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A Comparative Analysis of Two Patericon Stories

In his article “On the Question of Genres in Old Russian Literature,” D. Čičevsky points out that it is important to differentiate the genre of the patericon from that of the zhitiie. Unlike saints’ lives, patericon stories are not obligated to cover the monk’s entire life, and often portray holy men who are not yet saints. In addition, even fallen monks may serve as the subjects of some patericon stories. The imprecise use of the two terms may have resulted originally from the tendency of Old Russian scribes to apply the designation zhitiie not to the genre of the work but to the subject of the narrative. Thus, even in the Kievan Caves Patericon, individual patericon stories are called zhitiia. Whatever the cause of this confusion, however, it is imperative that contemporary investigators recognize that the patericon is a separate genre, possessing its own rules and traditions. Moreover, not only is the patericon an independent genre from the zhitiie, it is a different type. The patericons, like chet’i minei, chronicles, and azbukovniki, belong to the category of “ensemble” genres, which unite works of various other genres called sub-types. The literary investigator must concern himself not only with what Likhachev calls the “suzerain genre,” but also with the sub-types.

Any comparison of the native Russian patericons, such as the Kievan Caves Patericon, with the patericons translated from Latin and Greek is thus a very complex undertaking, made even more difficult by the wide differences among the translated patericons themselves. A comparison of a Kievan Caves Patericon (henceforth K.C.P.) story with one from the Skete Patericon (Skitskii poglavnii paterik) may yield vastly different results from a comparison of the same story with one from the Sinai Patericon (Sinaiskii paterik). By the same token different results may be obtained by selecting other stories from the K.C.P. for the comparison, as they are by no means all of the same type. With this in mind, one must be wary of accepting R. Pope’s contention that the

3. Ibid.
K.C.P. is quite different from the translated patericons in terms of genre, until the whole question of the patericon genre has been more adequately examined, and until more stories from the K.C.P. have been systematically studied and compared to their translated counterparts. It is the purpose of this article to contribute in a small way to this immense task by examining one story from the K.C.P., in terms of its own structure and also in its relationship with other patericons.

Previous investigators have noted the attainments of the K.C.P. in the area of psychological characterization and have particularly praised the works of Polikarp in this regard. Perhaps for this reason, the stories in his part of the collection have received greater attention than those in the section written by Simon. In an attempt to redress the imbalance slightly, I have selected a work from Simon’s collection, “The Story of Evstratii,” for analysis here. The tale deserves further examination not only because of previous neglect but also because of the somewhat unusual and curious parallels drawn between the death of its hero and the Passion of Christ.

The basic structure of the story of Evstratii is characteristically tripartite. The introduction briefly presents the main character and sets the scene. We are told that “a certain man came from Kiev to the cave, in order to become a monk.” It is only after he has become a monk that we are told his monastic name, and nothing is said of his previous history. This immediately differentiates the story from a zhite and implies that only Evstratii’s life as a monk interests the author. As was the custom, Evstratii distributed his goods on entering the monastery and devoted himself to spiritual concerns. At the end of the introductory section, the narrator concisely describes Evstratii as a lay brother (poslushnik) to all and a faster (postnik). This initial characterization is important, for it tells us what to expect of him subsequently, and is all the background material provided.


