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## THE DRAGON/SNAKE MOTIF IN THE ILLUMINATED OLD GLAGOLITIC MANUSCRIPTS

The motif, embellishing the earliest Glagolitic books, reveals itself as a meaningful, polysemic image and partakes in a visual paradigm, which the decorators abode by. In this paper the author proceeds with a theme taken up nearly fifteen years ago, now exploring in detail the artistic specificity of the repetitive zoomorphic or, rather, teratological motif. Previously it has been identified as a dragon head but the persisting ambivalence in the notions of the snake/serpent and the dragon cannot be ignored. As it has been applied most of all to the decorated initials, some interpretations of the twofold symbolism of the letter – as a ‘picture’ in itself and as a message related to the text – are offered on examples from the codices Assemanianus and Psalterium Sinaiticum.

Key words: Boiana Palimpsest, Codex Assemanianus, Codex Marianus, Codex Zographensis, Glagolita Clozianus, Euchologium Sinaiticum, Psalterium Sinaiticum, Glagolitic manuscript, Slavonic literacy, illumination, initial, ornament, dragon, snake, serpent

### 1. THE DRAGON MOTIF

All scholars who studied the illumination of the Old Slavonic manuscripts have mentioned the prevalence in it of geometric patterns over an undeveloped vegetal ornament.<sup>1</sup> Yet another decorative element, a zoomorphic one, was registered by the first generation of scholars in Slavonic studies like Nikodim P. KONDAKOV (1903) as a specific repertoire. One could recall the words of Henri FOCILLON (1988: 50) about the arts of building

<sup>1</sup> ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА 1965; 1976; ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА; МАВРОДИНОВА 1980; 1999; ДЖУРОВА 1981: 18–20; МАВРОДИНОВА 1985.

and sculpture »mettant en lumière deux principes appelés à un développement considérable dans l'art du haut Moyen Âge: géométrisme, zoomorphisme«. Actually these two principles are known from the ancient civilizations down to the popular art of today. Even though many authors discuss the animalistic visual repertoire in the oldest preserved books of the Slavs, the impression left is of a poor awareness about the permanent presence in the Glagolitic illumination of a motif which I prefer to call »dragon's head« (*zmejskag lava*)<sup>2</sup> on premises soon to be exposed.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. THE DRAGON AND THE SNAKE

The dragon (bulg. *zmej*; croat., serb., *zmaj*), is one of the polysemic and multifunctional zoological personages combining contradictory and diverse characteristics which make the distinction of »species«, especially when represented in art, so problematic. Its symbolism, being shared by ancient and modern civilizations is often deemed to be universal, and in art and writings its features are closely linked to that of the serpent, which is particularly obvious in relationship in the Slavonic linguistic couple *zmej* and *zmija* (ГУРА 1997: 277–278).<sup>4</sup> The two terms could signify female or male gender of the serpent but *zmija* also acquires the demoniac characteristics of the *zmej*. In Bulgarian folklore the flying dragon appears as the male dragon, the *zmej*, the daemon, who is fighting against the female *lamja* or *ala/hala*, who is a harmful power (ГУРА 1997: 280). Being related to the earth, the snake/serpent (*zmija*) is appreciated in the positive aspect of a mediator between

<sup>2</sup> МУСАКОВА 1995: 109; 2000.a; 2000.b: 100 and other papers.

<sup>3</sup> Analysing two types of teratological images – »oživljeni oblik« and »zverinje glave nasadene na stablo« – Gordana Babić distinguishes in them »змије, ован, гуштер, змај, чудне немани« and, similarly, between »профила животиња, ... змајева, змија, немани«, but does not explain the differences (БАБИЋ 1995: 16, 20). The motif has been interpreted as serpent's head in ДЖУРОВА 1981: 20. Other authors prefer the more neutral term »zoomorphic image«, for example ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА; МАВРОДИНОВА 1980: 193, 196; ŠEVČENKO 1991: 640.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. БЕР 1971: 647 about the etymological similarity between *zmija* and *zmej*, reflected in Slavonic languages. Dragon (Greek δράκων meaning *snake*) in the Bulgarian language has acquired the meaning of a fantastic animal, fire breathing and/or flying *zmej*. The tau-tological usage of the notions *zmej* and dragon is seen in definitions like this: *zmej* looks like a steel clad enormous dragon with one or more ... heads (СМ 1995: 196). More on the subject in МНМ 1980: 394–395, 48–471.

the living and the dead and she also becomes a sign of fertility and earthly fortunes. In such a role she has been represented as a guardian of the Tree of Life testified early by Sumerian art. An inverted translation is the biblical serpent dwelling in the Tree of Life in the centre of Eden: by seducing Eve, she attempted to destroy God's creation. According to myths from various folklores the serpent takes part in the creation of the world, embracing it by its flexible body thus uniting and delimiting the elements – earth and water, air and fire. Assuming the different qualities of these zones, she reveals herself as a primeval dragon (*zmej*), master of elements and hence possessor of wisdom, but also as the impersonation of the dark beginning, of the cosmic chaos. A condensed explanation of the snake/serpent symbolism, reflecting common beliefs of the Balkan people, is found in Artemidorus Daldianus' *Oneirocritica*: »[2.13] A serpent<sup>5</sup> signifies a king because of its strength. It also signifies time because of its length and because it casts off its old skin and becomes young again ...It also means wealth and possessions, since the serpent guards treasures. Furthermore, it signifies all the gods to whom it is sacred, namely Zeus, Sabazius, Helios, Demeter, Corē, Hecate, Asclepius, and all the heroes« (ARTEMIDORUS 1975). This quotation is another example of how certain characteristics of the serpent are projected on the dragon and how confusing are the translations from language to language.

A remarkable book about the illuminated initials in Byzantine manuscripts which pays a special attention to the snake/serpent motif has been published recently (MAAYAN-FANAR 2011: 147–166). The ambivalence of the motif is treated in a broad context including Biblical exegesis, developed by the Evangelists and Apostles, the early Christian apologetics, and the Church Fathers. Also, by drawing in evidence from other sources, the author exhibits the complicated meaning of this extensively used image on symbolic, literal or allegorical levels without leaving out its purely ornamental application. Maayan-Fanar refers to it only as snake or serpent but never as 'dragon' even when she discusses those versions in which the snake is winged – the most common depiction of the dragon – or it is combined with vegetal elements. One exception is the synonym *dragons/snakes* appearing in the passage where she comments the interpretation of Psalm 73

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<sup>5</sup> *Zmejovete* (the dragons) in the Bulgarian translation (АРТЕМИДОР ДАЛДИАНСКИ 1988: 102).

