASTE* IN THE *BERLIN DAMASKIN*¹

PONADCZASOWA WARTOŚĆ ŚWIADECTWA WIARY
W *OPOWIEŚCI O CZTERDZIESTU MĘCZENNIKACH Z SEBASTY
W BERLIŃSKIM DAMASKINIE*

Abstract

The manuscript collection of the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow contains the so-called Berlin Damaskin (Berl. Slav. Fol. 36, late 18th c.), a handwritten codex belonging to the former Prussian State Library in Berlin. Damaskin, as a book type, marks a transition in the literary tradition in the Balkans, and in particular in Bulgaria, between the medieval Church Slavonic, and the early modern tradition of the Orthodox Church. Its expression is characterised by simplified language, less formal register, and a more extensive use of the common (vernacular) spoken language. Among the forty-five texts included in the Berlin Damaskin there is the *Story of the Forty Holy Martyrs of Sebaste*. Based on medieval hagiographic sources, the *Story* is an interesting case of employing an old literary theme in the service of the new Bulgarian religious and homiletic literature. The present paper discusses the characteristic features of the *Story*'s composition and its plot, with special emphasis put on the narrative's axiological message.

¹ The research leading to the present paper has received funding from the Excellence Initiative – Research University (IDUB) programme at the Jagiellonian University, Cracow.



Streszczenie

W zbiorach rękopisów Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej w Krakowie znajduje się tzw. Berliński damaskin (Berl. Slav. Fol. 36, kon. XVIII w.) – rękopiśmienny kodeks pochodzący z dawnej Pruskiej Biblioteki Państwowej w Berlinie. Damaskiny jako typ księgi stanowią formę przejściową pomiędzy średniowieczną, cerkiewnosłowiańską a nowożytną, cerkiewną tradycją literacką na Bałkanach, w szczególności zaś w Bułgarii. Charakteryzują się uproszczoną formą wypowiedzi, obniżeniem stylu i szerszym wykorzystaniem języka mówionego (potocznego). Jednym z czterdziestu pięciu tekstów wchodzących w skład *Berlińskiego damaskinu* jest *Opowieść o Czterdziestu Męczennikach z Sebasty*. Oparty na średniowiecznych źródłach hagiograficznych tekst *Opowieści* jest ciekawym przykładem wykorzystania starego wątku literackiego dla celów nowego bułgarskiego piśmiennictwa religijnego i homiletycznego. Artykuł omawia charakterystyczne cechy kompozycyjne i fabularne *Opowieści* ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem akcentów położonych w nim na treści aksjologiczne.

Keywords: hagiography, early Christian martyrs, damaskins, Christian ethics, Orthodox literature

Słowa kluczowe: hagiografia, wczesnochrześcijańscy męczennicy, damaskiny, etyka chrześcijańska, literatura cerkiewna

The hagiographic account of the imprisonment, trial, and execution of forty Christian soldiers of the XII Roman Legion known as Fulminata, or Lightning Legion, in the town of Sebaste in Asia Minor (Gr. Sebastea, nowadays Sivas in Turkey²) around the year 320, undoubtedly counts among the most interesting texts included in the handwritten Berlin Damaskin (18th c.). The manuscript belongs to the collection of the former Prussian State Library in Berlin (whence its popular name is derived), nowadays kept in the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow (shelf mark: Berl. Slav. Fol. 36).³ It is a manuscript of Bulgarian origin, exemplifying a new type of South

² In antiquity (during the reign of Emperor Diocletian, at the end of the 3rd c. CE) the town belonged to the Roman Empire and was the capital of the Roman province of Lesser Armenia (Armenia Minor). Later, after having been reconstructed and fortified by Emperor Justinian I, Sebaste was among the most important urban centres in Cappadocia. See S. Vailhé, *Sebastia*, [in:] *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13, New York, Robert Appleton Company, 1912, pp. 667–668.

³ More or less detailed descriptions of the book appear in the following catalogues: А.И. Яцимирский, *Описание южнославянских и русских рукописей заграничных библиотек*, vol. 1, Вена, Берлин, Дрезден, Лейпциг, Мюнхен, Прага, Люблина, Петербург 1921 (Сборник Отделения русского языка и словесности Российской академии наук, vol. 98), pp. 459–467 (no. 59); Б. Цонев, *Славянски ръкописи в Берлинската държавна библиотека*, “Сборник на Българската академия на науките” 1937, vol. 31, pp. 3–15; *Rękopisy cerkiewnosłowiańskie w Polsce. Katalog*, A. Naumow, A. Kaszlej (Eds.), Kraków, Wydawnictwo “scriptum”, 2004, pp. 477–478 (no. 1028). Partial descriptions can be found in a number of scholarly papers and publications dealing with the ‘Berlin collection’, e.g.: K. Günther, *Slawische Handschriften in Deutschland*, “Zeitschrift für Slawistik” 1960, vol. 5,

