Why Cyril: Choosing the Apostle to the Slavs

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To Doug and Kristi for always encouraging me to study what I love

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Introduction

During the mid-ninth century in the Byzantine Empire, Emperor Michael III said to a young man named Constantine: "Philosopher, go to these people, preach and answer for the Holy Trinity with Its help. For no one else is capable of doing this properly."[1] Constantine, hereafter referred to as Cyril, was chosen for the mission to Khazaria not by chance, but because his education, linguistic skill, and theological training made him uniquely suited to represent Byzantine interests abroad. This confidence in him was reaffirmed when he was later entrusted with an even more significant mission to Great Moravia.

Prince Rastislav of Great Moravia made an appeal for missionary guidance in 862 AD to the Byzantine Empire. Cyril was sent on this mission at the behest of Emperor Michael III. The Moravian representatives, as directed by Prince Rastislav, said:

> Though our people have rejected paganism and observe Christian law, we have not a teacher who would explain to us in our language the true Christian faith; so that other countries which look to us might emulate us. Therefore, O lord, send us such a bishop and teacher; for from you good law comes to all countries.[2]

Prince Rastislav requested that a bishop and teacher be sent to Great Moravia so that his people could practice Christianity in their native Slavic tongue. After careful consideration, the Emperor and his counselors decided to send brothers Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica.

The task presented to the Byzantine delegation was daunting and needed a learned man who was up to the challenge. After consulting with his advisors, Emperor Michael III was convinced that Cyril was the man for the job. This thesis grapples with why Cyril

[1] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine ; The VITA of Methodius*. University of Michigan, Michigan Slavic Publications, 1976, 21.
[2] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine, The VITA of Methodius,* 43-44.

was chosen to create and introduce the Slavonic liturgy to Great Moravia. What events occurred during his childhood that showed he was ready to undertake this task? Previous scholarship offers a simple explanation by attributing the decision to the brothers' knowledge of a Slavic language and their monastic discipline; however, the matter is considerably more complex. How did his upbringing and education prepare him for this mission? Were there signs early on that showed Cyril to be in God's favor? These events are examined in hagiographies, the life of a saint. This thesis examines the *VITA of Constantine*, focusing on the saint's youth and early missionary journeys to demonstrate how he, together with Methodius, was uniquely suited among Byzantines for the mission to Great Moravia. All events in the *vitae* were purposefully recorded to establish that these men were marked by divine favor from the earliest stages of their lives. Cyril's childhood and accomplishments demonstrate why he was chosen. Recognized as saints shortly after their deaths by the Eastern Orthodox Church and eventually the Roman Catholic Church, the brothers had a profound impact.[3] Although the Moravians had practiced Christianity for years, they had done so in Latin; now, they sought to worship in their own language. With a written script they cultivated a deeper understanding of Christian teachings and practice. Their commitment to learning and speaking about God to others constantly sets an example for a pious Christian.

Saint Cyril the Philosopher and Saint Methodius were natives of Thessalonica, the second largest city in Byzantium. Situated on the gulf of the Aegean Sea west of Constantinople, this city was an essential port in the empire both politically and culturally. The brothers' father, Leo, a wealthy nobleman, served in the city's

[3] Cyril and Methodius were recognized as saints by the Eastern Orthodox Church shortly after their deaths in the ninth century. In 1880, their veneration was extended to the entire Roman Catholic Church by Pope Leo XIII.

administration. The brothers grew up in a family of seven children, with Cyril the youngest and Methodius among his older siblings.[4] Their mother's name and identity are unknown, as is Methodius' baptismal name. Methodius was the name he took upon assuming holy orders, his name at birth remains a mystery. The boys grew up in a Chrsitian household and received a well-rounded education thanks to their father and many tutors. From a young age, Cyril was fascinated by the world around him; he actively studied philosophy, theology, and languages, which helped him become a prolific missionary within the empire. Living in the Byzantine Empire fostered a rich intellectual and cultural environment that not only nurtured his scholarly pursuits, but also exposed him to diverse peoples and traditions.

In the fourth century, the Roman Empire was divided into the Western Roman Empire and Eastern Roman Empire. Following his conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century, Constantine the Great established Constantinople as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire in 330 AD, now commonly known as the Byzantine Empire.[5] Followed by centuries of growing division between the eastern and western churches, Byzantium rose from a tiny Greek town to be reborn and renamed "New Rome." The end of the fourth century saw the beginning of a period of decline for the Western Roman Empire, while Byzantium gradually acquired a personality of its own, transitioning from the use of Latin to Greek in its courts.[6] The empire was a bustling center of trade due to its position between Europe and Asia; goods such as silk, spices, and jewelry flowed through its markets and across its territories. Byzantium also faced mounting pressure from neighboring powers on multiple frontiers, many of whom threatened Constantinople

[4] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine, The VITA of Methodius,* 5.
[5] John Julius Norwich. *A Short History of Byzantium.* 1st Vintage Books ed. Vintage Books, 1999, 13.
[6] Norwich, *Short History of Byzantium*, 36.

itself. In the ninth century, Byzantium was under constant siege from the Arabic peoples who attacked the southern seabound borders of the empire. While largely unsuccessful, these raids showed the Christian and Islam divide at its peak. Another group who encroached on Constantinople were Slavs under the direction of Norse figures.[7] Arriving in fleets from the Black Sea in the year of 860, the raiders made contact with the Byzantine emperor and from that point forward, contact with Slavic nations was continuous.

Since the middle of the sixth century, Slavic peoples inhabited the central Danube valley. The Danubian Slavs are present day ancestors of Slovaks, their original tribal name being *Sloveni*.[8] Their blood brothers, the Moravians, settled in the valley of the Morava river, and both of these tribes were located in present day Czech Republic and Slovakia. The *Sloveni* and Moravians were ruled separately, but in the middle of the ninth century, Prince Mojmir I of Moravia conquered the territory of the *Sloveni* from Prince Pribian, and the combined principalities of these two peoples made up the empire of Great Moravia. It is possible Prince Mojmir attempted to take more territory from the Bavarians in the west which alarmed their king greatly. Louis the German, King of East Francia, ruled from 843 to 876 and deposed Prince Mojmir in 846. He entrusted his new territory to his nephew Rastislav.[9] Prince Rastislav came to rule Great Moravia under the watchful eye of the Bavarians, but "The new ruler submitted for a time to the Bavarian domination, but in 855 he succeeded in throwing off his shackles and became completely independent."[10] Great Moravia's independence is the turning point in the small empire's

[7] Norwich. *A Short History of Byzantium,* 153.
[8] Michael Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius* (Slovak Editions "Sts. Cyril and Methodius," 1969), 62.
[9] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 63-64.
[10] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 64.

story; if Rastislav had not separated himself from the Bavarians, Cyril and Methodius most likely never would have entered the picture. King Louis attempted to take Great Moravia back from his rebellious nephew, but ultimately retreated after seeing their strength in fortifications and numbers. Instead, the Bavarians decided to win allies against Prince Rastislav and turned to the eastern neighbors of the Moravians, the Bulgarians.[11] Rastislav sought out allies instead of sitting and watching his enemies gather. At first, Rastislav went to Rome to speak with Emperor Louis II who turned him down. Then, he turned to the Byzantine Empire, whose army and blistering artillery could provide assistance. The purpose of the delegation to Byzantium was political, as Rastislav hoped to gain allies to reinforce the Moravains against the Bavarians, but he also asked for a teacher to be sent to better the Christian learning of his people. Little did he know Byzantium would send Cyril, later known as an Apostle to the Slavs.

Saints were especially important in Late Antiquity, and Christians created cults surrounding them which gives insight into their religion and how they interacted with the world around them. Hagiographies are works that showcase, but often embellish, the life of the saint, showing their virtue and commitment to Christianity. The main primary sources drawn upon in this thesis are the *VITA of Constantine, VITA of Methodius,* and the *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*. The *vitae* include numerous depictions of events from the brothers' early years until their death. This thesis uses translations of the *vitae* into English. This specific translation of *The VITA of Constantine* comes from the Vladislav Grammitcus manuscript dated at 1469. There are earlier editions of the text, but this version was chosen because it is the longest and contains the most events as recorded by the author. The manuscript from the *Uspenskij sbornik* was employed for the

[11] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 66.

translation of *The VITA of Methodius,* which dates back to the late 12th or early 13th century, and this is the oldest extant manuscript of the *vita*.[12]

The third primary source, *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*, is thought to originate from a work written by Cyril himself. This text contains specific details about the discovery of the relics of Pope Saint Clement I of Rome. Within the texts, there are many biblical quotations, paraphrases, and allusions, and for these the King James Version of *The Holy Bible* was used. The hagiographies are essential for understanding the lives and work of the brothers, and in turn they are how the cults of Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius are maintained as time goes on. They are not biographies in the modern sense: they are spiritual narratives meant to depict the brothers as exemplary figures. Supernatural events occur that emphasize sanctity, and are tropes of a Byzantine style of hagiographical writings. There is scholarly debate on the authenticity of the v*itae*, worries about embellishments within the stories, but many scholars now affirm that these hagiographies contain true anecdotes that showcase the wisdom of the brothers, along with some elements that may have been stretched to make them seem closer to God.[13]

It is commonly agreed that the author of *The VITA of Constantine* is his brother Methodius, or if he was not the author himself that he played an editorial role. One of Methodius' disciples is thought to be the author of the *VITA of Methodius*. In the introduction of the hagiography collection, the author says, "[t]he author of the Life of Constantine appears to be a sober narrator, yet one with a feeling for the artistic arrangement of the choices and facts."[14] Everything recorded in the *vitae* was written for

[12] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine ; The VITA of Methodius*, *xvi.* This information is given in the section titled 'Translators Preface, which introduces the *vitae*.
[13] *Les Legendes* written by Francis Dvornik covers the topic of the authenticity of the *vitae.*
[14] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine ; The VITA of Methodius*, *vi*.

a reason, the author would not have included events or descriptions that did not serve to show the holiness of the brothers. The authors most definitely embellished some of the stories within the hagiographies to make the brothers seem more saintly.

> The author had two principal aims in mind while writing the *VITA* of Constantine:
>
> The first aim was to define the holiness of Constantine by representing the life of this New Apostle who participated in the process of redemption, thus showing the Slavs the way to salvation through the will of God. The second aim was to defend the Slavic alphabet, the Slavonic translation of the Holy Scriptures, and the Slavonic liturgy.[15]

This thesis examines how Cyril's holiness guided his missionary activity and diplomatic work for the Byzantine Empire, and how his diligence demonstrated to those around him that he was divinely guided. In examining the Great Moravian mission, it becomes clear that his task was to create an alphabet through which the Slavic peoples could understand and practice Christianity. While in Great Moravia, Cyril stayed much longer than necessary to merely present the Slavonic liturgy to the Moravians. He stayed for many years to teach and educate the population about the translated scriptures, which he continued to work on while in the area. His commitment and hard work was formidable, and shows a pattern of wanting to educate others about Christian values. Had Cyril not prioritized his intellectual and spiritual development in his youth, the trajectory of his life might have been significantly altered.

There is a vast amount of scholarship pertaining to the role of Cyril and Methodius in the Great Moravian mission. Notably in the field of Slavic studies, one of the foremost scholars was a Czech scholar named Francis Dvornik, a central authority on Slavic and Byzantine studies in the 20th century. His monographs, such as the title

[15] Maddalena Betti, *The Making of Christian Moravia (858–882): Papal Power and Political Reality* (Brill, 2014), 76.

Byzantine Missions Among the Slavs written in 1970, have played a vital role while conducting research for this thesis, mainly his works in English. This monograph is essential not only for understanding the brothers' missionary activity, but also for illuminating the motivations behind these missions, particularly their political and religious dimensions. Dvornik was also a central figure in the debate on the authenticity of the *vitae* of the brothers: whether or not they could be read as primary sources. He authored a whole book on the subject titled *Les Legendes* in 1933. Since its publication, the debate on the authenticity of the hagiographies has subsided. Along with Dvornik, scholars include Michael Lacko, who wrote *Saints Cyril and Methodius* published in 1963. This book is key because of its approach to the specific events of the missionary work of Cyril and Methodius prior to the Great Moravian mission. It also includes numerous maps and figures, laying the groundwork for the possible routes taken by the brothers. Along with these monographs, many articles published on the actions of Cyril and Methodius are consulted in this thesis. Mirela Ivanova, an intellectual and social historian of Byzantium, wrote an article titled "Re-Thinking the Life of Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher," which is drawn upon especially when examining the specific debates Cyril had while on missions.

The first chapter of this thesis largely focuses on the earliest events of Cyril's childhood as recorded in the *VITA* of Constantine. The heritage of the brothers and the question of Slavic descent is discussed. The author of Cyril's hagiography recorded numerous events from his early years in Thessalonica to his last days in Rome. After leaving Thessalonica, Cyril lived in Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium, where he worked closely with prominent scholars and began to create a reputation for himself in

the court. The second chapter begins with Cyril's debate with the former Patriarch of Constantinople, John VII, an iconoclast. Following the debate, Cyril journeyed to Samarra where many Arabic peoples resided and participated in theological discussions with Muslim scholars at the court. This chapter also examines a mission to Khazaria, where Cyril again engaged in theological discussions.

