

THE PERESOPNITSA GOSPEL:  
THE FIRST TRANSLATION OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE  
INTO POPULAR LANGUAGE “RUSSIAN MOVA”  
IN THE UKRAINIAN LAND DATING FROM THE 50s — 60s  
OF THE 16th CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:**

The article deals with a wonderful monument of book and language culture, the Peresopnitsa Gospel. This parchment manuscript of large format (482 s.) was written in 1556–61 in the Ukrainian land of Volhynia. It contains the first translation of the Holy Scripture from Church Slavonic language into the West-Russian language, which included the Old Ukrainian and Old Belarusian dialects. Some structural and linguistic features of the monument tell us that translators of the Gospel used West Slavic and possibly Greek texts. The Peresopnitsa Gospel is one of the most precious ancient manuscripts of the Ukrainian people.

**Keywords:**

Book culture, Codicology, translations of the Holy Scripture, Ukraine, Peresopnitsa Gospel.

**Аннотация:** Л.Л. Щавинская. «Пересопницкое Евангелие 1550-х–60-х годов — первая попытка переложения в Украине евангельских текстов на народную “русьскую мову”».

В статье рассматривается замечательный памятник книжной и языковой культуры — Пересопницкое евангелие. Этот пергаменный рукописный кодекс большого формата на 482 листах был создан в 1556–61 гг. в украинских землях на Волыни. В нем помещен первый перевод Священного Писания с церковнославянского языка на народную «русьскую мову» — западнорусский язык с использованием староукраинских и старобелорусских диалектов. Ряд структурных и языковых особенностей памятника свидетельствует о том, что при переводе евангелия были использованы западославянские и, возможно, греческие тексты. Пересопницкое евангелие является одной из главных святынь украинского народа.

**Ключевые слова:**

Книжная культура, кодикология, переводы Священного писания, Украина, Пересопницкое евангелие.

Peresopnitsa Gospel is a first translation of the Holy Scripture from Church Slavonic language into the West-Russian language, which included the Old Ukrainian and Old Belarusian dialects. It is a large format parchment codex on 482 folia, one of the main shrines of the Ukrainian people. Since the early

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1990s the presidents of Ukraine have sworn an oath on it. The names of the two direct creators of the Peresopnitsa Gospel are known. They were the son of an Archpriest from Sianik and head of the whole work, Mikhail Vasyľ'evich, the scribe and apparently the main translator, the monk Gregory, the future Archimandrite of the monastery of Peresopnitsa. Creation of the codex began in the Ascension Monastery in Volhynia in the summer of 1556, where 155 of its sheets were written, and work on it was completed in the summer of 1561 in the Peresopnitsa monastery, which was only fifty kilometers northwest of the first. The second monastery was located in the village of Peresopnitsa, which had belonged since 1501 to the princes of Chartorysky, who presented it in 1630 to the Catholic parish of Klevan.

The Peresopnitsa Four Gospels (consisting of the four gospels and used for home reading) are written in a charter and half-order with cursive elements. It is richly illuminated: each Gospel opens with a beautifully executed colored miniature of a particular evangelist. The sheets are decorated with magnificent ornaments, it has many headpieces, initials and other decorations using multi-colored paints and gold. The Church Slavonic text was the basis for the translation of the Peresopnitsa Gospel. A number of structural and linguistic features also allow us to consider that its creators also used West Slavic texts and, possibly, Greek ones. There is no doubt about the fact of the creators' familiarity with the publications of Francisk Skorina. At the end of the manuscript, the creators of the codex commented on all their work as follows: "the books of the four Evangelists translated from the Bulgarian language to the Russian language." They also described the role of the Orthodox magnate patrons who financed their work: "With an overlay of the faithful and Christ-loving Princess ... Nastasia Yurevna Golshansky. And under the faithful and Christ-loving Prince Ivan Fyodorovich Chartororysky, her son-in-law's mercy. And under the faithful and Christ-loving Princess of his Eudoxia." They especially emphasized the contribution of Archimandrite Grego-



