

## HYGIENE OF THE BODY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Attitudes toward hygiene and towards the human body are among the essential and historically variable markers of different cultures. Scientists have described and characterized different types of such attitudes – from the cultures of the Far East, where ritual washing is a mandatory element of daily religious practices, through the Hellenistic cult of the nude body and keeping it in a state of health and cleanliness, to the Roman baths – centers of social networking and indispensable elements of urban culture.

As for the Balkans, in our lands the attitude to the cleanness of the body went through several substantially different stages. Thus far, science has no comprehensive data on the hygienic habits and requirements of the Thracians. We can only assume that the mandatory cleansing rituals practiced by those initiated into Thracian Orphism also include purely hygienic prescriptions. More information can be obtained about Roman times – archeological studies have found a considerable number of public baths, built not only in the vicinity of thermal springs, but also in city centers. A network of aqueducts, covering the outskirts of cities, ensured the supply of fresh water and provided an opportunity for the Roman society to practice its traditional cult of the healthy body. The fate of these facilities in late antiquity was quite interesting - most of them continued to function for centuries after Thrace was no longer a Roman province (e.g. the aqueduct from the Rhodope Mountains, built in I-II century, supplied Plovdiv with clean water until the Middle Ages). The public and private baths built in antiquity were abandoned after the devastation and depopulation of the city at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century, but it is difficult to judge whether this is in any way related to the introduction of Christianity.

The Middle Ages were a time of decline in the understanding of the need for bodily hygiene. The Christian Church, although not explicitly, emphasized the priority of caring for the spirit rather than the body. Moreover, the hygienic standards inherited from paganism were often suspected of threatening continence. In the messages of the apostles, the body is also mentioned as a part of a "sacrifice to God" ("*...I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, [which is] your spiritual service.*" (Romans 12: 1, American Standard Version) or "*Let us draw near with a true heart in fulness of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience: and having our body washed with pure water.*" (Hebrews 10:22) However, the attitude towards the body in the context of a basic dualism with the spirit is somewhat negative, and caring for the body was thought of as vanity and a departure from the path of salvation. In the process of enforcing the doctrine that sexual intercourse is the main way to sin, any

action related to the (naked) body (including bathing) was condemned as leading to prurience and threatening the salvation of the soul. Gradually the theme of the (cleanliness of the) body was pushed to the periphery of normative discourse, the body being permanently marked with a negative sign, Even talking about the body was avoided or eloquent euphemisms were chosen, as if even only mention of the body might lead the faithful to stray.

A possible source of the historical daily hygiene practices in our land could be the famous **“Responses of Pope Nicholas I to the Questions of the Bulgarians”**, which has not been thoroughly studied from this perspective yet. This document is widely known, repeatedly published and commented on.<sup>1</sup> Although briefly mentioned in historical surveys dealing with Bulgaria in the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>, historians rarely review it as anything other than evidence of the ecclesiastical and political events of the time. Vasil Zlatarski made detailed comments<sup>3</sup> on it and interpreted it as the striving *“of both the Bulgarians and their knyaz, even after the adoption of Christianity, to preserve some of their old pagan customs, beliefs and views.”*<sup>4</sup> However, Zlatarski’s attention is focused mainly on the religious and legal aspects of the text. An exception to the popular interpretations of the text is the opinion of Mutafchiev that *“these “Answers” are the most important testimony not only of the dead end, to which the life of the just-converted (into Christianity) Bulgarian society came; and not only of the Bulgarian culture in the period of paganism; but also of the spiritual status of (Knyaz) Boris himself ...”*<sup>5</sup>.

Let us discuss the everyday life of the medieval Bulgarians, reflected in the “Responses”. Question № 6 apparently refers to bathing: *“... you say that the Greeks [Byzantine missionaries in the Bulgarian court] contend and declare that in no way should you go to a (public) bath on Wednesdays and Fridays ...”*<sup>6</sup> The idea behind is that the days observed as fast day - Wednesday and Friday - would be “become unclean” by something as “anti-ascetic” as having a bath.