Cyril was a great theologian, who debated with all kinds of people and honorably defended Christianity. He repeatedly draws on biblical quotations in these deliberations showing how closely he studied scripture. The final chapter investigates the miracles attributed to Saint Cyril, before and after his mission to Khazaria. Before arriving in Khazaria, the Byzantine delegation made a stop in Kherson where Cyril discovered the relics of Pope Saint Clement of Rome. This event was pivotal in his career and clearly demonstrates that God entrusted him with sacred authority, affirming the divine favor that would shape his later successes among the Slavs. Throughout their years, Cyril and Methodius often acted together, but Cyril's early years and activities are far more thoroughly documented, and of the two he is celebrated more. In this thesis, Cyril plays the central role and Methodius enters the narrative intermittently as he emerges in the documentary record, primarily in relation to shared missionary efforts and institutional developments.

One challenge I had while conducting this research was the language barrier. There are sources pertaining to Saint Cyril and Methodius that are written in languages I do not know. I am currently in the third year of my Russian language studies, and I have less knowledge of Latin or Greek. One of the primary texts I draw from, *Vita Cum*

Translatione S. Clementis, is in Latin and was kindly translated by Bevin Killen, a graduate student at the University of Michigan.

Chapter I: Early Childhood

Introduction

The question of why Cyril was chosen for the mission to Great Moravia cannot be answered solely by examining the moment of his selection; rather, it must be understood through the conditions that shaped his earliest years. The hagiographical accounts of Cyril and his brother Methodius present more than a simple record of childhood. They construct a narrative designed to reveal signs of future greatness from the very beginning. By situating the brothers within the social, political, and cultural landscape of ninth-century Thessalonica, these sources emphasize the formative events that proved Cyril was an intelligent and divinely guided young man.

This chapter explores the childhoods of brothers Cyril and Methodius, from their youth in Thessalonica to when Cyril was invited to study in Constantinople. Methodius was older than Cyril, and instead of taking the educational route decided to begin his career as soon as he was old enough to take on an administrative role in a Slav-inhabited province.[1] The first section investigates the question of the brothers' supposed Slavic heritage, and how their environment provided them with the linguistic exposure necessary to carry about future tasks. A close reading of the *VITA of Constantine* and *VITA of Methodius* constitutes the second section, and certain events from Cyril's childhood are examined to show how intellectual curiosity and wisdom was bestowed upon him by God. The third section traces Cyril's invitation to study at the Emperor's

[1] Anthony-Emil N. Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 21-22. It is still unclear where exactly the province Methodius administrated was located, but it was somewhere that had settlements of Slavic tribes, possibly near his home of Thessalonica. The administrative unit he was assigned, called an *archonita*, was either independent or part of a larger administrative district called a *thema.* In his hagiography, it says he was assigned to a "Slavic *archonita*"

court in Constantinople, where his learning quickened and he gained access to some of the greatest scholars in Byzantium in the ninth century. Everything in the *vitae* was recorded for a reason; the authors, chose to include all of these details from their early years to show that Cyril and Methodius were given specific educational opportunities because they showed great promise and divine favor from a young age.

Section One: Heritage of the Brothers

Cyrillo-Methodian scholars have grappled for centuries on the heritage of the brothers, with a particular emphasis on whether they were of Slavic origin. Cyril and Methodius were born in the city of Thessalonica, the second largest city in the Byzantine Empire during the ninth century. Though the exact dates of their birth are unknown, Cyril, born Constantine, is believed to be born in the year of 826 or 827 AD, and was the youngest of seven children.[2] Methodius was older than Cyril, and was born around the year 815.[3] Methodius' baptismal name is unknown, Methodius being his religious name given to him later in life upon assuming holy orders. As scholars like Michael Lacko have determined, it is likely that he was baptized a name like Michael, Manuel, Maximos, or Methropanes as traditionally the religious name began with the same letter as the baptismal name.[4] Their father's name was Leo, and their mother's name is unknown, but later sources call her Mary.[5] Cyril's *vita* states that after he was born, "the good parents agreed not to lie with each other. They never once transgressed their vow, but lived that way in the Lord for fourteen years, parting at death."[6] This decision was made out of religious conviction, and the boys' parents lived together as brother and sister, meaning they did not share a bed, until they parted.[7]

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[2] Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs*, 1. This information is deduced by the fact that in the *vita*, it states in chapter 18 that Cyril died in 869 at the age of forty-two.
[3] Michael Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius* (Slovak Editions "Sts. Cyril and Methodius," 1969), 16. This information is deduced based on the accepted belief that Methodus was seventy years old when he died in 885.
[4] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 16.
[5] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 15.
[6] M. Kantor, R. S. White, and A. Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius* (Michigan Slavic Publications, University of Michigan, 1976), 5. Some sources also call her Maria, see the *Prolog Life* of St Cyril.
[7] Nick Mayhew, "Petr and Fevroniia's Unorthodox Marriage," *Slavonic and East European Review* 100, no. 4 (October 2022): 654–73. This is a common trope in Orthodox hagiography that includes a sexless or near-sexless marriage, which seems to be the case for Cyri's parents.

As far back as the sixth century, Slavic tribes settled in the northern Balkan peninsula, where they expanded southward to occupy almost all of central Greece. When they reached Thessalonica, which was further south than their earlier boundaries, they often attacked the city and tried to take it for themselves but these attacks were largely unsuccessful. Namely, Emperor Justinian (527-565) fought against the Slavic tribes, forcing these bands to become federates of the Empire.[8] Eventually, Slavs began to settle in the outskirts of Thessalonica and later, after their power had been broken, they were allowed within the city walls. From the late sixth century onwards, the area surrounding Thessalonica was overwhelmed by Slavic tribes. There are many rich sources that back up this information, showing the movement of these tribes. The *Miracles of St Dimiter of Salonika,* a hagiographical text that supplies details regarding the relationship between Thessalonica and the "barbarian" Slavs, shows that the Slavs were at first enemies of the city, but gradually became a settled population.[9] This new settlement of people brought their own culture and ways of life that differed from that of Byzantium, prompting the Slavs to be referred to as barbarians in texts recorded from this period.

Family and nobility at birth played a crucial role in shaping the direction of a person's life. In one of the opening passages of the *VITA of Constantine*, the author immediately references the brothers' familial background to emphasize their noble status and position within Thessalonica:

[8] Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (Rutgers University Press, 1970), 2.
[9] Vassilka Tapkova-Zaïmova, "The Slavs of Salonika and the Origin of Cyril and Methodius," in *The Work of Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher*, A Miscellany, 62–69 (Sofia-Press, n.d.), 64.

> There was a certain noble and rich man named Leo in the city of Thessalonica who held the rank of *drungarios* under the *strategos*. He was, as Job once was, a pious man and kept faithfully all God's commandments. He begot seven children of which the youngest, the seventh, was Constantine the Philosopher, our preceptor and teacher.[10]

This excerpt introduces the reader to Cyril's origins, birthplace, and his family's social standing within the city. While the text provides little information about the other siblings of Cyril and Methodius or their mother, it offers a clear picture of their father and his administrative role. Leo held the rank of *drungarios* in Thessalonica within the Byzantine Empire's complex administrative system. During this period, this title was commonly associated with the naval fleet, indicating that Leo likely commanded maritime units in Thessalonica.

During the first half of the ninth century, Thessalonica served as a vital outpost of the empire. As Francis Dvornik explains, "during the political and ecclesiastical reorganization of the empire after the pacification of the Slavs, Thessalonica became a *thema* headed by a *stategos*, who exercised not only administrative power but also military command."[11] A *thema* functioned as a major military and administrative province, governed by a *strategos* who held authority over both military forces and civilian affairs, including taxation. Beneath the *strategos* served officials such as the *drungarios*, who carried out regional military responsibilities.[12]

Tensions persisted between the Greek and Slavic populations in Thessalonica, and the young brothers likely witnessed aspects of this unrest. Around 836, Slavic groups living to the east of Thessalonica revolted, followed by a series of smaller uprisings

[10] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 5.
[11] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 53.
[12] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 15.

throughout mainland Greece and the Peloponnese peninsula in subsequent years.[13] Given Leo's position, he likely participated in efforts to suppress these revolts, experiences that may have influenced the boys' early understanding of imperial authority and conflict. Because this title was reserved for high-ranking military officials, especially in a strategically important city like Thessalonica, its holders were expected to demonstrate loyalty to the emperor and a firm commitment to Christianity.

Although the rank of *drungarios* did not necessarily require high birth, the sources clearly mention that Cyril and Methodius came from a noble family. The *VITA of Constantine* states that "there was a certain noble and rich man named Leo."[14] Then the *VITA of Methodius* says, "He [Methodius] was not of mean origin on either side, but of a very good and venerable one, which was known first and foremost by God, and the Emperor, as well as the entire region of Thessalonica."[15] This statement reveals that their parents came from nobility and people knew them, and this was reflected in the prosperity of both brothers. Their family being well known in Thessalonica and by the emperor played a helping hand in the opportunities that are presented to the boys later in life.

The court of the Byzantine Empire spoke Greek, but in the specific *thema* of Thessalonica, officials were often expected to have knowledge of local Slavic dialects. Many people within the city spoke Slavic varieties used by the communities living in and around Thessalonica. Byzantium as an empire had a very heterogeneous population with

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[13] Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs*, 12-13. Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus wrote about these events in his work on the administration of the Byzantine state, *De Administrando Imperio* (948-952).
[14] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 5.
[15] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 73.

regards to the ethnic origins of its people.[16] However, origin did not matter as much as who you respected and listened to. If one followed the emperor, and met the conditions he put on his subjects, a high government position may have been attainable. In the fourth and fifth centuries, many noble positions in the administration were occupied by Goths, and there are cases from right before and after the time of Cyril and Methodius where people of Slavic descent held high political positions.[17]

Of the concrete cases of Cyril and Methodius, a dominant theory is that the brothers were in fact of Slavic origin. Whether or not they were of Slavic heritage, or rather just grew up among people who spoke the language, each possibility could help explain why the brothers were ultimately chosen to go on missions via the Byzantine Empire. Many scholars have gone in circles around this debate, but regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, Cyril and Methodius' childhood environment made them into the learned men they are known as today. This debate takes away from the achievements of the brothers, and it is likely a definite answer of their heritage will never be found. Regardless of their ethnicity, their accomplishments are their own, and they would still be called the Apostles of the Slavs.

Most likely, the brothers had some knowledge of the Slavic language, specifically the dialect they grew up hearing in and around Thessalonica, or else the mission they were tasked with later would have been near impossible. When preparing men for religious missions, the empire often chose persons of local origin to where they were going. There is one passage within the *VITA of Methodius* that implies they knew a Slavic

[16] P. Lemerle, Invasions et Migrations dans les Balkans, *Revue historiquie*, (1954), 273. cited in Vassilka Tapkova-Zaïmova, "The Slavs of Salonika and the Origin of Cyril and Methodius," in *The Work of Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher*, A Miscellany, 62–69, 66.
[17] Tapkova-Zaïmova, "The Slavs of Salonika and the Origin of Cyril and Methodius," 66.

language from childhood. Upon Prince Rastislav's men being received by Emperor Michael III, the Emperor said to Cyril, "Take you brother, the Archimandrite Methodius, and go. For you are both Thessalonians and all Thessalonians speak pure Slavic."[18] This line has sparked much debate over how to interpret it and if it means that the men were of Slavic origin, or just knew how to speak the language. Some scholars of Slavic history consider this passage to be a later interpolation.[19] The author may have been trying to say that since they were from Thessalonica, they must be fluent in the Slavic dialect spoken there. I do not believe this necessarily implies fluency, just that they heard it spoken before and were familiar with the language. It was well known in Constantinople by this time that Thessalonica was in flourishing commerce with the Slavs, and the language had begun to be picked up by the Greeks so that they could communicate and trade peacefully with the Slavs.

Given the ethnic makeup of Thessalonica at the time, it seems possible that at least one of the brothers' parents was of Slavic descent Nonetheless, the brothers were both Greeks culturally and since there is no concrete evidence, it is impossible to make a fully credible claim regarding their origin. Another possibility is that in Cyril and Methodius' family home, there were Slavic servants or slaves who spoke their native tongue around the family. The city of Thessalonica and its surrounding regions were populated with Slavs, and considering the educational background of the two brothers, it is likely they already understood the basics of the Slavic language.

[18] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 75.
[19] Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs*, 19. Tachiaos points to an author by the name of S. B. Bernshtejn who states this opinion in his book titled *Konstantin-Filosof i Mefodij*.

Section Two: The Pious Child

The author of the *VITA of Constantine* was well versed in the style of Byzantine hagiography, and all of their remarks about Cyril's youth stipulate this. Events were recorded for a reason, to show that what this child did was different than other children. The author showcases how Cyril acted on his own accord so that future readers would understand this was as God intended. Cyril was known as a pious child, and many examples within the *vita* showcase this element of his personality. Early in his youth he seemed wise beyond his years: "However, until the child was weaned he would not take any other breast but his mother's. This was by God's design so that there be a good offshoot from a good root."[20] The author included this to emphasize that as a baby, Cyril made distinctions between nobles and non-nobles. Actions took the place of words, and by refusing to drink the milk of another woman besides his mother, he was making a statement. He was familiar with his mother, the pious Christian woman who birthed him, and did not want to come in contact with someone who did not share the same values. This makes sense in the context of his family's nobility, that Cyril did not want a wet nurse because the woman's status would not be the same as his family's. Dvornik interprets this passage as, "This had to happen in order that a child of such parentage should be nourished only by the milk of his pious mother."[21] He was only to be nourished with 'pure milk,' as God had already singled him out as a future learned man and given him virtuous parents.

