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The Incantation against Snakebite from Norov's Psalmbook – Linguistic and Historical Aspects

Abstract. The paper explores the linguistic and cultural patterns behind an oral incantation against snakebite that appears on the last page of a Middle Bulgarian book of psalms. The manuscript dates back to the 14th century, and was created in the Eastern regions of Medieval Bulgaria, observing the orthography of the Tarnovo Literary traditions. The Russian traveller Norov found the book of psalms during a trip to the Holy Land at the beginning of the 19th century and brought it to Russia. The incantation contains a significant number of words of unclear origin. Yatsimirskiy – the first researcher of this incantation – offers two possible explanations about the source language that allude either to its derivation from an Oriental tongue, or to local folklore practices. Modern Russian researchers maintain the hypothesis about its folklore origin and emphasise its opening words *sarandara*/*marandara* as an example of ritual nonsense speech – in their view, this could have been a popular phenomenon in the ethnic religious practices of Slavic communities. After a linguistic analysis of the text and its unclear words, I hypothesise that the words belong to one of a range of secret languages. I also attempt to identify the group that used the incantation.

Keywords: incantation, ecstatic speech, secret language, Norov's Psalmbook

Norov's Psalmbook is a Medieval Bulgarian manuscript dated back to the first half of the 14th century. It was found in 1835–1836 by the Russian pilgrim Avraam Norov in the St. Sava Monastery in Palestine. Its orthographic and linguistic peculiarities supposedly ascribe it to a group of manuscripts created in the North-eastern Bulgarian lands[1]. A prayer, or more exactly an incantation, against snakebite was included on page № 263b after the main text. It was added below the main text without any relevance to either the book of psalms, nor to the graduals

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[1] Е. Чешко, И. Бунина, В. Дыбо, О. Князевская, Л. Науменко, *Норовская псалтырь*, *Среднеболгарская рукопись XIV века*, vol. I, София 1989, p. 93–112.

and prayers which were read between individual cathismas during the liturgy. According to the researchers of Norov's Psalmbook the handwriting of incantation differs from that of the main text[2].

и҃сұс х҃с нιка. сараи́дар. асарандара.
марандара. марандара рꙋ́х҃ь се
теоу́сⸯ хаза оулⸯты. се ти даръ.
ꙋ҆ льты. апл҃ь павел҆·. рахасⸯ.
петрⸯ сааⸯⸯⸯтаⸯсь. а҆спида ꙋ҆гасⸯ
василиско деⷢгⷩеⷩⸯ. х҃с деръⸯти.
ἀμήν. аминⸯ. ἀμήν.[3]

The Latin transcription of the incantation is: *Jesus Christ nika. sarandar asa-randara. marandara. marandara. roh se teos haza ulti. se ti dar ulîti. Apostol Pavel. rahas. Petr saalats. aspida ugas. vasilisko degen. Christ derûti. amin. amin. amin*[4].

The meaning of the words from the initial phrase in the text is comprehensible. They represent a variant of the traditional Christian invocation "IC XC NIKA", the names of the Holy Apostles Saint Paul and Saint Peter, the Middle and Old Bulgarian words аспида (aspida) – from the Greek ἀσπίς/ἀσπίδες (plurality) and the Middle and Old Bulgarian василискъ from the Greek βασιλίσκος – both meaning *venomous snake*[5], as well as ἀμήν/аминнъ – Greek and Middle Bulgarian transcriptions of *amen*. The meanings of the other lexemes remain unclear.

It is obvious that the incantation is a medieval interpolation added after the compilation of the book. The unknown interpolator defines it as "a prayer". A short description of ritual referring to incantation is given as well. Its text is in Middle Bulgarian and is completely comprehensible. According to it, following a snakebite the "prayer" must be read over water. After the incantation, the bitten man must drink the water.

In the description of the ritual, between the verb "to read" and the noun "water", there is an unclear sign – a combination of two elements. The first one somewhat resembles a trident. The second element is placed above it and resembles a crescent[6]. This obscure sign cannot be identified as any known astrological or alchemical symbol, and indicates that most likely the interpolator did not know the incantation and ritual by heart, but used an existing record of its words.

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[2] Е. Чешко, И. Бунина, В. Дыбо, О. Князевская, Л. Науменко, *Норовская псалтырь…*, vol. II, p. 735.

[3] *Ibidem*. Bellow I will use the Latin transcription of the incomprehensible words.

[4] Below I will use the Latin transcription of the incomprehensible words.

[5] *Старобългарски речник*, София 1999, p. 44, 142.

[6] Е. Чешко, И. Бунина, В. Дыбо, О. Князевская, Л. Науменко, *Норовская псалтырь…*, vol. II, p. 735.

