Ralph Cleminson

Silk in the Slavonic Scriptures

Silk was known in Europe from antiquity, but there was no domestic production until the age of Justinian: silk was imported from the East. Consequently, silk is designated in European languages by loan-words, neologisms or resemantisation – in Slavonic, свила, сиречь, коприна, шикъ/сикъ, шьлкъ, шьла, бодваб, etc. The present article examines the Slavonic words for ‘silk’ in the limited context of the Slavonic version of the Bible.

In Greek, the words for ‘silk’ reflected the sources from which it was obtained: Procopius, writing in the sixth century A.D., refers to “ἡ μέταξα [...] ἣν τάλαι μὲν Ἕλληνες μηδικὴν ἐκάλουν, τανῦν δὲ σηρικὴν ὑνομάζουσιν” (De bello Persico, 1.20). In other words, they first obtained it from the Persians, and designated it accordingly (μηδικὸν); then, as their commercial activities extended further to the East, and they began to deal with silk-traders among the Seres, a people inhabiting the present-day Punjab (Cleminson 2021), they began to call it σηρικόν. It would appear, though, that by Procopius’ time the basic designation was η μέταξα. This is a loan-word. It is first attested in Latin in the second century B.C., before silk was known to the Romans (Marx 1904-1905, i : 81; ii : 377), and survives in Italian (as matassa), meaning a ball or skein of wool (or indeed of anything else that can be wound up). This meaning already existed in antiquity: Isidore of Seville says “Mataxa quasi metaxa, a circuitu scilicet filorum; nam meta circuitus”. If something of this sense persisted in the Greek word, then the oldest Slavonic name for ‘silk’, свиля, could be a calque of μέταξα in the same way as свитое is a calque of εἰλητόν (Afanasyeva forthcoming).

The first attested use of the word свиля is by John the Exarch of Bulgaria in his Богословие, at the very end of the text, in a section relating to exempla of the resurrection

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1 By ‘silk’, here and throughout, we mean the thread produced by the domesticated silkworm, the larva of Bombyx mori. Wild silks, produced by the larvae of other moths, were known in Europe much earlier – the locus classicus is Aristotle, Historia animalium 5.19.6, for an exposition of which see Forbes 1930 – but the two commodities were regarded as distinct from the earliest times.

2 Etymologies 19.29.6. Though worthless as an etymology, this does indicate how the word was understood. Strictly speaking, a meta was one of the markers of the circuit, for example in the hippodrome, which had to be gone round. Since both silken cloth and silken thread were imported into the Graeco-Roman world, it may be surmised that the merchants distinguished the latter as η (σηρική) μέταξα, and that the word eventually acquired the meaning of silk as such.
(приклади ще въстаний) for which no Greek original is known (though it is manifestly a translation): in the oldest manuscript (Moscow, gim, Syn. 108, f. 209v), съмотри чрьви иже исебе свилоу точить. This manuscript was written at the end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth century in the East Slavonic area, but it is probable that the word свила in such a context is a South Slavonicism, reflecting the earlier history of the text.

In the East Slavonic area only we find the word шьлкъ, which is a borrowing from Old Norse. Its first attested use is probably in the Canonical Responses of John Prodmus, written during his tenure of the metropolitan see of Kiev (1076/7-1089) and presumably translated into Slavonic immediately. The thirty-third of these begins: Онѣмьже а̇ще подобаѥть и̇же б̇огу ӧтлученьѥ и̇ѥ̇рѣ̇ѥ̇мъ ӧблачитисѧ в ризꙑ различнꙑꙗ... as the editors say, “место вообще весьма темное”. It is moreover unfortunate that the Greek text survives only in a very late and abbreviated form, in which this passage is not present, but Pavlov (1873: 20) points out a partial correspondence to the beginning of section 10 of the Greek: Καὶ τοὺς ἱερομένους δὲ σπουδάζειν ἵματίοις ἐκ μετάξεις, ἤ ἐκ λίνου ἑιργασμένοις...