The next instance the author records is a dream Cyril had when he was seven years old, which made those around him curious about his notions of the world:

[20] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 5.
[21] Dvorník, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 54.

> the child had a dream which he recounted to his father and mother, saying: "After the *strategos* had assembled all the girls of our city, he said to me: 'Choose her who you wish as your wife and helpmate among them.' Gazing upon them and taking note of each one, I discerned the most beautiful of all, with radiant face, richly adorned in gold necklaces and pearls, and all manner of finery. Her name was Sophia, this is, Wisdom. I chose her."[22]

This event can be better understood in light of Byzantine customs at the time, when officials gathered young women from the most prominent families of a city and presented them before the imperial court for the emperor to choose a bride in a ceremony known as a brideshow. The word 'Sophia' also held a deeper meaning for the Greeks: it signified wisdom and represented an idea of perfection for both humans and the divine. It is therefore no coincidence that the most celebrated church in Constantinople was consecrated under the title of Hagia Sophia, meaning the Church of Holy Wisdom. Rather than choosing a human bride, Cyril symbolically chose a life devoted to divine wisdom and religious devotion. For a child to describe such a vivid dream and articulate this choice is striking. Within Christian tradition, dreams often serve as a means through which God communicates with individuals, and this moment can be understood in that light. Interestingly, in the writings of one of Cyril's favorite saints, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, he recounts a similar vision in which he was asked to choose between two women, Chastity and Temperance.[23] It is possible that the biographer drew on this earlier tradition to shape and elevate the portrayal of his subject.

After the occurrence of this dream, Cyril's parents told him to "take her to yourself as your wife, you will be spared much evil through her."[24] They wanted their son

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[22] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 5.
[23] A. Benoit, Saint Gregoire de Nazianze (Paris, 1876), 22. cited in Francis Dvorník, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, Rutgers Byzantine Series (Rutgers University Press, 1970), 54.
[24] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 7.

to take this vision seriously, that he should only look to follow wisdom in his future endeavors, rather than take a real bride. The author draws much attention to the piety of Cyril's parents, to show that Cyril was influenced by good Christians all around him, a common theme in hagiographies. Whether the dream actually occurred, or was merely an allegory, it expresses how Cyril lived by this design for the rest of his life. He never married, choosing a celibate religious life devoted to Holy Wisdom. He did not seek worldly pleasures, but aimed to acquire wisdom through the study of philosophy, theology, and language.[25] Cyril began his education following this event, and surpassed his fellow students in all subjects.

It was customary for sons of noblemen to go on hunting expeditions, and Cyril was no exception. One day while out with his father, Cyril "took his falcon and went out to the fields with his companions. And when he released it, the wind rose by God's design, caught the falcon and carried it off. The youth became very despondent and dejected by this event and would not eat for two days."[26] Cyril was deeply saddened by this event because it showed him that life was not always fair. From this day forward, he committed to understanding the wisdom of his world. The author of the *vita* writes that Cyril thought to himself, "Is this life such that sorrow takes the place of joy? From this day forth I shall take a different path, a better one than this. But I shall not live out my days in the tumult of this life."[27] Losing his falcon deeply troubled him, but Cyril saw this as a turning point: to leave behind worldly concerns and pursue a greater spiritual purpose. Cyril learned that life is unstable and unreliable, even for a nobleman. Human

[25] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 18-19.
[26] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 7.
[27] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 7.

control over events in the natural world is limited, and he sought meaning behind life's misfortunes. He could not find his lost falcon, but he could try to understand more about the world around him and why unfortunate events happen to even the most pious Christians.

While writing this particular passage, the author of the *vita* was most likely inspired by the story of Saint Placidas, who was converted while on a similar hunt for a stag. While hunting, St. Placidus noticed a large stag and began to stalk it. As he moved in for the kill, a cross was discerned and the figure of Christ was seen between the stag's antlers. A voice was also heard, asking Placidus why he was stalking Christ. Placidus fainted, and upon waking up heard the same voice again commanding him and his family to be baptized. These occurrences are not exact in nature, but the author of the *vita* wanted to show a similarity between these two events in the saints' lives.[28] Both marked an important turning point: As St. Placidus' interaction with Christ through the stag placed him on the correct path of conversion, Cyril's experience made him begin to question the vanity of his life. The loss of his falcon triggered a desperate need to back away from all earthly things, and to pursue the study of what could not be physically seen on earth.

Cyril and Methodius were educated by the finest tutors in Thessalonica thanks to their father. There was no formal system of education within Byzantium yet, but students studied under the direction of grammar-men, who focused on classical texts, primary skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, and more complex topics like theology and philosophy as they got older. Methodius was tutored by his father so that he could work

[28] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 7.

within the Byzantine administration.[29] The *VITA of Constantine* presents Cyril's first educational phase as the study of Hellenic arts, namely the visual and literary arts from the Greek world. Cyril was quite enamored with his studies, both of the natural world and religion, and according to the *vita,* "he remained at home and committed to memory the writings of Saint Gregory the Theologian."[30] Saint Gregory of Nazianzus lived in the mid-fourth century and is considered one of the founding fathers of the Eastern Church. The source goes on to describe how Cyril made a cross upon the wall and asked the saint to "enlighten the universe with teachings of true faith."[31] According to the *vita*, Cyril composed a eulogy, or short prayer to honor the Saint. It is no surprise that the young boy took an interest in Saint Gregory, for he was well known in Byzantium because of his writings on the Trinity and Christology. Saint Gregory, along with Saint Basil and Saint Gregory of Nyssa, form a group of the most famous theologians from the fourth century who defended the true faith against the Arians who had heretical views of Christianity.[32]

As Mirela Ivanova discusses in her article which re-envisions the early actions of Cyril, "It is significant that Gregory of Nazianzus is enlisted to legitimize the first phase of Cyril's education: the study of Hellenic arts. This forms part of a much wider preoccupation in the VC to harmonize 'outside knowledge' with Orthodox piety."[33] Saint Gregory's own career began with the study of rhetoric and classical literature, and the *vita's* author drew a connection between the two, especially as this saint's popularity surged through Byzantium. Even with Cyril's great wisdom, he still struggled to

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[29] Cyril J. Potoček, *Saints Cyril and Methodius, Apostles of the Slavs* (P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1941), 51.
[30] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 7.
[31] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 7.
[32] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 20.
[33] Mirela Ivanova, "Re-Thinking the Life of Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 98, no. 3 (2020): 443, https://doi.org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.98.3.0434

understand the works he was reading, "He became engrossed in numerous discourses and lofty thought but was unable to comprehend their profoundness and succumbed to great despondence."[34] As a young boy, he was already deeply troubled by what he could not understand, and it can be read that to have a comprehension of Chrsitian writings, one must first finish their classical education. The author shows that even though Cyril was surpassing the minds of those around him, he still had much to learn before he could understand God's will. A solution is offered for this internal conflict in the *vita*, the young boy needed to pray and seek a teacher and enlightenerer, someone who could answer his questions.

Cyril sought answers to all his worldly questions, and the first possible solution came in the form of a foreigner in Thessalonica. The *vita* states that "There lived a certain foreigner who knew grammar. Going to him and falling at his feet in submission, the youth begged that he teach him thoroughly the art of grammar."[35] This man refused the young Cyril, concealed his talents, and told him that he should not trouble himself as he renounced the teaching of this subject. It seems strange that a man would refuse to help an eager boy, especially one who fell at his feet. It is also notable that Cyril had to seek the assistance of a foreigner, meaning there were no natives in Thessalonica who he thought could help him. The author foreshadows his departure from the city to a new one, where he could interact with the scholars he desired. Though discouraged, Cyril did not let this interrupt his prayers. The author repeatedly shows how in times of trouble, and when disappointment could lead to losing hope, the boy's trust in God to guide him never swayed.

[34] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 7.
[35] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 7.

After Cyril's discouraging conversation with the learned foreigner, he quickly encountered a new and better opportunity. Just as Methodius' path was opened up to him by the emperor's administration, so was Cyril's. God heard Cyril's prayers, and soon, "Upon hearing of the youth's keenness, wisdom and zeal for learning with which he was imbued, the Emperor's administrator, called the *Logothete*, sent for Constantine to study with the Emperor."[36] A new door was opened for Cyril, and it was due to word of his fervent commitment to education being spread about the empire. His father's high position in Thessalonica probably played a role in the invitation, and the *Logothete* may have even known Leo and his family personally. From 842-856, Byzantium was headed by Empress Theodora, who ruled in place of her underaged son, Emperor Michael III. A *Logothete* is an important administrative post similar to the position of a modern-day cabinet member.[37] Theoctistus was the *Logothete* under Empress Theodora, and he took a key interest in the reorganization of the imperial school of higher learning that was occurring in Constantinople.[38] However, it cannot be true that Cyril actually went to Constantinople to study with the young Emperor Michael III. Michael III was born in 836 and would have only been six years old at the time. Maybe the empress and Logothete wanted Cyril to become a mentor to Michael III, someone educated and pious that the young emperor could look up to. The invitation was sent to Cyril around 842 shortly after the death of his father. When Leo was about to pass, Cyril's mother was consumed with worries about her son's future. Leo comforted her, saying she needed to trust God, who

[36] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 9.
[37] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 9.
[38] John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium* (Vintage Books, 1999), 111.

would provide an educator for him.[39] Just as he predicted, the invitation was sent in the following year.

[39] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 21.

Section Three: Learning and Growing

The young Cyril set out on his journey to Constantinople from Thessalonica.[40] He recognized how fortunate he was to receive this opportunity and frequently prayed to God on his way there: "give me wisdom, that sitteth by Thy throne so that I might understand what is Thy will and be saved. For I am Thy servant, and the son of Thine handmaid."[41] An argument could be made that all of his good luck was attributed to his familial ties with the empire, or maybe even from the prowess of his older brother Methodius, but in actuality, Cyril proved to those around him that he was wise beyond his years and his faith in God was true.

Immediately after arriving in Constantinople, Cyril was thrust into the hands of teachers at the imperial school attended by youth from noble families. Similar to the case in Thessalonica, he quickly surpassed all other students around him. In just three short months, he mastered grammar, the subject he was so keen on learning, and was able to move onto the next interest. A strong knowledge of the Hellenic arts was needed before moving onto other subjects such as theology, so Cyril began studying Homer, rhetoric and arithmetic, music, and astronomy. The author of the *vita* writes, "He mastered them all just as though he were mastering only one of them. For keenness joined with zeal, the one surpassing the other, and as a result his studies were completed with excellence."[42] Along with learning these subjects and about the world around him, it seems the young Cyril reflected inwardly on himself. According to the *vita*, he decided to only surround

[40] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 9.
[41] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 9.
[42] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 9.

himself with people who encouraged him, and turned away from people who reflected inner malice.[43]

The mastery of Hellenic arts was a large accomplishment for Cyril, which led to the eventual focus of his studies: philosophy. Byzantium, and specifically its capital of Constantinople, was home to many great scholars of this era. Cyril was fortunate enough to learn from two of these great scholars in his youth: Leo the Mathematician and Patriarch Photius. Leo was the archbishop of Thessalonica, but after the defeat of the Iconoclasts, he returned to Constantinople to take on a teaching position in the church. In 856, when Emperor Michael III took to the throne, Leo became head of the Imperial school. Photius was a brilliant scholar and theologian who became the Patriarch to Constantinople after Patriarch Ignatius was deposed in 858.[44] The *vita* mentioning Cyril's studies with these two men adds further credence to the young scholar's genius. It is unlikely these men of much higher stature would agree to take on a pupil who did not exceed all of their expectations. At first glance of the *vita*, one may notice that omitted from the list of subjects are theology and sacred scripture, but it is important to note that Cyril was still studying these subjects as well as deepening his learning of the words of Saint Gregory.[45] He did not forget who brought about his initial fascination with learning, and continued to pay tribute to him.

Throughout his time in Constantinople, Theoctistus, Cyril's sponsor, kept a close eye on his pupil. Since Theoctistus advocated for Cyril, the boy's education was his responsibility. After he saw how consumed Cyril was in his studies, Theoctistus gave him

[43] Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs*, 25.
[44] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 9.
[45] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 25.

control over his entire house and the right to enter the royal palace. It is striking that someone so new to Constantinople was already so well respected, and had built a network of trust around him. The *Logothete* occasionally had questions for Cyril, once asking, "Philosopher, I wish to learn what is philosophy."[46] Cyril, being of quick mind, replied, "The knowledge of matters of God and man, to what extent man can approach God and how, through virtue, it teaches men to be in the image and likeness of the Creator."[47] This definition of philosophy is derived from Greek philosophers, such as Plato, and supplemented by the idea of perfection and how one can attain it. In one sentence, Cyril was able to make a concise statement about understanding the relationship between man and the divine. The *vita* shows that the *Logothete* was right to trust him, and to bring him to Constantinople. Cyril loved learning and challenging ideas of theology, power, and hierarchy, and in this statement it is clear that he attributes his learning to God. From time to time, the *Logothete* would ask Cyril similar philosophical questions, and he always answered in the same, honest way, and this is how he earned his epithet of Philosopher.[48]

The dream Cyril had as a child came full circle when the *Logothete* presented an offer to him. Cyril lived a life of chastity, completely devoted to his education; paradoxically this led others to seek a marriage alliance with him. Theoctistus came to Cyril with a proposal, "I have a god-daughter whom I took out the font. She is beautiful, wealthy, and from a good and noble family. If you wish, I shall give her to you as your

[46] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 9.
[47] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 9.
[48] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 26. This epithet of Philosopher was given to him a few years later, when he accepted a position to teach philosophy at the Imperial School in Constantinople.

wife."[49] This seems to be an offer of good intentions with high praise, but Cyril was not interested. He responded, "This is indeed a great gift for those who have need of it. But for me nothing is greater than learning. Having acquired knowledge, through it I wish to seek the honor and wealth of my ancestors."[50] He again renounced marriage, reasserting the same desire he held as a young child to seek learning and wisdom in this life. The inclusion of this conversation demonstrates that worldly pleasures would never be enough for him. To fulfill himself while on earth, he needed to do everything in his power to increase his spiritual love for God, and intellect he knew he could attain. After this discussion, the *Logothete* went to Empress Theodora and informed her that Cyril was not attracted to the riches and honor life at the court could bring him. Theoctistus suggested the position of librarian to the Patriarch of St. Sophia be given to Cyril, and this was the next step in the young man's life.[51]

[49] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11.
[50] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11.
[51] Cyril J. Potoček, *Saints Cyril and Methodius, Apostles of the Slavs* (P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1941), 51.