We have no clear idea of the hygienic practices of the Slavs, but we assume that the question raised that way stems mainly from the proto-Bulgarian hygienic traditions. The common concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Knyaz Boris I addressed his question to the pope during the second half of 866, therefore this text is one of the few precisely dated evidences of the earliest epoch of the Bulgarian Christianization. I use the edition of **Kalin Yanakiev** (ed). Photius Patriarch of Constantinople to Knyaz Boris. Pope Nicholas to the Bulgarians. (hereinafter: Responses ...) S., 1994. The translation from Latin is by Dimitar Dechev from 1922 and is identical with the second Bulgarian edition of **D. Detshev**. Responsa Nicolai I papae ad consulta Bulgarorum. Serdicae, 1939, and with the one in IBI, 7., S., 1960, 65-125.

<sup>2</sup> **Petar Mutafchiev**. History of the Bulgarian People (681-1323) S., 1986, 158-160; **Vasil Ghiuselev**. Boris I. S., 1969, 202-208, **Ivan Bozhilov**. The Culture of Medieval Bulgaria. S., 1996, 72-73. History of Bulgaria, Sofia, BAS, 1981, vol. 2, 220-223;

<sup>3</sup> **Vasil Zlatarski**. History of the Bulgarian State in the Middle Ages. vol. 1 / 2, p. 85-112

<sup>4</sup> there, 103.

<sup>5</sup> **Petar Mutafchiev**, quote, works, 158-159.

<sup>6</sup> Responses...,121

proto-Bulgarians as being primitive nomadic people has long been rejected by numerous archaeological studies and other data. It is an established fact that in the period between the 7-th and 9-th century they built numerous baths (and obviously – used them). Proto-Bulgarian baths were discovered during archaeological excavations in the towns of Madara in Pliska and Preslav (Bulgaria), in many monastery centers near the capital cities, and even in the temporary auls (fortified military camps) where sometimes soldiers had to spend the winter.

The technique of heating the water was the traditional hypokaust system known from the Roman baths, but proto-Bulgarians also built a large number of smaller and larger pools.<sup>7</sup> It is hard to imagine that all these facilities were enjoyed only by the extremely limited circle of senior nobles (bolyars) and dignitaries accompanying the king. Bathing as a favorite pastime of the Bulgars (St. Vaklinov suggests that this inclination for bathing is due to long time spent in the arid Asian steppes!) seems even more significant, having in mind that at the same time, even in the sophisticated Byzantine Empire, the old Roman hygienic traditions had long been neglected and most of the impressive buildings with such functions which survived the past centuries, are dry and buried in weeds.<sup>8</sup> Of course, it is needless to mention that in Western European castles such intricate conveniences like running water and sanitation were still unheard of and emerged only a few centuries later. (Against this background, we can not but be amazed by the artistic hit of the writer Emilian Stanev, who opens his novel "The Legend of Sybil, the Knyaz of Preslav" with the sentence: "*The prince had returned from hunting and was now bathing*"<sup>9</sup>. Later on the writer sets a series of key scenes of the novel - including the final one! - in and around the bath complex. Without being a medievalist, the writer has caught an essential feature of day-to-day life in the Bulgarian Middle Ages, although he has anachronistically transferred it several centuries later.)

The response of the Pope is evasive - he quoted Pope Gregory I at the end of the 6-th - early 7-th century, and recommended having a bath at any time "if it is necessary for the body" and rejects it in all cases "if it is for the joy of the spirit and for pleasure ". Undoubtedly, the boundary between these two functions of the bath is rather vague and in fact Bulgarians received papal permission to bathe, as they used to, every day. An entirely different question can be raised: when and how regular bathing ceased to be a part of everyday life and how the Christian Church, far from always being as tolerant as Pope Nicholas, contributed to this. According to Rule XXX of the Council of Laodicea "*None of the priesthood, nor clerics [of lower rank] nor ascetics, nor any Christian or layman, shall*

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<sup>7</sup> See details on the matter by **Stanko Vaklinov**. Formation of Old Bulgarian culture. S., 1977, p. 91, 95, 110, 118, 122, 126, 194, 195 and literature cited there

<sup>8</sup> **C. Mango**, Daily life in Byzantium. B: XVI. Internationaler Byzantinistenkongress Wien, 4.-9. Oktober 1981. Akten I/1. (=Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik 31/1) Wien 1981, S. 338-341.