Surprisingly, more than four centuries later, an incantation very similar to the one in Norov's Psalmbook appeared in one of the popular works of the 19th century Ukrainian literature – "Кайдашéва сім'я́" (The Family of Kaydashes). The novel, written by the famous Ukrainian author Ivan Nechuy-Levyts'kyy, was published in 1879 in the Russian Empire. It includes the description of an incantation, referring to the 19th century practice of treating snakebite in Ukrainian countryside: *Сарандара, марандара, гаспіда угас, василиска попер! Амінь біжить, амінь кричить, амінь доганяє! Баба Палажка дмухнула на воду тричі навхрест і дала Кайдашеві напитись*[7].

The Ukrainian text partially repeats the incantation from Norov's Psalms and can be regarded as its short variant. At the same time, one of the female characters in the novel, Grandmother Palazhka, performs the water ritual included in Norov's Psalms in its entirety.

Contemporary literary critics do not link this passage of the novel to the Middle Bulgarian incantation, but fully ascribe it to the authorship of Ivan Nechuy-Levyts'kyy who, in their view, tried to intensify the comedic effect of the story[8]. It is difficult to say whether the author, who graduated from a seminary and a theological academy, had borrowed the incantation from some unknown source or if a similar ritual really existed in the 19th century Ukrainian folk traditions. The words "гаспіда" (gaspida) and "василиска" (vasiliska) which are obviously Eastern Slavonic phonetic adoptions of the Middle Bulgarian аспнда (aspida) and васнлнскѡ (vasilisko) support the second hypothesis. The above cited passage indicates that different variants of the incantation existed in the medieval period, and most likely their spread in the north-eastern direction was one of the consequences of the so-called "Second South Slavic influence" (14th–15th century) on the Eastern Slavs.

Ivan Nechuy-Levyts'kyy's novel shows that the first fragment was *sarandara sarandara* not *sarandar asarandara*, as in Norov's Psalms. The Ukrainian variant of the incantation also indicates that over time it had lost many of its Middle Bulgarian features and only a few initial elements were preserved by the 19th century – *saranadara marandara* and *aspida ugas, vasilisko*. Apparently, most of the incomprehensible "lexemes" were abandoned and replaced with words from the popular vocabulary of the Eastern Slavs.

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[7] *Sarandara, marandara, gaspida ugas, vasiliska poper! Amin' bizhit', amin' krichit', amin' doganуaе! Baba Palazhka dmuhnula na vodu trichi navherst i dala Kaydashevi napitis'* – I. Нечу́й-Леві́цький, *Кайдашева сім'я*, Київ 2010, p. 271.

[8] O. Авраменко, В. Пахаренко, *Укарінська Литература. Підручник для 10 класу загальноос-вітніх навчальних закладів (рівень стандарту, академічний рівень)*, Київ 2010, p. 30.

1. Attempts at explanation and decoding of the incantation

The first mention of the incantation in the academic literature dates back to 1836. It was published in the journal of the Russian Ministry of Education, in a paper describing the manuscripts and printed books from Norov's collection. The author of this paper (A. Vostokov) suggests that it could have been written in some Oriental language[9].

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian scholar Alexander Yatsimirskiy published the text of the incantation in his investigation of the so-called "false prayers" in the South Slavic written traditions and suggested that all of the incomprehensible words in their incantations may possibly have been derived from Syriac. However, he based this assumption not on a linguistic analysis, but on cultural factors – the assumption, widely spread in the Middle Ages, that demons spoke Syriac[10].

Later Russian scholars abandoned the hypothesis of an Oriental language and adopted the view of the folklore origin of the incantation. Its initial words *sarandara*, *marandara* were usually cited as an example of the so-called "заумная речь" – i.e. 'abstruse/absurd speech'[11]. In her investigation of the nonsense texts in the South Slavic folklore traditions the Russian ethnologist Plotnikova also mentioned the first part of the incantation:

> Например, болгарский заговор от укуса змеи: "Сарандара, сарандара, марандара, марандара"; хорватский девичий заговор на любовь: "Ja djelsun, ja gebersun, ja batersun, ja divani deli olsun", типичная южнославянская загадка, имеющая русские, белорусские, польские аналоги.

> For example the Bulgarian incantation against snakebite: "Sarandara, sarandara, marandara, marandara"; the Croatian virginal love incantation "Ja djelsun, ja gebersun, ja batersun, ja divani deli olsun" are typical South Slavic mysteries, having Russian, White Russian and Polish analogies[12].

However, Plotnikova has certainly made an incorrect claim with respect to the "Croatian virginal love incantation". It is not an absurd text and it is not a "South Slavic mystery". In fact, it is in Turkish and is completely intelligible and strongly resembles a curse: 'Let him perforate, let him kick the bucket, let him sink, let

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[9] А. Востоков, *Описаніе рукописныхъ и печатныхъ книгъ Словенскихъ, принадлежащихъ Г. Норову*, ЖМНП 11, 1836, p. 532–533.