Conclusion

As seen in the *vitae*, the early years of Cyril and Methodius were recorded not only to inform, but also to persuade readers that the brothers displayed signs of wisdom from an early age. By emphasizing their noble birth, proximity to Slavic speaking communities, and the intellectual promise that distinguished them from childhood, the hagiographers construct a narrative in which their later missions appear inevitable. This chapter has shown that the environment in which the brothers grew up mattered far more than the possibility of Slavic heritage. They grew up surrounded in Thessalonica's multilingual landscape in a noble family, and they had access to the best educational opportunities available. These factors created the conditions that allowed the brothers to develop the intellectual and administrative capabilities that would later define their careers.

For Cyril especially, the *vita* portrays a childhood filled with divine foreshadowing and intervention, with dreams, losses, and intellectual struggles. All of these trials mark Cyril as a man whose wisdom and love of learning were understood as God's gifts. He knew that his misfortunes could never be permanent if he relied on God to help him. Cyril's devotion to theology and classical studies which led him to turn away from all worldly pursuits, and commitment to Saint Gregory, serves to reinforce the message of the *vita*, that he was predestined for holy work. Methodius, though less elaborately described, appears along similar lines. His administrative talents and keen mind aligned with the imperial needs of the emperor, and foreshadowed his future role alongside his brother. By portraying the early lives of Cyril and Methodius as divinely guided and deeply intellectual, the authors of the *vitae* demonstrate that the brothers were

not only worthy of their later missionary work in foreign lands, but uniquely fit for it from the very beginning.

Chapter II: Delegations and Deliberations

Introduction

Cyril's arrival in Constantinople was a turning point in his life. He gained access to some of the greatest thinkers of the ninth century in Byzantium as Constantinople excelled as a place of learning in the arts and sciences. Constantinople was also a major center of trade between the East and West, so as people and goods passed through, so did ideas and scholars. As Cyril continued his learning, people around him began to take interest in his studies. Notably, the *Logothete* Theoctistus, an administrator to the emperor, was moved by how focused the young philosopher was on his studies. This is why he was ordained and given the office of patriarchal librarian at the church of Holy Wisdom, the Hagia Sophia.[1] There is some debate on the exact position Cyril was given; the *vita* says he had a position similar to a librarian (*bibliothecarius*), but it also may have been closer to a secretarial position (*chartophylax*). A secretary had a voice in general church administration, receiving visitors and escorting them to the presence of the patriarch, but it is unclear what the exact requirements to gain this title were.[2] Regardless of the exact title, around 849, Cyril, now about twenty-three years old, became a part of the Hagia Sophia's administration under the Patriarch Ignatius.

Even though he was given the title at the behest of the *Logothete* and empress, Cyril did not stay long. After a short while, Cyril left for the Narrow Sea and hid himself in a monastery where, even after an extensive search, people of the empire could not find

[1] M. Kantor, R. S. White, and A. Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius* (Michigan Slavic Publications, University of Michigan, 1976), 11. This position was given to Cyril after Theoctistus discussed Cyril's wishes of acquiring knowledge, rather than taking a wife. The *Logothete* most likely went to Empress Theodora who deemed this position fit for Cyril.
[2] Michael Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius* (Slovak Editions "Sts. Cyril and Methodius," 1969), 28.

him. The author of the *vita* writes, "They searched for him for six months before they were able to find him."[3] As someone whose sole focus in life was learning, it is not surprising that he chose to isolate himself from the empire for a period of time. He preferred scholarship to an administrative office, and other sources indicate that Ignatius himself did not favor scholarship, and was in fact hostile towards certain studies.[4] Defying expectations, Cyril chose to prioritize himself and his studies.

The second chapter of this thesis explores Cyril's early career in Constantinople as he navigated administrative duties to the empire and his desire to continue his learning. When Empress Theodora became the ruler of Byzantium, she attempted to liquidate what remained of iconoclasm, but ultimately divisions were still felt in the atmosphere of the Church. The first section examines Cyril's debate with an iconoclast, the former Patriarch of Constantinople, John VII. Cyril's learning shines through as he is able to engage in this debate with wisdom and sound arguments. Moving forward, the second section examines Cyril's first mission to the land of the "Hagarites." Cyril was entrusted with the task of explaining Christianity to the Arabic peoples residing in Samarra, namely the nature of the Holy Trinity, with hopes of converting their people. The bulk of the contents in the *VITA of Constantine* pertain to the second mission taken by Cyril who was joined by his brother Methodius to Khazaria, the land of the Khazars. This mission is explored in the third and final section of this chapter, which not only examines the specific debates Cyril had with the Khazars but also considers his learning in Kherson before arriving at the Kagan's court. By paying close attention to certain conversations that were recorded in

[3] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11.
[4] Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (Rutgers University Press, 1970), 59.

the *vita*, this chapter argues that this activity showed the emperor that Cyril was capable of leading the mission to Great Moravia. Through this activity, they were still developing themselves as learned men. Within the different debates, Cyril defends Christianity, and each discussion he had expanded his knowledge of theology. The missions they were entrusted with doubled as diplomatic work at the request of the Byzantine Empire, and although not always successful, they proved themselves as scholarly and pious individuals to outsiders.

Section One: Debate with an Iconoclast

While Cyril began his new life in the capital, Methodius was far away, holding the administrative title of *archon* of the Slavic principality assigned to him by the Byzantines. Authors like Francis Dvornik argue that the principality was close to his hometown of Thessalonica and assume that it was situated in the region near the river Strymon.[5] After only a short time, just as Cyril had done, Methodius left his position. Methodius "abandoned his worldly career, his wife and family and entered one of the monasteries on the Bithynian Olympos, the greatest center of Byzantine monasticism during the fifth to eighth centuries."[6] The question is: why did he choose to abandon his position and his family? The author of the *VITA of Methodius* writes:

> After spending many years in that principality and witnessing the excessive and disorderly tumult of this life, he voluntarily exchanged earthly darkness for heavenly thoughts. For he wished not to disturb his venerable soul with transient matters and, upon finding the opportunity, he left the principality. Going to Olympus where the holy fathers live, he was tonsured and clothed in black habit.[7]

There are few records of Methodius' time in the principality besides what is recorded in the *vitae.* The disorder the author writes about could be unrest from the Slavic tribes near Thessalonica as noted in chapter one. At this time, it was not unusual for married men with families to retire to monastic life. In the case of Methodius, it is unknown what happened to his family after he left. In a liturgical panegyric, a speech in honor of Saint Methodius called *canon*, its anonymous author writes, "Holy and most glorious Teacher, when you had decided to leave your family and your native country, your spouse and

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[5] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 58.
[6] Alexis P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 34. The monasteries were on Mount Olympus in northwest Asia Minor, located in Bithynia in the inaccessible mountainous districts.
[7] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 73.

your children, you chose to go away into the wilderness in order to live there with the Holy Fathers."[8] An arrangement like this one made between Methodius and his wife was more complicated since they had children, but nonetheless the authors of the *canon* and *vita* show that the decision was made freely, without political motivations.

Cyril also went to the monastery on his own accord, but after a few months he was found by Theoctistus' associates. Cyril did not want to return to working for the Patriarch of the Hagia Sophia, so he was instead appointed professor of philosophy at the university in Constantinople, the School of Magnaura. This appointment most likely happened in 850 or early 851, and the *vita* says, "they besought him to accept a chair and teach philosophy to his countrymen and foreigners with all authority and with compensation."[9] It is likely that Cyril assumed this role from his former teacher, Photius, who once held the same position under Theoctistus. Around 850, Photius abandoned teaching to become chancellor of the Byzantine Empire, a position he also owed to Theoctistus.[10] Upon taking the chair of philosophy, Cyril was called an "oecumenical teacher," or someone who promotes unity among multiple different religions, a title later given to the rector of the patriarchal academy.[11]

Quickly after returning to Constantinople, Cyril was asked to engage in a debate with the former Patriarch of Constantinople, John VII. John VII was an iconoclast, and the emperor sought to rid the empire of these views. Iconoclasm literally means "the

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[8] P. A. Lavrov, *Materialy po istorii voznikovenija drevnei slavianskoi pismennosti* (Leningrad, 1930), 122 ff. cited in Francis Dvorník, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, Rutgers Byzantine Series (Rutgers University Press, 1970), 58.
[9] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11.
[10] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 60.
[11] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 60. We do not know if other professors were given special titles or not. A rector is a name for the head of a department within a university, and later it was given to a member of the clergy in charge of a parish.

smashing of icons," and an icon is a holy image typically on wood used as an aid for religious worship. The sudden appearance of iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire occurred in the early eighth century during the reign of Leo III. Leo III was most likely influenced by the Islamic world, which staunchly opposed all images and depictions of holy figures.[12]

In 725, Leo III gave a series of sermons, even though he was not a priest, where he pointed out the excessive uses of icons. In the following year, he made a radical decision. Above the great bronze doors of the principal gateway to the Imperial Palace rose a vast golden image of Christ, and this was the most prominent icon in the whole city. He had it destroyed. Almost immediately, widespread demonstrations opposing this act of destruction took place across the city, as people loved their images and were prepared to fight for them. Leo III might have been expected to call off the destruction, but he did quite the opposite, issuing his one and only edict against images. In 730, he called for all images to be taken down[13] For the next forty-seven years, iconoclastic emperors came and went, and tension around icons never stopped. In 787, Empress Irene acting as regent convened the Seventh Ecumenical Council at the scene of the First council, the Church of the Holy Wisdom at Nicea. Iconoclasm was condemned as heresy, and icons were decided to be objects of veneration rather than adoration.[14] Then, in 842, iconoclasm died with the last iconoclastic Emperor, Theophilus. His wife Empress Theodora became regent on behalf of her two year old son Michael III, and in 843 she summoned another Council to further confirm the orders of the Seventh council. In spite

[12] John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium* (Vintage Books, 1999), 111.
[13] Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium*, 112.
[14] Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium*, 112.

of such definitive official action, iconoclasm was still very present in the Byzantium the brothers lived in, and would be the subject of Cyril's first recorded debate. There were still people in the empire that believed images were blasphemous, and the administration wanted to quell this notion.

In the *VITA of Constantine*, the dispute between the former patriarch John VII and Cyril takes place after Cyril returned to Constantinople. Though, as Dvornik points out, it is quite possible this conversation actually took place when Cyril was hiding in the monastery on the Bosphorus, as former Patriarch John VII was sent to a monastery also on the Bosphorus.[15] Another theory is that Cyril was directed to have this conversation as a test of sorts to qualify for the chair of philosophy. This is how it is presented in the *vita*, and how Michael Lacko and other Slavic philologists interpret the passage.[16] John VII had convened a synod to speak about the evils of honoring holy icons, and Empress Theodora along with Theoctistus and their other supporters deposed him as patriarch. The Empress and her court prepared the Philosopher for a debate and sent him to the now deposed John VII, who upon laying eyes on the young man said, "None of you are worthy of being my footstool so why should I wish to dispute with you?"[17] This was a bold choice of words for an ex-patriarch. Cyril was tasked with convincing John VII of his errors, and as John VII was much his senior, it was quite the daunting task to lay on Cyril's shoulders. Cyril, however, did not turn from the challenge and neither did John VII.

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[15] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 61. John VII is said to have been excommunicated to a monastery near the one Cyril allegedly stayed at.
[16] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 30. The direct quote from the *vita* reads, "If you can prevail over this young man, you will again receive your office." (VC 11).
[17] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11.

John VII, being referred to as "old man" by the author of the *vita*, says, "Tell me, young man, why bow we not to a broken cross nor kiss it, while you are not ashamed to do obeisance to an icon though it be depicted only in bust form?"[18] The Philosopher replies, "Each cross has the same image as the cross of Christ, but not all icons have one and the same image."[19] Then the old man says, "When God spoke to Moses He said: 'Thou shalt not make any likeness.' Why then make you one and bow to it?"[20] To answer this question, and to conclude the dispute between the two, Cyril says, "Had He said: 'Make not any kind of likeness,' you would be correct. But He said: 'Not any,' that is, any unworthy."[21] The passage alludes to Exodus 20:4, which reads: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."[22] With this final remark, Cyril proved himself as a learned man of scripture to John VII who had doubted the younger man's abilities. After the conversation, "Unable to answer, the old man fell silent and was shamed."[23] The word "shamed" is interesting and suggests that the author was attempting to elevate Cyril in this conversation to show him as the debate's winner. Considering how iconoclasm was such an animated topic in the empire at this time, it is remarkable that Cyril, still a young man, could have this conversation and prove himself in it. The outcome shows that even though the Philosopher was still young and early in his career, he was well on his way to becoming a prominent scholar of the court and deserved the chair of philosophy.

