

SOPHRONIUS OF VRATSA, THE AUTHOR OF THE FIRST-EVER BULGARIAN “AUTOBIOGRAPHY” AND COMPOSER OF “NEDELNIK”, THE FIRST BULGARIAN PRINTED BOOK IN A LANGUAGE CLOSE TO POPULAR SPEECH¹

Abstract:

The author considers the biography and creative output of the Bulgarian educator, Bishop Sophronius of Vratsa (1739–1813), author of the first-ever Bulgarian “Autobiography” and the first Bulgarian printed book *Nedelnik* (“Sunday Book”) published in a language close to popular speech. He created them during the period of the Bulgarian national revival, which was characterized by an abundance of unfinished genre and stylistic forms: a phenomenon common in the transition from one literary era to another. All this was fully evident in the two main innovations of Sophronius: “Autobiography” and *Nedelnik*.

Keywords:

Bulgarian national revival, Sophronius of Vratsa, the first book in a New Bulgarian language, the first autobiography in the history of Bulgarian literature.

АННОТАЦИЯ: И.И. КАЛИГАНОВ. «Софроний Врачанский — автор первой в болгарской литературе “Автобиографии” и первой болгарской печатной книги “Недельник” на языке, близком к народному».

Автор рассматривает биографию и творчество болгарского просветителя епископа Софрония Врачанского (1739–1813) — автора первой в истории болгарской литературы «Автобиографии» и первой болгарской печатной книги «Недельник», изданной на языке близком к народному. Он творил в период Болгарского национального возрождения, которое характеризовалось обилием незавершенных жанровых и стилистических форм — явлением, обычным при переходе от одной литературной эпохи к другой. Все это в полной мере проявилось и в двух главных новациях Софрония — «Автобиографии» и «Недельнике».

Ключевые слова:

Болгарское национальное Возрождение, Софроний Врачанский, первая печатная книга на новоболгарском языке, первая автобиография в истории болгарской литературы.

After Paisius of Hilendar, Sophronius of Vratsa was, chronologically speaking, the second most important figure of the Bulgarian national revival, an enlightener of the people and a church hierarchy. He was born in the Bulgarian town of Kotel into the family of a cattle trader, Vladislavov, receiving

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Sophronius of Vratsa,
self-portrait in "Autobiography"

the name Stoyko at baptism. In the "cell" school (a form of parochial school), the boy studied Church Slavonic and Greek. Having lost his parents at a young age, he took up tailoring and immediately started a family. A thirst for education led him to the church, and in 1762 he was ordained as a priest in his hometown and guided his flock of parishioners for 30 years. He was greatly affected by a meeting with Paisius of Hilendar in 1765 and the ideas of enlightenment of this national awakener. Two trips to Mt. Athos in 1770 and 1775 also contributed to the expansion of his spiritual and political outlook.

Due to conflicts with wealthy locals, in 1792 Stoyko was transferred to another diocese, where he received a parish in Karnobat and 12 neighboring villages. Two years later Stoyko went to visit his son, who lived in the village of Arbanasi, and then settled in one of the nearby monasteries. On 17 September 1794 he was elevated to the rank of

Bishop of Vratsa under the name Sophronius, but he did not head his episcopal department for long, due to the turmoil that erupted in northwestern Bulgaria. Here military clashes broke out between the sultan's army and the troops of the rebel Pasha of Vidin, Osman Pazvantoglu. In addition, the cities and villages of the diocese were constantly being robbed by the Turkish deserters, "kirdzhali." To save his life, Sophronius fled from Vratsa in 1797 and hid in one city, then another. He then found himself in Vidin, where he was forcibly held by Pasha Osman Pazvantoglu, for three years, until May 1803.

After his release, Sophronius went to Bucharest, where he was welcomed by the local hierarchs and Prince Constantine Ypsilantis. Here he continued to worship together with the local clergy and, despite his voluntarily resigning from his episcopal powers, continued to sign his works as a bishop. During the Russo-Turkish War (1806–12) Sophronius came into contact with the army command of the Russian troops that had appeared in the Balkans, assisted them as an interpreter and drafted an appeal to the population of the Bulgarian lands, urging them to render all possible assistance to the Russian army. He also actively defended the interests of the Bulgarian refugees then in Romania. The exact date of Sophronius' death and the place of his burial remain unknown. According to scholars, he died in a monastery in the vicinity of Bucharest in the second half of 1813.