Slavic homiletical and paraenetical works modelled on the *Thesaurus* by Damaskenos the Studite (Damaskinos Stouditis, or Studites; 1500–1577), published in Venice.⁴ Yet, the *Story of the Forty Holy Martyrs of Sebaste* was not among the texts originally appearing in the *Thesaurus*. It can be found in damaskin literature written in Church Slavonic and in Modern Bulgarian relatively late, and as an addition at that. It appears only in the so-called type IV Modern Bulgarian damaskins, dated to the middle or the end of the eighteenth century, and counts among their characteristic features.⁵ In the handwritten Berlin Damaskin, which belongs to this very group, the text in question comes ninth (fols. 77–85v), forming part of orations intended for the feast days in the winter and spring-time part of the liturgical year (within a slightly distorted Menaion cycle).⁶

The manuscript clearly identifies the author of the text as Damaskenos the Studite, but the book is in fact a pseudepigraphon, being a translation of a collection of homilies, Βιβλίον ὀνομαζόμενον Νέος Θησαυρός [Biblion onomazomenon Nēos Thēsaurus] (A Book Entitled ‘New Treasure’; Venice, 1672), by Georgios Sougdoures (or

p. 323; H. Miklas, J.N. Šćapov, W.R. Veder, *The Slavic Manuscripts in the Federal Republic of Germany*, “Polata knjigopisnaja” 1984, vol. 9, pp. 39–42; A. Наумов, *Нови сведения за кирилски ръкописи в Полша*, “Palaeobulgarica – Старобългаристика” 1986, vol. 10, no. 1, p. 75; M. Райкова, *Отново за Берлинския дамаскин (Берлинската сбирка на Ягелонската библиотека)*, “Български език” 1996, vol. 46, no. 3, pp. 57–58; P. Чарамелла, *Нови данни за Берлинския дамаскин*, “Palaeobulgarica – Старобългаристика” 1996, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 120–129. The 2022 research project financed from the Excellence Initiative – Research University programme produced a comprehensive description of the book, to be published in a catalogue of Cyrillic manuscripts held in the ‘Berlin collection’ at the Jagiellonian Library (currently in preparation).

⁴ A characteristic feature of this homiliary was the use of the Modern Greek language and its evidently simplified style of expression. Its full title reads: Θησαυρός Χαμασκηνοῦ ὑποδιακόνου καὶ Στουδίτου τοῦ Θεσσαλονικέως, μετὰ τῆς προσθήκης ἐν τῷ τέλει καὶ τέρων πτὰ λόγων ψυχοφειλεστώτων καὶ τῆς ἐξηγῆσεως τοῦ Πάτερ ἡμῶν [Thēsaurus Damaskēnou tou hypodiakonou kai Stouditōu tou Thessalonikeōs, meta tēs prosthēkēs en tō telei kai heterōn hepta logōn psychōphelestatōn kai tēs exēgēsēs tou Pater hēmōn]. The date of its first edition given in the literature varies, the most prevalent being 1558 and 1561. It went through numerous editions. See H. Eideneier, *Der “Θησαυρός” des Damaskenos Studites von 1557/58*, “Θησαυρίσματα” 1995, vol. 25, pp. 160–164; Л.А. Герд, *Дамаскин Студит*, [in:] *Православная Энциклопедия*, vol. 13, Москва, Церковно-научный центр “Православная энциклопедия”, 2013, pp. 698–699.

⁵ The same translation appears in four other books known today. See Е.И. Демина, *Тихонравовский дамаскин: Болгарский памятник XVII в. Исследование и текст*, pt. 1, София, Издателство на Българската Академия на Науките, 1968, pp. 62–64. The text under discussion represents one of the two variants that occur in damaskins, see O. Mladenova, *Towards a Classification of the Early Modern Bulgarian Vernacular Texts of Type Togizi*, “Balkanistica” 2015, vol. 28, pp. 313–336.

⁶ The full title of the *Story*, translated into English, reads: ‘A story of the fathers, by Damaskenos the Studite, a monk and subdeacon, about a miracle that occurred in the month of March, on the 9th day. A martyrdom of the 40 Holy Martyrs, famous soldiers chosen by God, who accepted the (crown of) martyrdom in the lake of Sebaste. Re-written in simple language. Father, give your blessing!’