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[18] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11.
[19] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11.
[20] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11.
[21] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11.
[22] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11. The verse comes from footnotes written by Kantor, White, and Dostal.
[23] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 11.

There is speculation about when and where this conversation was held, and if it was indeed a true conversation between John VII and Cyril. The author of the *vita* presents this debate as if it was held in public, when it probably was an imaginative presentation of a private disputation. The situation in Byzantium around the year 850, which is supposedly when the conversation took place, still was extremely hostile towards icons. For this to be held in public is near impossible as fears of a renewal of the iconoclastic movement were present and it would offer heretics an opportunity to defend themselves.[24] The author used this opportunity to refute the iconoclasts' opposition to the worship of images and of the cross. The author shows Cyril's prowess over the deposed patriarch; this text would eventually serve as a guide for Christians, and this showed Cyril to be in favor of icons with God's approval. Iconoclastic discussion recorded as heresy follows the ideals the Byzantine Empire wanted to push onto their subject, as the problem was still lively and would be for years to follow.[25]

The inclusion of this debate provides support to the theory that Cyril's older brother Methodius was in fact the author of the *VITA of Constantine,* or that he at least had a role as an editor. If this debate is to be accepted as having elements of historical truth and not just purely literary embellishment, the matter would be especially important to someone closely in touch with Byzantine ecclesiastical affairs at the time.[26] A conversation like this one was a commonplace in hagiographic literature, it put the speaker in a position to defend what the church believed in, this case being icons. Divisions such as the one over icons left a deep wound that the administration had to

[24] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 62.
[25] Francis Dvornik, "The Patriarch Photius and Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 7 (1953): 81, https://doi.org/10.2307/1291056.
[26] Vlasto, *Entry of the Slavs into Christendom*, 30.

heal, and the tense atmosphere that prevailed in Byzantium shaped the way the author depicted the debate.

Section Two: Journey to Samarra

Following his successful conversation with John VII, Cyril was officially appointed to his new position. Now chair of the philosophy department, Cyril taught at the School of Magnaura and was paid by the empire for his work. Teaching philosophy was a short-lived stint for the young professor as a new challenge presented itself. Around this time, deteriorating Byzantine-Arab relations necessitated negotiations and a diplomatic mission to Samarra, located along the Tigris river in present day Iraq. The young Arab Caliph, al-Mutawakkil, encroached upon Byzantine territory and called for diplomatic contact between Byzantium and the Arab Caliphate.[27] There is much discussion on whether or not this mission to Samarra actually took place. The *vita* says it did, and that it was initiated by an invitation from the Caliph's court, to discuss their questions about Christianity.[28] The author of the *vita* makes it seem as though Cyril headed this mission, writing that he was assigned a court secretary by the name of George to go with him.[29] Cyril was only twenty-four at the time of the mission, and it is unlikely he would be in charge of leading people to Samarra. These inventions of the author, like others, were included to glorify the Philosopher, and they correspond to the spirit of Byzantine hagiographical writing at the time. Despite the lack of concrete evidence for this mission, the author incorporates a detailed theological exchange to showcase Cyril's rhetorical ability and to emphasize his authority in matters of doctrine.

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[27] Anthony-Emil N. Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 30.
[28] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 285.
[29] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 15. George is believed to have been some sort of officer within the court, whether that be the position of secretary or something similar.

In the *vita*, the Saracens sent a letter to the emperor that reads: "Assuming that God is one, how can you Christians further divide Him into three, saying He is Father, Son and Spirit? If you can explain clearly, send us men who can speak of this and convince us."[30] This blasphemy angered the Byzantines greatly, and the emperor convened the senate where he told Cyril what the "filthy" Hagarites were saying about the Holy Trinity. Cyril went on the mission, along with other members of the court. For a while, scholars believed that Cyril's own teacher Photius also took part in the delegation. But, Dvornik asserted that Photius did not take part in this particular mission, instead journeying to the Arabs sometime in the late 850s.[31] The mission's primary concern was political: negotiating peace and managing affairs of state. Included in the politics were theological discussions because of the letters sent by the Arabs to the Byzantines challenging and attacking Christian doctrine, thus the Empress included Cyril in the delegation to facilitate theological discussions.[32]

Upon arrival in Samarra, the Greek delegation claimed to see evidence of particularly callous treatment towards Christians living in these lands. The *vita* reads, "In these places all those living in piety in Christ were caused much grief. Thus on the outside doors of all Christians they painted images of demons playing tricks and grimacing."[33] This is just one of the things the Saracens did to persecute Christians living in their lands. Christians were also required to wear yellow clothing, and they were forbidden to carry the crucifix publicly.[34] Upon seeing the images on the doors, the

[30] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 15.
[31] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 287-288.
[32] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 36.
[33] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 15.
[34] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 36.

embassy asked the Philosopher what he made of the sign, to which he replied: "I see demonic images and assume that Christians dwell within. However, the demons are unable to live with Christians and flee from them. But wherever this sign is not present on the outside, the demons dwell with those inside."[35] The mention of this shows how divided the faith was in the community, and that Cyril noticed the divisions almost immediately when he arrived.

The conversation moved to the dinner table, where Cyril, the delegation, and members of the Caliph's court gathered. The author acknowledges the Hagarites as a "wise people, well versed in scholarship, geometry, astronomy, and other sciences."[36] These are typical Hellenistic arts studies, and the author stresses these subjects to show that the Arab scholars had a particular interest in these topics and were worthy opponents to showcase Cyril's knowledge. There was somewhat of an intellectual rivalry between the Byzantine court and the Abbasid court, and with the arrival of Cyril a true scholarly discussion occurred.[37] The Hagarites tested the young Cyril and asked, "Since God is one, why do you glorify him as three? If you know, explain this! For you call Him Father, Son and Spirit. If this be so, give Him a wife so that many gods may be sired by Him."[38] The Philosopher replied, "Speak not such despicable blasphemy. For well have we learned from the prophets, fathers, and teachers to glorify the Trinity, the Father, the Word and the Spirit, three hypostases in one being."[39] After saying this, the Arabs were "defeated," and moved on from the topic.[40] As a follow up question, the court asked Cyril about

[35] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 15.
[36] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 15.
[37] Mirela Ivanova, "Re-Thinking the Life of Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 98, no. 3 (2020): 449, https://doi.org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.98.3.0434
[38] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 17.
[39] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 17.
[40] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 17.

matters of the Gospel: "For in the Gospels it is written: 'Pray for your enemies, do good to them that hate you and persecute you, and unto them that smite you turn your cheek!' You are not like that but, on the contrary, you sharpen weapons against those who treat you in such a manner."[41] The Saracens accused the Byzantines of failing to obey this command, that they are selective with the Christian tenets they followed. When his opponents accuse Christians of "sharpening weapons" instead of practicing nonviolence, Cyril asks, "If the law contains two commandments, who fulfills the law, he who keeps one commandment or both?"[42] Once they concede that the one who keeps both fulfills the law, Cyril juxtaposes Christ's injunction, "Pray for them which despitefully use you," with the teaching, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."[43] By placing these anecdotes together, Cyril says that Christians must be personally merciful and forgiving, but that they are also responsible for defending others. This passage also contains paraphrases of scripture from the book of Matthew and Luke, which closely follows the Byzantine hagiographic style of showing the theological skill of their subject.

The dialogue in the *vita* clearly demonstrates Cyril's rhetorical abilities and high education. After he swiftly answered their questions, their final remark was, "How do you know all of this?"[44] The Philosopher replied:

[41] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 17.
[42] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 17.
[43] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 17.
[44] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 19.

> A certain man drew water from the sea and, carrying it in a bag, boasted to strangers, saying: 'See this water? No one has any except me!' To him came a man who lived by the sea and said: 'Are you not ashamed of what you are saying, boasting merely about this stinking bag? We have a sea of it!' You are acting the same way. All arts have come from us.[45]

The inclusion of the statement "all arts have come from us" is critical, and is a reference to the fact that Muslim scholars were trained in Hellenic arts, namely astronomy.[46] The author makes an explicit association between the Byzantine polity and its peoples, and the intellectual tradition of Hellenic education. As Ivanova writes, "This association is used to argue against the Caliphate. Muslim scholars can only receive from outside, something that is internal to the history of Byzantine culture, and thus they cannot match Cyril in learning."[47] The author shows the superiority of the Byzantines, and the superiority of Cyril's learning in his own empire and while outside of it. The author also describes the attitude of the Greeks, that they believed Christianity to be the intellectually superior religion, even though he barely resorts to scripture. The argument presented stresses the supremacy of Byzantium, and by showing that the Muslims inherited the Hellenic arts from the Byzantines, the author suggests that they had not yet developed the necessary strength in scholarship.

While most of the dialogue recorded in the *vita* is likely fabricated, it remains important to note how the author relates the story. He emphasizes Cyril's quick replies to numerous questions, and shows that this ability reflects his past learning and scholarship. By learning from the most noble of scholars in Constantinople, and continuing personal learning through humility and following God's plan, he was well prepared for his first

[45] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 19.
[46] Ivanova, "Re-Thinking the Life of Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher," 450.
[47] Ivanova, "Re-Thinking the Life of Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher," 450.

mission. During this time, there was less distinction between religion and power, so the *vita* has no issue connecting Cyril's missionary and diplomatic work. Instituting a religion was key to military power, and having allies with similar religious ideals was very important. Byzantium, attempting to make peace with its neighbors, would have liked to convert the Saracens to Christianity in the process of diplomatic negotiations. This was Cyril's first time being directly involved in the empire's politics, and this conversation proves he was well prepared.

With the conclusion of the dispute, the Greek delegation was taken on a tour of the palace grounds. The Caliph's court showed them the cultivated garden "in which some of the things appeared to have once sprung from the earth."[48] The Caliph was known to collect exotic trees and flowers from all parts of the world, and in his gardens he had constructed a system of irrigation using the waters from the Tigris.[49] When the delegation was shown the palaces shining with precious metals, the hosts exclaimed: "behold the wondrous miracle! Mighty is the power and the great the wealth of Amerumnin, lord of the Saracens."[50] Amerumnin is a corruption of the Arabic appellation for the caliph, *amir al-mu' minin*, or "commander of the faithful." This statement made Cyril upset, who saw it foolish to attribute this power to only the Caliph, "This is not wondrous. Glory and praise be to God who hath created all these things and given them to man for consolation. For these things are His and no other's."[51] To give credit to the Caliph instead of God for this wealth went against Cyril's Christian doctrine. The author's inclusion of this anecdote is important because it helps prove the historical reality of this

[48] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 19.
[49] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 37.
[50] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 19.
[51] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 19.

mission; the specific descriptions of the gardens and the palace align with other descriptions of Samarra around this time. After Cyril belittled their palace, the Muslims became angry and sought to poison him. They mixed a deadly drink, and gave it to Cyril, "But merciful God said to all who truly believe in him: 'and if you drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt you.'"[52] Cyril was preserved from harm, showing he was indeed in God's favor.

Since there are few records of this mission, it is hard to gauge how successful it truly was, or if it actually took place, but the fact Cyril was supposedly poisoned by the Saracens indicates that it was not triumphant. The delegation remained important for Cyril's development nonetheless, as it showed that he could engage in theological debates with eloquence, further proving his intellect. This phase of his life connected diplomatic and missionary work, and set a pattern seen throughout the rest of his life. Debates with leading intellectuals from around the world were critical for the young Philosopher to experience: He was able to assert himself in a dialogue on difficult topics, and he did so with grace through the learning he had accumulated up until this point.

[52] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 19.

Section Three: To Khazaria

Movement is a recurring theme in Cyril's life, and a short time after returning from Samarra, he renounced his life entirely and settled in a place far away from the empire's capital, away from turmoil. The author writes that "[Cyril] kept nothing for the next day [not] even for bodily nourishment" and "upon receiving something, distributed it all to the poor, and placed his hope in God who cares for everyone every day."[53] He wanted to be in a setting of privacy and poverty after completing his first big mission. So, where did he go? Joining Methodius, he went to one of the many monasteries on Mount Olympus in Bithynia. This happened around 856, shortly before the great *Logothete* Theoctistus was murdered at the hands of Caesar Bardas, Empress Theodora's brother. Michael III, who was not so young anymore, sealed his fate, "The *Logothete* was walking through the palace when he was set upon by Bardas and a group of his fellow-officers. Quickly overpowered ... it was Michael himself who gave the order to kill him."[54] Empress Theodora's rule ended and Michael III officially became sole ruler of Byzantium. Some scholars believe that these changes in the affairs of state were not unconnected from the developments of the brothers' private lives. With Theoctistus gone, they lost their main benefactor and took it as a sign for change.[55] After returning from Samarra, Cyril resumed his teaching position at the university. Although, after the death of Theoctistus who greatly supported the young Philosopher, he was found without a patron and protection.

[53] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 19.
[54] Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium*, 141.
[55] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 63-64.

