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Life-Giving Springs and The Mother of God Zhivonosen Istochnik / Zoodochos Pege / Balükliyska. Byzantine-Greek-Ottoman Intercultural Influence and Its Aftereffects in Iconography, Religious Writings and Ritual Practices in the Region of Plovdiv¹

This article looks at the veneration of healing springs in Orthodox Christian churches and monasteries in the region of Plovdiv and Asenovgrad (Bulgaria) to raise the problem of its connections to Byzantine, Greek and Ottoman religious cultures² of Constantinople/Istanbul. My argument is based on fieldwork and

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² The focus in this text is predominantly on the religious habitus that contributed to the emergence of this cult, rather than on the related modern religious practices. Those are obviously touched on in passing here, and I plan on examining them at length in a separate article.

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research I conducted in 2012–2014 to seek an answer to a research question that had kept me intrigued for over a decade: namely, what is the meaning, in practical terms, of the claim frequently made by Orthodox Christians that the various religious rituals they engaged in (with the exception of funerary ones) were practiced “for health” (*za zdrave*). It is reportedly “for health” that holy icons are kissed, food gets ritually shared, and devotees make ablutions using holy water or offer sacrifices. In fact, it is with that purpose in mind that most religious activities are performed. I found that interesting, especially given how Bulgarian scholars of Orthodox religious life tend to take the problem completely for granted and regard it as being too obvious to merit commentary or explanation, consequently failing to account for the religious imageries involved in the practice (ШНИТЕР, 2015).

In Bulgarian Orthodox Christianity the strong connection between health and various forms of religious practice is a unique amalgamation of practices of varied provenance combining pre-Christian influences (e.g. healing rituals involving water from healing springs), Byzantine practices (incubation in holy shrines, physical contact with healing icons and relics, healing practices involving spring waters from so-called *ayazma*³ or holy springs), Ottoman practices (the *kurban* or animal sacrifice practiced as a healing practice), and modern neo-pagan influences (the practices of Theosophy-inspired religious movements such as the White Brotherhood of Peter Deunov).

This article focuses primarily on ablutions using water from *ayazma* as practiced by Orthodox devotees “for purposes of health” (both spiritual and physical). In this I hope to reveal the connections between the practice and the Byzantine religious imagery which has been revived and processed by icon painters and clergymen in the period of the Bulgarian national revival, notably in religious writings intended for popular use and in symbolic monuments such as monumental paintings and iconographic depictions, as well as in rituals practiced by the Orthodox Church (baptism, *Malük* (minor) and *Golyam* (major) *vodosvet* rites⁴) and certain religious holidays in which ablutions involving the use of holy water play a significant part.

³ Bulgarian: *ayazmo*. It is difficult to tell whether the term was borrowed in Bulgarian directly from the Greek word *hagiasma* (from which it ultimately derives), or the Turkish *ayazma*.

⁴ The *vodosvet* is a church ritual involving the blessing of water. The “major” *vodosvet* is held on the feast of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan (6 January), and “minor” *vodosvets* are part of the celebrations held on every major Church holiday. Devotees are sprinkled with holy water, which they also take home in bottles to be used for healing rituals throughout the year.

The centrality of health aspects to Bulgarian Orthodox Christianity may suggest a certain archaic, *longue durée* quality of local religious life. Before the fall of Constantinople local medieval religious culture had remained within the sphere of Byzantine influence, preserving, in a Christianized form, many practices adopted from Judaism and ancient pagan religions. Incubation in shrines practiced for health purposes (probably introduced under Emperor Justinian) with miraculous interventions of saints in the lives of believers is an obvious calque of the ceremonies once held in ancient asclepeions⁵ (Wickkiser, 2008, p. 1; Sulikowska, 2013, p. 202). The practice of situating sacred buildings next to healing springs in which devotees would bathe to seek healing from various ailments has a similar provenance. The practice of using water for healing purposes was also known in Judaism, and later in Christianity, as attested by the story in the Gospel of St. John, where a paralyzed man is healed at a pool called Bethesda, a subject to which I shall return later in the article. The cult of healing waters was also known to the Thracians and proto-Bulgarians once inhabiting the lands of modern-day Bulgaria (Мутафов, 1992, p. 79).

The legitimation of the cult of healing waters in Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures occurred on the linguistic as well as practical levels, and it would be difficult to indicate which of those two semiotic vehicles played a more important role. For the purposes of this article, my account of the phenomenon will focus on religious culture in the geographical area covered by my field research, and will identify directions for potential further in-depth research efforts.

In my field research I was often intrigued by the way my respondents described water from *ayazmo* as being “*zhivotvorna*” (life-giving). In verbalizing their belief with the use of that concept the devotees were conveying what I consider a fundamental quality of their form of religiosity. The same epithet was used to describe miracle-working icons. Thanks to that concept (with its attendant visual and physical counterparts) I came to understand that performing certain activities “for health purposes” related not merely to physical healing, but also to becoming open to life-giving (*zhivotvorno, zhivonosno*) forces, a number of which can be at play at any one time in anyone’s life

⁵ Asclepius was known in the ancient Philipopolis (Plovdiv), as attested by historical monuments including the 2nd-century Plovdiv frieze “The health-bearing family of Asclepius”, depicting Asclepius and his daughters Yaza, Panakeya and Higia, his sons Mahaon, Podalerios and Telesfor, and his wife Epione (picture 10: Мутафов, 1992).

regardless of one's physical condition. Bulgarian devotees believe that water can produce physical, mental, and spiritual healing because it "brings life", and physical contact with sacred objects available in the monastery or ablutions performed at *ayamos* provide a way of achieving that effect.

