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## BLESSED ARE THE MEEK: DIVINE JUSTICE AND REBELLION IN GRIGORIJ TSAMBLAK'S *VITA OF STEFAN DEČANSKI*

The complexity of the medieval man is illustrated in the life and work of Grigorij Tsamblak (ca. 1364/1365 – ca. 1419/1420). He was a fertile Orthodox Church author who contributed to the literary heritage of Bulgaria, Serbia, Moldova, Romania, Ukraine, and Russia. Tsamblak left a controversial legacy, torn between pro-Orthodox and pro-Catholic factions within the Slavic world. Towards the end of his life, he took part in the Council of Constance, despite refusing to sign the union.<sup>1</sup> The Bulgarian monk went to Serbia for a diplomatic mission and later became abbot of the *Visoki Dečani* Monastery. There is no agreement regarding the exact time of his Serbian stay, Serbian and Bulgarian scholars hold different opinions, suggesting periods as 1402–1409, 1402–1406, and/or 1406–1409.<sup>2</sup>

During his sojourn in Serbia, Tsamblak contributed several works to Slavonic medieval literature, supporting the cult of the Bulgarian Saint Petka of Tarnovo by writing a homily on the transfer of her relics to Belgrade and by expanding upon the existing *Church service for St. Petka of Tarnovo* with the composition of new stichera. Tsamblak's most important works were devoted to Stefan Uroš III Dečanski. Not only did he dedicate a church service to him, but he also wrote the *Life (Vita) of Stefan Dečanski*,<sup>3</sup> a new, extended hagiography detailing the life of the martyr-king, founder of the Dečani monastery.

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Stefan Uroš III Dečanski Nemanjić (ca. 1276–1331; king of Serbia: 1322–1331) is the most important dynastic saint of the Nemanjić dynasty (1166–1371), besides Saint Sava and Saint Simeon Nemanja. Dečanski earned his popular name from his legacy church, the Visoki Dečani monastery. The construction of the monastery began in 1326–1327, and after the death of Stefan Uroš III, his son, King Dušan, completed it around 1335.<sup>4</sup> The veneration of Stefan Dečanski grew rapidly, with a lasting impact on the Serbian national and religious consciousness, eventually allowing his canonization in 1343, only twelve years after his death. A key part of this process was the production of his first hagiography, written somewhere between 1343 and 1349 by an anonymous author known as Danilo's Student, a disciple of the Serbian writer and archbishop Danilo II.<sup>5</sup>

Tsamblak envisioned Dečanski as a well-rounded recognizable martyr-king, an image of the saint that cemented in Serbian folklore, later baroque literature, and persisted into the works of late classicism and romanticism. The cult of Stefan Dečanski traversed a long path: “evolving from dynastic and martyrdom aspects to becoming part of national ideology and the religious-political program grounded in the idea of ‘Serbia Sancta’”.<sup>6</sup>

To better understand Tsamblak's work, we must briefly revisit the life of Stefan III Dečanski, marked by violence and suffering. In his youth, Stefan was given as a hostage to the Tatars (1292)<sup>7</sup> and left their captivity in 1299. This experience surely left an impression on Stefan. King Milutin, his father, later proclaimed Dečanski the *young king*. This title was typically given to the designated heir and came with the responsibility of ruling the Zeta oblast. In 1314,<sup>8</sup> Stefan tried to overthrow his father. The attempted rebellion ended up in failure, leaving Stefan partially blinded, imprisoned on the orders of King Milutin and sent into exile to Constantinople where he stayed for seven years.<sup>9</sup> Here, Stefan's second son Dušica died. However, Dečanski's blindness was not permanent and after Milutin's death, Stefan claimed to have regained his sight miraculously, with the help of Saint Nicholas of Myra. This event solidified his claim to the throne once again. Dečanski's path to the throne was far from peaceful. He secured power through a bloody civil war (1321–1322) against his younger half-brother, Konstantin,<sup>10</sup> who, despite being probably designated by King Milutin as heir to the throne, died in battle in unclear circumstances. Dečanski later faced a challenge from his cousin Vladislav (1323–