[10] А. Яцимирскій, *Апокрифы и легенды. Къ исторіи апокрифовъ, легендъ и ложныхъ молитвъ въ южнославянской письменности*, Петроградъ 1915, p. 271.

[11] Е. Левкиевская, *Заумь как разновидность ритуальной речи славян*, [in:] *Славянские древности. Этнолингвистический словарь*, vol. II, ed. Н. Толстой, Москва 1999, p. 281.

[12] А. Плотникова, *Фольклорный текст абсурд в южнославянском селе XX века*, [in:] *Абсурд и вокруг*, ed. Г. Ритц, Д. Вайс, Москва 2004, p. 405.

him become insane'[13]. The mistake of Plotnikova reveals her ignorance of the non-Slavonic languages spoken on the Balkans. Therefore, her conclusions about the incantation from Norov's Psalms can also be doubted.

On the whole, Russian scholars considered *sarandara*, *marandara* to be a Bulgarian incantation, however they did not mention the fact that these lexical components were only the opening phrase of the incantation.

In literature, there have been attempts to explain the Greek and Turkish origins of the incantation. Some authors suggest that *sarandara* stands for the Modern Greek word combination 'forty years', *marandara* for the Persian *marandar* – 'viper' (here a Turkish mediation is proposed), *degen* for the Turkish word for 'touching', *derôti*/*derûti* for the Turkish word *dertli* – 'passion'. However, in spite of these attempts, authors admit that most of the words are unclear and the whole meaning cannot be reconstructed[14].

Indeed, the Modern Greek σαραντάρα can be explained as 'forty something' (including the age of forty) but its connection to the popular Bulgarian belief according to which *a snake unseen by a man for forty years becomes a demon*[15] seems unconvincing.

The Persian word for 'snake' is *mār*, in plurality *mārān* (snakes). Viper is *māri afá*[16] but the existence of a single word, or a combination of words *marandara* or *marandar* in Modern and Middle Persian is an unfounded hypothesis. Besides, there is no evidence that the Persian word has been loaned to popular Turkish, excluding the designation of the mythological creation *Şahmeran* (Shamaran – the king of snakes)[17]. The plural form of *mār* – *mārān* was registered in the Ottoman poetry from the 18th–19th century[18] as a literal loan from Persian, but the word *marandara* or *marandar* existed neither in Ottoman Turkish, nor in popular Turkish.

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[13] The lexeme "ja" is a disjunctive "or", "djelsun", "gebersun", "batersun", "divani deli olsun" are the third person singular imperative/optative forms of the verbs *delmek* – 'to perforate, to pierce, to pick', *gebermek* (to kick the bucket), *batırmak* (to cause, to make something sink), *divane deli olmak* (to become insane). The borrowing of the incantation took place after the 17th century, when the third person imperative forms replaced the third person forms of optative. The ending/suffix "sun" indicates that the donor of this incantation was some of the Western Balkan Turkish vernaculars where the 4 variants of vowel harmony were reduced to only one. Besides, it must have been strongly influenced by local Slavonic languages – for example, the verb *batırmak* (to cause, to make something sink) is wrongly used instead of *batmak* (to sink), i.e. the difference between the active voice and the causative has been lost.

[14] W. Budziszewska, *Z problematyki obcości w języku magii*, [in:] *Język a kultura*, vol. IV, *Funkcje języka i wypowiedzi*, ed. J. Bartmiński, R. Grzegorczykowa, Wrocław 1991, p. 88.

[15] *Ibidem*.

[16] F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*, London 1963, p. 1139; D. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, London 1986, p. 54.

[17] Y. Çağbayir, *Orhun Yazıtlarından Günümüze Türkiye Türkçesinin Söz Varlığı*, vol. VIII, İstanbul 2016, p. 5382.

[18] *Ibidem*, vol. VI, p. 3786.

The connection between *degen* and the Turkish verb *değinmek* (to touch) seems implausible as well. If the assumption of Budziszewska is correct, then *degen* should be the second person singular imperative of *değinmek* – i.e. 'you touch', possibly 'you, venomous snake touch', but from a semantic perspective such a construction is odd. The supposed etymological connection between *derôti/ derûti* and the Turkish word *dertli* (worried, distressed, pained, in trouble) – i.e. Christ is worried, distressed, pained, in trouble, is also unconvincing. Besides, in the context of the history of Turkish-Bulgarian language contacts, there are obvious chronological and lexical discrepancies in Budziszewska's hypothesis. The first Turkish loan words in Bulgarian were personal names and a few titles. They were loaned no earlier than the last decades of the 14th century – that refutes the hypothesis of the appearance of Turkish loan words in Middle Bulgarian texts from the first half of the 14th century.

In 2015, Svetlana Tsonkova claimed in her dissertation on the incantations in Medieval Bulgarian sources that the text of the incantation from Norov's Psalm-book was written in an Oriental language that could be Arabic or Hebrew, or a non-existing abracadabra language imitating Oriental languages[19]. However, she did not give any arguments in favour of these hypotheses and effectively repeated Yatsimirsky's opinion, with some nuances.