There is another possible explanation for this change, one that does not depend on political hostilities within the empire. Rather, the silent and solitary lives they undertook suggest that they were preparing for something new; a significant event was imminent.[56] While they both spent their time reading and writing, unlike Methodius, Cyril had not yet become a monk. The decision to enter the monastery shows the brothers' devotion to God, and to learning. Away from Constantinople, they occupied themselves with scholarship while surrounded by other men in the well-known monastic center. At the end of the eighth century, ascetic life had reached its peak and both monastic establishments and the number of saintly monks were growing, so the brothers could not have chosen a better time to journey to Mount Olympus.[57]

The brothers were only at Mount Olympus for a short time before they were called to take part in another mission: to the land of the Khazars. The Khazars were a Jewish, Turco-Tartar nation which inhabited the region bounded by the Sea of Azov, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, the Volga, and the Dnieper rivers.[58] An emissary from Khazaria came to the Byzantines, and according to the *vita,* requested counsel and a learned man to teach them about the Christian faith. The Khazars felt pressure from all three major religions — Christianity, Judaism, and Islam — and said if Byzantium did indeed send a man who could prevail over the Jews and Saracens, they would accept Christianity.[59] While the sending of a Khazar embassy could be an authorial invention, exchanges of embassies between the powers did occur. The embassy's stated aim, to debate about Christianity, was most likely fabricated. Nevertheless, religious discussions

[56] Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs*, 34.
[57] Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs*, 35.
[58] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 47-48.
[59] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 21.

at the Kagan's court were common enough to necessitate a theologian's presence.[60] The *VITA of Constantine* and *VITA of Methodius* both contain accounts of the emperor asking both brothers to go on this mission. In the *VITA of Methodius*, Methodius said, "I am prepared to die for the Christian faith" and the author follows with, "Thus he refused not, but went along and served his younger brother, obeying him like a slave."[61] Even though he was older, and relying on his younger brother for guidance on this mission, he was prepared to do what the emperor expected of him. In turn, the emperor said to Cyril: "Philosopher, go to these people, preach and answer for the Holy Trinity with Its help. For no one else is capable of doing this properly."[62] Cyril actually wanted to go on the mission "on foot and unshod," but the emperor said imperial help would be necessary on such an honorable mission.[63]

On the way to Khazaria, the embassy made an important stop in Kherson, where Cyril was exposed to a new wave of learning. Here, he gained a deeper understanding of Hebrew and was able to read original scripture, and translated eight parts of the grammar. Cyril undoubtedly would have been interested in learning Hebrew before arriving at the Kagan's court in preparation for his encounter with the Jewish scholars.[64] By studying this, he would be able to converse with the Khazars in a new way: with a Christian outlook and now further understanding of their faith.

In Kherson, Cyril also had a debate with a Samaritan, who brought the Philosopher Samaritan scripture. Cyril locked himself in his house and gave himself up to

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[60] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 65. Kagan is the word for 'ruler,' used by Turkic peoples.
[61] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 73.
[62] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 21.
[63] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 21.
[64] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 66.

prayer until he obtained understanding from God, "he began to read the scriptures without error. When the Samaritan saw this [...] He had his son baptized immediately and he himself was baptized after him."[65] His ability to pick up a foreign language so quickly was admirable, and could not be done by just any man. Quickness of learning is something authors of hagiographies often embellish, but it is still something to take note of, as this episode demonstrates how the *vita* portrays Cyril as a divinely inspired intellectual whose mastery of language and scripture serves as further evidence of God's favor.

After this, one of the most debated lines written in the *vita* comes into play. In Kherson, Cyril "found the Gospels and the Psalter written in Russian letters."[66] Upon finding the text, he found a man who spoke that language and "having conversed with him, acquired the force of speech."[67] Scholars have debated for years about what this passage actually means, and what 'letters' it is referring to. It is unlikely that Cyril found a Russian alphabet in Kherson since at the time the Russians did not possess a written language.[68] Some scholars have speculated that this was a Gothic script, but this was debunked by French Slavist André Valliant.[69] Valliant in turn presented a new theory, saying that the letters were 'Syriac.' There are a few more theories, one notably made by George Verandsky who suggested that the Russians may have adopted Armenian or Georgian script to their language. Since Cyril was able to learn this language and

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[65] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 21.
[66] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 21.
[67] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 23.
[68] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 66.
[69] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 59. Valliant refuted the Gothic interpretation by noting that Cyril referred to the Goths later in the *vita*, and therefore knew of their existence, so the author of the *vita* would have simply wrote 'Gothic' instead of 'Russian' if this was the case.

converse in it so easily, the script may have been close to the Slavic dialect spoken in Thessalonica where he was born.[70] There has not been a clear answer about this perplexing addition to the *vita*. This highlights the brilliance of Cyril's philological talents: he mastered two languages during his stay in Kherson, further demonstrating why his intellectual prowess surpassed that of his peers.

Following this discovery, the *vita* introduces one of its most significant miracle narratives: the finding of the relics of Saint Clement I of Rome. This event is discussed in greater detail in chapter three as it played a critical role in the Great Moravian mission and developing his saintly status. Having boarded a ship, the delegation set out from Kherson by way of the Meotis Sea and Caspian Gates of the Caucasus Mountains.[71] Upon being received by a "cunning and resourceful man," the delegation was brought to a feast at the Kagan's dinner table where the Khazars wished to seat the Byzantines.[72] Cyril was asked, "What is your station so that we may seat you according to your rank?"[73] Cyril's father had a connection with the court in Byzantium, and he answered:

> I had a great and very renowned grandfather who stood close to the Emperor. But he voluntarily rejected the great honor granted him and was banished. He became impoverished after going to a foreign land, and there he begot me. Though I have sought my grandfather's former station, I have not succeeded to obtain it, for I am Adam's grandson.[74]

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[70] George Vernadsky, *Ancient Russia* (Yale University Press, 1943), 348. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.279556 and Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 23. The specific language the author is referring to is not mentioned in the text.
[71] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 23. It is not entirely clear where the brothers met the Khazar Kagan. Dvornik believes that they evidently expected the Byzantine delegation, and the emissary sent to meet them probably met the envoys at Sarkel on the Don. The author makes it seem like this was all planned in advance, meaning the mission did in fact take place and that communication between the two powers happened prior to their advance in Crimea.
[72] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 25.
[73] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 25.
[74] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 25.

This reply shows that Cyril was carefully chosen for the mission, and the response cannot be regarded as a stylistic choice of the author. This reply is meant to emphasize to the Khazars that the noble origin of Adam superseded that of Abraham, whose sons the Jews called themselves.[75] Also, it shows that Cyril was not the head of the delegation because if he were, no clarification of his rank would be called for.[76]

Just as in the mission to the Saracens, the Khazars questioned Cyril about the Holy Trinity. Although, this section of the text is different from his debates with the Arabs. Cyril now had a deeper understanding of the Hebrew language. The Saracens and Khazars both asked Cyril a question about his worshipping of the Trinity versus the one God. In Samarra, Cyril did not answer the question with direct scriptural reference, but at the Kagan's table, having gained a deeper understanding of the Old Testament after his stay in Kherson, he replied differently.[77] The Philosopher answers: "Thus, we do more by revealing things and obeying the prophets. For Isaiah said: 'Hearken unto me, O Jacob and Israel, my called; I am the first, I am for ever. And now the Lord, and his Spirit, hath sent me.'"[78] To support the truth of his statement, Cyril turns to Old Testament prophecy, something he could not have done effectively without going to Kherson first. After an undisclosed amount of time, Cyril again sat down with the Kagan where they discussed which law God gave first to man. The Jews claimed that they followed the law of Moses, the oldest law of God, while Cyril and the Greeks did not. This prompts a very lengthy

[75] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 68.
[76] At dinner time in the Kagan's court, the leader of a visiting embassy would sit next to the Kagan. It would also be clear who the lead man was, and since Cyril was asked it means they did not know.
[77] Ivanova, "Re-Thinking the Life of Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher," 454.
[78] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 25.

discussion between the two, in which Cyril answers based on Old Testament scripture, including Genesis and Daniel.

To again show Cyril's intellectual abilities, the author writes of a brief discussion of idols when the Jews asked, "How can you who worship idols pretend to please God?"[79] Cyril answers: "Learn first to distinguish the names, what an icon is and what an idol and, considering this, assail not Christians. For in your language there are ten names for this image."[80] The author again brings up the issue of idols, pushing forth the idea that iconoclasm was heresy, and true followers of Christ defended idols. The mention of their language shows further how he was prepared for this mission. He knew that before arriving at the court, he needed to develop the necessary skills, and the author laid the background perfectly. The chiefs of the court said to the Philosopher, "you have spoken properly, delighting each of us in full with honied words from the Holy Scriptures."[81] The court elevates the young man to a high status because he proved himself in these disputes. Much of the discussion towards the end concerns Christianity as the successor to Judaism. This is why it was even more important for Cyril to carry out these debates drawing from the Old Testament. He is enabled by his Hellenic education received in Byzantium, and by the learning he acquired as an envoy for the empire.[82] The author wrote about these events because they elevated Cyril in the eyes of those he interacted with, and to readers who eventually read his hagiography. The actual disputations in Khazaria take up the biggest section in the *VITA of Constantine* because it is such a

[79] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 35.
[80] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 35.
[81] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 35.
[82] Ivanova, "Re-Thinking the Life of Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher," 455.

profound showing of knowledge: it demonstrates that Cyril was able to form a defense for Christianity through the education given by God and his supporters in Byzantium.

According to the *vita*, the mission to Khazaria proved to be more successful than the mission to Samarra. Following the disputations, the parties "parted joyfully" and two hundred people from Khazria wished to be baptized.[83] Through his words, Cyril convinced those people that Christianity was the one true faith. The Kagan wrote the following to the Emperor:

> Lord, you have sent us a man who in word and deeds has shown us that the Christian faith is holy. We are convinced it is the true faith and, in the hope that we too shall attain it, we have commanded all to be baptized voluntarily. We all are friends of your Empire and are at your service wherever you require it.[84]

The Kagan praised Cyril's learning but more importantly, permitted those who wished to receive baptism. Even though the Khazars did not officially adopt Christianity, the court became more tolerant of all religions and a few people decided to convert. The end of the letter from the Kagan, talking of a friendship between the two empires, is also important and goes back to how understanding different faiths could bring people together. If the account is accurate, Byzantium gained another ally through a diplomatic-missionary effort which would prove useful in the coming years.[85] Cyril turned down the Kagan's offer of many gifts, instead asking for "as many Greek captives as you have here."[86] He did not care for physical gifts of splendor and only wanted to free as many souls as possible, which he was only able to do after his successful discussion with the Khazars.

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[83] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 39-41.
[84] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 41.
[85] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 69.
[86] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 41.

Conclusion

Cyril's early career in Constantinople reveals a man shaped by a desire to learn and a devotion to God. From his reluctant participation in administrative duties of the empire to his withdrawal to solitude, Cyril consistently prioritized learning over status. Methodius in turn took a similar path, leaving his *archion* to take monastic habit. The diligence of Cyril did not go unnoticed, and this is precisely why he became indispensable to the Byzantine court. His dispute with the iconoclast John VII demonstrates his knowledge of theology and eloquence with words. The author's inclusion of this discussion reflects broader ninth-century concerns and elevates the young Philosopher; while the missions to Samarra and Khazaria further demonstrate how diplomacy and mission operated together in Byzantium. In engaging with lengthy theological discussions with Muslim and Jewish interlocutors, Cyril adapted his arguments to his audience relying on newfound spiritual knowledge. Before entering the court of the Kagan, Cyril undertook more learning in Kherson which proved to be useful for his upcoming debate. Whether embellished or not, the inclusion of dialogue with peoples from other nations reveals the author's intent to depict Cyril as a scholar capable of defending Christianity in numerous ways. All of these steps show why the brothers were well suited for the mission to Great Moravia, and these clear accounts of earlier events show how both were shaped by study and humility while also supporting the wishes of the Empire.

Chapter III: Miracles

Introduction

Even as his reputation grew, Cyril's devotion to learning about the world around him never diminished. His determination alongside missionary work marked him as a man set apart by God. As a child in Thessalonica, he learned about everything the city had to offer and turned to prayer when his studies confused him. His residence in Constantinople, where he continued his learning, gained him the favor of *Logothete* to the emperor, and the imperial court demonstrated its trust in him by sending him on missions to Samarra and Khazaria. Along with his learning and missionary activity, there were other signs of divine intervention according to the *vita* that led Cyril on the path of being chosen for the Moravian mission and becoming a saint: the performance of miracles. Scholars often describe miracles as acts brought about by God, who can interfere with the normal course of nature.[1] In early medieval Christian thought, miracles served as visible evidence that God worked through the saint, a tangible sign that God chose the individual. The performance of miracles and telling of them in hagiographies also reinforces the legitimacy of the subject and adds to how the saint is remembered today. The *VITA of Constantine* follows this broader literary and theological tradition by including accounts of miraculous events that underscore his spiritual authority and missionary role. These miracles occur at key points in the narrative, supporting the notion that Cyril's actions and journeys were guided by divine intervention.