1324),<sup>11</sup> the son of his uncle King Dragutin. Despite prevailing against the Bulgarians in the important Battle of Velbužd in 1330, Stefan's rule remained turbulent. Shortly after this victory, in 1331,<sup>12</sup> Dečanski was deposed by his son, Stefan Dušan, who would later become the first Serbian emperor supported by the ambitious Serbian nobility. Stefan Dečanski was subsequently imprisoned and killed in the autumn of the same year, most likely on the orders of his son, although this has not been definitively proven. Historians find Tsamblak's account of the king's violent demise at Zvečan fortress more plausible than the sudden death explanation offered in the older *Vita*.<sup>13</sup>

In the older *Life of Stefan Dečanski*, Danilo's Student writes from a clear pro-Dušan perspective. He blames Dečanski for starting the war against his son, and frames his death as an abstract event, caused by Divine Providence: "this pious and Christ-loving King Uroš III surrendered his spirit to the Lord, because no one, my dear brothers, knows on which day or hour the soul will separate from the body, when no one expected".<sup>14</sup> There is no murder, no human agency, and no blame. In contrast, siding with Dečanski, Tsamblak asserts that Dušan is responsible for his father's death and provides an opinionated description of the deed.<sup>15</sup>

The elusive moments of Dečanski's life – his rebellion, his son's rebellion, his blinding, and his violent death – weave a narrative that defies straightforward interpretation. These episodes remain particularly problematic due to the inherently religious nature of medieval texts and their striving to convey a higher truth. They describe a chronological order of events leading from Genesis to Salvation, where real-life figures emulate biblical ones, often devoid of worldly features.

However, as we can see while comparing multiple and conflicting accounts, this truth is often corrupted by a strong ideological agenda. While solving the puzzle, creating a syuzhet and dealing with problematic themes, medieval authors are forced to become visible to the modern critical eye. As a consequence, medieval sacred (and even more so profane) literature starts to feel surprisingly close to our own modern world.

Tsamblak himself is close to his contemporaries, since his main goal was that of affirming the sanctity of his monastery through the sanctity of its founder. Grigorij, as a Bulgarian monk, abbot of a Serbian monastery, modeled Stefan Uroš III as an idealized martyr-king. All the problematic moments in the king's life are framed in a

manner that absolves Stefan of any blame. In his effort to exonerate both Milutin and his son from any responsibility for their conflict, Tsamblak puts all blame on the Byzantine princess and Milutin's wife, Queen Simonida. This tendency reflects a common trope in medieval writing of assigning negative roles to women.<sup>16</sup>

Tsamblak lived in Serbia after the Battle of Kosovo (1389) and after the fall of his hometown, Bulgarian capital Tarnovo, to the Turks (1393). Tsamblak worked within the framework of the End Times idea and the feeling of an upcoming apocalypse was prevalent. The Orthodox world was on the brink of collapse under the Ottoman invasion. *Vita of Stefan Dečanski* fits into the spirit of the late medieval Serbian literature. The sense of hopelessness and a lack of perspective leaves a void in which the grand idea of the Nemanjić dynastic power once stood. From that moment on, historical figures are revered as martyrs rather than triumphant victors over the enemy. This is why, during this period, the cult of Prince Lazar also emerged, and why in Tsamblak's *Vita*, Stefan's character is depicted in the likeness of Stephen the Protomartyr.

In the late medieval period, Orthodox Christian intellectuals found little hope in their earthly existence and were often drawn toward fatalism and pessimism. Tsamblak later countered this sentiment by seeking alliances with potential Catholic partners. The world surrounding him during his sojourn in Dečani was rife with internal struggle. Brother against brother, father against son. Bulgarians, Byzantines, and Serbs clashed amongst themselves, all the while facing the Ottoman threat. This turmoil originated fissures and opportunities for critiquing the social hierarchy. Importantly, the widening dissonance between secular and priestly elites granted the latter more space to criticize the failings of the former.

