

Electronic Research Infrastructure for Bulgarian Medieval Written Heritage: history and perspectives

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Abstract

The paper traces the history of the *Histdict* system, which turned into a basis for the new *Electronic Research Infrastructure for Bulgarian Medieval Written Heritage*, which was included into the National Research Roadmap at the end of 2020. Through this act the state declares its support to our resources, that have been so far created and supported by project funding. And of course, it is a big recognition of our efforts and achievements. On the other hand, this act coincided with two other events: the inclusion of RESILIENCE (Research Infrastructure on Religious Studies) in which *Histdict* is taking part, in the European Research Infrastructures Roadmap and the start of the updating and upgrading of the system. Given the situation the Infrastructure is now facing new challenges—not only the successful improvement of the services it offers, but also the inclusion of the Orthodox Cultural Heritage into European research exchange, which will promote and popularize the history and culture of Southeastern Europe.

1. Introduction

The *Electronic Research Infrastructure for Bulgarian Medieval Written Heritage* started in 2009 as a doctoral and post-doctoral project BG051PO001-3.3-04-001 ICT Tools for Historical Linguistic Studies, funded by the European Social Fund, OP Human Resources, and was upgraded by three following projects under the same scheme:

- BG051PO001-4.3.04-0004 *E-Medievalia (Electronic Resources for Distant Learning in Medieval Studies)* (2012–2014)
- BG051PO001-3.3.06-0024 *Informatics, Grammar, Lexicography* (2012–2015)
- BG05M2OP001-2-009-0005 *Modern Palaeoslavonic and Medieval Studies* (2017–2019)¹

In the periods when our activities were not covered by European funding, we used other project opportunities such as internal funding in the framework of the University Humanities Complex, in which we participated with the project *Digital Medievalia* (2016–2018). Since the end of 2019 the RI has been supported by the National Research Programme “Cultural Heritage, National Memory and Social Development” funded by the Ministry of Education and Science and coordinated by Sofia University as a leading research institution in the field of Humanities. In the meantime, we were allocated a substantial amount of money for upgrading the existing digital resources under the project *Heritage BG* funded by Science and Education for Smart Growth Operational Programme (nasledstvo.bg). Now, after two years spent for unsuccessful bids, we have selected an IT company that is supposed to fulfil this important task.

In 2019 we applied for becoming a part of the National Roadmap for RIs and at the end of 2020 our digital resources were officially accepted as a starting RI.

Since March 2018 we have been involved in two overlapping ESFRI projects aiming at becoming

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¹The projects' goals and results have been constantly reported and popularised, see [Ganeva \(2018\)](#), [Totomanova \(2012, 2017, 2018\)](#), [Totomanova-Paneva \(2020\)](#).

a European RI on Religious Studies (ReIReS², RESILIENCE³). Therefore, we have not been able so far to count on a stable funding on behalf of the state and we had to finance our work under different kinds of project initiatives in order to survive and implement our plans to produce a complex of digital resources for studying and popularising Bulgarian written heritage. Our resources are included in the *Cyrrillomethodiana* web portal where you can find detailed information about all our projects related to the RI. The partnership consists of 3 institutions: Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Cyrillo-Methodian Research Center at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, BAS Central Library.