I believe that the specific nature of that conceptual category can be grasped not only through fieldwork (my findings based on field research in the area will be discussed in a separate article), but also through the complex network of a historical and theological background. The meaning of "life-giving" effects as a conceptual category and its related practices cannot be understood without taking into account the related historical and theological perspectives perpetuated by tradition, and handed down through the generations of Orthodox believers in the area. The theological perspective makes it possible to identify the remote origins and meanings of certain motifs which have been since processed in local religious culture. The term itself, *zhivotvornost*, was not coined by devotees, but rather became internalized from the language of liturgy⁶. It is used in the *vodosvet* and baptism rites, and legitimized by iconographic depictions found in churches.

A private recollection is perhaps excusable in this context. In 2013, I was watching Orthodox devotees making ablutions with water from an *ayazmo* in the Kuklen monastery of SS. Cosmas and Damian. They were sharing stories of the local healings produced by drinking the water, taking baths in the water or pouring it over demoniacs. Witnessing the scene I found myself unable to shake off a certain sense of familiarity: I had already seen a similar scene, depicted in an icon formerly displayed at the old church of St. Petka in Plovdiv (Photo 1). Called *The Mother of God of the Life-Giving Spring* (Greek: Ζωοδόχος Πηγή, Zoodochos Pege, *Theotokos tes Peges*, Bulgarian: *Bogoroditsa Zhivonosena/Zhivotvoryasht/Zhivopriemen Iztochnik*), that icon was not unlike a snapshot taken at the Kuklen *ayazmo*, except that it was a simultaneous depiction of a series of scenes that would normally occur as a sequence. The scenes shown in the icon illustrated the practices taking place at such springs on a regular basis, rather than any single particular event. At its center the icon depicted the Virgin holding Christ Emmanuel. The Virgin is shown in a half-length view in a posture of prayer, as

⁶ My analysis in this text is limited to the category of "life-giving" powers (*zhivotvornost*), a concept of Byzantine origins, though I realize that it ultimately derives from the Judaistic belief in the living water flowing in the river of paradise (Gen 2, 10–13), a term also applied with reference to God (Psalms 42:2–3), Jesus (John 4:10–14, 37–38), and the Holy Spirit. In the Christian tradition it is likewise accepted that the saved will drink of the living water (Rev. 21, 6).

it were emerging from a bowl-shaped fountain. Water is flowing from the bowl of the fountain into a pool surrounded by various sufferers who are collecting the water into jars or using it for ablutions. Some people are healed immediately, some, too disabled to move on their own, are assisted by caretakers. The group includes dignitaries and ordinary people, adults and children.

In researching this phenomenon I realized that the motif was a popular subject in that region of Bulgaria thanks as a result of contributions from two icon painters from the Samokov School of icon-painting⁷ active in the period of Bulgarian national revival: the frescoes of Hristo Dimitrov (e.g. in the monastery of Bachkovo), and the icons of Zahari Zograf (1810–1853), who painted as many as four icons of the Mother of God of the Life-giving spring known in the Plovdiv region⁸, including an icon in the old church of St. Petka mentioned above (Brisby, 2003, p. 40; Москoвa, 2002, p. 20).

In the 1837 icon by Zahari Zograf, the Virgin appears to be the source of the water streaming down from the fountain, her figure completely filling the bowl of the fountain. The water is flowing from two taps shaped to resemble anthropomorphic fish mouths. There are more fish (usually seven in number) swimming in the healing pool, apparently as evidence of the water's purity. This indicates that life-giving water must literally contain living things in it.

⁷ For more information on the development of that iconography and the cultural influences affecting it see Claire Brisby (2003). Brisby identifies as paradigmatic for the development of this iconography a print by Christophor Zefarovic published in 1744 in Vienna (Moutafov, 2001, p. 165) and frequently copied, evincing a clear influence of the Western baroque aesthetic (clouds separating the heavens from the earth, the baby shown cradled on Mary's left arm rather than in a full-face posture, the dynamic posture of the demoniac in the foreground). On the other hand, the iconographic model came from the *hermeneia* by Dionysius of Fournia written in the second half of the 18th century, which preserves the "Orthodox visual tradition" (Brisby, 2003, p. 37). In this iconographic model Christ is shown full-face, holding against his chest a gospel scroll bearing the words "I am the living water" (Djonizjusz z Furny, 2003, p. 187). Dionysius of Fournia also painted one of the icons on the same subject, made in 1737 for the Church of the Transfiguration at Fournia. Icon-painters of the Bulgarian Revival drew inspiration from those two models, a fact reflected in their art and *hermeneias*. For instance, Dicho Zograph's alternatively replicates the model of Zefarovic and Dyonisyus of Fournia, respectively (cf. Brisby, 2003, p. 36). For more information on *hermeneias* by Christophor Zefarovic and on the painter himself see Moutafov, 2001.

⁸ The other icons include one painted in 1836 and displayed in the monastery of St. Petka of Moldova near Asenovgrad, a 1838 icon from the church of SS. Kirik and Yulita in Gorni Voden, and the icon from the Church of Annunciation in Asenovgrad (Москoвa, 2002; Brisby, 2003, pp. 40–41).

The sufferers are shown getting water from the spring, drinking it, pouring it over their bodies or taking it to those too frail to approach the pool. The people include patriarchs, priests, rulers, and princesses, one man possessed by an evil spirit (with a demon escaping through his mouth), and another man brought back to life when the water is poured over his dead body⁹.