In contrast to Student's abstract work, which presents Dečanski's life merely as a short link leading to the Serbian Empire under Dušan, Tsamblak's hagiography slows down the narrative pace and focuses the reader's attention on the violence and suffering endured by the holy king. Of course, the medieval king was understood to have two bodies in him: a physical body (*body natural*), and a symbolic body (*body politic*). This thought also applies to the body of Stefan Dečanski, sufficiently idealized to reflect the general perception of royal bodies during the epoch, where physicality often symbolized divine favor and political legitimacy. The symbolic body is connected to the state's well-

being state and should be devoid of fallacies: “utterly void of Infancy, and Old Age, and other Natural Defects and Imbecilities”.<sup>17</sup>

In the *Vita of Stefan Dečanski*, the impact of recent history and its destructive consequences are reflected on the king's physical form. Tsamblak transforms Dečanski's physical body into a powerful symbol, by portraying his enduring suffering into the fracturing of his *political body* and, by extension, showing the fate of the state in the End Times. This fragmentation is amplified beyond the literal, with the decay of the human form playing out metaphorically. Body parts appear independently, in a literal as well as in a metaphorical sense: hearts, hands, legs, eyes, the human face, abdomen, neck, teeth, liver are all scattered through the hagiography, especially in violent scenes.<sup>18</sup>

After rebelling against his father, Stefan Dečanski was partially blinded. In the *Vita*, however, he is portrayed as *completely* blind, with his sudden regaining of sight described as a divine miracle. In medieval Serbia, the practice of blinding was adopted from the Byzantine court as a form of punishment often employed against male members of royal families to remove them from the line of succession. A man with a deformity, according to the norms of the era, was not considered dignified to inherit the throne. It was a common belief that an imperfect body could not be anointed by Divine Will. Thus, through this act of violence, Stefan was stripped of his royal rights. Dečanski will be healed, made *whole* again by Saint Nicholas, his protector and mediator during the king's ascension to sainthood. The miracle worker from Mira bestows sight upon his protege, during Stefan's exile in Constantinople, saying: “Do not worry, Stefan. Here, in the palm of my hand, are your eyes”.<sup>19</sup> But the hero's body stays perfectly whole only for a very short amount of time, since, as we can read in the scene depicting his violent murder, it is attacked and fragmented once again. After his death, Dečanski is presented as a miraculous healer of people with disabilities and handicaps. In the afterlife, the king, bestowed with special, transcendental sight, gravitates towards the weakest, the meek, and the societal outcasts. Together, this community of imperfect bodies becomes an allegory for the crumbling state.

Tsamblak strips Stefan of his symbolic royal power in the murder scene through a description<sup>20</sup> of his passive, aged, vulnerable, and suffering body. He emphasizes the power imbalance by contrasting Stefan's frail body parts with the “free legs” and the “sinful”, “villainous hands” of the murderers. The deed is explicitly labeled as

the “most gruesome death by strangulation”. Tsamblak does not spare our senses but tries to invoke the feeling of guilt and suffering at the same time. The murderers are clearly designated as the “evil servants” of an “evil master”, a symbolic *extension* of the body of King Dušan who cannot conduct the cruel act himself. Dušan is clearly blamed. The mention of the “parental womb”<sup>21</sup> is a direct accuse to the main perpetrator, leaving no doubt about his guilt.

The power of the saint is proven through his miracles. Sacred wonders connect the Heavenly and the Earthly realm but, more interestingly, they show the needs of a community that looks for and receives the miraculous. They underline that which is lacking, in this case justice and consequences for the wicked laic leadership. The demonstrative and large-scale miracles of Saint Simeon Nemanja,<sup>22</sup> the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty, as described by Stefan Nemanjić, were different, important for the people and the dynasty. Dečanski shares the model of his suffering with Jesus who suffered at the hands of political authority. The birth and resurrection of Christ were acts of rebellion, as were some of his miracles.<sup>23</sup> Tsamblak writes about an important martyr, and martyrs, since Roman times, suffer under unjust rule while mirroring the experiences of Christ.

