
INVITATION, ARRIVAL AND ACTIVITIES OF THE BYZANTINE MISSIONARIES IN GREAT MORAVIA

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Abstract

In the Christianization of Great Moravia in the Middle Ages, the key role was played mission of Saint Constantine-Cyril and Saint Methodius from Byzantine Empire, who came to this territory probably in 863. Their arrival was a result of Great Moravian sovereign Rastislav's request sent to Byzantine Emperor Michael III (842–867). Duke Rastislav desired to establish autonomous ecclesiastical organization independent from the Frankish clergy.

Keywords: Christianization, Saint Constantine-Cyril, Saint Methodius

1. Introduction

Saint Constantine-Cyril and Saint Methodius were the most intelligent Christian missionaries and diplomats of their period. They are undoubtedly two great personalities of European culture, Science, politics and diplomacy. The mission of the Byzantine brothers in Great Moravia was a profound historical landmark in connection with the development of education, literature, and spreading of Christianity in Central Europe. The Byzantine mission led by Saint Constantine-Cyril and his brother Methodius, which reached Great Moravia in 863, had several dimensions. It was a diplomatic attempt of Rastislav's Empire to disengage from the Frankish influence in the Church and political spheres. Its other dimensions include the work of evangelization and the cultural and civilizational function. The translations of the Gospel and liturgical texts into Old Slavic intensified the religious life of our ancestors and laid foundations of literature and culture for almost the whole Slavic world.

2. Activities of the Byzantine missionaries in Great Moravia

The year 863 is traditionally accepted as the date of the Solun brothers' mission to Great Moravia. In 862, the Great Moravian duke Rastislav (846–869) turned to the Byzantine emperor Michael III (842–867) with the request to send a bishop and a teacher to proclaim the true Christian faith in the Slavic language.

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Rastislav also requested someone who would settle the law. Mostly for strategic reasons, the emperor decided to grant his request, but not fully – he agreed with the mission, but did not send a bishop. He entrusted the mission to Constantine and his brother Methodius [1-6].

Michael III, a caesaropapistic ruler of that time world power, accounted for his choice by the fact that both brothers speak the Slavic language [1, p. 124-125]. Moreover, they belonged to the clergy and had served in various administrative posts. Another reason was the fact that both brothers had experience with missions. Already at the age of 24 (in 850 or 851), Constantine had taken part in the Byzantine mission to the Arab Caliph. Ten years later, Constantine and Methodius led a deputation to the Khazars [6, 7].

When the brothers were entrusted with leading the Great Moravian mission, they first had to solve one very serious problem: if they wanted to proclaim the Word of God in the Slavic language, they had to do so also in a written and comprehensible form. All such attempts had not been successful. However, Constantine managed to carry out this daring deed in the history of thought and spirit even before the departure to Great Moravia. The creation of an alphabet (Glagolitic) and the translation of liturgical texts required a well-learned world-class thinker – Constantine was undoubtedly one. The missionary journey to Moravia could then start and reached the country most likely in 863 [5, 8, 9].

The exact route of Constantine's and Methodius's journey to the heart of Great Moravia remains unknown. It may be assumed that they travelled either through Bulgaria or towards Belgrade and along the Danube to Great Moravia, or they first sailed across the Adriatic Sea to Venice or another Adriatic port under the Byzantine administration and then travelled along the ancient Amber Road to Great Moravia [10]. The brothers spent approximately 40 months there, teaching the disciples appointed by Rastislav. Constantine definitely did not waste his time, which is evidenced by numerous translations of liturgical books. It was only a matter of time before he got into conflict with the trilingualists proclaiming – irrespective of the Pope's verdict – that God can be praised only in Hebrew, Greek and Latin (these were mostly Frankish priests) [4, p. 103-104].

In order for the mission to succeed, the strenuous preparatory phase had to be followed by other actions. Around summer 867 Constantine and Methodius left Great Moravia and headed for Venice, which was under the Byzantine rule at the time. En route to Venice, they visited the Blatnograd duke Kocel', who gave them 50 disciples. As good hosts, both Kocel' and Rastislav intended to reward the brothers for their services, but they declined the offered gold, silver, and other gifts. Much to the surprise of the then community, the brothers instead asked for 900 prisoners, who were generously released. In fall 867, the delegation finally reached the famous port on the Adriatic coast. Already here, Constantine had to vigorously defend the use of the Slavic language in liturgy against the trilingualists. He managed to phenomenally defend his stance by using Biblical quotes from the Gospels and eventually defeat his opponents [3,

p. 49-51; 11-13]. Constantine's erudition earned him the epithet of 'the Philosopher'.