The presence of the word шьлковъ is part of the evidence for an East Slavonic origin for the Ausgangstext of the Slavonic Book of Esther, which was “made most probably by a scribe in the western East Slavic lands in the mid-1300s” (Lunt, Taube 1998: 7). It occurs twice, at 1.6, бобръмь и оутринъмъ и чьрвемь сниманънъ вьрвьми шьлковыми, и лептугъ на главахъ сребреныхъ, and 8.15, where there is something of a reprise of the vocabulary of the former verse, и мардъхаи выниде ў лица царева въ свитѣ царстѣи и въ черви и въ оутринѣ, и вѣньць ꙁлатъ великъ [на главѣ его], и оушьвъ шьлковъ лептугъ.

The earlier history of this text is highly problematic. It is uncertain when and where it was originally translated, or even from what language: whether from a lost Greek intermediary (Altbauer, Taube 1984) or directly from Hebrew (Lysén 2001). The question remains open (Pereswetoff-Morath 2002: 71-79), but further arguments in support of a Greek intermediary have been advanced by Kulik (2008: 58-62). If the original was Hebrew, the word here translated as шьлковъ was бутс (בוץ), and if Greek, βύσσινος, neither of which means ‘silk’, but rather ‘fine linen’.

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3 Vasmer 1987, IV:423-424. The unfounded conjecture found in some older etymological dictionaries of the Scandinavian languages that the Norse word is a borrowing from Slavonic has evidently been abandoned in more recent scholarship. Whereas s > š in Slavonic borrowings from Old Norse is well attested (Sobolevskij 1910: 186-187), š > s in Nordic borrowings from Slavonic is improbable.

4 Edited in Pavlov 1880: 1-20; the base text is from gim, Čud. 4 (Varsonof’evskaja kormčaja), written at the end of the fourteenth century.

5 Pavlov 1873: 11. The gist of both passages is the same: that priests must wear the prescribed clothing when performing their priestly duties, but at other times some latitude is permitted in accordance with the customs of the country.

6 As edited in Lunt, Taube 1998: 24, 46.
The Greek word βύσσος (and the corresponding adjective βύσσινος) is used in the Septuagint to translate not only buts, but also bad (בּד; but this may also be translated as λίνον or left untranslated) and shesh (ψῆ; particularly frequent in the book of Exodus). All of these words refer to linen of high quality, and this is the correct meaning of βύσσος, which is a Semitic loan-word in Greek. The word itself is well established, but its precise meaning does not seem to have been widely familiar in the Greek-speaking world: it appears to have suggested the quality of the fabric rather than its material. This leads to a confusion with the other luxury fabric of ancient and mediaeval Europe, silk. This confusion, which is endemic to the entire continent, is seen even in the Vulgate, where the distribution of byssus / byssinus (allowing for the occasional divergences between the texts) is almost the same as in the Septuagint: but at Esther 8.15 the word is sericum. Up to early modern times “the word was to English writers often a mere name to which they attached no certain meaning, except that of fineness and value” (OED, s.v. byss¹). In Slavonic, βύσσος is translated as въссъ or въссонъ, suggesting that it was not identified with any known material; evidence of the same confusion is found in East Slavonic where въссъ is glossed as шіда (Sreznevskij 1893-1912: 1592-1593), another word for ‘silk,’ borrowed from German or Swedish⁹.

The only place in the Bible where silk really is mentioned is in the Apocalypse (18.12). The early history of this book in Slavonic is almost as obscure as that of the Book of Esther. The earliest manuscripts (Nz and possibly Rum) date from the fourteenth century; the vast majority are East Slavonic. All either contain the commentary of Andrew of Caesarea or show signs of being descended from manuscripts which contained it. Obviously the commented text is not Methodian (since in translating the whole Bible one would not translate a commentary for one book only), but it is uncertain whether it represents an independent, later translation, or the translation by Methodius (which, on the testimony of the Vita Methodii, must be assumed to have existed) to which commentary was subsequently added; in the latter case some revision to the text would typically have taken place at the same time.