(MAAYAN-FANAR 2011: 156).<sup>6</sup>

Etymologically the ancient Greek verb δρακεῖν meant »to see [strong]«, relating to »one who stares« but at some point it was fused with the word for serpent, *drakon* (δράκων). From there it worked its way to the Latin language, where *draconis* means »snake« or »serpent«. In the English language, for instance, the Latin word was split into several different words, all similar: dragon became the official name for the large, mythical creatures, while variations on the root, such as »draconian«, »draconic« and »draconical« all came to be adjectives describing something old, rigid, out of touch with the world, or even evil.<sup>7</sup>

The manner of introducing the serpent/dragon motif not only in the Glagolitic, but in the South Slavonic and Byzantine manuscripts suggests that it does not necessarily imply the unclean devilish nature of the creature. Maayan-Fanar's comment that »Our further task will be to understand if indeed the snakes in the initials are used only as ornaments as it seems at first glance; and if not, why, being a symbol of the devil since early Christianity, snakes are used to such an extent in the most important liturgical manuscript, the Gospel Lectionary« was incited by the observation on her case studies – BnF sign. *Paris. gr. 277* and Patmos Monastery sign. *Patmos 70* (MAAYAN-FANAR 2011: 151). The positive aspects in which the motif is used are triggered by the biblical symbolism in Genesis 3:1 and Matthew 10:16, associating the serpent with the [forbidden, secret] wisdom. Due to it the snake body could partake in the letter structure not just as a suitable, flexible element, but also as an image alluding to this notion of hidden

<sup>6</sup> It is worth reminding that the (Slavonic) Psalm verse 73:13–14, used in the service of Theophany, in the Septuagint version reads as ἡὺ ἐκραταίωσας ἐν τῇ δυνάμει σου τὴν θάλασσαν σὺ συνέτριψας τὰς κεφαλὰς τῶν δρακόντων ἐπὶ τοῦ ὕδατος; σὺ συνέθλασας τὰς κεφαλὰς τοῦ δράκοντος ἔδωκας αὐτὸν βρῶμα λαοῖς τοῖς Αἰθίοψιν. In Bulgarian Synodal Bible (БИБЛИЯ 1992: 669) the word in question is translated as *zmejove*, which refers to the mythical creature and not to *zmija* (snake/serpent). Its English equivalent in King's James version of the Bible is »Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness« (Psalm 74:13–14).

<sup>7</sup> See δράκων, in *Wiktionary*. URL: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%CE%B4%CF%81%CE%AC%CE%BA%CF%89%CE%BD> (16.04.2016.); Dragon, in *New World Encyclopedia*. URL: <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Dragon#References> (16.04.2016.). For the reminder that Draco is the first Athenian lawgiver hence the (harsh) »draconian« laws, I am thankful to Alexander Lozeff.

knowledge by which the letter is grasped as a powerful magic sign. The latter aspect might have been activated also by the folk beliefs in the snake protector or »master of the house«, related to the ancestor cult.<sup>8</sup> What must be even more important for legitimating of the positive, apotropaic serpent or dragon is the implied reference to John 3:14–15 interpreting the brass serpent of Moses raised in the desert as an archetype of the soteriological deed of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MOTIF IN THE GLAGOLITIC MANUSCRIPTS

In the extant Glagolitic manuscripts the reptile's image is represented with few exceptions as a head attached to the initial's stem. Within the invariant image two general modes of rendering could be discerned: the one in which the head has an eye, a prolonged or shorter snout, and a couple of pointed ears or horns. The other makes the animal look like a plant, similar to the common half-leaf or half-palmette motif, designated as animalistic by adding an eye and sometimes also ears/horns. This second variant I shall call phyto-zoomorphic.

As the dating of all early Glagolitic manuscripts is still debatable, the order in which they follow below is not submitted to an established chronology.

#### 3.1. Codex Zographensis

Animal heads embellish the initials on fols. 77r (*zemlja*), 131r (*pokoj*), 225r (*iže*). The first one, at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, is stuck in an upside down position to the horizontal bar of the letter. A head with prolonged muzzle, curled at the end, is drawn by a thick black line while a dot, marking the eye, is surrounded by orange paint which also accentuate on some details of the head. The next one, composed in the same way but larger, enough to fit the size of the giant-initial at Luke's Gospel, is substituted for the bow of the letter. Orange paint clearly delineates the »eyelids« and

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<sup>8</sup> For these functions and the contradictory characteristics in the symbolism of the serpent see more in ГУПА 1997: 277–298, 307–319.

<sup>9</sup> Extensive comments on the subject see in МААЯН-ФАНАР 2011: 156–160.

fills in the pointed ears, set on the outline just above (that is, below) the eye. Short orange and black strokes enrich the texture of the image. The form of the third initial, at John's Gospel, is suitable for applying two hanging heads in place of the bows and they have the same characteristics as those on fol. 77 with the difference that the muzzles are wrinkled. As described, the artistic image is far from what the spontaneous perception would identify as snake/serpent, therefore its description as a dragon seems more appropriate.

### 3.2. Codex Clozianus (Glagolita Clozianus)

The illumination in this manuscript is very simple, made by pen and ink solely. On fol. 11v of the Trident fragment<sup>10</sup> the head, facing downwards, adheres to the middle bar of the Glagolitic initial *šta* and its form slightly resembles those on fols. 77r and 225r in the Zographensis. The eye is large, filling most of the head, the muzzle is short and curled, with outlines which do not meet at the tip of the nose. Short strokes designate the animalistic character of the motif in a way also similar to that in the Zograph Gospel. A variant is the head on fol. [1]r in the Innsbruck fragment,<sup>11</sup> placed there on the horizontal bar of the letter *xěrb* in the same way as in the Zographensis. The muzzle, protruding from a round head, is elongated and curled at the end but, in contrast to the other manuscript, the ears, drawn by two strokes of the pen, are leaning backward.

### 3.3. Euchologium Sinaiticum

Without being exhaustive, the following list of dragon-head initials in the manuscript includes the most characteristic representations. In both parts of the manuscript<sup>12</sup> the motif is applied to the letters *glagoli* and *pokoj*. Interlaces, used as structural element for many of the initials, contribute to the individual style of the scribe (or the artist). Another motif, »hand«, also distinguishes the illumination of this manuscript. Due to the interlaced construction the animalistic element has become, more or less convincingly,

<sup>10</sup> Biblioteca Comunale, sign. 2476. On the illumination of the manuscript and the new order of the folios in the fragment see MYČAKOBA 2000.b. Once again I take the chance to thank Mr. Luciano Borrelli, curator, for his kind assistance to my work in the library in 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Museum Ferdinandeum, sign. *Dip.* 973.