It remains questionable, what was to be the next stop of the brothers. Did they intend to travel to Constantinople, or to Rome? Coincidentally, that year saw a change in the political situation on the Byzantine imperial court. Michael III was murdered and succeeded by Basil I (867–886). One of the new emperor's first steps was the deposition of Photius, the Patriarch of Constantinople and patron of Constantine and Methodius. Another important factor in deciding on the destination of their journey was the fact that in Venice the brothers received the invitation from another Christian center. Having learned about their stay in northern Italy, The Pope Nicholas I (858–867) did not hesitate to invite the deputation: towards the end of 867, the brothers set off to Rome [5, p. 140-160; 11].

However, Nicholas I died on November 14, 867 after a long service, and was succeeded by Adrian II (867–872). The new Pope decided to go to meet the Thessalonian brothers together with Romans to greet them in person. The reason for this courteous invitation were the relics of the fourth Pope Saint Clement (89/91–97/100) brought by the brothers [3, p. 51-52].

Constantine and Methodius found Clement's relics during their Khazar mission in 861 in the city of Kherson in the Crimea, where this Pope had been martyred around the year 100. They took the relics to Great Moravia and then at the right time, they could transport them to Rome. The presence of Saint Clement's relics had quite a miraculous influence on the Romans: the sources talk about numerous healings and released prisoners. The Pope's affection to the Thessalonian brothers was also demonstrated in an extraordinary act that affected the spiritual history of a number of nations [4, p. 58-62]. The Holy Father studied and approved the Slavic liturgical books, consecrated them and deposited them in the church of Saint Mary (today known as Saint Mary Major), where liturgy was also served. The Solemn Masses were also held in other churches, including Saint Peter's Basilica. Adrian II ordered that Methodius and other three Slavic disciples be ordained priests (other two disciples received minor orders) [14, 15].

Constantine, the head of the mission, was accepted in Rome with great reverence and he received many curious visitors for open discussions. However, the Philosopher soon fell ill and, inspired by divine revelation, he entered the monastery. Shortly after having received the name Cyril, he died on February 14, 869. Constantine's burial took epic proportions, as the Pope ordered all the Romans and Byzantines living in the city to mourn and with candles and singing they took part in the funeral procession that is normally given only to an earthly representative of Christ. Despite Methodius's intent to take his brother's body home, the Pope – after consulting with the Roman bishops – decided to bury him symbolically in the Basilica of Saint Clement in Rome [4, p. 136-142].

Around spring 869, Kocel' asked the Pope to return Methodius to his court in Pannonia. The Pope agreed. Methodius was appointed a teacher and papal legate for the Slavic countries. Kocel' received Methodius with reverence,

however, after a short period of time he sent him and twenty of his noblemen back to Rome, where Methodius was to become a bishop. This would have allowed the creation of a church province like Great Moravia, providing more spiritual and political independence. This attempt was successful. The Pope decided to restore the Pannonian bishopric, which once existed with its headquarters in the ancient town of Sirmium (today's Sremska Mitrovica). However, there were problems from the very beginning of Methodius's service in the new office [16]. In 870 there was a clash between the ruler and Svätopluk in Great Moravia; Rastislav was captured and taken to Regensburg where he got convicted and blinded. Methodius did not evade imprisonment and trial either. The Bavarian bishops accused him of preaching in the Frankish missionary regions. Subsequently, he got imprisoned for two and a half years in Bavaria [5, p. 187-189; 15].

Sometime in 873 the new Pope John VIII ordered that Methodius be released and he punished the Salzburg, Passau, and Freising Bishop for wilfully judging the papal envoy Methodius. The papal legate Paul of Ancona became the mediator between the Bavarian bishops and the East Frankish emperor Louis II the German (826–876) on the one hand and the Pope on the other. The Pope appointed Methodius an archbishop in the newly created Diocese of Moravia and Pannonia and he also proclaimed him the Rome's ambassador to Great Moravia [3, p. 64-76; 16]. It can be said that at this stage, Methodius is no longer a representative of the Constantinople Patriarchate and he makes all his steps in the authority vested in him by the Roman Curia. These events also testify to the fact that the Church was at that time not yet formally divided.

After Methodius's return to Great Moravia, Svätopluk put all churches and clerics under his authority. In his new mission and the office of Archbishop, Methodius focused on converting the pagans to Christian faith, first in the territory of Svätopluk's empire and later outside it. This activity is apparent in Life of Methodius, where his letter to a mighty pagan ruler on the Vistula is mentioned. Methodius admonished him to get baptized voluntarily; otherwise he would get baptized by force in a foreign country. The archbishop did not hesitate to support Svätopluk in his military campaigns against the pagan enemies. At the same time, he oversaw the adherence to the Christian tenets in higher Great Moravian classes, which was not a popular decision and led to more and more enemies with the elite. In addition, he also had to confront the Frankish priests who wrongly accused him of heresy [4, p. 154-157].

Methodius interpreted the Holy Trinity differently from the settled interpretation by the Frankish clergy. The Franks proclaimed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. Methodius, however, interpreted the Holy Trinity in a way that was customary not only in the Byzantine Empire, but also in Rome – the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. The western clergy could not forgive him for the use of the Slavic language in liturgy [17].