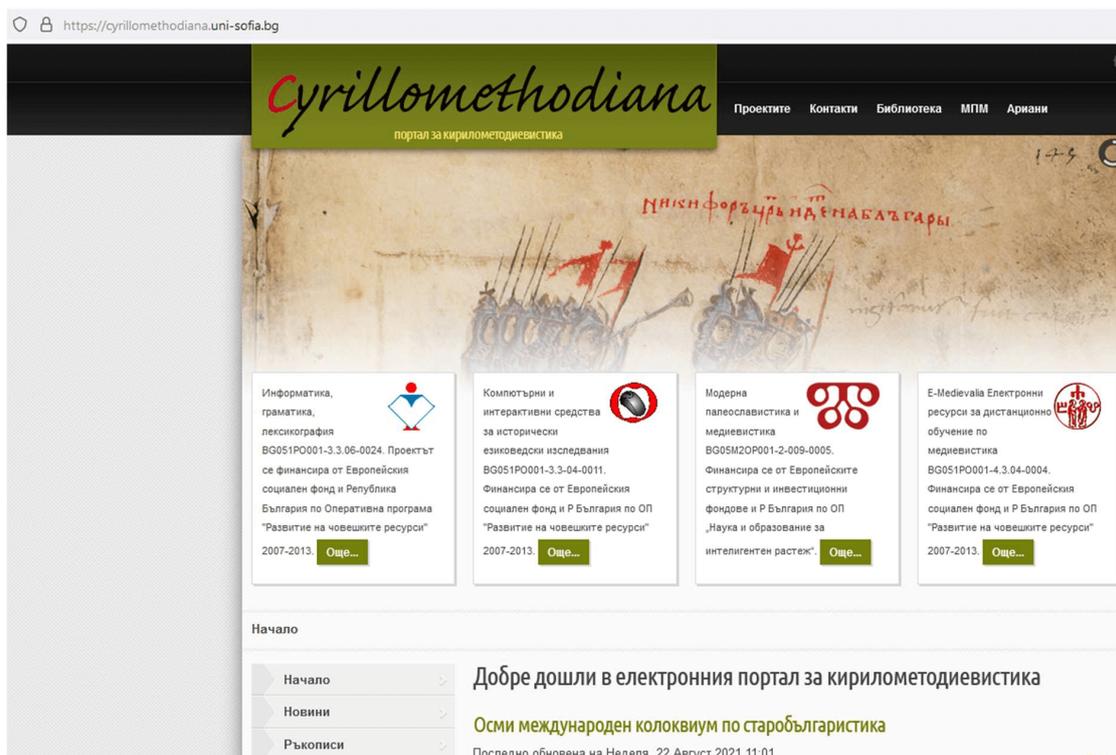


Figure 1: *Cyrrillomethodiana* web portal, cyrrillomethodiana.uni-sofia.bg

But why the written heritage?

The written heritage is the most reliable source of history of every nation and country and the basis of the national identity. Our RI provides digital research resources and tools for studying Bulgarian Medieval written heritage in terms of *diachronic linguistics*, *literary history*, *Bulgarian and European history*, *theology*, *cultural history*, and *philosophy*. The Old Bulgarian language (Old Church Slavonic), created by the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius, functioned as a sacred language of all Orthodox Slavs in Southeastern Europe during the Middle Ages as well as in Romania and Moldova. That is why researchers in the field of the history and culture of the Slavo-Byzantine Medieval world are interested in using the available digital resources.

And why electronic?

- Using digital technologies for publishing and processing medieval texts reduces the time of data collection and production of reliable research results. In other words, the introduction of digital technologies in such a conservative field as historical humanities not only optimizes the work of researchers but also creates the conditions for new research initiatives and projects.
- Digital tools make the field of historical humanities more attractive for young people born in the digital era.

²See reires.eu.

³See resilience-ri.eu.

2. Our digital resources and tools

As you can see the electronic research resources and tools for processing medieval texts of proven Bulgarian origin have been created in a period spanning over 10 years through a series of scientific and educational projects. The *Histdict* system includes the following digital resources and tools:

2.1. Diachronic corpus of Bulgarian language 9th–18th cc.

The Corpus contains more than 150 texts of proven Bulgarian origin from different genres of the 10th–18th cc. and has its own specific software that allows for textual and paleographic annotation. Given the fact that the Bulgarian literature transmitted the Byzantine cultural and literary model to the other Orthodox nations in our part of Europe the Corpus contains both translated and original Medieval Bulgarian texts. The texts are digitally typed and all of them (excluding the works of St. Kliment Ohridski) are reproduced in the orthography, in which they were composed (Bulgarian, Serbian or Russian). The Corpus includes also Early Modern Bulgarian texts mostly Damaskini and other compilations as well as some not literary texts such as scribal notes, inscriptions, and juridical documents. Back in 2011 we had only 75 texts whereas now their number has doubled, and we continue uploading new texts. Some of them are provided by colleagues abroad who also use the corpus. One of the largest texts uploaded on to system is the so-called *Chronograph of the Archive* or *Jewish Chronograph* that includes the oldest text of the Octateuch and Kingdoms translated in Bulgaria during the reign of Simeon the Great (893–927). Each text is introduced by the respective archæographic data (title, source, dating, orthography, author etc.). The corpus software needs upgrading to allow for other types of annotation: morphological and content annotation.