<sup>12</sup> Mount Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, sign. *Sin. Slav.* 37 and *Sin. Slav.* 1/N.

an organic part of the whole and not an application as in the codices just mentioned: such cases are the initials *glagoli* on fols. 23r and 32v in the old part of the manuscript.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, in the outlined geometric initials, such as the letters *pokoj* on fols. 30v, 38v, 61v and 63r<sup>14</sup> (old part) and on fols. 1r and 28v (newly discovered part) the motif, turned upside down, replaces the bows on the same principle as in *Zographensis* and *Clozianus*. Two varieties can be easily discerned in the *Euchologion*: one is sharing some similarity with the rendering in *Zographensis*, but the head is more oblong, the muzzle – narrow, and the ears – small and rounded. More particular are the features of the second type, in which the form of the head can be rounded or, either elongated or leaf-like, while the muzzle in several instances ends with something like a short horn. Certainly a horned head adorns the initial on fol. 32v (old part). Some of the rounded heads, each with a big eye, have lost the »naturalistic« appearance since they practically have no muzzles and those on fols. 38v and 63r lack ears/horns. Much alike except for its unusual beak, is the image in the *pokoj* initial on fol. 83r (old part). Conversely, more similar to the *Zographensis* type are the heads decorating the same letter on fols. 1r and 28v in the newly found part. A novel artistic solution is demonstrated by the initial letter *glagoli* on fol. 40r (old part), the interlaced stem of which ends with a hanging snake or dragon whose jaws are open, the upper one ending with a curl, possibly figuring a horn.

### 3.4. Psalterium Sinaiticum

Here only one initial *vědě*, on f. 54v (old part), is adorned with two animal heads in place of the letters' bows in the manner of *Zographensis*. However, the type is definitely different and it is not possible to place it among the snake/dragon images.<sup>15</sup> The marked eyes and the couple of pointed ears (or horns) of the left side drawing are the sole details betraying the animalistic nature of the ornament.

In the initial letters *vědě* on fols. 3v, 60v, 61r, 67v and 78v (old part) the bows are turned into rather formless endings in which the inserted big eye

<sup>13</sup> Surprisingly, in ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА; МАВРОДИНОВА 1999: 31 the image is grasped as a caricature human representation.

<sup>14</sup> This initial is interlaced.

<sup>15</sup> In БАБИЋ 1995: 10 the image is identified as *neman* with horns.

and the curls of the upper outlines are the only elements linking these to the already discussed images. The motif is rather phyto-zoomorphic as its general appearance reminds of a leaf. One of the letter's stems on fol. 60v has an interlace-like filling which represents the scaly body of the snake. Another specificity of the decoration of these initials is the »normal«, upright position of the heads.

The initials *vêdê* on fol. 34v and *glagoli* on fol. 31r (both in the old part) show an artistic approach not witnessed in any of the Glagolitic manuscripts. The round bows of these letters are filled in with a four-leaf rosette on dark-ink background – the motif itself with similar decorative rendering is often used in the Codex Assemanianus. The forked stems of the letters are turned into snakes whose heads envelop the bows. Pen-and-ink hatches on the bodies on fol. 34v represent the scales. It is the largest and the only coloured initial in the part written by the second main scribe.

### 3.5. Codex Assemanianus

The only dragon image appearing in full length is on fol. 147v. Usually called »a reptile« (ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА; ДЖУРОВА 1981: 50; ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА; МАВРОДИНОВА 1999: 16), the monster with a scaled body seems to be crawling upwards the stem of the initial. Its elongated, pointed jaws are open and the sharp ears are driven backwards. The monster faces the bust image of St John the Baptist, inscribed above in the letter's bow.

The upper part of the small initial on fol. 121v – letter *myslite* – is composed of an outlined horizontal bar with vegetal endings. Beneath them the scribe has drawn two round heads, attached to the bar, each with an eye and narrow, long and curled proboscis.<sup>16</sup> A repetition of the pattern for the same letter is seen on fol. 146r the only difference being that the bar is a simple line. The images, set upside down, are odd but it is not difficult to recognize in them the dragon-head type of Zographensis and Clozianus. Their simplified replica is seen in the minute initial on fol. 145v.

On fol. 129v the initial letter *vêdê*, outlined with the ink of the text and

<sup>16</sup> According to ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА; МАВРОДИНОВА (1999: 12) the bows are each illuminated with small proboscis and an eye, thus foreshadowing other zoomorphic images in the early manuscripts.

left uncoloured, represents the second, phyto-zoomorphic type. The bows are both turned into an elegant half-leaf-like motif, the longest part of which is curled at the end. Its stylisation together with the small »eye« marked by a circle, and the shorter leaves on top, at the place of the ears/horns, invest the pattern with the described zoomorphic characteristics of the already familiar snake/dragon head. Since the nature of the image is beyond doubt, it helps to identify the remaining, more abstract versions on fols. 6r, 113r, 119r, 131v.

The rather formless bow of the initial letter *rbtsi* on fol. 27r, enlivened by a red eye with white pupil, slightly resembles the dragon-head pattern. Its nature is more explicit in the initial on fol. 29v where the head is given a big muffle.<sup>17</sup>

On fols. 48r, 55v, 60v, 61r, 61v, 62r, 64v, 65r, 65v, 71v, 73v, 75, 77r, 78r, 117r, 120r, 136v, 142v, 144v the initial letters *vêdê* and *rbtsi* could be put with more or less certainty into the group of *оживљени облик* according to the classification of G. Babić.

### 3.6. Codex Marianus

Once established on the example of the Assemanianus, the principle of constructing the vegetal dragon-head pattern is detectable in the interlaced headpiece on fol. 133r before the chapters in John. Even though some authors do not see it,<sup>18</sup> the image is there, somewhat hidden among the intertwined stems ending with large, partite half-leaves. Two horizontal stems confine the space of the interlace itself, leaving its endings outside. Supposing it to be an inner frame, exactly on its outlines two couples of heads are seen. If it is true that the manner of their rendering is arbitrary, at least those on the lower side have noticeable eyes and triangular ears. The long muzzles, drawn by parallel lines, end with the common twirl. Sharing the same formal characteristics except the ears, the upper couple does not immediately attract the viewer, who automatically registers it as a detail of the interlaced pattern. Thus the animalistic aspect of the pattern escapes attention together with yet another particularity – the stylized plant between each of the couples, encoding the Tree of Life with its guards. The same scheme, within

<sup>17</sup> On this page the script is restored by a later hand (ДЖУРОВА; СТАНЧЕВ; ЯПУНДЖИЧ 1985: 52), to which the illuminated initial also belongs.