<sup>9</sup> Emilian Stanev. Legend of Sybin, Preslav Prince. S., 1968, p. 7.

*wash in a bath with women; for this is the greatest reproach among the heathen.*"<sup>10</sup> Although the rule refers to the **washing together** of representatives of both genders, and besides this, an interesting statement is made that the ban is in response to accusations "by the heathen"; it is quite clear that, with the gradual alienation from the Hellenic tradition, having a bath gradually became less common. However, we have evidence that in the High Middle Ages and the Bulgarian Revival, bathing was considered a highly unacceptable action for certain categories of Christians - eg. monks, and for others it was limited to several times a year - before major holidays. In these cases, bathing was considered mandatory (eg. before confession and receiving communion at Easter), however, here again there are no instructions from the church - the tradition was maintained as a form of custom. Interestingly, according to the same (folk) tradition we have several mandatory ritual bathings unrelated or only partially related to Christian rites (eg, bathing in the dew before sunrise on St. George's day, nameday bathing, showering the midwife on Midwives' Day, the bath of the bride and groom, the mandatory bathing of the newborn and the dead, etc.).

According to the study of everyday urban life in the Bulgarian Revival period made by Rayna Gavrilova,<sup>11</sup> *"traditional society ... perceives washing as a useless health risk ... A typical person at that time undresses very rarely - in some special rituals. All other activities - washing and bathing, sleeping, sex, are done with clothes on."* Furthermore, *"one should wash those parts of the body that get dirty - hands and arms, legs, face, ears, hair. The body covered with underwear shirt has no visible signs of dirt, therefore, does not need washing. "*

On the other hand, there is a specific area, implicitly related to water and bathing (as pleasure) and it is clearly marked as "alien", "beyond-normal" and "dangerous." This is the space of female mythological creatures (fairies, mermaids, etc.) that are known to inhabit areas around water sources (springs, wells, rivers, lakes and swamps), where they bathe "in the moonlight" (to the sweet sound of the wooden flute (kaval) of a charmed / enchanted shepherd). Although externally attractive, these bathing girls are considered extremely dangerous and a meeting with them usually ends with "treacherous" disease and death. In general, to see a woman who is bathing is considered a moral violation (those peeping from behind the bushes by the river or through a hole in the wall of a bathroom are subject to a mandatory punishment). Additional negative connotations attributed to bathing (this time from the point of view of the church) stem from the fact that in many cases the

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<sup>10</sup> Literally the rule also corresponds to Rule 77 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council (Third Council of Constantinople), which adds that such an alleged clergyman should be expelled, and a layman - excommunicated. In Rule 11 of that council there is the same penalty for anyone who comes into contact or bathes in the same bath complex with Jews.

<sup>11</sup> **Rayna Gavrilova.** "The Wheel of Life. Everyday life of the Bulgarian city of the Revival Period". S., 1999, 174-184, 174-175 here especially

medical practices prescribed by traditional healers and sorceresses include (ritual) pouring of herbal water onto the diseased person, washing the problematic area of the body at a certain water source or other hygienic activities. Following the principle of "alien" = "bad", here too, bathing is associated with non-Christian behavior, and is therefore interpreted as dangerous and harmful (if not for the patient's body, in all cases – for their soul).

The disappearance of bathing as a daily practice in the Balkans in the Middle Ages is a subject that deserves a special study. Given the Muslim conquerors's cult of bodily cleanliness, we can hardly blame this change on the "Turkish yoke". According to ethnographic data from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup>, *"our peasants, and sometimes even citizens, have a somewhat reluctant attitude to bathing, reluctantly have a bath. ... A baby is bathed every day for 40 days after its birth and then bathing is put aside. People are also washed when they die ... in both cases a person is bathed by other people without realizing it ..."* Of course we have a variety of local options. It is quite likely that in areas with thermal springs, the Ottoman cult of hygiene contributed to a greater penetration of daily hygiene practices among the Christian population. Yet, we must bear in mind that **the association of those practices with the cultural tradition of 'the other' (i.e. Islamic culture) most likely prevented their adoption in the Orthodox Christian environment.**