2. Linguistic analysis

2.1. Ecstatic speech (*glossolalia*)

The Byzantine chronicler Niketas Choniates described the preparation of the anti-Byzantine uprising of the brothers Assen and Theodor (Peter) which marked the beginning of the Second Bulgarian Tsardom in 1185 in the following way:

> At first, the Vlachs were reluctant and turned away from the revolt urged upon them by Peter and Asan, looking askance at the magnitude of the undertaking. To overcome the timidity of their compatriots, the brothers built a house of prayer in the name of the Good Martyr Demetrius. In it they gathered many demoniacs, they were instructed to say in their ravings that the God of the race of the Bulgarians and Vlachs had consented to their freedom and assented that they should shake off after so long a time the yoke from their neck; and in support of this cause, Demetrius, the Martyr for Christ, would abandon the metropolis of Thessaloniki and his church there, and the customary haunts of the Romans and come over to them to be their helper and assistant in their forthcoming task. These madmen would keep still for a short while and then, suddenly moved by the spirit, would rave like lunatics; they would start up and shout and shriek, as though inspired, that this was no time to sit still but to take weapons in hand and close with the Romans…[20]

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[19] S. Tsonkova, *Charms, Amulets, and Crisis Rites: Verbal Magic in Daily Life in Medieval and Early Modern Bulgaria*, PhD Thesis, Budapest 2015, p. 133.
[20] Niketas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium. Annals of Niketas Choniates*, Detroit 1984, p. 205.

This passage indicates that the initial kernel of the anti-Byzantine uprising led by Assen and Theodore (Peter) were Bulgarian and Romance-speaking communities inhabiting the region of the Haemus mountains, united by the common cult of Saint Demetrius. However, this cult included non-liturgical ecstatic practices that strongly resembled the state of trance of seers in ancient religions. Similar practices have in fact been well-testified in the Balkans even in modern times and it is interesting that they are present across ethnically mixed population. For instance, until the beginning of the 20th century, in many Greek and Bulgarian-speaking villages from the region of the Strandzha mountain – the most southeastern part of the peninsula, next to the Black Sea, the so-called *nestinarstvo/anastenaria* was widely practiced by women who "were possessed by the spirit of St. Constantine" on the day of St. Constantine and St. Helen and during other religious holidays, and performed a ritual dance on hot embers. During this ecstatic dance, they often spoke prophesies[21].

This phenomenon must have been widely spread in the Middle Ages and the testimony of Niketas Choniates shows that it was common among the population in the very centre of the Second Bulgarian Tsardom. It is well known that *glossolalia*, 'a vocalization of sounds that are only alike, but in their semantic meaning and syntax they are different from any known languages'[22] often appears in similar ecstatic states.

One of the possible explanations of the incantation from Norov's Psalmbook is that it represents an ecstatic speech. Apparently, in Medieval Bulgaria, there were groups who could produce or borrow similar speech from Byzantine sources.

However, some specific details of the text of the incantation challenge this hypothesis. *Glossolalia* includes unconsciously pronounced and frequently repeated rhythmic sound combinations with the most common sonorous consonants – "r", "l", "m", "n". Often pseudo-suffixes and prefixes were added to an initial root. Reduplication of roots, change of the initial and root sounds and unification of different sound combinations were common phenomena, too.

All of these variants of *glossolalia* were well represented in the South Slavic "false prayers" published by Yatsimirskiy in 1915 – врись (vris), чаврись (chavris), деврись (devris), наврись (navris), доувлись (duvlis), финовриси (finovrisi), авриса (avrisa), ивриса (ivrisa), навриса (navrisa), гедиврисани (gedivrisani), еврисень (evrisen), гка (gka), пагка (pagka), пагканана (pagkanana), пагканива (pagkaniva), пагкарарата (pagkararata), понопоно (ponopono), понопоидосорь (ponopoidosor), поропокеты (poropoketi), порометато (porometato), поромстате (poromstate), сарьсарь (sarsar), фарьфарь (farfar), диза (diza), диза (diza), даза (daza)[23].

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[21] И. Георгиева, *Нестинарството в Странджа*, [in:] *Културно-историческо наследство на Странджа-Сакар*, ed. В. Фол, София 1987, p. 108.

[22] Е. Коıć, Р. Filaković, S. Naђ, I. Ćelić, *Glossolalia*, CAnt 1, 2005, p. 373.

[23] А. Яцимирскій, *Апокрифы*…, p. 240, 242, 265, 269, 270, 271.

Some researchers try to explain the phonetic structure of some of these expressions as an imitation of the words from Solomon's square[24]. However, similar rhythmic and nonsense constructions were known from other traditional incantations – for example in Syriac: *argi*, *drgi*, *zrgi*, *mrgi*, *hrgi; asima*, *thsima*, *zusima*, *abrhima*[25].