Figure 2: Diachronic corpus, histdict.uni-sofia.bg

2.2. Digitized Old Bulgarian dictionary (10 500 dictionary entries)

Our main goal under the first project was to compile an electronic *Historical dictionary of Bulgarian language* and we decided that the easiest way to achieve it was to take the *Old Church Slavonic Dictionary*⁴ compiled and published by Institute for Bulgarian Language to the BAS as a basis for this dictionary. That is why we started digitizing the *Old Church Slavonic Dictionary* but in two years we managed to digitize only 10 000 of its entries, and the remaining 500 entries were digitized later under the second project since they do not comply with the entire format of the other entries or contained different types of errors and had to be processed one by one. The full electronic version of this dictionary is now available online and contains the lexis of the Classical OCS manuscripts of 10th–11th cc.

⁴ Старобългарски речник. Т. I, 1999. София, Валентин Траянов, 1027 с. Т. II, 2009. Валентин Траянов, 1325 с.

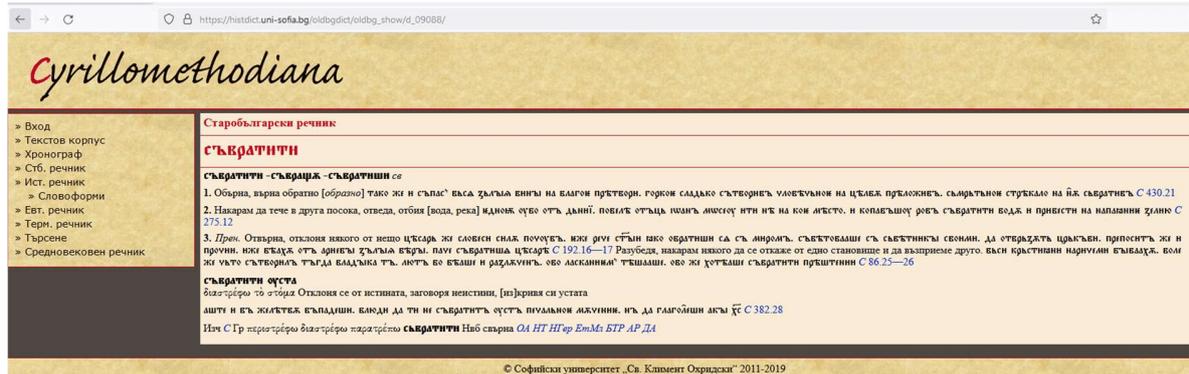


Figure 3: Old Bulgarian Dictionary online, *histsdict.uni-sofia.bg*

2.3. Reverse Greek–Old Bulgarian dictionary

The structured XML document that included all entries of the Old Bulgarian Dictionary was used to produce a reversed Greek-Old Bulgarian Dictionary, which is also available online and is widely used by colleagues who deal with the metaphrastic practices of Old Bulgarian men of letters. The reverse dictionary was a spin-off result of E-Medievalia project that produced an interactive teaching-learning platform in Medieval Studies. The platform contains 24 interactive courses for both under- and postgraduate students in the area of Philology, Philosophy, Theology, History and Arts, among them there are courses of Old Bulgarian (OCs), Old Bulgarian literature and History of Bulgarian, which are available also in English. The platform is combined with a virtual classroom, that we used for workshops and conferences. When the pandemic started this digital resource allowed us to start immediately the on-line teaching.