Systematic attention to personal hygiene was understood as a sign of low morals. A confession questionnaire, preserved in the Zaykovski prayer-book<sup>13</sup>, in Sveta Gora, contains the following question: *"Have you washed yourself after making love. Have you washed yourself for no reason"?* It seems, washing after sexual intercourse was considered as particularly immoral, perhaps because in the Islamic tradition it is required both before and after the act. Paradoxically, it appears that **the hygienic practices of the Islamic population were interpreted as a marker of ritual impurity, as opposed to the concept of their own (Christian) tradition of forbearing from bathing to preserve the immanent (sacred) bodily purity obtained once "in the source of eternity" (by ritual of baptism).**

In the Revival period, in some of luxurious town houses, private bathing facilities were designed, but this was mostly in the ethnically mixed regions and was perceived more as a form of "foreign" lifestyle.<sup>14</sup> Even in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Bulgarian cities, where there was an abundance of public baths, tradition required to go there once a week. Moreover, in the town of

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<sup>12</sup> D. Marinov. Folk beliefs and religious folk customs. S., 1994, 654

<sup>13</sup> Prayer book from the National Library Sofia No. 960, parchment, first half of XIV century f. 39r

<sup>14</sup> See Hindliyan house in Plovdiv and Karlovo and especially Rhodope houses with bathrooms and home hamams - **Todor Zlatev**. "The Bulgarian house in the Revival" S., 1955, 106-110, 115-126, **Dimitar Popov**. "Architectural heritage of Karlovo", 1967, 45-52, 57-61, 81-83

Velingrad for example – where there were seven public baths with different mineral waters, and hundreds of mineral springs whose water freely poured through taps and fountains in the streets into the so-called "topila" (hot pools) – going to the public baths was a real ritual, which required at least half a day off.

There were strict rules as to on which day of the week people from which neighborhood should go to which public bath (not necessarily the nearest to the neighborhood); who it is proper to assist by scrubbing their back clean; what the order (hierarchy) of bathing is... Grandmothers would first bathe their grandchildren (boys and girls younger than 5-6 years were bathed by grandmothers and mothers in the 'female' baths), then put them on special couches, wrapped in towels, to sleep or at least have some rest after the intensive treatment (due to both the high mineral content of the water, and the high temperature, humidity, noise, as well as the rough massage they received while being scrubbing clean). While children were dozing off under their sheets, it was time for the mothers, and grandmothers to bathe, while carefully observing another set of rules – who can sit where, how to wash / cleanse the seat prior to sitting, in what order to wash the parts of the body, and so on.

There were days of the week when Gypsies would go to the public bath, other days for Bulgarian Muslims (called Pomaks) , etc. On those days Christians would visit the bath only as an exception. Visiting the public bath at a time when it was almost empty was considered a special pleasurable experience. On such occasions grandmas would say they have had "'gemish' bath" , explaining to us that this was the name of the ritual bathing of the bride in Islamic cultures on the day before their wedding, which (linked with a series of rituals (having their hair hennaed, their skin depilated, etc.) not only prepared young women for the upcoming event, but also allowed the female relatives of the bridegroom to inspect and evaluate the would-be-daughter-in-law for possible bodily defects. This "'gemish' bath" is a synonym for a prolonged pleasure – it takes almost a whole day, while from time to time women would go out to have some pastries, sorbet and pickled vegetables or fruit.

Bathing in the premodern era is definitely a collective activity. The nakedness of the body is seen naturally and seamlessly – to the horror of the modern Western observer (as a child I brought our friends from Germany in one of Velingrad public baths to show them "what it is like" – they were shocked in their Puritan way by the thought of taking their clothes off in front of so many people). Here is the place to mention that this tradition, of which our generation has living memories, is actually pretty old. Let us recall the famous description of 1717 by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu of her visit to a public bath in Sofia. - according to her the scene could have had a strong impact on the

oriental fantasies of a London artist: " *To tell you the truth, I had wickedness enough to wish secretly that Mr. Gervase could have been there invisible. I fancy it would have very much improv'd his art to see so many fine women naked in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their cushions while their slaves ... were employ'd in braiding their hair in several pritty manners. In short, 'tis the Women's coffee house, where all the news of the Town is told, Scandal invented, etc...*"<sup>15</sup> Naturally, this is most likely the case with customs of Muslim women (in the 18<sup>th</sup> century), but similar practices have been adopted and undoubtedly inherited also in the Christian community in the following centuries.