In his earthly life, Dečanski adopted a passive stance against violence, mirroring the biblical Job. This is clear in the last instance when Stefan is informed about his son’s rebellion and expresses relief at the prospect of leaving: “the stirrings of the earthly realm and continuing living with Christ”.<sup>24</sup> This aligns with the cultic model of the saint of the martyr type, who typically accepts a violent death inert. But this stance changes in the afterlife. Tsamblak narrows the scope of Dečanski’s miracles, focusing them on internal enemies – secular figures who mistreat and behave violently towards the monastic community. These are *vengeance miracles*, performed by Dečanski when the last survivors in the End times are at odds with each other. Tsamblak is close to the witnesses to these two miracles, in the case of the second one, he is even an eyewitness himself: “our own eyes saw, and more others were spectators themselves”.<sup>25</sup>

The first miracle is performed soon after Dečanski’s death, when the martyr’s weak material body is transformed into powerful relics (called *mošti* in Serbian language, whose etymology derives from the Old Church Slavonic noun *moštī*, which means power). Čelnik,<sup>26</sup> commander Ivoje, appointed to power by Dušan’s wife Empress Jelena,

was entrusted with safeguarding the monastery's rich possessions. However, he proves to be both unjust and impious, usurping the monastery's wealth for his own gain and mistreating the monks.<sup>27</sup> Ivoje is a prominent secular figure: he is a knight who perishes at the hands of a stronger soldier, a *soldier of Christ*, a frightening being imbued with divine power that manifests in terrible physical strength. This fearsome being is the monastery's protector Stefan Dečanski. As a manifestation of the Divine, when enacting vengeance within the sacred Dečani space, Dečanski has no longer mercy, he no longer speaks. He acts: "with fervor confronting the one who raged against his people and punishing the tormentor by just judgment".<sup>28</sup> Now, as a soldier, Dečanski is more interested in secular life than ever before. His body is transformed, he is quicker and stronger. Just like the biblical angels, he is a material manifestation of the Divine, which breaks the boundaries of the physical world, and incites fear in humans.<sup>29</sup> Dečanski strikes Ivoje ferociously: "he had knocked him down from his horse and thrust two large pieces of iron into his throat, which went through to his chest and liver, and he could not utter a word, he just begged them to quickly bring a blacksmith".<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that the divine punishment is conducted with an *iron* tool, which is symbolic because they were used in the most common blinding punishments. In an emblematic reversing act, Dečanski now wields iron, the material previously used to harm and torture him, to punish the enemies of his monastery. These miraculous interventions serve as acts of protection for his monastic community, which tries to reinforce its own strength through a rebellious narrative written by the Bulgarian abbot.

The next adversary of the monastic community is named Junac. His name, meaning *young ox*, emphasizes his dehumanization. There is a progression, a gradation in the struggle between sacred and profane. The second vengeance miracle is even more detailed, reflecting the deteriorating state of the realm during the years from the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th century. The last-named figure of real authority was Empress Jelena. Even though the secular authorities remain unnamed, it is clear that Junac was sent by those who rose to power after the fall of the Nemanjić dynasty. Tsamblak is clearly referring to members of the Lazarević dynasty, who were indeed plagued by internal strife.<sup>31</sup>

Junac, who does not even have a secular title, threatens the brotherhood, especially the abbot (the one before Tsamblak). He tortures, imprisons, starves, and beats the monks, he makes sure they can *feel* their material bodies. At one point, Junac will even shout: “There is no God”,<sup>32</sup> pushing the world before us is on the verge of collapsing and at that moment, the abbot of the monastery offers a prayer to Dečanski. He does not explicitly request revenge, but implicitly urges the soldier of Christ to take up arms once more. The abbot is actively involved, taking part in the action, showing the connection between the saint and his brethren. Junac threatens to kill the abbot with his *own hands*, and he reacts by *kissing* the hand of the relics of Dečanski in his sanctuary while praying<sup>33</sup> – and those hands will later awake and enact revenge. Body parts are highlighted and have an important function in the secular violence and in the Divine vengeance enacted by Stefan Dečanski.