The icon also illustrates the idea that suffering is not something that must be accepted as divine will, but rather a condition in need of reparation using the material vehicles of divine grace, which were created for that purpose¹⁰. This is aligned with the semiotic message of St. John's Gospel with its story of a paralytic healed by a pool (Bulgarian: *kupalniya*) called Bethesda (*beth hesda* (בֵּית הַסֹּדָא), "house of mercy or "house of grace"), a passage customarily read out during the rite of *vodosvet*¹¹ or blessing of water. The reading directly anchors the Christian justification of the cult of healing waters in the authority of the gospels. According to that evangelical passage, invalids would lie by the pool near the Sheep Gate awaiting an occasional moving of the water, "For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool and troubled the water. Whosoever then first stepped in, after the troubling of the water, was made whole of whatsoever disease he had" (John 5:3, KJ21). Significantly, although the story goes on in the gospel, the reading during the rite of *vodosvet* breaks off at this point in the narrative, the intention being to emphasize the remarkable properties of holy water when agitated by a supernatural power. Accordingly, the prayer recited by the priest at this point asks God to make the water wholly through the force, action, and descent of the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Trinity (Требник, 2002, p. 353). At that point the water becomes imbued with a power that is "salutary to bodies and souls, and [...] drive[s] out any hostile

⁹ This refers to a famous story of the Thessalian man to which I will return in my description of the apocryphal sources that influenced the evolution of the subject in art.

¹⁰ The theological emphasis on spiritual and physical transformation (*metanoia*) as the fundamental goal of Christian life finds iconographic expression in the icon *Transfiguration on Mount Tabor*, which bolsters the patristic belief that "God became man so that man could become God", however that subject appears rarely in Bulgarian churches and is not widely noticed or understood by the devotees. This is an aspect of elite religious life that is not particularly emphasized by the Bulgarian clergy.

¹¹ In the rite the priest prays to the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity, asking that their grace and agency (*deystviye*) might descend on the water to "make it salutary to bodies and souls, and to drive out any hostile powers" (Требник, 2002, p. 353). The priest's prayer also refers to the many healings worked by Christ in the gospels. The healing springs found in monasteries are blessed anew every year as part of the *vodosvet* rite, and the water gets sprinkled on the devotees.

powers (Требник, 2002, p. 353). The scene shown in the icon of the Virgin of the Life-Giving Spring is highly reminiscent of the scene in the Gospel of St John, with the exception that in the icon it is the Virgin (rather than an angel) who moves the water to make it blessed (Virgin Mary is herself often likened to a wellspring). Accordingly, some icons as well as the Akathist Hymn treat the Virgin (who is sometimes referred to as the “life-giving wellspring”) as a personification of the healing pool described in the gospel:

Rejoice, for thou didst cause the river of many-streams to gush forth!

Rejoice, living image of the font!

Rejoice, remover of the stain of sin!

Rejoice, laver that washes the conscience clean! [...]

Rejoice, unwedded Bride! (Oikos 11, cited in: Onash & Schnieper, 2002, p. 175;

“Akathist to Our Most Holy Lady Mother of God,” n.d.).

When looking at the icons it is not always clear whether the Virgin is sitting in a bowl filled with water, or perhaps it is the bowl that contains water pouring out of the Virgin’s body. This ambiguity is presumably intentional, emphasizing the mystery of the healing water’s substantiality and its remarkable healing properties. In the Gospel, the water undergoes a process of *metanoia* through its contact with the Lord’s angel in the iconographic depictions, the same process occurs through physical contact with the Virgin’s body¹². As a result, the water it were becomes transformed into a different substance: life-giving water with a whole new set of physical properties. This connection between *ayazma* and holy water is a recurrent element in Orthodox theology and tradition. The pool at Bethesda is mentioned in every *vodosvet* rite, and every *ayazmo* is blessed in that rite at least once a year. In doing so, the healing properties of the spring become renewed and reinforced.

However, what is the connection between the ritual ablutions in *ayazma* and the icon under discussion here, other than the unmistakable similarity in appearance? Moving away from theological reflection, it is perhaps fitting to mention some of the cultural connections between the cult of life-giving springs in Plovdiv and Constantinople.

The image of the Mother of God of the Life-giving Spring (Greek: Ζωοδόχος Πηγή) and its veneration goes back to Constantinople, where a small shrine

¹² This is similar to the motif of the Mystical Winepress frequently found in Western iconography, though in that case the juice flowing from the grapes is unambiguously shown to be the blood of Christ.

became dedicated to the Mother of God of the Life-giving Spring¹³ as early as the fifth century on account of a healing spring located in the vicinity, whose miraculous properties were attributed to an intervention of the Mother of God. It is not known what kind of image of the Virgin (if any) was originally placed at that spring, but we do know the details of a later fresco painted in the first half of the 14th century¹⁴ and placed in that shrine upon its renovation¹⁵, as attested by a contemporary monk and church historian named Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos (1256–1335). Reportedly, the image was painted on a dome placed above the healing pool, and could be seen reflected in the water¹⁶, a vivid visualization of the fact that the Mother of God was the source of the healing waters in the pool (cf. Teteriatnikov, 2005, p. 226). The Virgin in the fresco was portrayed in a posture of prayer with the Christ Child, the “life-bearing source, who bubbles forth from her bosom, the most beautiful and eternal infant in the likeness of transparent and drinkable water which is alive and leaping”¹⁷ (Xanthopoulos, cited in Teteriatnikov, 2005, p. 225). The fresco may have served as the model for later depictions of that kind (Janocha, 2010, p. 132), and according to modern Byzantine scholarship was itself modeled on the depiction of the praying Mother of God in the church of Blachernae (likewise containing a healing spring).