<sup>18</sup> For example, УХАHOBA 2004: 223.

which animals and plants could vary and play according to the fantasy and affinity of the scribes or artists, has become a common and masterly developed composition on the top bar of numerous Byzantine headpieces since ten-eleventh century onwards. A number of identical decorated letters in the Codex Marianus are very similar to the phyto-zoomorphic initials *vêdê* in the Assemanianus, as pointed by Ivan Dobrev, who describes them as stylized teratological initials (ДОБРЕВ 1972: 64–65).

It is worth noticing that the heraldic pattern in the headpiece on fol. 133r, changed by a new aesthetic, reappears in the seventeenth-century illumination of the manuscripts from the Etropole Calligraphic School in Western Bulgaria (Sofia region). On top of the late headpieces usually there is either a cross or a stylized interlace, or a vegetal motif, flanked by ornaments resembling the described dragon heads, outlined only by a curve in the appropriate form of the upper frame line enlivened with an eye.<sup>19</sup> This way the whole pattern becomes analogous to the composition surmounting the wooden carved iconostases of the 17–19<sup>th</sup> century, where the cross is flanked by two monsters, which in the carvers' vocabulary are called *lami* (see above).

### 3.7. The Boiana Palimpsest

This fragment, less studied from the point of view of its decoration, offers examples of illuminated initial letters *rbtsi* in which Ivan Dobrev has seen the same animalistic form as in the codices Zographensis and Assemanius (ДОБРЕВ 1972: 66–67). His observation has distinguished in the motif a geometric schematization of the zoomorphic component of the Old-Bulgarian Glagolitic initials (ДОБРЕВ 1972: 66, рис. 3, 4). On fols. 1v, 3r, 7r (two initials), and 8r the bows are substituted by a head, stuck to the letter's stem and pointing upward. Only the outline and particularly the snout, curled at the tip, reveal in the pattern the dragon heads of the mentioned Glagolitic Gospels as neither eyes nor ears enliven it.<sup>20</sup> The composition, together with the interlace filling of the stem are the details which link these initials to the one on fol. 29v in the Assemanianus.

<sup>19</sup> The pattern, with the same interplay between the vegetal and zoomorphic nature is common also in numerous Serbian manuscripts of the same period.

<sup>20</sup> See also ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА; МАВРОДИНОВА 1999: 40.

In the cited monograph parallels of the initials *vêdê* are drawn with the phyto-zoomorphic initials in the Zograph Gospel, Assemani Gospel and Psalterium Sinaiticum (ДОБРЕВ 1972: 65, рис. 2). The likeness affirmed is rather questionable, therefore an accurate remark leaves out the latter manuscript from the list of analogies (ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА; МАВРОДИНОВА 1999: 40)

#### 4. IMAGE, FORM AND MEANING

##### 4.1. Image

A typology of the images seems to be possible, considering their descriptions. Phyto-zoomorphic appearance unites motifs in the codices Marianus, Psalterium Sinaiticum and Assemanianus. This specificity of some of the illuminating letters shows that the scribes (or the artist, at least in the case of the Assemanianus) have given preference to the ideas of fertility and renewal of life, associated with the snake (or dragon).

In the codices Zographensis, Clozianus, Euchologium Sinaiticum and Boiana Palimpsest a shared feature is the more expressive »monstrous« aspect of the image independly of the stylistic variations which, in some cases, produce a rather abstract form. However, a subdivision would have to take into account the differences mentioned above.

A third group would include the more naturalistically depicted reptiles in the Psalterium Sinaiticum and the Codex Assemanianus, though on stylistic level they also would each form a sub-group.

Putting together manuscripts by this particular token does not secure conclusions on the common origin of the members in one group because comparing more elements would require a different arrangement. Nevertheless coincidences in their animalistic repertoire are witnessed twice in the Assemanianus and Psalterium Sinaiticum and this correlates to other attested similarities in their decoration (ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА; МАВРОДИНОВА 1999: 36) no matter what obvious stylistic, paleographical and codicological diversities are seen.

#### 4.2. Form

Of all the manuscripts only the reptile images in Psalterium Sinaiticum represent snakes with their most typical features. While the drawing on fol. 31r is rather generalized, the other, on fol. 34v, shows a well-marked scale pattern by which the characteristics of the viper could be recognized. The peculiar images on fols. 23r and 32v in the Euchologium Sinaiticum possess certain characteristics (something like a short horn at the tip of the snout and something like horns above the eye) of *vipera ammodytes*, found in southern Europe through to the Balkans and parts of the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> But still, these representations could not be taken without reserve as snakes, so spontaneously or intuitively they would be rather called dragons.<sup>22</sup>

Another individualized image is that of the monster in the Assemanianus. Its identification as a crocodile is justified to some extent by the well pronounced, elongated muzzle. Moreover, the animal was known to people from Byzantium and Slavic lands from various sources – preserved Roman mosaics, travels to the Holy Lands or stories about travels, etc.<sup>23</sup> Besides, the image resembles a giant lizard, which is another impersonation of the dragon. The form of the head does not correspond exactly to neither the anatomy of the *crocodylus niloticus* nor that of the lizard, and what is more important, the animal has a couple of ears, drawn backward. This detail, which by its form and position is distinct from a possible couple of horns, pertains to the majority of the images not only discussed here but in the dragon images of various cultures. And this detail adds reason to preference of the name *dragon* for the Glagolitic animal-head motif.

<sup>21</sup> See the description of the species in Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vipera\\_ammodytes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vipera_ammodytes).

<sup>22</sup> Compare with a folklore record: »Змеят никој не го е видјал. Но според описанијата – много груба кожа, нарязана като люспи като на костенурка, на зеленикави петна, глвѣтъ плоска, тука на носъ има врѣхче нагоре (Е.М.). Изглежда, че е доста голям« (СИМЕОНОВА 2013: 60 after МАЛЧЕВ, Р. 2008. Змеят от Югово. Годишник на Асоциация »Онгъл« 6/2: 140–160).