Let us also mention male bathing, which also has its rituals. Alongside the tradition of scrubbing each other's backs clean with scrub-gloves, we should mention the usual attempts to peek into the "women's room" or at least to throw some ice-cold water over the dividing wall in order to cause confusion and joyful screams on the other side – immediately followed by the intervention of the strict telyaks (male or female "bath-ushers" assistants who scrubbed peoples backs clean with a scrub-glove on request), clattering with their wooden pattens and restoring the order and good-mannered behavior of the public bath visitors... An important part of the fun in the male bathing rituals is the time after the bath, in the pub opposite. Men would look at the maidens and the young women who come out of the public bath with an appreciating look and make corresponding 'salty' comments.

The adoption of bathing as an indispensable part of urban life in the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century was actually a rather late innovation. Of course, it happened in quite different ways in the different regions (e.g. in the absence of unlimited running hot mineral water). For me – who grew up among the gushing mineral water springs – it was a real shock to read an inscription in a public bath in another city during the 70's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which read "Save the water!". It was hard to imagine that water could and should be saved<sup>16</sup>. As to the villages, the changes described took place even later; even today in some parts of the country the bathroom is not a compulsory element in the plan of a village house. In regions where there are no mineral water springs in the immediate vicinity, going to a public bath in the past was a real journey with rituals of its own planned and related to a certain time and seasonal activities and/or Christian holidays. People in the mountain town of Bansko still tell an old anecdote about a man from Razlog (a little rival-town nearby) who having returned from the public bath in Dobrinishte (a town with mineral springs) found out that his sleeveless jacket

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<sup>15</sup> Quote by Larry Woolf. *The invention of Eastern Europe*. S., 2004, 7-8

<sup>16</sup> In ancient Rome fountains had no taps – it was believed that to regulate and restrict the flow of water would be an insult to the god of the Tiber River

was missing. He had just put up with the lost, when three months later he went to the public bath again and found his jacket – it turned out that the previous time he had put it on under his shirt...

However, it should be taken into consideration that the personal memories described here refer to a small town at a time of modernity and modernization – very soon after that time the majority of houses already had bathrooms inside – be they especially constructed or adapted into washrooms, though far from complying with the European idea of a luxurious bathroom. Only in the 80's and 90's did bathing ceased to be common and community activity and become something individual and intimate. The hectic renovation of bathrooms and their transformation into a luxury hallmark of social prestige happened in front of our eyes during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the first decade the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The history of bathing in our land is still to be written<sup>17</sup>. In this case what is important for us is whether the attitude of the Christian church to bodily hygiene determined the behavior of the believers. So far, we dare formulate a hypothesis that the traditional folk concept of the nude body being unclean and obscene is in direct conformity with the Christian worldview model. This has a negative impact on the attitude towards personal body care beyond the strictly determined Christian rituals. Probably, the early influence of the Islamic ideal of a clean body on the everyday beliefs and practices of the whole community only occurred in regions of mixed religious population. However, this influence too, even until modernity, was restricted by the association of hygiene with the life style of the "different" and the "enemy"<sup>18</sup>. In this sense, we would ask how long the Bulgarian Christians remained "pre-modern" in their attitude to bathing. Churchill's acrid note that "in the Balkans to this day there are people who say 'Congratulations' after a bath is not just an expression of (undue) Eurocentric arrogance, but also a classical example of divergence of interpretations within the framework of two religious contexts difficult to compare.

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<sup>17</sup> See the brief but useful work of **Miroslav Popov**. "On the history of the hygiene status of Bulgaria and the health beliefs and habits of its population during Middle Ages" In: *Nature*, 1956, 3, 79-84.

<sup>18</sup> Yet the scope of this convergence should not be exaggerated - even in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the construction of the first mineral pool in the village of Ladzhene (today a district of Velingrad) in 1936-7, the then mayor - the initiator of the work was threatened with excommunication for promoting immorality, and the local old women informed him that "if there is a pool, there will be no rain" (i.e. God will be angry and will not send rain) - information from his son, A.S., 83,