This topic appears to have only recently attracted scholarly attention in modern Byzantine Studies (from Alice-Marie Talbot (2012), Natalia

¹³ The shrine had a complicated history: destroyed by earthquakes several times during the Byzantine period, it was rebuilt on the initiative of various emperors. In the period of the crusades it came into Latin hands in the 13th century (no miracles occurred in that period according to the Greek sources). In the 15th century the shrine was supposedly destroyed by Muslims, and the material was used to build the Sultan Bayezid II Mosque. However, the shrine was later rebuilt under Sultan Mehmed II and re-consecrated in a solemn ceremony in 1835, attended by the Ecumenical Patriarch Constantius II of Constantinople. In 1955, the church was destroyed again during popular unrest aimed at the Greek inhabitants of Istanbul. It was replaced by a modest shrine with an underground healing spring visited to this day, mainly by Greek devotees Pierre Gilles (“Church of the Life-Giving Font of the Theotokos (Istanbul),” 2011).

¹⁴ Painted under Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282–1328) (Teteriatnikov, 2005, p. 225; Talbot, 1994, pp. 135–165).

¹⁵ It has been speculated that this depiction was made in connection with the shrine’s restoration at some point between 1306 and 1313, when the worn-out stairs in the shrine collapsed (Teteriatnikov, 2005, p. 227).

¹⁶ Especially when the tap was turned off. When the tap was on, Mary appeared to be hidden behind a cloud from which water would stream into the pool (Xanthopoulos, cited in Teteriatnikov, 2005, p. 226)

¹⁷ The earliest scenes did not therefore depict pilgrims gathered at the pool.

Teteriatnikov (2005), Rodoniki Etzeoglou (2005); Dejan Medaković (1971) and art history (Claire Brisby (2003), Ivanka Gergova (Гергова, 2012), Svetla Moskova (Москова, 2002), Alexiei Lidov (2014)), whose efforts provide anthropologists with better insights into the religious culture under discussion.

According to Natalia Tetariatnikov, the earliest surviving depiction of that kind can be traced to the monumental paintings of Mistra in the early 14th century church of the Aphendiko¹⁸ (Teteriatnikov, 2005, p. 226). Dejan Medaković argues that an earlier fresco on the same subject is known, located in the Boyana Church in Bulgaria dated to 1259 (Medaković, 1971, p. 159). Surprisingly, however, this is not mentioned by the scholars listed in the following paragraph, and I have been unable to find independent confirmation for his claim.

According to the Bulgarian historian Ivanka Gergova, the subject had not gained popularity in Bulgaria until the 18th century (Гергова, 2012, p. 67). Gergova lists only a few examples of similarly themed images in Bulgaria predating that period. Two are dated to the 16th century (a fresco from the church of St. Charalambos in the region of Melnik, and a scene depicting the patron in a niche over the southern entrance of the church of St. Stephen, known as the *Nova Mitropoliya* or “new bishopric” in Nesebar). Three more come from the 17th century: an icon from the monastery in Karlukovo and the church of St. Nicholas in the village of Zhelezna near Chiprovtsi (Гергова, 2012, p. 67). Outside of Plovdiv and Asenovgrad, depictions of the same subject are also found in the Troyan and Rila monasteries, near Tryavna¹⁹ (Brisby, 2003, p. 41), and in the port cities of Varna and Sozopol (Попова, 2008, p. 65; Мутафов, 1992).

It should be emphasized that Zoodochos Pege was “a place of worship much favoured by the Byzantines” (Etzeoglou, 2005, p. 239), attracting worshippers for centuries²⁰ even notwithstanding the shrine’s destruction in the mid-16th century²¹ (Talbot, 2012, p. XVIII).

¹⁸ Art historians suggest a time frame of 1312–1328 (Teteriatnikov, 2005, p. 227).

¹⁹ For instance, the icon of Zahari Tzanuv of Triavna, first half of the 19th century.

²⁰ There is no general agreement on this, as the cult was arguably discontinued in certain periods. Claire Brisby suggests that this applies to the period from the 15th to the 18th centuries. It was revived in 1727 when the “Ottomans again authorised worship at the site and the cult was revived by Metropolitan Nikodim (Brisby, 2003, p. 30). In 1833 a small new shrine was built, which stands to this day.

²¹ “Mother of God of the *Life-Giving Spring*,” n.d. In the 15th century, after Constantinople was conquered by the Ottoman Turks the building was supposedly demolished, and the building materials were used to build the Sultan Beyazıt Mosque. Only the chapel remained, which

Without a doubt, the abovementioned account by Xhanthopoulos contributed to the fame of the place. Xhanthopoulos not only described the image, but also initiated a holiday generating the Mother of God, The Life-giving Spring, a name he gave to the church in Pege, previously known simply as the “Virgin of the spring” (Etzeoglou, 2005, p. 240). The epithet of “life-giving spring” initially appeared only in hymns to the Virgin²², and was only used as the name of the church itself by Xhanthopoulos (Etzeoglou, 2005, p. 240). The life-giving spring is therefore one of the epithets describing Mary, and serves as a name of a holiday dedicated to her celebrated on the first Friday after Easter (also known as Bright Friday/Svetli Petük²³), with a liturgy that celebrates life by focusing on the miracle of resurrection²⁴.

According to apocryphal sources invoked in the *synaxarion*²⁵ reading for Bright Friday, the spring in Constantinople devoted to the Mother of God was revealed by Mary herself to the future Emperor Leo I²⁶, at that time still an ordinary soldier who found himself unable to help a thirsty blind man. Leo was showed a spring by the Mother of God, and as he offered water from it to the blind man, and he followed the Virgin’s advice and applied mud from the water to the blind man’s eyes. The man was healed, and the Virgin requested

too was destroyed in 1821. With the Sultan’s permission, a rebuilding effort got under way in the 1830s. In 1833, the existing church was (Talbot, 2012, p. XVIII).