Sophronius' literary activity may be broken down into three periods by his location at the time: Kotel, Vidin and Bucharest. Like most writers of the national revival, he began his work by copying manuscripts (there were no printing houses in the Bulgarian lands at that time). He wrote several handwritten collections of religious content. In addition, in his hometown of Kotel, he twice copied Paisius of Hilendar's *Slavo-Bulgarian History*. The Vidin period of Sophronius' life is marked by his translations of a number of works from Greek into, as the translator himself wrote, "Bulgarian short and simple language." Of these, Sophronius co-produced two different collections in 1802, which received the name "Vidin." The first of them had a purely ecclesiastical character and consisted of 79 sermons. The second Vidin collection contained secular works: engaging, didactic-soaked short tales, the Mythology of the Sintyper the Philosopher, Aesop's fables and "Philosophical Wisdom": excerpts from A. Marlian's essay "Theatron politicum," preaching the ideas of the enlightened sovereign. In this collection, Sophronius added his own thoughts about the need for education, the need for the Bulgarian people to overcome their ignorance and their lagging behind other peoples in cultural terms.

Sophronius' activity during his Bucharest period was his most fruitful and valuable in a historical-literary and historical-cultural sense. It was here that he prepared for publication the first printed Bulgarian book in a language close to folk language. This one was "Kiriakodromion", i.e., *Nedelnik*, published in Rymnik in 1806. It was a collection of precepts and sermons for Sundays and holidays of the year and was created to help Bulgarian priests deliver sermons from the pulpit in a language understandable to the people and for reading at home. Its contents included works borrowed from an appropriate repertoire of literature translated from Russian or Greek. Most of them go back to the sermons of the ancient Constantinople hierarchs John Chrisostomos and John Kaleka. A number of the teachings are of Bulgarian origin, being close to the works of the local scribe of the 18th century, Joseph the "Bradaty" (Bearded); some others appeared in *Nedelnik* thanks to the publication of the Russian translation of "Kiriakodromion" by the Greek preacher, Nicephorus Theotakis, in 1803. In the Bulgarian lands this book became a table book: it was affectionately called "Sophronie," and handwritten copies were often made of it. Having published *Nedelnik*, Sophronius put into practice the important ideas of Paisius of Hilendar, who dreamed of publishing Bulgarian printed books and advocated the use of the folk language in everyday life and in literature. At the same time, the language of this publication cannot be called that of the Bulgarian folk. The main part of its vocabulary consists of the lexical riches of Church Slavonic language. The latter was poorly understood by the uneducated Bulgarian peasants who heard it, and therefore Sophronius sought to resort to a living, spoken language. On the other hand, the scribe was afraid of overdoing it, fearing a negative reaction by the higher Church hierarchs, one of whom was supposed to bless the release of his book. It is no accident that in the subsequent editions of



The title sheet of “Nedelnik” by Sophronius of Vratsa.
Rymnik, 1806

Nedelnik, there is a partial rejection of the use of elements of the living Bulgarian folk language.

On the basis of compilations and translations from Greek and Russian sources, in Bucharest Sophronius also created the work *The Confession of the Orthodox Faith of Christians and Customs, and the Laws of Jewry and Mobamedan's Religion in General* (1805). He translated the entirety of the aforementioned work by A. Marlian, giving it the name *Civic Pozorishte* (1809). It developed humanistic and rationalist ideas of the Enlightenment that were progressive for the time.

In Bucharest in 1805, Sophronius also wrote his main work, his autobiography, which he called *Life and Sufferings of Sinful Sophronius*. It is placed in the same manuscript as *The Confession of...*, which subsequently ended up in the M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library (now the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg). According to a number of typological features, this work resembles the “Autobiography” of Archpriest Habbacum, written in the 17th century, or the 18th century work *The Life and Adventures of Dositheos Obradovich*. It is a literary classic of the “transitional” time: it organically combines the features of a medieval Life and autobiography, far in essence and poetic style from that of ancient hagiographic narratives. It can be considered among Bulgaria’s literary masterpieces — it is so truthful, sincere and confessional, and it attracts readers by the vitality of its descriptions of the then difficult Bulgarian life. Unfortunately, this work remained as only a hand-written manuscript for a long time. It was first published only in 1861 in the newspaper *Dunavsky Lebed* (“The Danube Swan”) by the Bulgarian revolutionary writer G.S. Rakovsky in exile. Therefore, among his contemporaries he was known primarily as the author of the famous *Nedelnik*. Sophronius’ activities were appreciated in Bulgaria only by his descendants: it is not by chance that schools, libraries and reading rooms have been named after him; in 1964 the Bulgarian Orthodox Church canonized Sophronius as a saint.

Translated by the author

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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