

# Reviews

Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić, *L'Écriture et la sainteté dans la Serbie médiévale: étude d'hagiographie*, Bibliothèque de l'École des hautes études, sciences religieuses, 179 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017). ISBN 978-2-503-56978-9. 305 pp.

The Serbian hagiographical tradition is unusual in its very intimate connexion with the Nemanjić dynasty that ruled Serbia from the late twelfth to late fourteenth centuries and, to a lesser extent, with their successors who maintained the waning Serbian power under the Ottoman advance of the next hundred years. Royal saints are of course to be found all across Christendom from Ireland to Armenia, and although the notion of a *beata stirps* was associated with the ruling houses of various European nations, not least in Serbia's immediate neighbours, nowhere were the idea of sainthood and the idea of the reigning house so closely intertwined as in Serbia. The dynasty was the repository of sanctity, beginning with its founder, Stefan Nemanja (canonised under his monastic name of Symeon) and his son Sava, first Archbishop of Serbia and co-founder, with his father, of the Serbian monastery of Hilandar on Mount Athos. The heavenly patronage of these two important historical figures, and that of an ever-increasing number of their descendants, infused the self-perception of the dynasty and the nation, as did their continuing presence in the Serbian lands through their relics and through the religious houses that they had founded. In this respect Serbia and its hagiographical tradition do indeed, as Professor Marjanović-Dušanić says, represent *un cas unique*.

It is this tradition of dynastic hagiography that is the subject of this book. The non-dynastic saints of Serbia are of course mentioned, but very much in the context of the relationship of their cults to that of the royal saints, on which attention is very firmly focused. The texts are approached from the point of view of literary studies: there is nothing here for the manuscript specialist, nor for the textual critic, though the historian will be interested not only in the biographies of rulers as sources *per se*, but also in the process of the creation of a 'historical memory', in which the lives of the saints, their foundations and the associated places of pilgrimage played an important part. The political, religious and cultural élites of mediaeval Serbia (though these are hardly to be distinguished) actively promoted this, and were the motive force behind the writing of the hagiographic texts: 'Il s'agit de faire entrer la Serbie dans le concert des nations chrétiennes d'Orient en créant des saints sur le modèle de l'hagiographie protobyzantine'.

Professor Marjanović-Dušanić traces this process with great assiduity through the texts, not neglecting possible interactions with oral traditions nor the influences of neighbouring countries, principally Hungary and Byzantium, through cultural contacts (in the latter case particularly mediated through Athos) and dynastic alliances. She displays an extensive and profound knowledge of contemporary scholarship in Byzantine studies and the study of sainthood in mediaeval Europe, and this is ever-present in her exposition of material, occasionally to the extent that the actual details of the lives seem to be in danger of drowning in a sea of erudition. Bulgarian and Russian scholarship, by contrast, are hardly mentioned, and there is similarly scanty reference to the mediaeval literature of those countries.

The book is organised in four parts. The first two deal respectively with the political context of Serbian hagiography and with the cult and conception of sanctity. The first of these deals with the recurring motifs of the outward behaviour of the saint and with his position in society—the taking of the monastic habit, the people’s lament at his death, etc.—and with the models of sanctity, derived in the first instance from the Byzantine tradition, to which these correspond. The second, which is the most substantial part of the book, takes these ideas and shows how they were applied in the *Vitae*, and in particular how they developed over time. This does not only apply to the image and activity of the holy ruler, which (despite certain persistent *topoi*) were significantly different at different stages of history. It is obvious that the prince-martyr Lazar Hrebeljanović in the dying days of Serbian statehood presents a different image from that of the prince-founder Stefan Nemanja at its beginning. What is more interesting is the continuity of the image of the holy ruler over all this period. Professor Marjanović-Dušanić demonstrates its evolution in the lives of successive saints, relating them as much to the period in which they were written and the requirements of the ruler of the day as to the personality of their subjects.

A similar thread runs through the next section, on miracles and re-writing. These two apparently disparate themes are united by the fact that as a saint’s activity is continued in his posthumous miracles, and his image thereby ‘brought up to date’ by his continuing interaction with succeeding generations, so successive lives of the saint present him in the light in which later periods regarded dynastic sanctity. For this reason the motives that prompted the writing of hagiography, or causing it to be written, receive particular attention in this section.

The fourth section begins with an abrupt shift of focus from hagiographic to apocalyptic writings (both peregrinations through the afterlife and eschatology), tenuously connected to the main theme by a sixteenth-century

report of a book of prophecies attributed to St Sava. However, with the approach of the end of the Serbian state, eschatological expectations increased, and the death of a ruler such as Stefan Lazarević was seen as one of the disasters belonging to the last days. In this way the apocalyptic element enters the princely vita, and these later compositions incorporate a lamentation for the death of the saint which reflects the desolation of the country as it gradually succumbed to the forces of the enemy.

The book as a whole is undoubtedly a serious and substantial contribution to scholarship, but one does wonder somewhat about its intended readership. Set as it is firmly within the context of contemporary Western mediaeval and Byzantine studies, it appears to be aimed at an audience who are not and cannot be familiar with the texts with which it deals (since they are available only in Slavonic); the brief summaries of some of the lives in the appendix are hardly adequate to address this problem.

Slavists and Eastern European mediaevalists (outside Serbia) will however be perplexed at the neglect of their own tradition. The author is of course not to blame for the distance between regional academic establishments, and though the book does not really bridge the gap, if it takes a step towards mutual awareness, that in itself is a valuable service.

Ralph Cleminson  
Oxford, UK