²² The Virgin was referred to by a similar epithet (“fountain/river of life”) in the 5th-century hymns by Proklos of Constantinople, so it appears to have been an early title that enjoyed popularity in medieval Byzantium after the Council of Ephesus declared Mary as *Theotokos* (Mother of God).

²³ As noted by Svetla Moskova (Москова, 2002, p. 21). The holiday was instituted in the 14th century (Teteriatnikov, 2005, p. 225).

²⁴ A description of the *utrenya* and *vechernya* liturgy for Bright Friday/Пятница Светлой седмицы. Живоносный источник can be found here: “Пятница Светлой седмицы: Живоносный источник: В четверток вечера Светлая седмицы,” n.d.; “Пятница Светлой седмицы: Живоносный источник: В пяток Светлая седмицы на Утрени,” n.d.; “Пятница Светлой седмицы: Живоносный источник: На Литургии, антифоны Пасхи,” n.d.; “Bright Friday,” n.d.

²⁵ Никифор Каллист Ксанфопул (n.d.); Синаксарь на Пресвятую Госпожу Владычицу Богородицу, живоприемный источник in “Пятница Светлой седмицы: Живоносный источник: В пяток Светлая седмицы на Утрени,” n.d.

²⁶ He reportedly erected the house of prayer, a small shrine called *Kataphyge* or *Refuge* (Etzeoglou, 2005, p. 239; Talbot, 2012, p. XIV). In his *hermeneia*, Dicho Zograf argues that Leo I is depicted in the icon of the Mother of God of the Living Spring as the person leading a blind man (Дичо Зограф, 1976, p. 94).

that a church be built on the site, promising healing to all comers. Water from the spring supposedly healed Emperor Justinian the Great of a urinary ailment, and the grateful emperor founded a church and a monastery on the site. The *synaxarion* reading for the holiday also mentions Empress Zoe²⁷, wife of Emperor Leo VI the Wise, who was healed of infertility, as well as other members of the imperial family, monks, nuns, and ordinary people. Healings could be produced by drinking the water or taking a bath in it, but also by rubbing oneself with mud from the spring or drinking oil from a lamp suspended in front of an icon of the Virgin (Talbot, 2012, p. XV). A total of 47 such miracles were originally described in a 10th century manuscript²⁸ entitled *Anonymous miracles at the Pege*, written in a simple language and, according to Alice Marie Talbot, intended for the working classes (Talbot, 2012, p. LXV; Etzegeleou, 2005, p. 239). The account was later supplemented in *Logos* by Xhanthopoulos, added fifteen more miracles from his own time.

In the Balkan context, three of those miracles are mentioned in the *Miracles of the Mother of God*²⁹, a piece of devotional literature popular in 19th century Russia and the Balkans, itself a simplified version of Volume 3 of *Amartalon sotiria*, a 17th century work. The book was published several times in Bulgaria during the period of national revival, and again reissued in Asenovgrad in modern times.

The third volume of *Amartalon sotiria* describes 69 miracles of Mary collected from various sources by a monk named Agapios Landos from the Lavra of St. Athanasius on Mt. Athos. First published in Venice in 1641 (Гепрова, 2012, p. 23), the work went through numerous Greek editions in the 17th century. In terms of translations into Slavic languages³⁰, it was first translated by Bakachich, a Ukrainian monk living on Mt. Athos. In 1817, a Bulgarian translation by Joahim Krchovski entitled *Chudesa presvyatŭja Bogoroditsy (Miracles of the Mother of God)* was published in Belgrade, followed by a simplified version intended for purposes of popular piety (Гепрова, 2012, p. 28). An 1867 edition of that work published in Samokov was supposedly popular with icon painters, including Zahari Zograf (Гепрова, 2012, p. 28). It was presumably also familiar to the

²⁷ This is a reference to Zoe Zaoutzaina. The name of the empress may have contributed to the story's survival (*Zωη* [zōé] meaning "life" in Greek).

²⁸ Preserved in the Vatican (Vat, gr.822, fols, 180v-270v) (Talbot, 2012, p. XV)

²⁹ In Bulgarian *Chudesa Bogorodichni/ Chudesata na Presveta Bogoroditsa*

³⁰ Pege was also the end point of an imperial procession on Ascension Day (Talbot, 2012, p. XV).

Samokov master painter Dimitar Hristov, who painted a series of frescoes in 1846 illustrating seven of the miracles mentioned in the book, located in one of the narthexes of the main church in the Rila monastery, placed around the circular fresco of the Mother of God, next to the entrance of the chapel of St Nicholas. The fourth and final edition of the work (1867), published by Velikov, was intended for ordinary devotees, as attested by Bulgarian revival writer Zahari Stoianov in *Zapiski po bŭlgarskite vŭstaniya*/Записки по българските въстания (Стоянов, 1996, p. 33, cited in Гергова, 2012, p. 29). Another possible source of inspiration for the icon painters was an 1812 edition of Xanthopoulos' work published in Constantinople, which undoubtedly contributed to the revival of the veneration of the holy spring (Brisby, 2003, p. 31). The book was reissued in Asenovgrad in the modern times, entitled *Chudesata na Presveta Bogoroditsa*/Чудесата на Пресвета Богородица (Чудесата, 1995)³¹.