The relevant passage, as written in an early manuscript, Rum, which has often been taken as typical of that redaction found in most Slavonic manuscripts of the Apocalypse (the ‘majority text’) reads:

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⁷ The adjective βύσσινος is found in the tragedians and in Herodotus.
⁸ The modern application of the word byssus to the threads produced by the mollusc Pinna nobilis may be seen as the culmination of this semantic process; they were not so named in antiquity (see Jaroszyński, Kotłowska 2013).
⁹ Similarly, шьлковъ in the Slavonic Esther may suggest an underlying βύσσινος, and thus a Greek original.
¹⁰ For the purposes of this article we shall disregard the later manuscripts (after c. 1500), and also the cycles of illustrations which they contain.
¹¹ The sections are those of the commented manuscripts, and may be numbered 229-230 or 227-228 in the Slavonic tradition. They do not correspond exactly to the modern division into chap-
There are a number of variants in the Slavonic version of this passage that allow the manuscripts to be grouped – not something that one would normally do on the basis of such a small portion of text, but since the results agree with those of more comprehensive text-critical studies of the book (Alekseev, Lichačeva 1987; Grünberg 1996; Trifonova 2016) they may be taken as valid. In the majority text (corresponding to Grünberg’s families d and e, which do not differ at this point; for the purposes of the present study, Ni Rog11 Rum Tsl6 Tsl120 Tsl121 Tsl122 Vol) σηρικοῦ is translated, not with any of the known Slavonic words for ‘silk’, but by a hapax legomenon. Along with σεμενε ΔΕΛΑ (σεμενε Rog11 Rum Tsl122), it is one of the distinctive readings of this text-type, presenting in two forms, σηκα Rum Tsl120 Tsl121 Tsl122 and σηκα Ni Tsl6 Vol.

This may be compared with the text of the Bosnian group of manuscripts (family a), the closest of the other types to the majority text and, though without commentary, long recognised as having been extrapolated from the commented text:

The corresponding Greek text reads:

καὶ οἱ ἔμποροι τῆς γῆς κλαύσουσι καὶ πενθήσουσιν ἐπ᾽ αὐτῇ, ὅτι τὸν γόμον αὐτῶν οὐδέὶς ἀγοράζει υπότη, γόμον χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργυροῦ καὶ λίθου τιμίου καὶ μαργαρίτου καὶ πορφύρας καὶ σηρικοῦ καὶ κοκκίνου. Τῶν γὰρ ἐν δυναστείᾳ καὶ τρυφῇ φθειρομένων ἡ τούτων ὡν ἡ κατάρρησις, καὶ πᾶν γὰρ αὐτὸν ξύλον καὶ πᾶν σκέφος ἐλεφάντινον καὶ πᾶν σκέφος ἐκ λίθου τιμωτάτου καὶ χάλκου καὶ σιδήρου καὶ κινάμου καὶ ἁμομοῦ καὶ θυμαμάχτα καὶ μύρων καὶ λίβανον καὶ οἶνου καὶ ἔλαιου καὶ σεμίδαλιν καὶ οἶνων καὶ κτήνη καὶ πρόβατα.”13
Here we find that the word, like some of the other obscurer commodities in this list, remains untranslated. This is also true of another significant group of Russian manuscripts (family b, which besides Q, the text of which is given here, also includes Čud tsl710 Und):

Q is unusual in that the commentary is given separately (on ff. 41v-125) from the text (on ff. 1v-39), but paragraphs are numbered in each, so that the two can be correlated. This is evidently the first step in the extrapolation of the biblical text from the commentated version. The other manuscripts in this group have no commentary. Some of the variants (ћ древа драгаго, omission of и амон и и вина, and transposed вещь и скота) also occur in the Greek tradition, and indicate (as does the hyperliteral не есть, οὐκ ἔτι) that the text of this group has been heavily revised against a Greek text that differed from the original Vorlage; it is not, however, an independent translation (Grünberg 1996: 66–71). It has been suggested that the revision was a very early one (Alekseev, Lichačeva 1987: 14 – “напоминает редактуру […] проведенную в Болгарии в x в.”), in which case the reading сиріка here and in Bosn is evidently primary, continuing the text as it was before the appearance of the distinctive variants of the archetype of the majority text (a corollary of this is that the Čudov New Testament is not a single translation, and the Apocalypse therein has a different origin from the Gospels and the Apostolos)14.