At first glance, the initial sound combinations *sarandara*/*marandara* correspond to some of the characteristics of ecstatic speech. However, the relatively large number of comprehensible words such as "aspida", "vasilisko", "apostle Paulus", "Peter", "Hristos", "amin" brings into question the hypothesis of ecstatic speech, which is a result of an unconscious "vocalization of sounds", while the above lexemes definitely indicate conscious speech.

2.2. Corrupted or secret language

The language of the incantation could be a distorted variant of a real language. Distortion, confusion and omission of sounds, words and phrases commonly occur in the process of copying and transliteration of texts, as well as in cases when the text in one language has been continuously memorised and pronounced by heart by the speakers of other language(s). The incantation from the Norov's Psamlbook actually offers a relevant hint: the first phrase *sarandara sarandara* appeared incorrectly as *sarandar asarandara*.

However, distortion could be the result of a conscious interference. For instance, in the 19th century several secret languages used by Bulgarians were recorded and described. They were widely used by isolated craftsmen and mountain communities, and included three types of lexemes: words knowingly corrupted by means of sound shifts or change of meaning. They were loaned from different Balkan languages – Albanian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Greek, Balkan Romance, and even Romani and Sephardic. There were both words artificially created from real roots and suffixes/prefixes and entirely new words without connection to the vocabulary and grammar of real languages[26]. The existence of groups who used some type of secret language(s) in the Middle Ages cannot be entirely ruled out, either.

The previously mentioned unclear sign/symbol that is obviously connected to the incantation offers additional arguments in favour of the hypothesis of a secret language. Many parts of the incantation actually strongly resemble Aramaic or corrupted Aramaic. Below I will try to discuss these fragments:

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[24] A. Kier, *"Instruments of the Old Faith". Magical Words in Three Medieval South Slavic Healing Rites for Snakebite*, PSS 3, 2012, p. 86–87.

[25] H. Gollancz, *Book of Protection Being a Collection of Charms*, London 1912, p. LXIX, LXXXI–LXXXII.

[26] С. Аргиров, *Към българските тайни езици. Брациговски мещровски (дюлгерски) и чалгаджийски таен език*, СБКДС 1, 1901, p. 7–37.

- *sarandara*/*marandara*: The first letter combinations can be identified with the Aramaic words śr, śrˀ "(śar"/"śara")[27] – angel, guardian angel, lord, prince, leader[28], mar/mara[29] – development from "mry"/"mry?"(mārē, māryā, mārā) – master, Lord, owner[30] and "ndar" – the third person masculine singular perfect form of the verb "ndr" – to vow, to impose a vow upon someone, to forbid one from getting benefits from someone[31]. The last five sounds (ndara) could be identified with the verbal derivative ndrˀ (nḏārā) – vowing[32]. However, the verbal form seems more convincing. The final "a" could be the result of a subsequent omission of "ndr" with "ndrˀ" or a late interpolation that occurred in the Bulgarian or possibly Greek speaking milieu to intensify the rhythm of the phrase.

As a whole, *sarandara*/*marandara* could be explained as "śara ndar" and "mara ndar" – "the master/angel has vowed, imposed a vow or forbidden" and "Lord has vowed, imposed a vow or forbidden". Another possible explanation refers to the first person plural possessive construction: "śaran ndar" and "maran ndar" – "Our master/angel has vowed, imposed a vow or forbidden" and "Our Lord has vowed, imposed a vow or forbidden".

Similar language construction is known from the New Testament, more specifically from St. Paul's Letters: *If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him*

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[27] The word in the various ancient and medieval Aramaic dialects is pronounced with initial š or s. The Latin transcription ś reflects this ambivalence of the initial sound.

[28] M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, London–New York 1903, p. 1627; J. Hoftijzer, K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. II, Leiden 1995, p. 1190; M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*, Ramat Gan 2002, p. 572. The meaning of 'angel, leader, prince' is widely used in the Palestinian branch of Aramaic. The same word with the meaning of "master" is used in the antique inscriptions from Palmyra (Syria) – D. Hillers, E. Cussini, *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts*, Baltimore–London 1966, p. 417. The consonant group "sr" appears in some early Syriac incantations but its exact interpretation continues to be a matter of discussion. Some researchers share the opinion that "sr" has the same meaning as in Palestinian Aramaic – "prince" but others tend to explain it as "visiting spirits" or "Initiator" – M. Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls. Syriac Magical Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia*, Leiden 2014 [= MRLLA, 3], p. 97–98. According to the *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* the word śr, śrˀ with meaning of "angel", "genius" is known in different branches of Aramaic, including Syriac (*Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*, https://cal.huc.edu/ [31 VIII 2024], śr, śrˀ (śār, śārā).

[29] Śara and mara are the emphatic (definite) forms of "śar" and "mar". The emphatic form became the main form of the words during the Late Antiquity.