Three miracles connected with the healing powers of the Constantinople spring are mentioned both in *Amartalon Sotiria* and in the *Chudesata na Presveta Bogoroditsa*, appearing as items 5 – (“Of a certain blind man healed by the miraculous waters of the Mother of God”, narrating the story of Emperor Leo and the blind man, as described above), 6 (“Of the most wise Emperor Leo,” describing how Emperor Leo was healed on his deathbed with water from the spring fetched by a nun working in the shrine of the Mother of God of the Life-giving Spring, when the emperor's wife prayed devoutly for his healing; this miracle is depicted in the monastery of Rila), and 7 “Of a certain man who was brought back to life by the life-giving water of Balıklı/Balıklıya.”³²

The last miracle is a story of a man from Thesalia (Thessaloniki?) referred to as a “Thesalian”, who embarked on a sea journey to Constantinople hoping to drink from the healing waters to “enlighten his soul”. However, his dream began to slip away as he fell mortally ill on his journey. Realizing that he would not reach his destination alive, he asked one of the sailors not to throw his body into the sea, but rather to bury it near the healing spring. The sailor complied with his request. During the funeral, water from the spring was sprinkled over the man's body, and he came back to life. He spent the remaining 20 years of his

³¹ I am referring to the second amended edition of that book (1995), based on an earlier 1905 edition translated from Greek by shimonah Paisiy (Чудесата, 1995, p. 5).

³² The place is described by a Turkish name derived from the word balık (“fish”), and literally means “the place of fishes”, “a place where there are fishes”. This is related to a different legend, as discussed below.

life as a monk praising the Virgin (Чудесата, 1995, pp. 18–19). It was probably that miracle that led the Byzantine chronicler Xanthopoulos to describe the spring as “life-giving” or “life-bearing”³³. Depictions of a man miraculously brought back to life are often included in icons of The Mother of God of the Life-giving Spring, showing him coming back to life when sprinkled with the healing water.

Interestingly, miracles 5 and 7 are also included in the aforementioned 12th century manuscript, though not without certain anthropologically interesting differences. In the 12th century version of the miracle of the Thesalian man, it is the man himself, rather than a sailor, who asks that the healing water be sprinkled over his dead body. In that source the spring is obviously not referred to by its later Turkish name of Balıklı, but the word does appear later in the 1817 edition of *Amartalon Sotiria*, in which Ivanka Gergova has identified numerous Turkish-influenced departures from the Venetian original. Presumably, Joahim Krchovski used that word because it was used in his own day by pilgrims visiting the Pege spring. In Bulgaria, the Mother of God of the Pege Spring and her local variants came to be referred to as Balükliyskata, or the Mother of God of the Fishes³⁴. In terms of Byzantine sources, supposedly the first person to mention the fish swimming in the spring was “the Russian Anonymous who visited Pege between 1389 and 1391” (Talbot, 2012, p. XVII; “Anonymous Miracle of the Pege,” 2012, p. 148). Given this date, George Majeska speculates that the tradition may be Byzantine in origin (Majeska, 1984, p. 326).

The name itself, Balıklı, appears to be a later development. Majeska supposes that it “could be a calque of a popular name of the area in the Late Byzantine Times” (Majeska, 1984, p. 326). However, the fact that fishes were found in the spring in the late Byzantine period does not prove that the Turkish name Balıklı would have been used, especially given that the place had been known for centuries as Pege, an appellation that became current among the Orthodox population. It seems far more likely that the name Balıklı was a later coinage by the local population (or possibly by the Turkish authorities) at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. Regardless of whether the name was an organic development or became officially imposed from the top down, the Turkish name

³³ “Life-giving Spring,” 2017. The liturgical interpretation connects that appellation to the fact that the Mother of God gave birth to life that is Christ.

³⁴ Prot. Emil Paralingov (Паралингов, 2012) notes that the holiday is also referred to as “Балъкълъ” (The Mother of God of the Fishes).

as used by the Muslims was an effective way to symbolically de-Christianize the site, or at least to neutralize its Christian associations, especially given the references to Muslims visiting the spring. Incidentally, sites of a dual cult were relatively widespread in the Ottoman Empire, with each religious group justifying the sanctity of various sites in terms of its own cultural traditions (Hasluck, 2005; Hayden, 2002; Иванова, 2000; Lubanska, 2015). With regard to the Pege spring, this fact may have influenced a depiction in a Greek icon (shown below Photo 2) where one of the pilgrims appears to be a Muslim in eastern garb (a black fez with red feathers and a large, loose-fitting cloak). The icon shows the man leaning over the spring, filling a chalice with water. Standing next to him is a patriarch wearing a mitre and some soldiers (probably Turkish ones). At the other end of the pool a bishop and another believer are washing their eyes with water from the pool, with the Thesalian coming back to life and a demoniac (*besnovat*) in the foreground. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that an iconographic depiction of a Muslim man or the fact that *The Miracles of the Mother of God* mentions Muslims visiting the spring may or may not be a reflection of actual events: those might just as well have been messages calculated to the prestige of the site, a frequent strategy in communities made up of different religions.

I have come across the phenomenon of dual cult at holy sites on numerous occasions in Bulgaria³⁵, a practice of which many historical examples can be found in Frederik Wilhelm Hasluck's *Islam and Christianity under the Sultans* (1925). It should be mentioned, however, that a dual cult was mainly practiced by the dervishes, with infrequent exceptions among other groups. Perhaps visits of Muslims at the Pege spring were merely an occasional rather than a regular occurrence. In any case, the site would have fit in comfortably with their own Muslim religious imageries, where the healing water of life plays a major part, perhaps explaining why Muslims would have been prepared to use healing water from the spring.