There is some mixing between this text-type and the majority text. TSL119 is a majority-text manuscript that has been corrected against a text of the Q type; MDA27 again contains basically the majority text, but with the Q readings сиріа, бисера, и амон и и вина, and transposed вещь и скота; FMČ and the closely related TSL83 have double readings such as корица и киннамонов. This suggests that the corrector of TSL119 and the scribe of MDA27, at least, regarded the Q text as superior.

A further group which evidently arose comparatively early is that represented by Rogi and Sol (both with commentary: family c). The manuscripts are Russian, but a South Slavonic origin for the group is implied both by the spellings турня и терня, and by its affinity with Vid, which shares some distinctive readings. Vid is the only one of the

14 Grünberg regards Čud as the manuscript furthest from the archetype of family b (Grünberg 1998: xiv).
northern’ group of glagolitic breviaries that contains the relevant passage (Jurić-Kappel 2004: 183). Although compiled on a Latin model, these breviaries used existing Slavonic translations from Greek where available, with hardly any revision; the ‘southern’ group, by contrast, were revised (progressively) against the Latin text (Stankovska 2006: 211-212). That the same translation in different redactions appears in Vid and in the cyrillic Apocalypses is further evidence for its antiquity. The passage in Rogn and Vid reads:

The reading сурика is an error, for сурикъ is minium (pb₃o₄), perhaps more likely to be part of a scribe’s vocabulary than сирисъ, and a plausible item of Babylonian trade, so not necessarily a reflexion of the συρικός found in some Greek manuscripts. (It is also found in the majority-text Rogn, either spontaneously or by contamination.) The confusion had been prevalent since ancient times: “Aliud est autem sericum, aliud syricum. Nam sericum lana est quam Seres mittunt; syricum vero pigmentum quod Syrii Phoenices in Rubri maris litoribus colligunt” (Isidore of Seville, Etymologies 19.17.6). Perhaps more interesting is the reading кризму (similarly хризми Bosn). This is the regular translation of μυρον in the glagolitic tradition (Šafařík 1858: 33), occurring only sporadically in cyrillic manuscripts, which usually have μυρο. More extensive study would be required to determine whether this represents a survival from a very early state of the text or is the result of an interpenetration of traditions in the Western Balkans.

In favour of the latter hypothesis are the similar affinities visible between the un-commentated ‘calendrical redaction’ of the Slavonic Apocalypse, here represented by Drag₁⁵, and 2Ber:

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Footnote: ¹⁵ Four other manuscripts of this group are listed by Ivanova (2016: 494-495), to which should be added a fifth described by Iufu (1963: 456, № 18).
Both have a defective text (2Ber with a more serious lacuna), with shared omissions, and both have lexical changes, in one case introducing a Greek word (conceivably via Latin, cfr. kokcina, 1493), elsewhere apparently updating the vocabulary in line with changing norms (єже носимь, suk’ne, bagr’ynicyk). The latter phenomenon is typical of the development of the glagolitic text, and is taken further (though not on the basis of the text represented by 2Ber) in Mosk and 1493, for example masti for muro and melkie muki for smidalь.

It appears, therefore, that the prototype of the Slavonic version of the Apocalypse did not translate the word for ‘silk’, but retained the Greek word, along with others in this list for wares unfamiliar to the Slavs. Either Methodius could find no Slavonic word for it in Moravia, or a later generation did not recognise the obsolete σηρικόν as a synonym for μέταξα. Nor did copyists realise that σηρίκα was the same as свила or шьлкъ. The word was not in their active vocabulary, and was thus easily distorted to сикъ (by simple omission – cfr. 2вэ’ [suk’] 2Ber), and thence to шика. The latter change is due to the neutralisation of /s/ and /š/ in Old Pskov dialects (Zaliznjak 2004: 52, Sobolevskij 1884: 118-143, 149-150). Its persistence in manuscripts otherwise free of this feature is explained by the fact that scribes copying from such an exemplar could normally correct from their knowledge of the norm – except for a word that occurred nowhere else. Its meaning remained mysterious to readers and copyists of the Slavonic Apocalypse; it is only late in the transmission of the glagolitic version, in 1493, that it is replaced by a contemporary word with the correct meaning: dubalja.

