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DOMINIKA GAPSKA, *Woman. Church. State. Cults of the Female Saints in the Writings of Serbian Orthodox Church, Scriptum, Cracow 2021, pp. 208.*

The newest monograph by Dominika Gapska, a paleoslavist and Serbist from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, is an extended English-language version of her doctoral thesis that was defended in 2020. It remains in line with a very important and increasingly popular trend in today's humanities (both historical and literary studies) to appreciate the role of female saints, especially female rulers, in medieval and early modern European culture. By taking as a starting point a view, that the cult of female saints in the Serbian Orthodox Church has been a unique phenomenon, for which there is no analogy in other areas remaining under the influence of Byzantine-Orthodox civilization (especially in its political-state aspect)¹, the author set herself the ambitious task of collecting and presenting all the figures of this kind who are important for the Serbs' spirituality and national identity in one volume (p. 11–12). It is particularly noteworthy that the criterion on which she has relied in choosing these figures was not so much their ethnicity as

the function they exercised (p. 12). Such an approach has allowed her to include in her analysis not only women who were of Serbian origin (for example, Princess Milica) or who became by marriage members of the “holy” Nemanjić dynasty (for example, Queen Helen of Anjou), but also women who came from other Slavic regions (Zlata of Meglen) or from outside the Slavic environment (Petka), and whose cults have been adopted in Serbia over the centuries.

The work also distinguishes itself by the wide time span it covers. Dominika Gapska has decided to move beyond the mid-fifteenth century, which is usually considered to mark the end of the Middle Ages in historical research, as well as abandoning the perspective (characteristic for Slavic studies), in which the epoch is extended to include what is known as the post-Byzantine period (the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries). She has thus included in her study of the phenomenon under discussion some testimonies from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and even texts that are created recently and posted on the Internet. This approach appears to be fully justified by the specificity of the source material. It has enabled her to focus on female saints living as late as the eighteenth century (for example, Zlata of Meglen, who died in 1795), to trace the evolution of the cult of particular women, and to show how the Serbian Orthodox Church has come recently to appreciate the role of the women who have so far been deprived of a separate hagiographic tradition, serving just as a kind of a background for their husbands and sons (for example, Anna, wife of Stephen Nemanja, mother of Rastko-Sava and Stephen the First Crowned).

¹ The attitude towards female sanctity and the place held by female rulers in the state tradition distinguish the Serbian from the Bulgarian culture in the Middle Ages. The issue of how far the idea of saint female rulers from the Nemanjić, Hrebeljanović and Branković dynasties differs from the Byzantine model of *imperial feminine* and *royal female sanctity* is quite complex and as such requires further scholarly investigations. See: Z.A. BRZOZOWSKA, M.J. LESZKA, *Maria Lekapene, Empress of the Bulgarians. Neither a Saint nor a Malefactress*, Łódź–Kraków 2017 [= BL, 36], p. 99–144, 149–150; M. HOMZA, *Mulieres suadentes – Persuasive Women. Female Royal Saints in Medieval East Central and Eastern Europe*, Leiden–Boston 2017 [= ECEEMA, 42], p. 33–79, 211–215.

The monograph is made up of two parts. The first presents, in a chronological order, six saints whose cult has, over the centuries, gained a nationwide and statewide character (p. 21–156). These are: Anna (died in 1200), wife of the Great Župan of Raška, Stephen Nemanja; Queen Helen of Anjou (died in 1314); Princess Milica Hrebeljanović (died in 1405)²; Despotessa Angelina Branković (died 1520); Paraskeva-Petka (the eleventh century?) and Zlata of Meglen (died in 1795). The second part provides the profiles of three women who were worshiped locally, either, for example, in a specific monastery or in Serbia's specific region (p. 159–179): Bulgarian Tsaritsa, Anna Neda, a sister of King Stephen of Dečani (died c. 1340); Serbian Tsaritsa, Helen, wife of Stephen Dušan (died in 1374), Despotessa Helen Štiljanović (died in 1546).

The author makes an attempt to place the analysed phenomena in a wider context of *Slavia Orthodoxa* (it is with this goal in mind that she cites, for example, Eastern Slavic collections of the lives of saints, such as the work of the bishop of Rostov, Demetrius Tuptalo, from the end of the seventeenth century, and other works created later). She also approaches them from the perspective of the spirituality of the eastern churches and Byzantine-Orthodox civilization. Introducing the reader to this theme, Dominika Gapska rightly argues that the figure who served as a model for female sanctity in the Serbian Orthodox Church was the Mother of God (p. 11, 182). However, given the fact that all of the heroines dealt with in the monograph represent