This chapter focuses on miracles performed by Cyril directly before and after his mission to Khazaria. After leaving the court of the Khazars, the Byzantine delegation

[1] Brian Davies, "Miracles," *New Blackfriars* 73, no. 857 (1992): 105, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43249099.

found themselves in a waterless, barren land. Cyril was on the verge of dehydration, and after much prayer God sent water to the land. Upon meeting a group of "semi-Christians" who still practiced pagan rituals, Cyril convinced them to forgo their old beliefs. The most significant miracle performed by Cyril though was before the men arrived in Khazaria, during their stay in Kherson. After much research, Cyril heard a tale that the remains of the third successor of Saint Peter, Pope Saint Clement of Rome (about 88-89 AD), were on an island near Kherson.[2] Instantly fascinated by the prospect of finding the relics, he began talking to locals and church officials about how he could locate the late Pope. The account of this event in the *VITA of Constantine* and *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis* do more than simply present remarkable events. They frame Cyril's journeys as moments in which divine power intervenes directly in human affairs and confirm that his mission was approved by God. The author of the *vita* constructs an image of Cyril as a divinely guided missionary, all factors in the decision of the emperor to send him to Great Moravia.

[2] Michael Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius* (Slovak Editions "Sts. Cyril and Methodius," 1969), 58.

Section One: Upon Leaving the Kagan

When the Byzantine delegation was about to depart, the Kagan, Emperor of the Khazars, attempted to send Cyril with many gifts. Cyril refused, and instead asked for "as many Greek captives as you have here," and he rejoiced as about 200 men left with him.[3] The whole presentation of the deliberation at the Kagan's court in the *vita* makes a good impression of Cyril, showing he was a great theologian. Even though the Khazars never adopted Christianity as a state religion, according to Francis Dvornik, the Kagan wrote a personal note to Byzantine Emperor Michael III thanking him for sending such a wise man. The Kagan said, "We are friends of the Empire and we are ready to be at your service wherever you may wish it."[4] These words indicate that religion and political alliances were talked about at the court, and that there was a renewal of the Byzantine-Khazar alliance. The Kagan also gave permission to those who wished to be baptized, an indication of religious tolerance.[5]

On the way home in the hot, summer heat of 861 AD, the delegation along with the 200 released prisoners found themselves without suitable drinking water in a barren land outside of Khazaria. They could only find water in a salt spring.[6] Exhausted and extremely dehydrated from their journey, Cyril said to Methodius: "I can endure thirst no longer. Scoop up some of this water. For He who once turned bitter water to sweet for the Israelites shall also bring us comfort."[7] In an allusion to Exodus, the author situated Cyril within a broader sacred tradition that God provides for his chosen servants during

[3] M. Kantor, R. S. White, and A. Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius* (Michigan Slavic Publications, University of Michigan, 1976), 41.
[4] Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (Rutgers University Press, 1970), 69. This is the only quotation published from the letter in Dvornik's monograph.
[5] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 69.
[6] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 41.
[7] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 41.

difficult times of an ongoing mission. God granted Moses and the Israelites water, just as He did for Cyril. Cyril was confident that God could transform the water, his faith unwavering. He is the one who proposed the action and expressed faith, reinforcing his spiritual authority over the delegation. As expected, God provides for Cyril and his company, "Scooping it up, they found it sweet like honey, and cold. And they both drank, praising God for accomplishing this for His servants."[8] The travellers drank and glorified God who looked out for them. It is also important to note that this miracle was witnessed by many people, strengthening its credibility. This miracle is recounted in the *vita* with the goal of describing and telling how Cyril was in God's favor. His second diplomatic and missionary journey was nearing its end, and the miracle reinforces the idea that God supported the mission and its delegation, namely the Philosopher.

After the men quenched their thirst, they went through the land of Phoullae, or Phillae, in the northeast part of the Crimean mountain range.[9] In the lands of the Phoullae tribe stood a great oak tree which intertwined with a cherry tree. The people of this land had converted to Christianity, but many still retained their pagan practices and venerated this tree. The great oak tree was named Alexander, and under it sacrifices were offered, though women were not permitted to approach it nor the sacrifices.[10] This inclusion of Alexander has not been given the necessary scholarly attention because it seems both unimportant and fantastical, but it was included in the *vita* to show how Cyril brought semi-Christians to fully practice Christianity in the correct way. Other sections of this thesis examine how Cyril deliberated with non-Christians, but this depicts him in a

[8] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 41.
[9] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 41. The tribe is situated in modern day Republic of Dagestan.
[10] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 41.

different theological context with people that still practiced some pagan rites. The author had the goals of Byzantium and the Church in mind when including this anecdote because traditionally, they aimed to convert pagans found in rural areas. Cyril questioned the pagan tree worshippers: "The Hellenites inherited eternal torment for having worshipped as God heaven and earth as well as all creation. How then shall ye who worship a tree, a worthless thing intended for burning, escape the eternal fire?"[11] Even on his journey home Cyril was still in his missionary role, attempting to fully convert the semi-Christians he encountered. A difference in this instance though is that he is now confronting local religious practice instead of foreign members at court.

The inhabitants defended their tradition by explaining that their ancestors honored the tree for generations and that it provided the necessities they requested, including rainfall.[12] Cyril rejected this explanation and instead used persuasion and scripture to challenge their beliefs. In his challenge, Cyril quoted abundantly from Isaiah in the Old Testament who spoke of the distant nations of Tarshish and Pul.[13] The inclusion of these scriptural references affirms the fact that Cyril gained a deeper understanding of Hebrew while staying in Kherson, to where he could quote it and use the text in theological situations mere months later.[14]

After convincing the community, he ordered that the tree be cut down and burned. As the *vita* recounts, the people followed his command:

[11] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 41.
[12] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 41.
[13] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 42.
[14] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 69.

> Their elder bowed, came forth and kissed the Holy Gospel, as did all the others. Upon receiving white candles from the Philosopher, they walked toward the tree, singing. And seizing an axe, Constantine struck the tree thirty-three times.[15]

That very night, rain fell upon the land.[16] According to the logic of the *vita*, this was definitive proof: it was not the tree that brought rain to the land, but God, who controls the natural world. Cutting down the tree symbolized the triumph of Christianity over older traditions, and Cyril, being at the forefront of this accomplishment, further reinforces his authority. The *vita* constructs Cyril as a missionary whose authority derived not only from learning and eloquence, but also from defending and preaching Christianity.

[15] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 42.
[16] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 42.

Section Two: The Relics of Saint Clement

Returning to the journey to Khazaria, Cyril, Methodus, and the Byzantine delegation made a stop in Kherson where one of the most defining moments of Cyril's career occurred. Cyril was convinced that the relics of Saint Clement of Rome, the fourth Pope, lay somewhere in the ground on a small island off the coast of Kherson. According to the hagiography written about Saint Clement, he was exiled to Kherson and died a martyr's death; this account, recorded in the fourth or early fifth century, circulated widely in both the eastern and western Christian traditions.[17] Because the story of his martyrdom was well known in Byzantium, Cyril and the rest of the delegation believed that the relics of the early pope were still located somewhere in the region. In early medieval Christianity and today, relics are believed to carry the spiritual power of the saint whose remains they preserved, and their discovery often served as proof of divine favor or intervention. Possession of such relics also enhanced the prestige of churches and individuals associated with them. At the time, Cyril, his companions, and those who witnessed the event were convinced that he uncovered the genuine relics of the early pope. The discovery therefore functioned as a sign of divine favor and greatly contributed to Cyril's reputation as a holy man. Scholar Francis Dvornik asserts that the author of the descriptions of Saint Clement's martyrdom confused Clement with another saint who was martyred in Crimea, suggesting that the tradition surrounding Clement's death is largely legendary and historically uncertain.[18] Nevertheless, this modern skepticism does not diminish the event's importance within the narrative of the *VITA of Constantine*.

[17] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 66.
[18] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 66.

The information we have about finding the relics comes from a special document called the *Discovery,* or the *Discourse on the Discovery and Translation of the Relics of Saint Clement,* which Cyril wrote shortly after the event according to the *vita.* The main source about the *Discovery* is a letter written by Anastasius Bibliothecarius, a cardinal and librarian of the Roman Church, who was personally acquainted with Cyril.[19] The *Discovery* was translated into Latin by Anastasius, but the original has been lost. The Latin text is sometimes called the *Italian Legend,* and the version this thesis draws on is from the *Acta Sanctorum Volume 07: Mar. II*, a collection put together by the Society of Bollandists in 1668. The Latin title is *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis.*

Once in Kherson, Cyril's curiosity was piqued by what he saw around him, and the tale of the relics. As previously discussed, he spent time studying Hebrew and its scripture to prepare him for the upcoming discussion in Khazaria. The majority of his stay, however, seems to be devoted to finding the relics of Saint Clement. For many centuries after the death of Pope Clement, the Christians in Kherson venerated this martyr as their patron.[20] The cult surrounding the saint began to diminish as time passed and soon, many people there did not remember the tale of their once beloved martyr.[21] Cyril began to make inquiries about the whereabouts of the relics:

[19] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 60.
[20] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 56.
[21] Florin Curta and Ethan Williamson, "Anchor of Faith: The Cult of St. Clement in Eastern Europe (ca. 500 to ca. 1050)," in *Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference "History and Theology," Constanța (Romania), November 17–18, 2020*, ed. Ionuț Holubeanu (Editura Universitară, 2021), 16–54.

> Meanwhile, by the inspiration of God, who had already decided to reveal to his faithful [servant] such a precious treasure–namely the body of St. Clement–the aforementioned man, like a curious explorer, began to diligently and skillfully investigate those things that had reached him from the inhabitants of the place, both through the written tradition and also through common rumor, about the body of Blessed Clement.[22]

Unfortunately the people in Kherson were unable to provide him with much information, "since they were not native, but newcomers from various nations, they did not know at all what he was looking for."[23] Leading Cyril to Saint Clement's place of rest was a document called the *Passio Sti. Clementis,* and according to the text his grave was located on a small island in the bay of Kherson. At one point, a church was erected there in his honor, and after a bad storm the island was submerged.[24] The *Passio* also recorded that each year, on Saint Clement's feast day, an unusually low tide occurred making it possible to reach the island for several days.[25] After the inhabitants fell into negligence, the sea ceased to retreat. A great part of the island was rendered desolate and uninhabitable, and the ark of the holy martyr containing Saint Clement's body was swallowed by the waves.[26] Everyone believed the remains were gone, and for a time, Cyril was "greatly astonished and saddened by this answer."[27] Turning to prayer, Cyril hoped to be "deigned by divine revelation to show him through the merits of the

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[22] "Interea Deo inspirante, qui iam iamque tantum tamque pretiosum thesaurum; corporis videlicet S. Clementis, fidelibus suis reuelare decreuerat, cœpit præfatus vir, acsi curiosus explorator, ab incolis loci diligentissime perscrutari ac solerter inuestigare illa, quæ ad se tum litterarum traditione, tum quoque vulgari fama, de corpore B. Clementis." *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*, in Acta Sanctorum, vol. 7, March II (Antwerp, 1668), accessed via ProQuest, https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/vita-cum-translatione-s-clementis/docview/2684133500/se-2. This and all subsequent passages from this text are translated by Bevin Killen.
[23] "sed diuresis ex gentibus aduenæ, se quod requireret omnino nescire professi sunt." *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.
[24] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 56. Lacko also states that excavations took place in the mid 1800s on this island, and findings showed an ancient stone church.
[25] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 58.
[26] *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.
[27] "Super quo responso miratus valde ac tristis Philosophus redditus." *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.

aforementioned Pontiff."[28] The discovery of these relics would not occur purely by chance, but through God's guidance.

After prayer, Cyril invited the city's Bishop, George, along with members of the clergy, and began the search for the martyr. Cyril "exhorted and encouraged many of them to come and see the many precious pearls that had been neglected for so long, and, with God's help, bring them back to light."[29] The mission seemed unpromising from the beginning, as the chances that the relics remained on the island were slim. Nevertheless, Bishop George, most likely Methodius, and other prominent men from the city agreed to undertake the search. On January 30th, the men boarded a ship in a calm sea and set out for the island.[30] Even though the task at hand was daunting, their spirits remained unbroken. The men, "Sailing therefore with great devotion and confidence, singing and praying" arrived at the island and began to search for the body of the holy martyr.[31] Upon reaching the island, the men sang and prayed once more as they searched through the ruins of the old church. They had faith that by some miracle God would send them a clue as to where the body of Saint Clement lay. Their reliance on prayer before and during the search emphasizes the importance of prayer as a theme in the *vita*: the relics would be revealed to those who placed faith in God.

Cyril led this investigation: he gathered the men, convinced them that their search would not be in vain, and brought them to the island. There was no clear plan set in place for how to find the body, and this process is not described in detail in texts relating to the

[28] "diuina sibi reuelatio meritis præfati Pontificis dignaretur ostendere." *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.
[29] "plurimos eorum accedere & tam pretiosas margaritas tamdiu neglectas requirere, & in lucem Deo iuuante reducere, suis adhortationibus animauit." *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.
[30] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 58.
[31] "Nauigantes igitur cum ingenti deuotione ac fiducia psallentes & orantes peruenerunt ad insulam," *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*. Lacko asserts that they sang a hymn in honor of Saint Clement (page 58.)

discovery. In any case, as scholars have noted, "the miraculous circumstances in which Clement's head was discovered suggest that it was found at the surface, not during excavation."[32] The first thing that the men saw were the ribs of the martyr, which they described as shining as bright as a star.[33] Excitement quickly spread throughout the group, and they immediately began to clear the rest of the ground. After remaining hidden for hundreds of years, Cyril and the men of Kherson finally discovered the relics of Saint Clement.