There is one partial exception to this, in the oldest Serbian manuscript, Н474, without commentary but descended from a commented protograph:

И коупци зема ны всплачуть и всплачуть о ньи. | и бисер’ сук’не багрицы и суку и кокин’ и всакое дрво кр’асное. и железо и мрамор’ и кумирь и тьм’ь муро | и ливань вино и олеи смидаль и пшенице скоть

This is notable for the East Slavonic spellings финна and фумина (against which, however, compare on f. 366v тиаєїрскыѥ 2:18; the remaining spellings are “neutral”, e.g. дягітъ 2:24, думина 8:3, 4), which suggest that the “македонизмы” (i.e. $o < o$, $e < e$, Grković-Major 2000: 314) might actually be East Slavonic forms too, and raise the

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16 Oller (1993: 579) identifies сикъ as a South Slavonic form, but this is due to a misunderstanding. Sobolevskij, whom he cites, does indeed include it in a list of “типичные южнославянисмы” (Sobolevskij 1910: 184), but this is in the context of the Hilandar Typicon, where silk is not mentioned: it is the pronoun сукъ that is meant.
possibility that this redaction belongs to the body of East Slavonic texts copied in fourteenth-century Serbia (Miklas 1988). The translation of κοκκίνου as жълта is inexplicable. It cannot simply be that, γъръвена having already been used, another colour was required, for at 18:16, where there is no such motivation, περιβεβλημενη βътъстинов кай порфирон кай κοκκινов becomes μεланънин в бълфиро || вь бътъстинов и вь жълтаꙗа (however, on f. 375, at 17:3, 4 we find the expected γъръвена).

And why is σηρικο translated as γъръвена? This at least is not wholly isolated. Silk is not often mentioned in the earliest Slavonic texts, but there are two passages of Byzantine canon law which refer to it and which were translated very early. These are Canon 45 of the Council in Trullo and Canon 16 of the Second Council of Nicea. Both are quoted in the Sylloge of xiv Titles, which was translated in the First Bulgarian Kingdom (Naydenova 2005-2006: 240 and the literature cited there) and is represented in the oldest Slavonic legal text, the Efremovskaja Kormčaja (gim, Syn. 227). The latter is also quoted in chapter 37 of the Pandects of Nicon of the Black Mount, of which there were two translations, the first made in the eleventh/twelfth century and the second, of which there is also a ‘Euthymian’ redaction, in the thirteenth/fourteenth (Bogdanova, Lukanova 2009: 358)”17. It also mentions silk in chapter 23, in what is evidently Nicon’s own text. The origin of the first translation is a matter of unresolved debate, but it is undisputed that the earliest witnesses belong to an East Slavonic recension; among the evidence cited for this is the lexeme шьлкъ in ch. 23 (Sreznevskij 1874: 296)18. The relevant phrases19 are:

Trull. 45 σηρικαικας και έτεραις παντοιαις στολαις ες γъръвенахъ и ινηθι χαλκοκεθις ριζαχις
II Nic. 16 ουδε εκ σηρικων υφασματων πεποικιλμενην ισβητα ένεδεδυτο τις
ηι ιν γъръвεναγα τυμνιαν ποσπρενεμον ριζουν δα ηε οξεβελετη κα κετο
(= Pand. 37) ηι ιν εικανως τυμανω ολαγωνω κα κετο
Pand. 23 ειτε άργυρων, ή χρυσων, ή εν σηρικος υφασμας κατασκευασμενον
λιν εφεβελεται λιν ζαλταλει ες λευκαςων.20 τυμανως σφουρεμενο

Elsewhere the old confusion of fabrics recurs, for βυσσος too is sporadically translated as γъръвена/γъръвеница in early texts (Jagić 1913: 305). The reading of Ν.474 is thus not a chance aberration, but a regular, if uncommon, rendering of σηρικος. The clue to the mys-

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17 The second translation need not be considered here, as it consistently reads γъръвачъ, implying that the original read (or was read as) συρικος.
18 Sreznevskij also finds the word in ch. 49, quoting St John Chrysostom’s Homily 72 on Matthew, but here it appears to translate κρόχαη. At this point the Euthymian redaction reads εφανεβαη.
19 Quoted from Beneševič 1906: 175, 222 and Maksimović 1998: 217, 308.
20 The Serbian manuscripts Rnb, f.п.i.121 and Q.п.i.27 read висерова, but the readings of the Serbian redaction are generally inferior (Pičchadze 2006: 60).
tery is probably to be found in II Nic. 16: a scribe unacquainted with the origin of silk could easily copy *чрьвина свила as *чрьвена свила, thus inadvertently creating a new synonym.