[30] C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, Niemeyer 1928, p. 401; J. Payne-Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, Oxford 1903, p. 298; M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim…*, p. 834; M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish…*, p. 329.

[31] J. Payne-Smith, *A Compendious…*, p. 328; M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish…*, p. 342; M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim…*, p. 880.

[32] C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon…*, p. 416; *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*, https://cal.huc.edu/ [31 VIII 2024], ndr, ndrˀ (nḏārā).

be Anathema Maranatha (1Cor 16: 22). Usually "Maranatha" is explained as "Our Lord has come"[33].

The other letter combinations do not make sense, but many of them have very close phonetic analogies in Aramaic and partly in Greek. The latter makes me think that they appear to be artificial secret words created on the basis of Aramaic and probably Greek prototypes[34].

- roh – rwh (rūḥ) – wind, spirit, ghost[35]

- haza – ḥzʾ (ḥezzā) – an abyss, a depth[36] or eventually variant of the demonstrative pronoun hdʾ (hāḏā) – this (feminine)

- dar – dr (dar) – to fight, Eccle procession and generation[37]

- ulti/uliti – ʾwlytʾ (ʾōlīṯā) – lamentation, wailing[38]

- degen (from vasilisko degen) – the Syriac verb dgn – to be(come) weak-eyed and degana/dagana – ophthalmia/blindness[39]

- ugas (from aspida ugas) – possible connection with the Aramaic verb gsy – to vomit, to throw up[40] can be suggested. Brockelmann reconstructs its third person perfect form as gᵘaśʿa / gᵘa śʿe[41]

- teus – the Greek θεός (God)

The most important arguments in favour of the hypothesis of corrupted Aramaic come from the letter combinations added to the personal names:

- Apostle Paul rahas: it could be connected to the Syriac word rḥsʾ – power, which is attested in Syriac incantations[42]. The name of Apostle Paul often appears in the incantations against snakes published by Yatsimirskiy. On this basis alone,

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[33] J. Payne-Smith, *A Compendious…*, p. 298; According to other explanations: "Come, O Lord".

[34] In order to support the hypothesis of a secret language I am going to present several examples of the 19th century secret languages spoken by Bulgarian population in the Rhodope mountains: burkač (man) from the Albanian word burr – man; bring/brič – bread from the Albanian brum – dough, gluf – chimney; according to Argirov the word comes from the Albanian glofkè – hole (С. Аргиров, *Към българските…*, p. 11–12). These and many other examples from the secret language show that in the best case we can reconstruct only the initial roots of some of the words, but their meanings remain uncertain.

[35] J. Payne-Smith, *A Compendious…*, p. 533.

[36] *Ibidem*, p. 136.

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 97.

[38] *Ibidem*, p. 6.

[39] C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon…*, p. 142; *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*, https://cal.huc.edu/ [31 VIII 2024], dgn.

[40] J. Payne-Smith, *A Compendious…*, p. 75.

[41] C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon…*, p. 126.

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 476.

it could be attributed to this cycle of incantations referring to St. Paul. However, all of them refer to the event from Act 28: 2–6[43]. The same motif is also included in the Serbian incantations against snakebite[44]. In this case, if the identification with rḥsʾ is correct, the word must be attributed to several passages from St. Paul's letters where he spoke about God's power which acted in him (2Cor 12: 9; Eph 1: 19–20; Col 1: 29).

• Peter saaltas – the second element stays very close to the Syriac slṭʾ (salṭā) – flint/flinty stone[45].

• Chris derûti/derôti – it resembles the Syriac drwsthyd – resurrection[46] or drwt – peace, benediction[47].

Yatsimirskiy published several other incantations against snakebite which were entirely or partially written in an 'unknown' language. They were preserved in later manuscripts created between the 15th and 17th century that mentioned similar rites – they must be read over bread or water that would be then consumed by the man bitten by a snake[48]. Most of them were composed in a language that is a typical example of *glossolalia*. Only an incantation found in the 15th century Cyrillic manuscript shares some common features with the language of the incantation from Norov's Psalms[49].

3. The social/religious environment of the incantation

Another important problem concerning the origin of the incantation is the community that initially created and used it. On the one hand, it contains common elements with many other apocryphal incantations – direct naming of the sources of evil, invocation of saints (St. Paul and St. Peter), God and possibly of God's/ Angel's vow. All of these components of the apocryphal incantations have been well described already by the first researchers of this phenomenon[50]. Incantations against snakebite which must be said/read over water and the invocation of St. Paul were well known in the Byzantine and Slavic apocryphal tradition. However, just like the above-mentioned Slavic incantations, they were based on the Act 28: 2–6[51].

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[43] A. Яцимирскій, *Апокрифы*…, p. 246–253.

[44] L. Radenković, *Apocryphal Prayers and Apotropaisms among Southern Slavs*, Balc 28, 1997, p. 154.