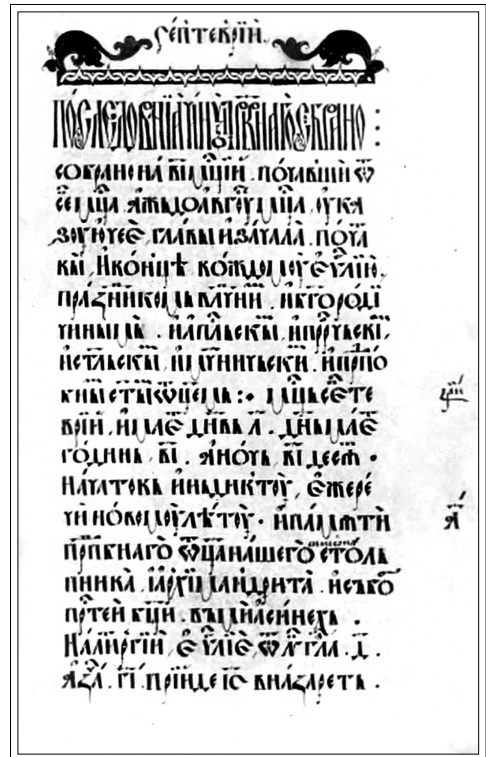
*The first sheet of the  
Peresopnitsa's Gospel,  
1556–61*

ry: “these books, the four Gospels, are arranged by the meek, humble and God-loving Hieromonk Gregory, Archimandrite of Peresopnitsa.”

Information about the fate of the Peresopnitsa Gospel after it was written until the beginning of the 18th century is almost nonexistent. As early as the 1570s, the Chartorysky family seized its property from the Peresopnitsa Monastery. In 1595, according to Prince Yury Chartorysky, there were no more monks in the monastery. In 1596 it was revived for a short time, but the transition to Catholicism by the representatives of the ancient powerful Chartorysky family at the end of the 16th century negatively affected their position as patrons of the Orthodox monastery. It apparently existed in some very wretched form until the 1620s, but then the buildings, along with the village of Peresopnitsa, were transferred to the Catholics in 1630. The last Abbot of the Orthodox Peresopnitsa Monastery was Nikon (Dobryansky), who in

1620 renounced his abbacy. In 1600 the Peresopnitsa Gospel was probably still in the monastery, since the inventory of its books compiled at the end of October of the same year by the former abbot Simeon (Kosovsky) says: “... another Gospel, written as tetr (consisting of the four gospels and intended for home reading), covered with green satin; on it there are five white silver plaques.” The monastery then had a significant library with a large number of various types of manuscript books. Abbot Simeon “gave in addition to these church books ... for his remission of sins” more than ten manuscripts and old-printed volumes of “books of his own” and “also a Moscow chest for the safekeeping of books.”

In 1701 hetman Ivan Mazepa presented the Peresopnitsa Gospel to the cathedral in the city of Pereyaslavl, which is recorded on its first pages: “This Gospel was sent and given from the clear lord of his grace, Pan Ivan Mazepa, the hetman of the tsar’s luminous majesty’s army on both sides of the Dnieper in Zaporozhie, and also the Cavalier of the glorious rank of the Holy Apostle, Andrew, to the throne of the Pereyaslavl bishop, which was created from his mercy as a donor and renewed and decorated with precious church utensils, at the time of Bishop Zakhary Kornilovich. Year 1701, on the 17th day of April.” At the end of the 18th



*The first sheet of the month  
in the Peresopnitsa's Gospel,  
1556–61*

century, the Peresopnitsa Gospel was transferred to the library of the Pereyaslavl Theological Seminary, and in the 1860s, together with the seminary, moved to the city of Poltava. Since then it has come to the attention of many scholars, and in 1948 was included in the Department of Manuscripts of the State Public Library of the Ukrainian SSR in Kiev (now the V. I. Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine), where it is now in safekeeping.

A historical and cultural center was opened in 2011 in the modern village of Peresopnitsa, which is located a few kilometers from the regional center of Rovno. Earlier, in 1989, a memorial sign was erected here in honor of the Peresopnitsa Gospel, and in recent years the Orthodox Peresopnitsa monastery has been revived, in which the wonderful parchment codex we discussed was created.

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#### ILLUSTRATIONS

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