It appears from the above that for the translators, copyists and readers of the Slavonic Bible there was a general lack of comprehension where silk was concerned. In the book of Esther, and in glosses elsewhere, we observe a confusion with βύσσος/вущъ/вущонъ that extends beyond the Slavonic Scriptures and indeed far beyond the Slavonic cultural sphere. In the Apocalypse silk is equally unrecognised. For the Slavonic translators the word presented a problem either in understanding the sources or in finding an adequate translation. The Greek word was thus left untranslated, as сирника, and as such it does not seem to have conveyed very much to the reader, particularly at its one scriptural occurrence in a list including a number of obscure and untranslatable commodities. This left it open to textual corruption, and indeed it is the corrupt form шика that is found in the majority of manuscripts. Though only the most highly educated readers could have had any idea of what it meant, it proved highly resilient, persisting in the Ostrog Bible and in the 1663 Moscow edition; only in the Elizabethan Bible of 1751 does the vernacular (but comprehensible) шелка finally triumph.

Literature

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_H474_ was consulted in a digital copy supplied by the Hilandar Research Library at The Ohio State University by kind permission of the monks of the holy Monastery of Hilandar. _Drag_ was consulted in a digital copy kindly provided by Professor Anissava Miltenova. Otherwise, where no edition is indicated, the manuscripts were consulted online at the websites of their respective libraries. The point in the source where the relevant passage occurs is indicated in each case.

*Bosn* Reconstructed archetype in Grünberg 1999: 128, 130
*Čud* Čudov NT, f. 156v (edited in Leontij 1892)
*Drag* Dragomirna, MS 1828, f. 73v
*H474* Hilandar, MS 474, f. 376
*MDA27* RGB, f. 173/1 (sobr. MDA), № 27, f. 393
*Mosk* RGB, f. 270/11 (sobr. P.I. Sevast’janova), № 51a, f. 132a-b
*Ni* BAN, Nikol’sk. 1, f. 82 (edited in Oller 1993: 235)
*Q* RNB, Q, n.1.6, f. 30
*Rogi* RGB, f. 247 (sobr. Rogožskogo kladbišča), № 1, f. 127c-d
*Rogi1* RGB, f. 247 (sobr. Rogožskogo kladbišča), № 11, ff. 111v–112
*Rum* RGB, f. 256 (sobr. gr. Rumjanceva), № 8, f. 75v
Und

RGB, f. 310 (sobr. Undol'skogo), № 1, f. 439

Vid

ÖNB, Cod. slav. 3 (Brevijar Vida Omišljanina, 1396, edited in Berčić 1866: 131)

VMČ

Velikie Minei Četii, sobrannye vserossijskim mitropolitom Makariem: sentjabr', dni 25-30, Sankt-Peterburg 1883, col. 1770

Vol

RGB, f. 113 (sobr. Iosifo-Volockogo monastyrja), № 641, f. 103

1493

Blaž Baromič, Breviary, 1493, f. 217b-c

2Ber

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Silk, as an imported commodity in Europe, is designated either by loan-words or neologisms in European languages. There are several of these in Slavonic languages, notably свила in South Slavonic and шьлкъ in East Slavonic. The use of the latter on two occasions in the Slavonic Book of Esther is part of the evidence for the East Slavonic origin of the Ausgangstext of this book. However, the word that it renders, either בּוּץ or βύσσος, does not mean 'silk', but 'linen' (although confusion between βύσσος and silk appears to be endemic throughout mediaeval Europe). On the one occasion on which silk really is mentioned in the Bible (Revelation 18:12), none of the established Slavonic words for silk is used, but, in most manuscripts, the hapax legomenon шикъ or сикъ, evidently a corruption of σιρικόν for σηρικόν, left untranslated. The occasional substitution of чрвленъ further complicates the picture of how the word was, or was not, understood.

Keywords

Silk; Church Slavonic; Book of Esther; Revelation.