Sougdooris; 1645/7–1725).⁷ The work must have enjoyed considerable popularity, since it appeared in a few successive editions.⁸ A hypothetical date of the text's translation into Modern Bulgarian suggests that it must have been based precisely on one of the late editions of the Νέος Θησαυρός [New Treasure], most likely one dating from the eighteenth century. A comparison of the Greek and Slavonic versions of the text demonstrates that the translation lacks the entire introductory part, that is about two printed pages, which results in the fact that the Slavonic text begins with the Greek phrase: Μετὰ τριαχοδίους... [Meta triachodious] (p. 218). Such a cut could not have been accidental; it may be conjectured that it was made in order to adjust the text in Modern Bulgarian to a version of an extensive account of the sufferings of the Forty Martyrs, well known in the Greek and Church Slavonic hagiographic tradition, that even appears in the title of the *Story*.

The veneration of the Forty Holy Martyrs of Sebaste counts among the most important cults within Eastern Christianity and was known in the Slavonic world as early as in the period of its Christianisation. Obviously, it has come there through the Greek (Byzantine) tradition. The earliest works of Slavonic literature attest to the fact that this literature encompassed a wealth of hagiographic texts intended for the liturgical feast day of the Martyrs of Sebaste (9 March).⁹ The popularity and distinctiveness of this feast is closely related to its date, which always falls during the period of Lent, and an association between the number of martyrs and the length of the fasting period.¹⁰ The Church Slavonic literary tradition related to the veneration of the martyrs of Sebaste is very old and diverse. Its decline, caused by a gradual disintegration of the medieval system of Byzantine-Slavonic literature, is attested by South Slavic damaskins. The *Story of the Forty Holy Martyrs of Sebaste*, included in the Berlin Damaskin, is an interesting example of an adaptation of an old

⁷ He was born on the island of Despotiko (formerly known as Kretsounista) in the Aegean Sea. Initially educated at Ioannina, later, being still in his youth, he spent a few years in Italy (in Venice and Padua). There he studied theology and philosophy, and became an Orthodox priest. After being ordained a deacon, and then a priest, he returned to his home country and became a teacher at Ioannina. His acquaintance with the Venetian typographer Nikolaos Glykys may be explained by the fact that Glykys originated from Ioannina, a town Sougdooures knew very well.

⁸ Κ.Θ. Πέτσιος, Γεώργιος Σουγδούρης (1645/7–1725): άγνωστα στοιχεία για τη ζωή τη διδασκαλία και το φιλοσοφικό του έργο, “Τόμος” 2002, vol. 31, pp. 241–308.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of this subject see М. Петрова, М. Йовчева, *Светците от Супрасълския сборник: имена, дати, източници*, [in:] *Преоткриване: Супрасълски сборник, старобългарски паметник от X век. Rediscovery: Bulgarian Codex Suprasliensis of 10th century*, Ed. А. Милтенова, Sofia, Изток–Запад, 2012, pp. 425–432.

¹⁰ Within the time span in which Easter may occur according to the Julian calendar (between 22 March and 25 April), the liturgical feast of the 40 Martyrs (9 March) falls either at the beginning of the last (sixth) week of Lent or immediately after the Forgiveness Sunday (also known as Cheesefare Sunday), that is, in the first week of Lent.

hagiographic subject matter for the needs of a new model of religious and homiletic literature.

All Slavonic versions of the martyrdom follow the same sequence of events leading to the execution of the forty soldiers of Sebaste that took place during the reign of the Roman Emperor Licinius (308–324). The narrative and compositional structure of the account clearly follows the principle of the *imitatio passionis Christi*. The plot and narrative episodes closely resemble events related in the Gospels and conveyed by church tradition. It was probably this association between the passion of the Forty Martyrs and the sequence of events during the Passion of Christ, well established in the collective memory of all Christians, that had contributed to the popularity of the cult of the martyrs and made their veneration particularly fitting for the Lenten period.

Regardless of the literary variant of the Slavonic translation of the martyrdom account we consult, its main message conforms to general rules governing medieval hagiographic literature. On a metatextual level, the story recounts a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil, a battle fought by representatives of the divine world with the diabolical one (the saints against Satan). An active contribution of the Devil in the suffering of the martyrs is shown both by his direct and indirect involvement. The *Story* shows him both in his anthropomorphic form and acting through the deeds of people subjected to his power and obedient to him.