According to Frederik Wilhelm Hasluck, archaeologist and historian, and a respected expert on Ottoman Islam and Christianity, the name Balükliyska (Fish) was in a distant manner related to a Syrian tradition in which a dervish fried some fishes on one side only to see them leap into the fountain of Sheikh

³⁵ For instance, at the monastery of St. George in Khajidimovo, where I conducted fieldwork in 2009 (Lubanska, 2015), I observed Muslims washing their heads with water from the *ayasma* located near the monastery.

al-Badawi³⁶ and come back to life in its waters (Hasluck, 2005, pp. 248–249). Since then, descendants of those miraculously revived fishes would bear visible marks of frying³⁷ (Hasluck, 2005, pp. 248–249). According to Hasluck, the story was widely known in Istanbul in his own day (the first half of the 20th century), except that its characters had become replaced by Emperor Constantine or a Christian monk (Hasluck, 2005, p. 249). This is a reference to a motif associated by Greek and Bulgarian folklorists with the Song of the Fall of Constantinople (cf. Стойкова, 1985, p. 33), where fish similarly leap back into a pool as a monk who is frying them (or, in other versions, Emperor Constantine himself) refuses to believe a prophecy brought by a falcon or another bird that Constantinople would fall to the Turks, and dismisses it saying that fried fish will as soon come back to life and leap into the water – which duly happens in the story. Bulgarian folklorists and researchers in Slavic studies generally assume that the legend dates back to the times of the fall of Constantinople, and originated among the Christian population. In the story, the figure of Constantine the Great becomes contaminated with Constantine Paleologos, and the duration of the Byzantine Empire is symbolically represented by “300 years”. The Bulgarian folklorist Stefana Stoykova, who studied the song, explains the narrative of the miraculously revived fish through other Christian traditions and practices known in the Balkans, such as the custom of offering fish as a sacrifice to St Nicholas (who, incidentally, appears in the “Song on the Fall of Constantinople” as a witnesses of the prophecy) (Стойкова, 1985). The popularity of that motif in the Christian variant may have formed a line of strategic symbolic defence on the part of the Christian population, who may have adopted the Turkish name of Baloukli, but still insisted on associating it with its own religious imagery traced back to supposedly original “Christian fishes”. Interestingly, echoes of that phenomenon are also discernible in the 18th century *hermeneia* mentioned above. Fishes swimming in the pool are mentioned by Dionysius of Fourni (2nd half of the 18th century), who mentions three fishes without going into more detail (Djonizjusz z Furny, 2003, p. 187), and, more interestingly for our purposes, by Dicho Zograf, whose *hermeneia* mentions seven fishes “that had been fried previously” (sic!) (Дичо Зограф, 1976, p. 94), even though he refers to the image as “Zhivonosena Istochnik” rather

³⁶ This is a reference to a fountain in the shrine of Sheikh Al-Badawi in Tanta, Egypt.

³⁷ According to Hasluck, this may be a reference to a fish in the pool of Solomon (*piscinae Salamonis*).

than “Balükliyska”. This demonstrates the fact that the motif exerted a palpable influence on the imageries of icon-painters and their works, and, indirectly, on the imagination of the devotees.

As an anthropologist of religion studying problems of Muslim-Christian syncretism in the former Ottoman Empire, I find the “Christian” affiliation of the fishes quite problematic. I am more persuaded by the hypothesis of Hasluck, who argues that the story of the fishes is a relatively late motif concerning the Pege *ayazmo*³⁸ (Hasluck, 2005, p. 244), presumably of Ottoman origin.

According to Hasluck, the prototype of the narrative about the fried fish coming back to life in its Muslim variant can be found in the Qur’anic motif (18:60) of a servant of Moses [Joshua – who is not mentioned by name in the Qur’an] and a fish [probably intended as food for the journey] which they leave behind by oversight. In the narrative, the fish comes back to life and leaps into the water to catch up with the travelers down the stream³⁹ (Hasluck, 2005, p. 249). The same Qur’anic story mentions an encounter with a mysterious sage responsible for a series of confounding actions (sinking a ship, murdering a boy, building a wall for free), believed to be the mystic Al-Khidr, a reincarnation of the prophet Elijah. Al-Khidr was supposed to have tasted from the Fountain of Life (Ma’ul Hayat), becoming immortal as a result. In Muslim iconography, he is often depicted as a turbaned sage wearing a green cloak, standing on a fish swimming in the River of Life (Photo 3).

Considering the fact that the Muslim stories of revived fishes pre-date the motifs found in “The Song on the Fall of Constantinople” we may suppose that it was the local Christian population who adapted a Muslim tradition, and not vice versa. From the perspective of anthropology of religion this would have been a fascinating example of intercultural rivalry over a holy site, in which certain components of the respective religious imageries become mutually appropriated by the other group and freely modified to suit its religion or the needs of the community. Although the coining of the term cannot be dated with precision (other than loosely to the 15th-18th centuries), it was already widespread in 18th century

³⁸ Hasluck relies on unidentified Byzantine sources claiming that the miracle of the Thesalian man was accompanied by another miracle, where salted fishes belonging to sailors were brought back to life in the healing *ayazmo* (Hasluck, 2005, p. 244). I could not establish the sources Hasluck may have had in mind. I have been unable to identify the motif either in the twelfth-century manuscript source or in the copy of *The Miracles of the Mother of God* available to me.