Appearing before Junac, Dečanski is finally described in his entirety as a “fear-inducing man, adorned in imperial attire, emerged from the location of the coffin, with a long and grizzled beard, just as he was painted”.<sup>34</sup> It is significant that Dečanski appears exactly “as he was painted”, referencing his *ktetor* portrait (donor portrait) – the fresco depicting him offering a model of the Church of the Holy Ascension to the Savior. Rising like a revenant from his *kivot* (coffin-reliquary holding his relics), he confronts the bandit in the heart of his church, behind the royal doors. His image becomes incarnated, able to take part in the physical reality, manifesting that the Dečani saint-protector is present, ready to defend his brotherhood.

Dečanski approaches Junac in his guise of the *soldier of Christ* and strikes the bandit in his face and chest with a candlestick, hitting him so hard: “that the candlestick broke from the mighty blow, and its half fell off”.<sup>35</sup> The weapon is again symbolic. Part of the church supplies, it becomes weaponized, a tool of light wielded by a saint who endured the suffering of partial blindness. As Junac starts to flee Dečanski strikes him on the thighs and on the upper right hand. However, the villain is not allowed to die in the fight. Instead, Junac succumbs to his wounds after seven weeks of agony, while lying in the monastery.

His body is decaying, the divine justice insists on the dissolution of the material champion’s body:



The rotten body and the bones of the punctured places also decayed, so that the internal organs themselves were visible. The foul stench of those wounds spread throughout the monastery, disturbing those who were inside it. His tongue fell off, and his teeth were split with great malice. One could see him, one who was so vain before, lying like a long-dead, decayed corpse.<sup>36</sup>

There is a kind of enjoyment in the naturalistic description of the inflicted punishment, a rarity in medieval literature. The weapon, the suffering, the wounds are unusually thoroughly described. Tsamblak continues relentlessly until his point is made: the once-healthy profane leader is reduced to nothing but a decayed corpse, his malice clear in the stench of his body. In contrast, the sacred protector, Dečanski, transcends his earthly remains to become a powerful, otherworldly being, reaching the perfect state of a human transformation. In the material world, he appears as if painted on an *icon*. Violence is a means to reverse unjust roles, with divinely ordained punishment enabling Dečanski's return. Most importantly, suffering demands punishment in the afterlife, and Tsamblak's hagiography becomes the medium through which divine justice is satisfied.

## Conclusion

We could seek harmony, peaceful beauty, and spirituality when exploring the Middle Ages. Escapism to another time through idealistic interpretative construction is legitimate, fair, and can bring us closer to the spirit of the medieval era. However, it is equally important to search for the cracks in the picture. The medieval man was a complex subject of an unpredictable history: "the subject turned out to be contorted in complexity by contradiction, characterized less by graceful self-mastery, more by discord, fragmentation, and motion".<sup>37</sup>

The Middle Ages were a time of suffering and conflict between different classes, nations, religions, families, and, most importantly, conflict within individuals themselves. In the *Life of Stefan Dečanski*, the description of the hero's bodily suffering serves as a kind of rebellion against secular authority embodied in the character of the king's son, Stefan Dušan. Grigorij Tsamblak wrote two stories about Stefan Dečanski. In the first one, Dečanski is a martyr, an idealized ruler searching for a *blessed death*. In the other, Dečanski is a formidable warrior who exacts revenge on those who dared disturb his brotherhood and his church.

The rebellion of the lower against higher social groups is evident in the described miracles. While some members of the Dečani brotherhood were privileged, coming from wealthy families, many belonged to the poorest of the poor. Through Stefan Dečanski, who became a formidable weapon, the meek and oppressed could rebel against the rich and powerful. Suffering transforms into punishment with heavenly help – no more abstractions, no more patience. It is crucial to note that Tsamblak's *second* story is genuinely medieval, not an account forcibly attached to the Middle Ages due to a modern agenda, but a narrative intrinsic to the period.