Once the relics were pulled from the ground, another phenomenon occurred: "at the discovery of the holy relics, and at the sweetness of the immense fragrance, it was thought that they were standing outside themselves in Paradise, giving thanks with ineffable joy."[34] The sweet fragrance that reportedly emerged from the body is particularly noteworthy, though from a modern perspective it may seem unlikely given that the body had lain there for centuries. However, the presence of this sweet fragrance is also recorded in the *VITA* of Constantine, and its inclusion in these accounts suggests that it served an important function within the conventions of hagiographical narrative.[35] Descriptions of pleasant scents, sweetness, or light frequently accompany miraculous events in saints' lives, signaling the presence of divine grace. Just as when Cyril and his companions were without clean water, they drank from soiled water that miraculously tasted like sweet honey.[36] The fragrance surrounding the relics reinforces the belief that

[32] Curta and Williamson, "Anchor of Faith," 28.
[33] *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.
[34] "de sanctarum inuentione Reliquiarum, tum de immensissimi odoris suauitate erat innata lætitia, vt cum iubilo ineffabili gratulantes in Paradiso extra sese putaretur consistere." *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.
[35] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 23.
[36] Kantor, White, and Dostál, *The VITA of Constantine; The VITA of Methodius*, 41.

the bones they found belonged to a holy saint, and that the discovery occurred through God's intervention rather than by ordinary chance.

Near the remains of Saint Clement, the men also found the anchor with which, according to legend, he had been cast into the sea and weighed down by.[37] The discovery of the relics became one of the most significant achievements associated with Saint Cyril's life. Without such divine intervention, the relics of Saint Clement would not have been revealed to Cyril and his companions. The success further enhanced Cyril's status as a holy man under God's guidance.

Cyril and his men accomplished something unimaginable, and left quickly for the mainland to share their discoveries with the people of the city. The Philosopher, "lifting the coffin of the holy relics upon his own head, carried them to the ship with great rejoicing from all who followed."[38] The text includes that the mystery of the relics' discovery was revealed to everyone in Kherson, so all could hear how God guided Cyril to Saint Clement's final resting place[39]. The relics were first brought to the temple of Saint Sozon, and then transferred to the Church of Saint Leuntius.[40] When morning came, "the entire multitude of the city assembled, took up the coffin of the holy relics, and with great praise they made a procession through the city in its entirety."[41] This public assembly not only honored the lost relics, but also Cyril, as he linked the community in Kherson with the memory of Saint Clement. Cyril became celebrated as the man who found the martyr's body and this elevated his status in the eyes of the Kherson people.

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[37] Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius*, 58-59.
[38] "vir super proprium caput sanctarum reliquiarum loculum leuans, ad nauim cum ingenti vniuersorum subsequentium tripudio detulit." *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.
[39] *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.
[40] *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.
[41] "vniuersa civitatis multitudo conueniens, assumpto sanctarum Reliquiarum loculo, totam cum magnis laudibus in circuitu lustrauerunt urbem." *Vita Cum Translatione S. Clementis*.

According to reports written by Anastasius Bibliothecarius, Cyril composed a hymn shortly after the discovery of the relics. This hymn appears in a Kievan Rus manuscript dated to the twelfth or thirteenth century discovered by Mikhail Mur'ianov.[42] Mur'ianov considers the canon as the Old Church Slavonic translation of the original Greek hymn composed by Cyril.[43] The original Greek hymn does not survive, but the translation into Old Church Slavonic does. The hymn is intended to be sung during the liturgical service of January 30th, the only holiday in Saint Clement's honour that can be found in the oldest Kievan calendar.[44] The composition of this hymn points to the beginning of a renewed cult of Saint Clement, which Cyril actively promoted through the commemorative work.

[42] Mikhail F. Mur'ianov, "Stranicy gimnografii Kievskoi Rusi," in *Tradicii drevneishei slavianskoi pis'mennosti i iazykovaia kul'tura vostochnykh slavian*, edited by V. P. Vomperskii (Nauka, 1991), pp. 69-143 cited in Curta and Williamson, "Anchor of Faith," 29.
[43] Enrique Santos Marinas, "The Ideological Use of Biblical Motifs and Quotations in the Canon on the Translation of the Relics of St. Clement of Rome," *Scripta & e-Scripta* 5 (2007): 97.
[44] Marinas, "Ideological Use of Biblical Motifs," 97.

Conclusion

The miracles attributed to Saint Cyril during his journey to the Khazars and after his departure from the court illustrate how the *vita* constructs him as a figure whose actions unfolded under divine guidance. He was chosen by the Byzantine Empire to undergo this mission because he had already demonstrated intellectual strength, an unending curiosity about the world around him, and success in theological debates. The emperor and his court saw something exceptional in this young man, who had already shown signs of holiness and continued to prove himself to be in God's favor. The transformation of water, the confrontation with the semi-Christian peoples of Phoullae, and the discovery of the relics of Saint Clement of Rome are key episodes that establish Cyril's saintly reputation. They show why he could be entrusted with later Byzantine missions. Drawing from narrative emphasis rather than explicit statements in the *vita*, these events are presented not nearly as wondrous, but signs confirming that Cyril possessed a special relationship with God.

Early medieval Christian authors often portrayed saints as figures whose lives revealed God's intervention in the world through miracles, and this pattern can clearly be seen in Cyril's story. By presenting these episodes, the author of the *vita* establishes a foundation of Cyril's learning, spiritual authority, and divine favor during the early and middle years of his life. The destruction of the sacred tree further demonstrates Cyril's ability to challenge deeply rooted beliefs other than Christianity and his willingness to take extraordinary action in the name of God. In a similarly extraordinary way, the relics of Saint Clement were long forgotten by the people in Kherson, but Cyril was able to convince men to board a ship in search of the holy martyr despite having no clear

direction. According to the *vita*, the discovery occurred through God's assistance and was witnessed by many, ensuring that the tale spread among the people. The discovery of the relics and success of the Khazar mission gave him credibility, and elevated him in the eyes of the Chrsitian authorities in Constantinople and made him a suitable candidate for the Moravian mission.

Conclusion

Cyril traveled far and wide from his Thessalonian beginnings. As a young man, he and his brother Methodius lived a childhood filled with wonder and education. Curiosity was fostered in Thessalonica, but Cyril believed that he could learn even more if he ventured outside his homeland. Upon arriving in Constantinople, he quickly engrossed himself in court life, becoming close to the *Logothete* Theoctistus, a right hand man of Empress Theodora. The environment of the golden city pushed him to study theology and philosophy rigorously while under the watchful eye of many prominent scholars including the soon to be Patriarch, Photius. After proving himself as a learned and pious individual, the court sent Cyril to debate with the ex-Patriarch, John VII, an iconoclast. Cyril established himself to be up to such tasks, and from that point on he was entrusted with several diplomatic missions where he went to discuss Christianity with Byzantium's non-Christian neighbors. He traveled to Samarra to debate Arabic peoples there, and then to the land of the Jewish "Hagarites" who both had theological questions. Through these conversations, Cyril not only showed his theological strengths, but acted as an envoy to the Byzantine Church pushing forth its values. From a young age, the author of the *vita* made it clear that Cyril was divinely guided, and God's favor revealed itself further through the miracles attributed to Cyril. From finding "sweet" water in a barren land, to discovering the relics of Pope Saint Clement I of Rome, Cyril showed to those around him that his mission was not merely intellectual or political, but deeply spiritual. According to the *VITA of Constantine,* it was these events which set him up as the only candidate to go on the mission to Great Moravia. When Prince Rastislav's envoys arrived, Cyril was chosen for the challenge.

Prince Rastislav's delegation arrived in Constantinople in 862 AD with an appeal to Emperor Michael III. The Moravians asked for a bishop and teacher to be sent to their lands to explain the true Christian faith in their own language.[1] Emperor Michael III, upon consulting with his advisors, chose Cyril to lead the mission: "Philosopher, I know you are tired, but it is necessary that you go there. For none other than you can attend to this matter."[2] Cyril had just returned from his long mission to Khazaria, but dutifully agreed. Initially, he thought a Slavic script had already been created, but this was not the case. He would have to create it himself. Following his customary practice, Cyril devoted himself to prayer alongside his servants.[3] Not long after: "[God] Hearing the prayer of His servants, soon appeared to him. And right away, Constantine composed letters and began to write the language of the Gospel."[4] Cyril composed the Slavonic script with the help of his disciples and God.[5] Now, he possessed an alphabet and could begin translating biblical texts into Slavonic with the help of Methodius and their followers.

Emperor Michael III rejoiced when the alphabet was created, and in an epistle written to Prince Rastislav, he said: "we have sent you the one to whom God revealed this, a venerable and pious man and very learned Philosopher. Thus, accept this gift which is greater and more valuable than all the gold and silver, precious stone, and transient riches."[6] Byzantium was pleased to send the delegation because it strengthened

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[1] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine ; The VITA of Methodius*. University of Michigan, Michigan Slavic Publications, 1976, 43-45.
[2] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine, The VITA of Methodius,* 45.
[3] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine, The VITA of Methodius,* 45.
[4] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine, The VITA of Methodius,* 45.
[5] Michael Lacko, *Saints Cyril and Methodius* (Slovak Editions "Sts. Cyril and Methodius," 1969), 86. There is debate on whether or not Cyril composed the Glagolitic or Cyrillic script, or both. Based on a discovery made at the end of the nineteenth century, a new investigation was launched and philologists concluded that Cyril had in fact written the Glagolitic script, attributing the Cyrillic script to a few decades after he died.
[6] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine, The VITA of Methodius,* 45.

its cultural and religious influence among the Slavic peoples. Along with the new liturgical script, Cyril also brought the relics of Saint Clement, which he discovered in Kherson. The findings gave their mission greater weight. In this moment, Cyril's learning and spiritual devotion converged, allowing him not only to preach Christianity, but fundamentally reshape how the Moravians understood and practiced it.

Together with Methodius, the brothers set out north to Great Moravia. When they arrived, Rastislav handed over a group of disciples to Cyril so they could begin their instruction. This indicates that the mission's primary objective was educational rather than evangelical, as many native youths were already in training for priesthood.[7] While there, Cyril, along with Methodius, continued translating parts of the liturgy into Slavonic. Little information is given about the delegation's activities while in Great Moravia, but according to the *vita* they were there for a total of forty months, a little over three years.[8] In the middle of the twentieth century, a series of excavations uncovered the remains of many churches in and near Great Moraiva. The archaeological findings showed evidence of churches when the Byzantines were present, and soon after the delegation left. In 1957, the largest and most interesting find was made in Mikulčice, Czech Republic. The church had a total interior length of thirty-four meters and the nave was nine meters wide.[9] Many graves, containing jewelry and other objects, were also found. A short distance away from Moravia the ruins of another church were found dated to the ninth century. It is known as "Klimentka," and it is evident the church was erected

[7] Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (Rutgers University Press, 1970), 105. Moravians practiced Christianity in the Roman rite due to the occupation of Bavarian kings in the early ninth century. So, many Moravians were Christian, but could not speak or read Latin. They wanted to practice Christianity in their native tongue which the Byzantines and Cyril made possible.
[8] Kantor, M., White, R. S., & Dostál, A. *The VITA of Constantine, The VITA of Methodius,* 47.
[9] Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, 119-122

to house Saint Clement's relics.[10] Through Saint Clement, Byzantium and Moravia were spiritually and culturally linked, reinforcing the mission's legitimacy and its connection to the broader Christian world.

Cyril's selection for the mission to Great Moravia was not simply a matter of convenience. It was the result of a lifetime of preparation that combined intellectual excellence, missionary experience, and evident divine favor. From his early years in Thessalonica, it was clear that Cyril was chosen by God to lead a saintly life. The *vita* reports that at seven, he dreamed of choosing Sophia, wisdom, revealing his dedication to learning from a young age. He never married, instead choosing to engross himself in his studies. His disappointment when the foreign grammarian turned him away quickly led to a new opportunity to study in Constantinople. The city gave him access to a better education, and he had new role models to look up to. His success in disputations, such as those against iconoclasts and non-Christian interlocutors, showed not only his mastery of Christian teaching but also his ability to communicate it persuasively. These qualities were further refined during his diplomatic and missionary journeys to places like Samarra and among the so-called "Hagarites". Cyril encountered new traditions and sharpened his role as a theologian and representative of the Byzantine Empire. By the time Prince Rastislav's request reached Constantinople, Cyril had already proven himself uniquely capable of undertaking a multifaceted mission.

Equally important, however, was the perception that Cyril was divinely chosen for the role of creating and bringing the Slavonic liturgy to Great Moravia. The *VITA of Constantine* consistently presents him as guided by God, a theme reinforced through the

[10] Anthony-Emil N. Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 78-79.

miracles attributed to him. His discovery of the relics of Saint Clement of Rome stands out as a pivotal moment in his career, showcasing God's approval of him and a connection to the early Christian past. This event, along with other miraculous acts, elevated Cyril beyond the status of a learned scholar to that of a holy figure whose actions carried spiritual authority. When combined with his creation of the Slavonic script and his commitment to translating the liturgy, it becomes clear why he, above all others, was chosen. The legacy of Saint Cyril is well known, but the question remains: why Cyril? By looking at his origins, we gain insight not only into his upbringing and intellectual curiosity, but also the intellectual culture that shaped him into an exceptional and uniquely qualified individual.

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