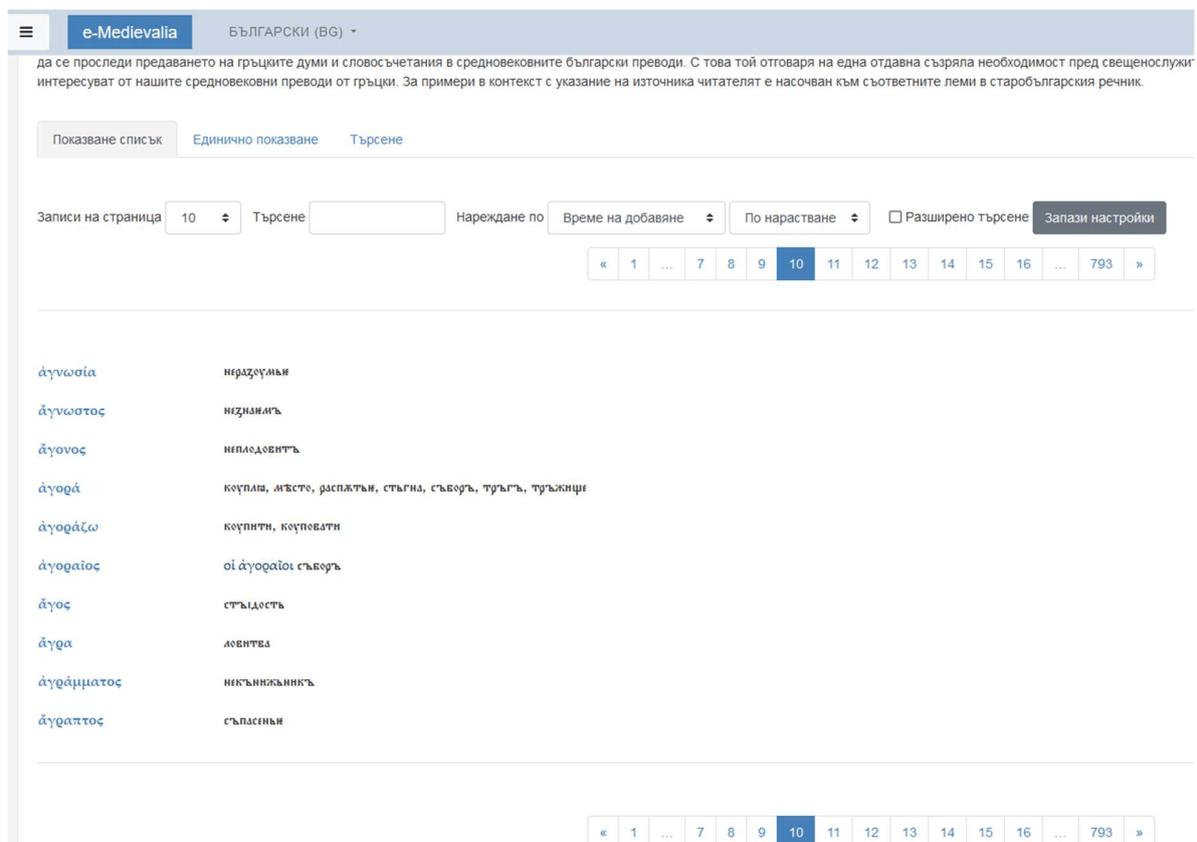


Figure 4: Greek–Old Bulgarian Dictionary online, *e-medievalia.uni-sofia.bg*

allows for morphological annotation of the inflectable words). And to produce one we needed to create a grammatical dictionary of OCS taking into account all possible representations of a single form. Yet we needed a quick search tool in order to facilitate the work on the historical dictionary and the use of the *Corpus*. The temporary solution came from our main software specialist who digitized the OCS dictionary and developed the software for the Historical dictionary. The search engine is installed in the system and one can search on all its entries (dictionaries, the *Corpus*, and the *Chronograph*) or choose one or more of them. The machine shows the list of the texts, in which the form, we look for, is found and to find it together with the respective context one has to use the browser internal search functionalities. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the ICT company we selected will be to design and install a real search engine that will enable us to search without using browser functionalities and according to different parameters: beginning or the end of the word, letter strings contained within the word, grammatical forms. The virtual keyboard, that might need some fine tuning as well, is also in place.

Figure 8: Search engine, histdict.uni-sofia.bg

2.7. Grammatical dictionary and semi-automatic morphological analyzer

The work on the grammatical dictionary started with compiling the tagset of OCS, which contains 2200 tags and describes the complicated OCS grammar (Totomanova *et al.*, 2015). The tagset was followed by a grammatical dictionary, which includes paradigms of the inflectable words taking into account different phonetic and orthographic variations (Totomanova *et al.*, online). The paradigms (rules) were ascribed to all inflectable words in the historical dictionary and as a final step the grammatical dictionary was installed into it. Now by clicking the sign + located next to the lemma the user can see the whole paradigm of the respective word. Based on that our ICT specialists created a prototype of the morphological annotator, which is also an open access tool on our site.