On the side of righteousness, the good and truth, we can see, above all, the collective protagonist in the form of the forty-people-strong unit of Christian soldiers. All texts of the cycle dealing with the martyrs of Sebaste strongly emphasise the trait of their exceptional bravery, solidarity and of the unanimity of their actions, which could not be hampered even by the fact that they had originated from various parts of the Roman Empire. Formally, this unity, and even a kind of unification, results from their belonging to a single military unit and having a similar military rank, yet, in reality, it is owed to the Christian religion which is the actual unifying and equalising factor. The axiological presentation of unity is clearly rooted in the ecclesiastical system and refers to the foundations of orthodoxy as set out by the Church councils. Even though only three martyrs (Candidus, Cyrion and Domninus) had spoken during their imprisonment, trial and execution, their statements, as a kind of synecdoche, represent the stance of all of the men. This characteristic form of expression – with utterances often spoken literally in unison (especially when reciting prayers and apologies) – is obviously rooted in the axiom about the actions of the Holy Spirit, whose inspiration prompts the martyrs to say the right thing, while their individual utterances join into a coherent whole, being parts of a uniform message coming from above.¹¹ Orations

¹¹ See Matt. 10:17–22; Mk 13:11. As the message of the Gospels was gaining widespread popularity, Jesus's words strengthened the above conviction among Christians. St Cyprian of Carthage gave

of the saints are based on distinctly theological foundations and have been carefully designed to sound like universal confessions of faith, professing the only God, apologies of Christianity and apotheoses of the martyrdom.

The two groups of protagonists depicted in the account of the martyrdom belong to starkly opposing worlds, which makes any agreement between them impossible: they communicate on different levels, using opposing arguments. The persecutors of Christians concentrate on the earthly reality and its dubious qualities (the emperor's grace, honours, and wealth, as well as carnal pleasures), whereas the saints look only towards the Heavenly Kingdom and the lasting values associated with it. The torturers invoke imperial orders they are supposed to carry out and refer to legal and official arguments, with their formal religious observances of making sacrifices to pagan deities. The martyrs, in turn, are interested exclusively in the religious message, using a mental concept of an opposition between the dead deities and the living God. When faced with choosing between affection towards the worldly sovereign and the eternal king, there can be only one choice, and it is obvious for the martyrs, because it is a choice between the transience of the worldly life and the eternal happiness; between the loss of the destructible body and the saving of the indestructible soul. A threat of physical death cannot frighten someone who has been given a guarantee of (the true) life. Thus, this is a prospect of a passage from the worldly to the eternal life which, however, in order to be accomplished requires as much (or perhaps as little?) as a necessary stage in the form of (a martyr's) death.¹² In this way, the participation of the martyrs in the salvific sacrifice of Christ and their following in his footsteps is realised. The above has been attested by the supernatural light, radiating around the saints, that lit up the darkness of the night in the hour of their death, and then the shining light that illuminated the relics of the martyrs and thus enabled them to be found in the depths of the lake. In keeping with the principles of Slavonic-Byzantine hagiography, the martyrs had anticipated their heavenly glory still during their lifetime, in this way maintaining a permanent link with the transcendent world. The reality of this link is particularly well visible when

a following advice: 'For when apprehended and delivered up, he ought to speak, inasmuch as the Lord abiding in us speaks in that hour, who willed that we should rather confess than profess', St Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle 82*, trans. by R.E. Wallis, [in:] *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. by A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A.C. Coxe, Buffalo [USA], Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886 (revised and edited for New Advent by K. Knight). Available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050682.htm> [accessed: 26.10.2023].

¹² It is illustrated by the haste with which the martyrs, who seem to be running against one another, undress and jump into the ice-cold waters of the lake. A similar zeal can be seen in the actions of one of the guards (the damaskin gives his name as Aglaius) who joins the martyrs, replacing the soldier who had given in (*lapsi*), and, while proclaiming out loud that also he is a Christian, he eagerly immerses himself in the freezing waters and even asks to be allowed to suffer a martyrdom.

Christ in person appears to the martyrs in prison in order to strengthen their faith and to confirm that eternal reward awaits them in heaven.

The Modern Bulgarian *Story of the Forty Holy Martyrs of Sebaste*, in its version appearing in the Berlin Damaskin, does not exist in a literary vacuum. Although the sequence of events described above does not, in principle, divert from other accounts of the story known in Slavonic literary tradition, the text under discussion stands out by a number of differences, both in its form and content, as well as in the style and the use of language, all of which are worthy of note, and attest to the changes in the priorities and literary strategies that took place across the centuries.