<sup>23</sup> Sebald Rieter and Hans Tucher described in 1479 the crocodiles they saw as »dragons without a crest or wings« see CHAREYRON 2013: 169. There is no reason to believe that earlier pilgrims or travelers have not got the same impression from their own or others' experience. The story about St Pachomius and the crocodile must have been well known; crocodiles are mentioned in St Basil's *Hexaemeron*, Homily VII, see SAINT BASIL 2016 and they were among the exotic creatures exhibited in the hippodrome in Constantinople, see WILSON 2006: 50.

According to the notions about the dragon (*zmej*), folklore including, he is a creature which possesses an extraordinary sharp sight, but he also speaks with human voice and since he speaks, he must hear as well.<sup>24</sup> These supernatural properties of his have been correspondingly rendered in art. Through the faculty of hearing, the dragon who is actually a snake, is involved into another biblical discourse, that of the aspid (adder) in (Slavonic) Psalm 57:5.<sup>25</sup> The *aspida* (gr. ἀσπίς) relates to a poisonous snake and is also a mythical winged creature, who, according to *Physiologos*,<sup>26</sup> does not stand the trumpet sound (БЕЛЮБА 1999: 58–59). Covering herself by her tail, she stops up her ears not to listen to the voice of the giant chasing her because otherwise she will die. In the Dobreisho Gospel, a 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript from Bulgarian National Library, sign. NBKM 17, the largest illuminated teratological initial on fol. 73r represents, as explained by a caption, the deaf *aspid* (masc.!) »that stoppeth his ear«.<sup>27</sup> Christian commentary literature juxtaposes her deafness to the words of the prophet: »O Lord, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid« (Habakkuk 3:2). So if not listening to God's word means death, those who listen and are God-abiding will be saved for eternal life. Chronologically earlier than the aspid/adder of *Physiologos* and the folklore *zmei* is the serpent, who conversed with Eve to seduce her, hence in the act of communication hearing must be presumed once again. Such could be the particular intentions in the image of the eared<sup>28</sup> – not horned – snake/dragon at least in Christian art. What is more, in the Jewish tradition the serpent-seducer once resembled a man, walked on two legs, possessed

<sup>24</sup> My thanks are to Elena Uzunova for her remark and turning my attention to the *zmejova svatba/bulka* subject in the Bulgarian song folklore where the dragon, overhearing a lassie who boasted that no lad could deceive her, assumed attractive human image and outwitted her.

<sup>25</sup> »... ὡσεὶ ἀσπίδος κωφῆς...«.

<sup>26</sup> For its Slavonic versions see Аспида in СТОЙКОВА 2009–2011.

<sup>27</sup> Another interpretation of this initial see in ФОКАС 2006.

<sup>28</sup> As is the case, in my view, in the most, if not all representations of snakes in the manuscripts, quoted by Emma Maayan-Fanar (MAAYAN-FANAR 2011: Table V, IIIb–e; Table VIII, I–III; Plates XIX, fig. 2; XX, fig. 1; XXXI, figs. 4 and 6 and others), contrary to her opinion that they closely resemble two types of horned viper (*kerastes* and *kerastes dikerastos*), see p. 150. Snakes are distinguishable from legless lizards by their lack of external ears. URL: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snake> (31.05.2016), but it refers to ear openings.

ears and could speak (КАСПИНА 2000: 118).<sup>29</sup>

And once a semiotic argument was reached through formal analysis, the way opens to an intertextual search within the snake/dragon image in the Glagolitic manuscripts.

### 4.3. Meaning

To the question whether in the dragon/snake motif one could see more than an ornamental device, an affirmative answer has been already given. A further step is to explore the possible messages left to the reader by those who elaborated the decoration, be them the scribes themselves or skillful artists to whom the embellishment of the words has been entrusted.

#### 4.3.1. *The Assemanianus*

Indeed, the monster participating in the decoration of the initial on fol. 147v is not a literal illustration of the Gospel reading (Luke 1:1–25) provided for the feast day, but alludes to the feast itself of St John the Baptist on 24 June. More precisely, the illuminated letter narrates, in a very concise visual discourse, two intertwined stories. One is the biblical story of Baptism, in which the illuminator has put in the foreground not Christ but St John whose nativity is celebrated. In fact, the stem of the letter *pokoj* is stubbing the chest of the agonizing animal, referring to Psalm 73:13,<sup>30</sup> in which the Christian exegesis has seen a prophecy of Christ's baptism and thus legitimised the liturgical usage of the Psalm in the services of Theophany.<sup>31</sup> The other story relates to the folklore celebration of St John's Day (bulg. *Enjovden*) (МУСАКОВА 2005), when in the night preceding it, various superficial creatures and daemons like *samodivi*, vampires and fallen from the sky dragons (*zmejove*) become active.<sup>32</sup> Well known fact is that the Christian holiday has substituted the European-wide pagan festivity on the day of

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<sup>29</sup> See the sources quoted by her, among which Flavius Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*.

<sup>30</sup> On fol. 72v in the Khudov Psalter the verse is illustrated by the scene of Baptism, where under the figure of Christ are represented two bleeding snakes/dragons, one of them with a severed head.

<sup>31</sup> On the history of the feast, compared to that of Nativity of Christ, see МИРКОВИЋ 1961: 112–115. See also n. 6.

<sup>32</sup> See БМ 1994: 114–115.

summer solstice, that is, the beginning of winter.<sup>33</sup> A reference to the nativity of the saint can be seen in his unusual, juvenile image inscribed in the letter's bow, but his fire-red hair and his antagonist are suggestive for the Forerunner's solar aspect hinted in John 3:30 (He must increase, but I must decrease). Even though neither the folklore Enjo nor St John the Baptist have been regarded as dragon fighters, the witty artistic composition echoes the ancient cosmological myth of the solar deity defeating the primeval darkness and chaos, personified by the snake/dragon, thus bringing the world into order. In our case St John actually appears as the agent through which Christ, the New Sun, crushed the Satan, signified by the snake/dragon and proclaimed the new way of salvation for the humankind.<sup>34</sup> If this interpretation is reliable, the given example reveals the dragon image as personification of vanquished evil.