Yet this is another temporary solution because our goal is however to create an automatic tagger. For this purpose, we are upgrading the grammatical dictionary and editing the grammatical rules. Entering the uninflectable words (adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, particles, interjections) as well as pronominal forms into grammatical dictionary turned out to be a big challenge. The inclusion of the participial forms seems to represent even a bigger challenge, given the fact that OCS verbs possess 5 participles, out of which four are declinable and have also determined counterparts. We developed rules for automatic generation of the participial paradigms depending on the verb type and so far, have produced the participial forms of the verbs of the first two OCS conjugations (i.e. 894 verbs with over 3 million forms). The grammatical dictionary upgrade made us realize the need to edit the lemmas and the grammatical definitions in the

Historical Dictionary, which seems to turn into a constant process and is also one of the tasks the ICT company is supposed to fulfil.

The screenshot shows the website https://histdict.uni-sofia.bg/dictionary/resolve_forms. The search term is 'савеси'. The results show historical forms and a list of grammatical forms (Tag and Словоформи) for the word 'савеси'.

Статия	Заглавна дума	Словоформа	Спряжение
d_08733	савеси	савеси	[Nsg] Съществително име, среден род, родителен падеж, ед.ч.
d_08733	савеси	савеси	[Npl] Съществително име, среден род, местен падеж, ед.ч.

Below the table, there is a section for 'Исторически речник: Всички словоформи:' which lists various grammatical forms (Tag and Словоформи) for the word 'савеси'.

Figure 9: Grammatical dictionary and tagger, histdict.uni-sofia.bg

2.8. Old Bulgarian Unicode fonts and converter

For compiling the Corpus and digitizing the Old Bulgarian Dictionary we needed not only the respective software but also specialized Unicode (UTF-8) OCS fonts readable online. To avoid the retyping of already digitally typed texts the new fonts were installed in a converter that allowed for their conversion to the new fonts. Now we use the third version of the converter, which includes 3 specialized fonts with different design *CyrillicaBulgarian10U*, *CyrillicaOchrid10U* and *CyrillicaOldStyleU*. The last one is meant for typing the Early Modern Bulgarian texts. In the beginning we were able to convert only the fonts of the families *Cyrillica Bulgarian*, *Cyrillica Ohrid* and *Cyrillica Shafarik*, developed by Synthesis Soft company and widely spread among the Palæoslavonic research community, to which gradually other OCS and Ancient Greek fonts were added: the Italian *PopRetkov*, Unicode font *BukyVede*, which is also based on Synthesis Soft design, *TimesGreekClassic* and *TimesGreekOld*, also developed by the same company, convert now into *Palatino*, as well as all varieties of the modern font *TimesCyrillic* in *Times New Roman*. Our OCS fonts and the converter spread throughout Europe since they were compatible with the editorial software programs and a series of books and periodicals in both Bulgaria and abroad are using them.

The open access Histdict system is a complex of unique resources and tools for publication and research of medieval Slavonic texts and in a European and global context it corresponds to *Thesaurus Linguae Graeca* and *Perseus*, representing the classical written heritage. Compared to them our RI has a big advantage—it is based on the link between the diachronic corpus and the respective dictionaries, that are being elaborated using the lexical material from the corpus.

3. Conclusions: future plans and development

The main objective of RI is to maintain, develop and upgrade the electronic research resources and tools through the creation of new functionalities and research capabilities. The following activities are envisaged:

- Complementing the corpus with new texts in order to collect all Bulgarian written heritage in digital format

- Creating a parallel corpus with translations into Modern Bulgarian language so that the works of Old Bulgarian writers will be accessible to the general public as well
- Continuous updating of the historical dictionary
- Creating synchronous electronic dictionaries on medieval texts
- Maintaining and upgrading the existing software
- Research
- Training of doctoral and postdoctoral students and young scholars
- Publishing: research and publications of texts and dictionaries

On June 30th, 2021, the ESFRI Forum included RESILIENCE in the Research Infrastructure Roadmap 2021. This means that RESILIENCE will take its place in the strategic Research Infrastructures for the European Research Area and that it can work on the further development of the Research Infrastructure for Religious Studies. Therefore, the situation now is different. As a part of RESILIENCE we will expand the circle of potential users of our digital resources including also the learning platform E-Medievalia with its courses in Old Church Slavonic. But the most important result of our participation in RESILIENCE opens for us new horizons and provides the great opportunity to include the cultural heritage of South-eastern Europe related to the Christianity into European research exchange. At the same time, it represents another big challenge for us. And to face this challenge decently we are looking for new partners...

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