First of all, the changes are visible in the democratisation of the text. This tendency is manifest mainly in the language and style, and consists in the abandoning of Church Slavonic¹³ – a language whose popularity slowly declined and that gradually became poorly understood by the majority of the Orthodox faithful in the Balkans (in particular those with little exposure to literature) – and by replacing it with the local Modern Bulgarian dialect (although still interspersed with numerous remnants of Church Slavonic). Thus the language of the text(s) included in the Berlin Damaskin reveals the majority of analytic traits of the Bulgarian language and provides a repertory of the usage of words ranging from the specifics of a local dialect, to words of Balkan origin (especially those borrowed from the Greek and Turkish). Particularly interesting changes, fascinating especially for language historians, are manifested additionally in the phonetics, morphology and syntax (word order in a sentence).¹⁴ As a consequence of the diachronic linguistic transformations, the damaskin texts reveal also stylistic innovations, partly resulting from the changes that occurred in the medieval literature of the Orthodox church. They show up very clearly in attempts at simplifying the style of expression directed implicitly to the listener (and only in the second instance to the reader) who is no longer a member of educated specialists with literary background, stemming from the monastic milieu where liturgical and hagiographic texts were copied, but one of the ordinary faithful

¹³ Church Slavonic continued to fulfil the function of a literary language, with fairly constant norms, therefore, in case of translations intended for church use, one would have expected that precisely Church Slavonic would have been used. Yet, a new homiletical model and the fact that texts were addressed to listeners whose language evolved towards analytical version and departed ever further from the lexical and grammatical norms of Church Slavonic, resulted in the fact that translators of damaskins chose the Modern Bulgarian dialect, alien to the literary tradition of the Orthodox Church, which, however, for practical reasons, turned out to be more appropriate in pastoral work. This mechanism reflects an evolution that occurred within the homiletics in Greek and applies also to medieval Slavonic texts which, 'translated' into – or rather re-written in – Modern Bulgarian were included into damaskin books, thus providing a precedent and material for the codification of a new literary language.

¹⁴ See P. Чарамелла, op. cit., pp. 120–129; E. Solak, *Na marginesie Damaskinu berlińskiego – z perspektywy językoznawczej* (in print).

from the local parish, often located in the remote provinces. Simplification of the message makes the subject matter better accessible to the listeners, resulting in its greater communicative effectiveness and greater efficiency in the work of a preacher. In order to attain these goals the author of the text (that is, translation) employs a simple, evocative and sometimes even explicit language, expands to the limits the use of fictional components in the narrative, trying to paint a very vivid image, full of details; contemporises the subject matter by using anachronistic wording, and supplements the plot with additions and commentaries, similar in their form (or rather function) to stage directions. Furthermore, as far as the message of the text in the Berlin Damaskin is concerned, the extent of some of the biblical quotations and statements of the martyrs, which serve as a sort of paraenetical lectures, as well as the stylistically sophisticated theological and apologetical utterances has been reduced.

Apart from the presence of historical and paraenetical inserts, the most conspicuous formal difference visible in the structure of the *Story of the Forty Holy Martyrs of Sebaste* is the final oration which, because of its substantial length (more than four pages of the manuscript) and subject matter, is actually a separate sermon-instruction about fasting. The addition of the homiletical element is roughly related to the main thread of the martyrdom and only in its initial part slightly resembles the medieval laudatory texts in honour of martyrs. The closing of the *Story* employs merely some threads of the martyrdom account in order to instruct the faithful in the matters apparently related to their everyday life and more pertinent to the present day – namely, dealing with the liturgical calendar (the period of Lent and Eastertide), and the regimen of fasting. The homiletical character of this part of the text, along with its paraenetical and axiological subject matter, have made the *Story*¹⁵ formally similar to the preaching convention of the damaskins.

By combining elements of a classical martyrdom account and a rhetorical tradition of homiletics, the *Story* contemporises the traditional subject matter giving it the shape characteristic of the damaskin tradition that clearly gravitates towards early modern literature. The composition of the text, as well as the modifications it had undergone, enabled a presentation of traditional values of medieval hagiographic literature (in this case, the constancy of faith, martyrdom and fasting discipline) in slightly different light and in a new form, that was more accessible to wider audiences. In the Ottoman period, the ancient martyrological ethos cultivated in the historical and liturgical memory, in spite of the secondary position of Christianity in the country, was no longer attractive and was replaced in the *Story* by its functional

¹⁵ One should not forget about the introduction, left out in the translation of the text into Modern Bulgarian, whose rhetorical character is roughly similar.

counterpart in the form of the highly emphasised ascetic (fasting) ethos. The homiletic part appended to the modified version of the account of the martyrdom of the Forty Holy Martyrs of Sebaste is in essence a catechesis that prepares the faithful for another form of suffering, namely, fasting and sexual abstinence which, especially during Lent, are obligatory, and at the same time serve as a testimony of true faith.

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