#### 4.3.2. *The Zographensis*

Turning to the initials in this codex, one realises that accidentally or not, only the dragon head at the beginning of St Luke's Gospel is given ears. As nothing in the text refers hearing directly to offer a key for the exception, a suggestion which cannot be proved would take into account the verse Luke 1:2 because hearing is inseparable from the »delivering« of »those things which are most surely believed among us«. From a different point of view, the suspended heads in all three initials as well as in the Clozianus and the Euchologium could be grasped as images of the evil neutralized by the sacred power of the text itself,<sup>35</sup> but a hint to encoding their positive aspect is the initial letter *iže* in the word *iskoni* in John 1:1 (fol. 225r). In Elena Kotseva's interpretation the word which signifies »primeval, initial in the inner, most profound meaning«, begins with a letter, in whose structure the two »pillars« are in fact twice repeated Glagolitic *I*, alluding to the Tree of Life (КОЦЕВА 1998: 345–346). In this way the relation between the graphical components confirms the idea of double symbolism of letter and text which evolves from the sacral, implicated in the name or »picture« of

<sup>33</sup> The christianised idea that on this day the sun would set off to winter has generated the mythologem of St Enjo, who begins to mend his fur-coat and prepares for winter, БМ 1994: 114.

<sup>34</sup> On the subject see МАВРОДИНОВА 2004; МУСАКОВА 2005.

<sup>35</sup> See МААЯН-FANAR 2011: 161.

the character (KOŢEBA 1998: 339).<sup>36</sup> Similar understanding of the illuminated initial letter as always carrying twofold characteristics, as a letter and an image, is maintained by Maayan-Fanar (MAAYAN-FANAR 2011: 165). On this ground another surmise could be made – that the visual association between *zmej* and *zemlja* has been first adopted (or became conscious) in decorating the Glagolitic letter *zemlja*. Same logic is found in the vegetal or floral ornaments illuminating the Greek letter *tau*, in which the Christian authors have seen the sign of the life-giving tree, that is the *tau*-shaped cross on which Christ has been crucified (MAAYAN-FANAR 2011: 110).<sup>37</sup>

#### 4.3.3. *Psalterium Sinaiticum*

The snake initials on fols. 31r and 34v are possibly the only ones in the manuscript to which a particular meaning was imparted with the view of liturgical usage of the text. The first initial precedes Psalm 26, the first antiphon in the liturgy on the vigil of Theophany (MATEOS 1963: 220). It has been already mentioned by the example from the Khludov Psalter that the snakes crushed by the stone on which Christ stood in the Jordan River are a common detail in the iconography of the Baptism.<sup>38</sup> As the Christian feast is also called *Prosveštenie* (Enlightening) in Slavonic (Feast of Lights, gr. τὰ Φῶτα, τῶν Φῶτων),<sup>39</sup> the combination with the solar symbolism of the rosette could be inspired by the pre-Christian idea of the combat between light and darkness, implemented by an aniconic image. A parallel is drawn in the Slavonic »bestiary« between man who is putting on a new clothing through the mystery of Baptism and the snake, who changes her skin (БЕЛЮБА 2000: 124).<sup>40</sup>

In a previous paper no reasonable explanation of the emphasis put on the initial at Psalm 29 (fol. 34v) has been given<sup>41</sup> but a certain key is found in the illustrations in three of the Byzantine marginal Psalters – the

<sup>36</sup> After NORDENFALK. 1970. *Die spätantiken Zierbuchstaben*. Stockholm: Egnellska Boktryckeriet.

<sup>37</sup> Also n. 423 with reference to bibliography.

<sup>38</sup> See also in MOUSSAKOVA 2008: 216–217.

<sup>39</sup> The theme of Christ and sun/light has been developed already in the Early Christian apologetic and patristic literature.

<sup>40</sup> In the 15<sup>th</sup> century version of *Tolkovaja Paleja*.

<sup>41</sup> MOUSSAKOVA 2008: 216. What is worse, there are some mistakes of Psalm numbers, the relevant verses and corresponding initials.

nine-century codex sign. *Pantocrator 61*, the Theodore Psalter (BL, sign. *Add. MS 19 352*) of 1066 A.D., and the Barberini Psalter (VL, sign. *Vat. Barb. gr. 372*) of approximately the same time, as well as in the Greco-Latin Hamilton Psalter of around 1300 (Berlin, Staatliche Museen, sign. *Kupferstichkabinett 78A 9*) (DUFRENNE 1978: Psaume 29). As an illustration at Psalm 29:4 all they show a miniature representing the Raising of Lazarus. While the liturgical usage of the verse is not confirmed by the consulted sources, its interpretation in the Pseudo-Athanasian commentaries to the Psalter clearly refers to the Resurrection of Christ: »Christ resurrected and brought up Adam's soul«. <sup>42</sup> In this context the notion of the snake as a symbol of rebirth has been given priority though the ambivalent interpretation is not excluded. Lazar's Saturday (*Lazarovden, Lazarova sabota*) is another liminal point in the folklorized Christian calendar marking the transition from winter to spring/summer, from death to life (BM 1994: 198). On ritual level it is signified by magic rituals protecting from snakes. Serbs, Bosnians, Montenegrins and Macedonians perform various acts like throwing stones, shouting or conjuring to chase away the loathsome creature from people's houses (ГРПА 1997: 345).

## 5. CONCLUSION – THE PARADIGM

Conceived as a whole, the repertoire of prevailing geometric forms, structural or ornamental, of undeveloped vegetal patterns, rare human images and persisting animalistic representations in the first Glagolitic manuscripts, demonstrate an idea of enlivening the words to which conforms the illumination of the Christian books East and West. As a reflection of God's wisdom imbuing his creation, the artistic arrangement follows principles of order and harmony and its carefully selected elements signify the entirety and diversity of the universe. Without being an exception in so far as a general visual vocabulary is utilized at an early stage in Latin, Byzantine, Armenian or Georgian manuscripts, the Glagolitic decoration is distinguished by a preference to aniconical means for transmitting messages to the reader. Among them the serpent/dragon motif is particularly active in its ambi- and polyvalent symbolism equally inherent to mythical, fol-

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<sup>42</sup> The literal translation belongs to the author of the paper.

klore and Christian thinking. An in-depth comparative study should be able to verify the prototypes, the ways of transmission and forms of adoption which specify (or not) the snake/dragon pattern in the Glagolitic illumination against the evidence of other manuscripts, the Greek manuscripts copied in South Italy at first place.<sup>43</sup> The observation of the codices Zographensis, Clozianus, Assemanianus, Boiana Palimpsest, Psalterium and Euchologium Sinaiticum bolsters the conviction that Slavonic scribes amplified the varieties in snake/dragon imagery when it was appropriated as one of the key visual concepts to expren with the twofold symbolism of the innovative Glagolitic letters.