the type of a saint ruler³ (the only exception being a martyr, Zlata of Meglen), more attention should be devoted to the figure of Empress Helen (she is only marginally mentioned in the monograph, p. 12, 27, 29, 49, 63, 160), Constantine the Great's mother. In the mid-fifth century in Byzantium (and in Slavic regions at least as early as the eleventh century), St. Helen began to be regarded as an ideal of the Christian empress with whom all the later female rulers who distinguished themselves through their faith and the care given to the Orthodox Church were equated by being given the honourable name of a 'new Helen'⁴. The cult of St. Helen as well as of Kievan Princess Olga, which was modelled on that of St. Helen, certainly existed in Serbia from the first half of the fourteenth century⁵. It is likely that the phenomenon of 'new Helens' was also known to the archbishop Daniel II who was the author of the oldest surviving Serbian hagiographic text devoted to a woman, that is, the *Life of Helen of Anjou* (although he never explicitly used that comparison while writing about the Serbian queen). Moreover, the days of commemorating female saints bearing the name of Helen – as Dominika Gapska states – were sometimes set on 21 May, that is, on the celebration day of Constantine and Helen (p. 49, 160).

It will be worthwhile to complement the reconstruction of the Serbian model of female royal sanctity (p. 181–186) with a discussion of

² Apart from medieval texts discussed by the author and containing references to Milica (written by patriarch Daniel III, Anonymous from Ravanica, Constantine of Kostenets, Gregory Tsamblak), it would be worthwhile to take into account the *Word about St. Prince Lazar (Храна духовна, похвално надметање, речи високоузнетом међу мученицима, новом кнезу Лазару, и о преносу моштију његових)* by Anthony Rafal from 1419/1420. *Хрестоматија средњовековне књижевности*, vol. II, *Српска књижевност*, ed. Т. ЈОВАНОВИЋ, Београд 2012, p. 143–159. The work provides a dramatic description of the widowed Princess's mourning lament. Z.A. BRZOWSKA, *Księżna Milica – między sakralizacją władzy monarszej, oficjalnym kultem cerkiewnym i narodowym mitem*, PSS 5, 2013, p. 65–68.

³ The 'monarchical character' of the cult of St. Petka has already been dealt with in scholarly literature: M. KUCZYŃSKA, *Paraskiewa-Petka Tyrnowska w rosyjskim wariacie służby – „monarchiczny” obraz świętości*, PSS 5, 2013, p. 157–171.

⁴ M. НОМЗА, *Mulieres suadentes...*, p. 33–210.

⁵ The lives of both female rulers can be found, among others, in the Prolog from Lesnovo (1330): САНУ 53, fol. 228–228' (St. Helen, 21.05), fol. 243–243' (St. Olga, 11.06). *Станиславов (Лесновски) Пролог от 1330 г.*, ed. P. ПАВЛОВА, В. ЖЕЛЯЗКОВА, Велико Търново 1999, p. 246, 261. There are also original South Slavic texts devoted both to St. Helen and to a 'new Helen', St. Olga. Н. ГАГОВА, *Владетели и книги. Участието на южнославянския владетел в производството и употребата на книги през Средновековието (IX–XV в.): рецепцията на византийския модел*, София 2010, p. 192.

the motive that, while known in the culture of Nemanjić monarchy from the thirteenth century, became widespread at the time when archbishop Daniel II created the work dedicated to Helen of Anjou, in the last years of Stephen Milutin (1282–1321) reign – Sophia, the female personification of [Divine] Wisdom⁶. Her images appeared not only on the walls of Serbian churches. Authors from the region also included references to Sapiential Books of the Old Testament (Prov, Sir, Wis) in texts devoted to female saints – a fact to which the author refers several times in her analysis (p. 33, 56–57, 127, 145–152).

While preparing the monograph's new edition – because of the topic it addresses and the insights it offers, it fully deserves to be published by the publishing house with an international reach – the aspects of it that pertain to scholarly technicalities should be refined. The bibliography that appears at the end of the work contains titles that are not referenced in the footnotes (and the other way around). Sometimes page numbers are missing from bibliographical references, like in chapter 7 devoted to Tsaritsa Anna Neda (p. 159), in which two works on Bulgarian female rulers are cited: С. ГЕОРГИЕВА, *Жената в българското средновековие*, Пловдив 2011 (Anna Neda appears only on a few pages of this monograph: 289–291, 345–347); В. ИГНАТОВ, *Българските царици. Владетелките на България VII–XIV в.*, София 2008 (it contains only a brief bibliographical note: p. 79–81). However, first of all it would be necessary to unify the wide source quotations woven into the text. Some of those quotations are in Serbian, some are in English and some are in parallel variants, both in Serbian and in English. In the English-language monograph sources should be quoted in their original version (in Church Slavic or

Serbian, depending on the epoch), possibly coupled with their English translations. However, these remarks are of secondary importance and do not detract from the significant value of the monograph that presents this little known part of European medieval culture.

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⁶ Z.A. BRZOZOWSKA, *Sophia: The Personification of Divine Wisdom in the Lower Danube Region*, [in:] *Routledge Handbook of Byzantium and the Danube Regions (13th–16th century)*, ed. M.A. ROSSI, A.I. SULLIVAN, Abingdon-on-Thames 2024, p. 251–264.

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