³⁹ This motif is therefore similar to Miracle 6 in *Amortolon sotiria*.

writings, and continues to operate in the religious imageries of Greek and Bulgarian devotees to this day, though no longer in reference to the original spring located in Constantinople. We are dealing with a local adaptation of a narrative, a case where most respondents are not aware of its origins, and assume it to be local in origin. This is perhaps a good opportunity to draw attention to one of the best-known holy sites in Asenovgrad in Bulgaria, where the term is applied to an *ayasma* in the chapel of St John the Baptist in the Church of Annunciation, and to the church itself, which goes by the name of *Balükliyskata*, but also to the church of the Mother of God of the Fishes (*Sveta Bogoroditsa Ribnata*), a point mentioned by one of my respondents, who said that he was living in Asenovgrad near the Church of the Theotokos of the Fishes.

This peculiar name of the Asenovgrad church was pointed out in the 1990s by the Bulgarian folklorist and ethnographer Vihra Baeva (Баева, 2013), however, her respondents and herself interpreted the name in terms of the local context⁴⁰. Aware of the Turkish etymology of the word, they nonetheless attributed it to the scale-like tiles covering the dome of the Asenovgrad church (which has no local equivalent), and to the fishes swimming in the pool. Neither Baeva nor any of her respondents mentioned the Byzantine etymology and origins of the name, offering several alternative explanations instead: 1) Fish is traditionally shared on the Feast of Annunciation, a custom observed by the local devotees, 2) the Christian symbolism of fish as a symbol of Christ, and 3) the symbolism of the fish as regards the various aspects of the Mother of God and of the lunar deities, 4) the symbolism of the fish has female origins, fertility and birth (68). In this, Baeva disregarded those cultural associations which were actually closer to home, failing to realize the remarkable symbolic similarities between the Pege source in Constantinople with its fishes, and the Asenovgrad spring.

The numerous questions and ambiguities invited by those historical and cultural findings suggest that more interdisciplinary research on the subject is required, involving collaboration in anthropology, Byzantine Studies, and Ottoman Studies. My contention here was merely to illustrate the likely cultural origins of the imageries from the region of Plovdiv and Asenovgrad. Such genealogies

⁴⁰ Baeva notes that the name *Balükliyska* is related to the Turkish word *balık* for *fish*, however, the text makes no mention of the Byzantine original for that association. It is not known when or how that tradition had reached that location. Perhaps this is connected with Asenovgrad's large Greek population, which may have been autochthonous or immigrant in origin (Baeva, 2013, p. 64).

can only be grasped from the historical and theological perspectives. The local religious practices undertaken “for health purposes” reveal a broad network of supra-local interconnections with the entire geo-cultural region subject to the workings of the *longue durée*. In doing so, those practices which can be studied with the tools of cultural anthropology take on a greater semantic complexity. The ablutions and drinking of the healing water “for health purposes”, which the devotees not infrequently regard as being more important than the liturgy, stories about healings experienced by demoniacs, church dignitaries and people of other religions, and the determined attachment to *ayazma* in local populations – all those things appear to be part of a centuries-old continuum, with ever-new generations coming to seek help at the same well-spring of life-giving forces.

Translated from Polish by Piotr Szymczak

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Życiodajne źródła i Bogurodzica Żiwonosn Iztocznik / Zoodochos Pege / Baliklijska. Bizantyńsko-grecko-osmańskie oddziaływania międzykulturowe i ich reperkusje w ikonografii, piśmiennictwie i praktykach rytualnych w regionie Płowdiwu

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcono problematyce kultu leczniczych wód (*ajazma*) na terenie bułgarskich prawosławnych cerkwi i monasterów w regionie Płowdiwu i Asenowgradu oraz jego domniemanych związków z bizantyńską, grecką i osmańską kulturą religijną Konstantynopola/Stambułu. Swoje tezy autorka opiera na badaniach terenowych i kwerendach archiwalnych prowadzonych w latach 2012–2014. Badania miały na celu odnalezienie odpowiedzi na nękażące autorkę od ponad dekady pytanie badawcze, co prawosławni wierni mają na myśli, gdy uzasadniają praktycznie wszystkie podejmowane przez siebie religijne rytuały (z wyjątkiem funeralnych) tym, że wykonują je „dla zdrowia” (*za zdrave*).

Słowa kluczowe: życiodajność, źródło, uzdrowienie, Zoodochos Pege, Bogurodzica, Baliklijska, Płowdiw, ikonografia

Life-Giving Springs and The Mother of God / Zhivonosn Istochnik /Zoodochos Pege / Balŭkliyska. Byzantine-Greek-Ottoman Intercultural Influence and Its Aftereffects in Iconography, Religious Writings and Ritual Practices in the Region of Plovdiv

This article looks at veneration of healing springs (*ayazma*) in Orthodox Christian churches and monasteries in the region of Plovdiv and Asenovgrad (Bulgaria) to raise the problem of its connections to Byzantine, Greek and Ottoman religious cultures of Constantinople/Istanbul. My argument is based on the fieldwork and archival research I conducted in 2012–2014 to

seek an answer to a research question that had kept me intrigued for over a decade: namely, what is the meaning, in practical terms, of the claim frequently made by Orthodox Christians that the various religious rituals they engaged in (with the exception of funerary ones) were practiced “for health” (*za zdrave*).

Keywords: healing spring, ayazma, Zoodochos Pege, The Mother of God, Balükliyska, Plovdiv, iconography

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Photo 1. Sv. Bogoroditsa Zhivonosn Iztochnik, Zahari Zograf, 1837, origin. Sv. Petka Stara, Plovdiv (Москва, 2002, p. 20)



Photo 2. (<https://russianicons.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/zoodpegjacks.jpg>)



Photo 3. Muslim sage Al-Khizr as shown in a Mughal era manuscript miniature. Kept in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inventory number IS.48:12/A1956 (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khidr#/media/File:Khizr.JPG>)