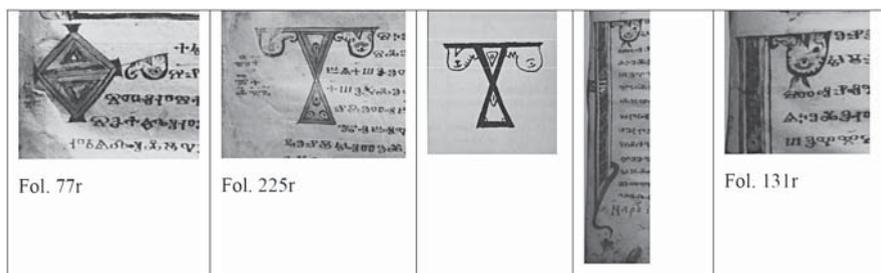


Fig. 1. *Codex Zographensis*<sup>44</sup>  
Sl. 1. *Zografsko evanđelje*

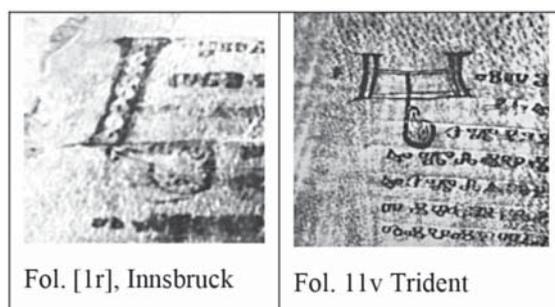


Fig. 2. *Glagolita Clozianus*  
Sl. 2. *Kločev glagoljaš*

<sup>43</sup> Most often considered as models for the illuminated Old Slavonic manuscripts, see ŠEVČENKO (1991) or УХАНОВА (2004).

<sup>44</sup> Fig. 1a, b, d, e. ХРИСТОВА, Б.; В. ЗАГРЕБИН; Г. ЕНИН; Е. ШВАРЦ 2009.