- 1 About Tsamblak's stance towards the church union, see: T. Cholova, *Bulgarian Scholars and Clerics in the European Politics at the end of the 14th Century and the beginning of the 15th Century*, in: «Codrul Cosminului», 20 (2014), n. 1, pp. 7–24.
- 2 A. A. Turilov, *Grigorij Tsamblak, v: Pravoslavnaya entsiklopediya, Tom XII. Gomelskaya i Žlobinskaya eparkhiya – Grigorij Pakurian, pod red. Patriarkha Moskovskogo. i vseja Rusi Alekseya II*, Moskva, Pravoslavnaya Entsiklopediya, 2006, pp. 583–592.
- 3 Italian translation: G. Cioffiari, *Gli zar di Serbia, la Puglia e S. Nicola: una storia di santità e di violenza*, Bari, Centro studi nicolaiani, 1989, pp. 119–165. Slavic edition: A. Davidov, G. Danchev, N. Doncheva-Panayotova, P. Kovacheva, T. Gencheva, *Žitije na Stefan Dečanski ot Grigorij Tsamblak*, Sofiya, BAN, 1983. As for the title of the work, Tsamblak's hagiography will be called *Vita* to be differentiated from the text of Danilo's Student.
- 4 S. Marjanović Dušanić, *Sveti kralj: kult Stefana Dečanskog*, Beograd, Balkanološki institut Srpske akademije nauka i umetnosti, 2007, p. 354. From here on, it will be cited as SMD followed by page number.
- 5 *Danilovi nastavljači, Danilov Učenik, drugi nastavljači Danilovog zbornika*, priredio Gordon Mak Danijel, prevod L. Mirković, Beograd, Prosveta, SKZ, 1989, p. 21. From here on, it will be cited as DU followed by page number.
- 6 All translations from Serbian are made by the author. SMD, op. cit., p. 194.
- 7 Ibidem, p. 212.
- 8 Ibidem, p. 234.
- 9 Ibidem, p. 244.
- 10 Ibidem, pp. 255–258.
- 11 Ibidem, p. 258.
- 12 Ibidem, pp. 310–319.
- 13 Ibidem, p. 317.
- 14 DU, op. cit., p. 65.
- 15 G. Camblak, *Književni rad u Srbiji*. Beograd, Prosveta, Srpska književna zadruga, 1989, p. 72. From here on, it will be cited as GC followed by page number.
- 16 GC, op. cit., p. 50.
- 17 E. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 7.
- 18 GC, op. cit., pp. 51, 72, 74, 78–80.
- 19 Ibidem, p. 53.
- 20 Ibidem, p. 74.
- 21 Idem.
- 22 Stefan Prvovenčani, *Sabrani spisi*. Priredila Lj. Juhas Georgijevska, Beograd, Prosveta, Srpska književna zadruga, 1988, pp. 88–89, 91, 93–94, 95, 98.
- 23 M. Rowley, *Divine violence: from the ancient Near East to the assault on the United States Capitol*, in: *Miracles, Political Authority and Violence in Medieval and Early Modern History*. Edited by M. Rowley, N. Hodgson, Abingdon, Routledge, 2021, pp. 1–28.
- 24 GC, op. cit., p. 70.

- 25 Ibidem, p. 78.
- 26 About the the title of *čelnik* see more in: M. Blagojević, *Čelnik*, u: *Leksikon srpskog srednjeg veka*. Priredili S. Ćirković, R. Mihaljčić, Beograd, Knowledge, 1999, pp. 812–814.
- 27 GC, op. cit., p. 77.
- 28 Idem.
- 29 Luke 2:9.
- 30 GC, op. cit., p. 78.
- 31 Idem.
- 32 Idem.
- 33 Ibidem, p. 79.
- 34 Idem.
- 35 Idem.
- 36 Ibidem, p. 80.
- 37 P. Haidu, *The Subject Medieval/Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 347.