The Benedictine monk Wiching was at the forefront of opposition against Methodius. The claims of the Frankish clergy were also brought before the Pope. As a result of these conflicts, John VIII decided in 879 to invite Methodius to Rome to cleanse him of libel. Methodius came to Rome in 880 with the Great Moravian message. He himself may have not expected the mission to be so successful. In June 880, the Pope issued the letter known as *Industriae tuae* which tells us that the head of the Western Church agreed with the use of the Slavic language and alphabet in liturgy. The Pope also confirmed Methodius in his archbishop office, put the whole clergy in Svätopluk's empire under his authority and took the Great Moravian ruler and his people under formal auspices of the Apostolic See. Furthermore, on Svätopluk's request, the Pope appointed Wiching a bishop in the newly created Nitra Bishopric, which belonged to Methodius's jurisdiction [11, p. 221-239; 18]. However, Methodius's success did not last long. After his return from Rome, he had another conflict with Wiching, this time already as the Bishop of the city under the Zobor. A direct impulse for the conflict was the unheard-of distribution of a forged papal document, which Wiching most probably procured during his stay in Rome. Unfortunately, the sources tell us nothing on its content. We only learn about it from the Pope's note to Methodius, assuring him that he had given Wiching neither any document, nor any other authorization [4, p. 175-179; 19].

Shortly after the return to Great Moravia, the emperor Basil I invited Methodius to Byzantium. The Archbishop accepted the invitation and set on the journey to his homeland in about 881. The sources do not contain any details on this visit; they only tell that he came back the following year [1, p. 135-137; 10].

In Great Moravia, a strenuous work was awaiting Methodius, since he continued in the work of his brother. They both had translated the collection of psalms and the Gospel, as well as several liturgical books. Methodius developed this project: he finished the translation of the entire Bible (except for the First and Second book of the Maccabees) and also translated the Greek collection of ecclesiastical law *Nomocanon* and the Church Fathers Book into the Slavic language [1, p. 138; 5, p. 269-276; 20].

In the meantime, the conflict between Methodius and Wiching, who was supported by Svätopluk, continued. The conflict with the head of the Nitra Diocese culminated in 884, when the Archbishop excommunicated Wiching. However, Wiching was not the kind of a person, who would give up easily, so he traveled to Rome to annul the excommunication. The exchange on the Holy See in September 885, when Stephen V became the Pope (885–891), was very much in his favor. He believed the allegations Wiching brought against Methodius, the evidence of which is in the Pope's letter to Svätopluk. Stephen V accused the Great Moravian cleric of heresy (regarding the teaching on the Holy Trinity) and an erroneous liturgical use of the Slavic language and he prohibited the use of Slavic in religious service under the threat of cursing Methodius [3, p. 95-103].

Methodius was not able to respond to this sad news. At the beginning of 885, his health deteriorated. Before his death, he recommended Gorazd, one of his disciples, to become his successor at the gathering of Great Moravian clergy. His last mass was on the Palm Sunday. He celebrated his last Holy Mass on the Palm Sunday. Three days later, on April 6, 885, he passed away [1, p. 139-140; 21].

He was buried in the capitular church of Virgin Mary. Owing to his social status and charisma, his funeral was attended by local citizens and many foreigners. The location of Methodius's church is still disputed. The final resting place of the Archbishop may be in Mikulčice, Staré Město, or Modrá na Morave. The Moravian archaeologist Luděk Galuška points in this case to another location: Uherské Hradiště-Sady [22].

3. Conclusions

After Methodius's death in 885, the clergy, promoting Latin liturgy and lead by Wiching, bishop of Nitra, opposed the disciples. Moreover, Wiching's followers won the decisive support of king Svätopluk. The disciples were exiled from Great Moravia. In the centuries to come, their works paved the way for the political and historical development of the Slavic nations mainly in South and East Europe. After the disintegration of Great Moravia, a place where the Thessalonian brothers spent the most fruitful period of their lives, the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition was on a decline. Great Moravia was certainly not abandoned by all the disciples of the Cyrillo-Methodian school. The clergy and common believers did not totally renounce the fruit of the Byzantine mission in the fields of religion, thought, and action [21].

The stay of the world-class thinkers, Saints Constantine-Cyril and Methodius, in the heart of Europe was certainly not random: it was meant to be the next stop on their multidimensional mission. Fate, however, arranged the circumstances in a way that their mission to the Great Moravia was their last, and it was of great significance not only for the Byzantine deputation, but also for the overall development of the Great Moravian Empire and the Slavic world. The great teachers left their traces not only in the creation of the new alphabet, but also in the translations of key literary works, production of their own literary creations, the Slavic liturgy and clear proclamation of the Gospel, establishment of schools, preparation of the priesthood and formation of a separate archbishopric [23-35].

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