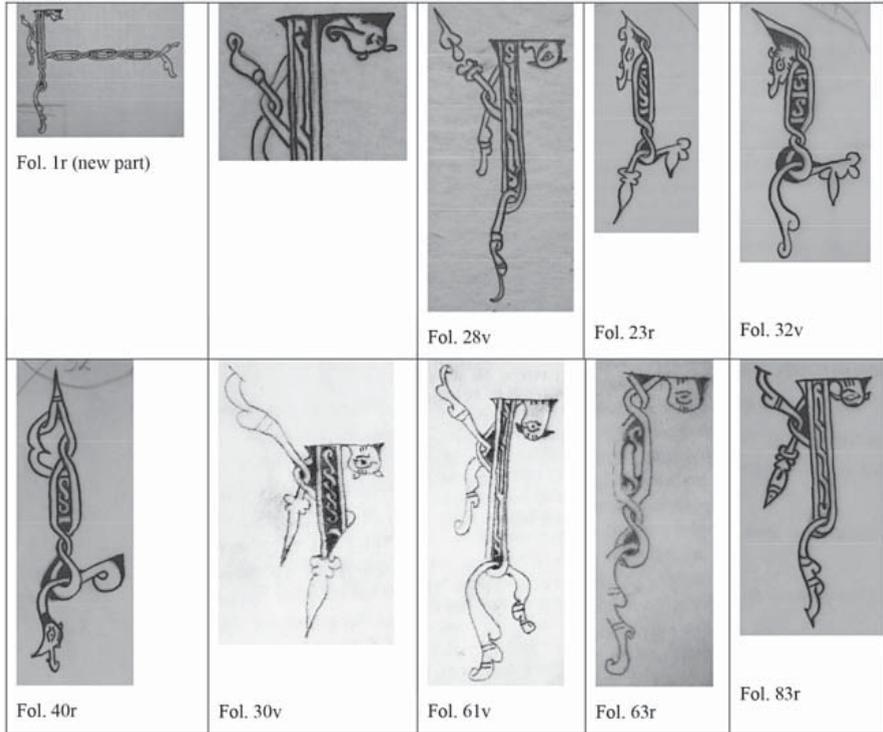


Fig. 3. *Euchologium Sinaiticum*  
Sl. 3. *Sinajski euhologij*

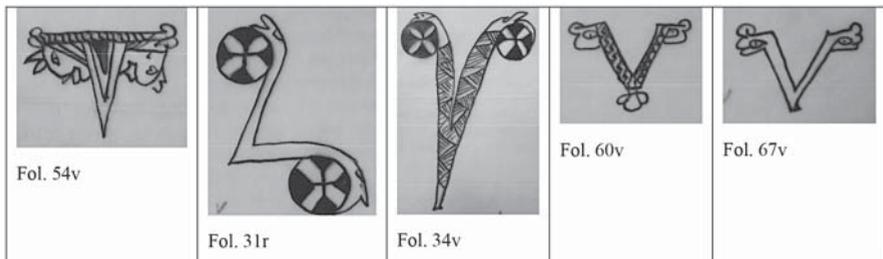


Fig. 4. *Psalterium Sinaiticum*  
Sl. 4. *Sinajski psaltir*

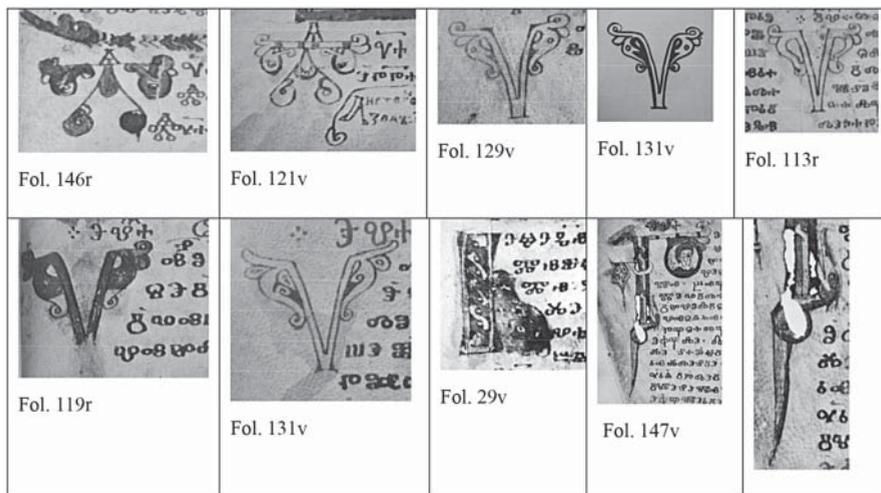


Fig. 5. *Codex Assemanianus*<sup>45</sup>  
Sl. 5. *Assemanijev evanđelistar*

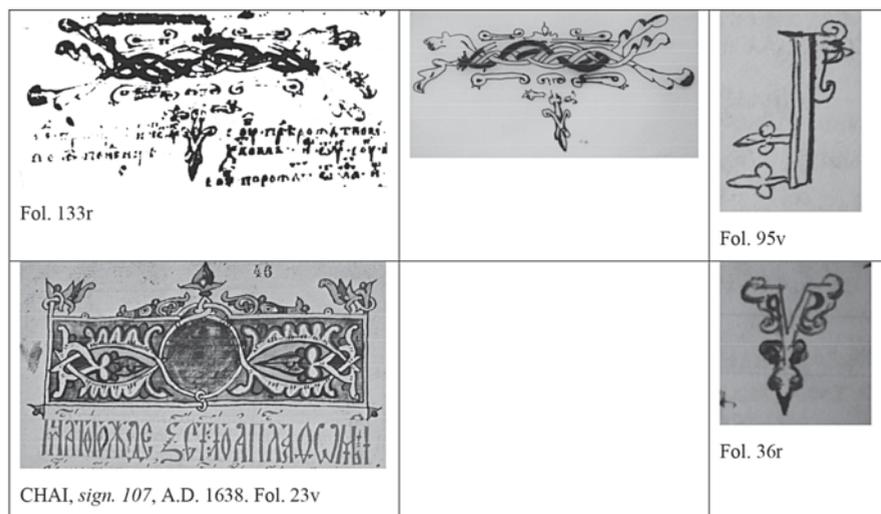


Fig. 6. *Codex Marianus*<sup>46</sup>  
Sl. 6. *Marijinsko evanđelje*

<sup>45</sup> ИВАНОВА-МАВРОДИНОВА; ДЖУРОВА 1981.

<sup>46</sup> Fig. 6d. ДЖУРОВА 1981.

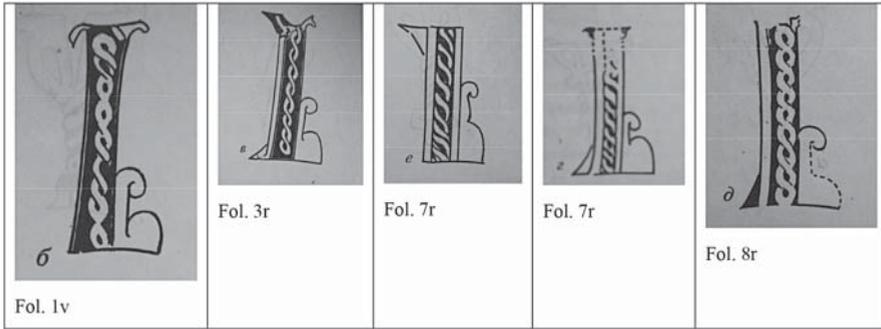


Fig. 7. *Boiana Palimpsest*<sup>47</sup>  
Sl. 7. *Bojanski palimpsest*

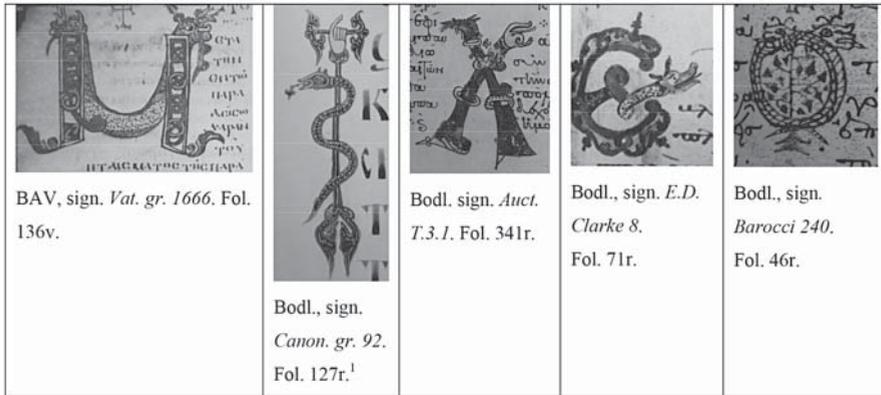


Fig. 8. Greek manuscripts (*Vat. gr. 1666.*, *Bodl. Canon. gr. 92*, *Bodl. Auct. T.3.1.*, *Bodl. E. D. Clarke 8*, *Bodl. Barocci 240*)<sup>48</sup>  
Sl. 8. Grčki rukopisi (*Vat. gr. 1666.*, *Bodl. Canon. gr. 92*, *Bodl. Auct. T.3.1.*, *Bodl. E. D. Clarke 8*, *Bodl. Barocci 240*)

<sup>47</sup> ДОБРЕВ 1972.

<sup>48</sup> Fig. 8a. CAVALLO 1982; Fig. 8. b–e. HUTTER 1977.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- BL – The British Library, London  
BnF – Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris  
Bodl. – The Bodleian Library, Oxford  
CHAI – Church Historical and Archival Institute, Sofia  
BAV – Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

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## S a ž e t a k

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### MOTIV ZMIJE/ZMAJA U STARIM GLAGOLJSKIM ILUMINIRANIM RUKOPISIMA

Motiv zmaja/zmije jedan je od motiva koji je ukrašavao najstarije glagoljske knjige. U ovom se radu nastavljaju istraživanja provedena prije petnaest godina, sada s naglaskom na proučavanju umjetničke vrijednosti često ponavljanoog zoomorfnoog, odnosno teratološkog motiva. Iako je prvotno utvrđeno kako je riječ o zmajevoj glavi, zbog stalne ambivalencije između pojmova zmije i zmaja, iz obzora se ne smije ispustiti povezanost s motivom zmije. Kao motiv najčešće se pojavljuje u ukrašenim inicijalima. Na primjerima iz *Assemanijeva evanđelja* i *Sinajskog psaltira* u radu se iznose tumačenja dvostruke simbolike inicijala: s jedne strane kao ilustracija slova kojom dominira teratološki motiv, a s druge strane kao poruka povezana s ostatkom teksta.

Ključne riječi: glagoljski rukopisi, slavenska pismenost, iluminacija, inicijal, ukras, zmaj, zmija, Assemanijev evanđelistar, Marijinsko evanđelje, Zografsko evanđelje, Bojanski palimpsest, Kločev glagoljaš, Sinajski euhologij, Sinajski psaltir