[45] C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon*…, p. 476.

[46] *Ibidem*, p. 167.

[47] J. Hoftijzer, K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West*…, p. 260.

[48] A. Яцимирскій, *Апокрифы*…, p. 238–240.

[49] I will not discuss it here, however it also contains elements which can be explained as of Aramaic origin and elements which resemble "distorted" Aramaic.

[50] A. Алмазов, *Апокрифические молитвы, заклинания и заговоры*, Одесса 1901, p. 14.

[51] M. Zellmann-Rohrer, *The Tradition of Greek and Latin Incantations and Related Ritual Texts from Antiquity Through the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, Berkeley 2016, p. 399–402; A. Kier, *Magical*…, p. 80; A. Яцимирскій, *Апокрифы*…, p. 239–240.

Nevertheless, so far, texts identical or similar to the incantation from the Norov's Psalm book have not been found in other medieval written traditions. It could be suggested that the incantation appeared in a community professing Christianity different from the classical Greek Orthodoxy. Indeed, ecstatic cults – most of them inherited from the pagan past – were present within popular Christianity, and that stimulated the appearance of phenomena such as ecstatic speech and secret/magical languages. However, the popular emergence of secret languages based on Aramaic words and roots seems more then doubtful. In my opinion, the latter directs to the heretical groups which were active in Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire during the medieval period. The written sources inform about different non-Orthodox groups, but the evidence about their doctrines and religious practices is not always unambiguous. For instance, according to the *Biography of St. Theodosius of Tarnovo*, in the mid-14th century a healer, whose name was Theodorite, came from Constantinople to Tarnovo and gained adherents and a considerable popularity among the local population and aristocracy. He used magical rituals and even introduced oak worship[52]. The same biography and other sources attest to the existence of groups which practiced ritual nudity, spread Jewish and Bogomil religious views, or were followers of contemporary and ancient heretical teachings. In practice, each of these groups could create or adopt some kind of magical or secret rite language. However, in this case, the Aramaic influence seems inexplicable. The water ritual also cannot be an identifying feature. In the Middle Ages it was widespread and used together with incantations against snakebite. It could, therefore, be rooted in the ancient notions of serpentine water creatures – for example the Biblical Leviathan.

Here I am going to present arguments in favour of the hypothesis of a possible connection of the incantation to the Paulician community in Medieval Bulgaria.

- According to the explicit evidence by Theophanes Confessor, Syrian and Armenian migrants were the first who started to spread and preached Paulicianism in the Balkans (in Thrace) in the mid-8th century[53]. Moreover, the medieval Bulgarian legend about the origin of Paulicians indicates that even in the 14th century Bulgarians preserved the memory of their initial Eastern origin.

- Anna Komnene asserts that in the 11th century representatives of the Armenian and Syrian churches made a political alliance with the largest Paulician community in the Balkans – the one in Philippopolis[54].

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[52] *Пространно житие на Теодосий Търновски от патриарх Калист*, [in:] *Стара българска литература IV. Житиеписни творби*, ed. Д. Петканова, София 1986, p. 452.
[53] Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, [in:] *FGHB*, vol. III, ed. И. Дуйчев, Г. Цанкова-Петкова, В. Тъпкова-Заимова, Л. Йончев, П. Тивчев, Sofia 1960, p. 270–271.
[54] Anna Comnena, *Alexies*, [in:] *FGHB*, vol. VIII, vol. VIII, ed. M. Voynov, V. Tapkova-Zaimova, L. Yonchev, Sofia 1972, p. 137.

- Paulicians in the 16th and 17th century spoke Bulgarian, used texts in Slavonic and had popular Bulgarian names. However, the linguistic analysis of the personal names of Paulician leaders in Philippopolis/Plovdiv from the 11th century shows many non-Slavic anthroponyms of popular Greek, Semitic and local Balkan origin[55]. This mixed anthroponomical layer indicates that in the 11th century the Balkan Paulicians were a multilingual community, which can explain the traces of Aramaic (Syriac) and Greek in the text of the incantation. Indeed, the linguistic processes that were taking place among the medieval Paulician community are an obscure and not easily addressed problem. But there is no doubt that they also used Greek – they took part in the campaigns of the Byzantine army and their leaders communicated with the Byzantine emperor. Besides, the final exclamation of the incantation – "amen" was written in Greek and Bulgarian. This gives reason to think that in the 14th century it was recorded in two different scripts: Greek and Cyrillic.

- One of the constant elements in the Paulician doctrine was the extreme respect with which Paulicians treated the person of St. Paul the Apostle. This respect dates back to their earliest Anatolian period when they named their communities and leaders after the churches established by St. Paul and his disciples[56]. A medieval Bulgarian legend concerning the origin of the Bulgarian Paulicians notes that *these people are called Paulicians and they glorify Paul*[57]. Even in the 17th century the English diplomat Paul Rycaut mentioned the respect to St. Paul as a distinctive feature of the religious beliefs of the Bulgarian Paulicians[58]. On the other hand, Paulicians rejected the authority of St. Peter the Apostle and reduced the number of the canonical books of the New Testament – the epistles of St. Peter were excluded from the New Testament books used by Paulicians[59]. This information by Petrus Sicilius from the 9th century was confirmed by Peter Bogdan Bakshev in the 17th century – he found among the Bulgarian Paulicians only the four gospels, Acts of the Apostles, the letters of St. Paul the Apostle and the Book of Revelation – all of them in Slavonic[60]. This peculiarity of the Paulician doctrine can explain the unusual fact that in the text of the incantation only St. Paul is called an "Apostle" but St. Peter is mentioned only by name without the title of an "Apostle".

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[55] I have regarded this anthroponymical layer in another publication.

[56] Petri Siculi, *Historia Manichaeorum seu Paulicianorum*, Gottingae 1846, p. 48–49.

[57] *Слово как се появиха павликяните*, [in:] Д. Радева, *Павликяни и павликянство в българските земи – архетип и повторения VII–XVII век*, София 2015, p. 518.

[58] Пол Рико, *Сегашното състояние на Османската империя и на гръцката църква (XVII век)*, София 1988, p. 175.

[59] Petri Siculi, *Historia Manichaeorum…*, p. 14.

[60] Fr. Petri Bogdani Bakšić, *Episcopi Gallipoliensis et coadiutoris Sophiensis, de statu ecclesiae suae relatio accuratissima cum notis cuiusdam in margine adpostis L.A. 1640*, [in:] *Acta Bulgariae ecclesiastica*, ed. E. Fermendzsin, Zagrabiae 1887, p. 80.

- In the context of the great prestige which St. Paul's epistles were accorded, a connection between the initial phrase *sarandara marandara* and Heb 7: 21 *The Lord swear and will not repent…* could be suggested.

- The ritual described in Norov's Psalms requires the man bitten by a snake to drink the water after the reading of the incantation. The latter suggests that this water was collected in a vessel – most probably a cup. This suggestion is confirmed by the texts of other Slavic incantations against snakebite where the role of the ritual cup is explicitly mentioned[61]. In the 17th century Peter Bogdan Bakshev noticed that during wedding ceremonies the Paulician priests blessed the cups with some prayers and drunk from them together with the grooms[62]. The prototype of this ceremony was probably the Wedding at Cana, but the testimony of Bakshev shows that Paulicians knew and performed rituals with cups.

- According to the evidence of Catholic missionaries, the Bulgarian Paulicians adopted some elements of the Orthodox clerical system long before their conversion to Catholicism in the first half of the 17th century – the Friday fasting, the Easter lent, the fast preceding the day of the Virgin Mary (15 August), the celebration of Sundays, the main Christian holidays fixed in accordance with the Julian calendar. They celebrated some "personal" holidays, such as these of St. Barbara or St. Sava[63] and performed rituals identical to those of the Orthodox Bulgarians and even Muslims[64]. Obviously, Paulicians in the late medieval period interacted with the popular Orthodoxy, which essentially changed their normative culture. Peter Solinat noticed that Paulicans often married their daughters to Orthodox Christians and even to Turks[65]. Most likely, the practice of close relations between popular Paulicanism and popular Orthodoxy allowed some of the ritual practices of the former to gain popularity among the Orthodox Christians. In fact, the first sentence of the incantation – ї҃суⷭ х҃с нⷩка can be regarded as an element of the adoption of the incantation in the Orthodox milieu.

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[61] A. Kier, *Magical…*, p. 80; A. Яцимирскій, *Апокрифы…*, p. 239–240.

[62] Петър Богдан Бакшев, *Описание на царство България*, [in:] *Петър Богдан Бакшев. Петър Богдан Бакшев български историк и политик от XVII век*, ed. Б. Димитров, София 2001, p. 135.

[63] Антон Стефанов, *Доклад за посещението на Никополския епископ*, [in:] *Документи за католическата дейност в България през XVII век*, ed. Б. Примов, П. Сарийски, М. Йовков, София 1993, p. 482.

[64] S. Notarfonso, *Il rito del kurban tra i pauliciani bulgari: le fonti missionarie (secoli XVII–XVIII)*, Stor 18, 2022, p. 9–11.

[65] Петър Солинат, *Доклад на софийския епископ Петър Солинат до съборната кнограгация в Рим от 1622 г.*, [in:] *Документи за католическата дейност в България през XVII век*, ed. Б. Примов, П. Сарийски, М. Йовков, София 1993, p. 22.

The incantation from Norov's Psalms is a manifestation of medieval Balkan popular culture. It can shed light on the religious and cultural interactions between Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities that were taking place during the 14th century on the Balkan Peninsula. These ties have also influenced the contacts between southern and eastern Slavs from the medieval and later eras.

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