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Nationalism and Patriotism in
Serbian Political Discourse:
Medieval, Modern,
Contemporary

Proceedings of the
Conference held on 30–31 May 2024
at the University of Belgrade,
Faculty of Philosophy

Edited by
Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić
Aleksandar Z. Savić

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THE BORDERS OF THE SERBIAN LAND FROM THE END OF THE 12TH TO THE MIDDLE OF THE 15TH CENTURY ACCORDING TO NARRATIVE SOURCES

The term *Serbian land* can be said to be continuously encountered in narrative sources written in the Serbian-Slavonic language. These sources shed light on the events that occurred from the later decades of the 12th century until the mid-15th century. The authors of those works were mainly the highest state or church dignitaries. Their accounts are somewhat connected to the information that can be found in documents issued by the rulers. Consequently, the comparison of those sources is to a certain extent inevitable. We should note that the term *Serbian land* is closely connected to the term “fatherland” (*otačastvo*).

In the biographies they dedicated to their father, Grand Župan Stefan Nemanja (1166–1196), in 1208 and 1216 respectively, Saint Sava and Stefan Nemanjić basically equate the territories he held with *Serbian land*. From the data presented by them, it is clear that *Serbian land* also included the maritime territory of Zeta (Dioclea). Sava described all territories conquered by Stefan Nemanja as the renewal of his grand paternal heritage. It should be pointed out that in the charters issued by Stefan the First-Crowned (1196–1227), besides the term “all Serbian lands”, the names Dioclea, Dalmatia, Travunia and Zachlunia (Hum lands) were also mentioned and used particularly for Serbian maritime principalities. In 1263/1264, in *The Life of Saint Simeon*, hieromonk Domentijan describes the conquests of Stefan Nemanja in an almost identical manner as Stefan Nemanjić. A decade earlier, the same author wrote *The Life of Saint Sava*. In this biography, he mentions, as a rule, maritime lands together with *Serbian land*. In this manner, he applied the intitulation that could be seen in the contemporary documents issued by the Serbian rulers. However, we cannot generally doubt that he also perceived the entire state territory as *Serbian land*. Monk Theodosius the Hilandarian, about whom there is scarce information, apparently wrote in the later decades of the 13th century. It can be discerned

that in *The Life of Saint Sava*, he mainly used the term *Serbian land* to denote the entire territory which was governed by the Serbian rulers. He clearly indicated that the maritime principalities, mentioned in the intituations of documents issued by the Serbian rulers, were actually *Serbian lands*. Furthermore, Theodosije the Hilandarian consistently called Saint Sava the *Archbishop of all Serbian lands*, except in one specific instance.

Archbishop Danilo II left an extensive hagiographic body of work. He is believed to have written the biographies of Queen Jelena, as well as of her sons, King Dragutin and King Milutin, between 1317 and 1324. In the period 1317–1324, when he was head of the Serbian Church, Danilo II wrote the biographies of Archbishop Arsenije I and Archbishop Jevstatije I, and he may also have authored *The Life of Archbishop Joanikije*. From numerous examples it is clear that he also used the term *Serbian land* for the entire state territory. Writing about King Dragutin, he made a clear distinction between *Serbian land* and the territories which had been given to King Dragutin by the Hungarian Crown for his governance. It appears that he clearly understood that, although these territories were held by a member of the Nemanjić dynasty, they actually belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary. Danilo II wrote about King Milutin's conquests of vast Byzantine territories as extending the borders of *Serbian land*, i.e., the fatherland (*otačastvo*).

Danilo's anonymous disciple wrote *The Life of Archbishop Danilo* and most likely authored the hagiographies of King Stefan of Dečani (1321–1331) and his son Stefan Dušan (1331–1355), thus covering the period until 1335. These hagiographies are believed to have been written between 1337 and 1345, definitely before Dušan's coronation as emperor. We could say that, much like his teacher, this unnamed disciple used the term *Serbian land* in the meaning of the state of Serbian kings. Nevertheless, certain differences between the two authors are detectable. Namely, Danilo's disciple does not state that the territories of *Greek lands*, conquered by King Stefan of Dečani after the Battle of Velbazhd, were included in the fatherland. It is not clear whether the absence of such a statement is merely a coincidence or whether it should be interpreted as a different treatment of the conquered lands.

In his descriptions of King Dušan's early conquests, Danilo's disciple emphasises that the ultimate intention of the Serbian ruler was to banish Byzantine emperor Andronicus III (1328–1341) from *his empire of Greek land*. On the other hand, as was the case before, he notes that the conquered Greek territories were added to the lands of the fatherland (*otačastvo*). Further conquests by Stefan Dušan were not described in more detail in the Serbian narrative works, but information about them, known from other sources, is worth mentioning. After new conquests, approximately in August 1343, Dušan added to his royal title *Greek lands*, i.e., territories, and the Greeks alike. By the end of 1345 he declared himself emperor and in April 1346 he was crowned emperor, and that is how a new stage ensued. Stefan

Dušan signed Serbian documents as the “emperor of the Serbs and Greeks”, whereas in the documents written in Greek he used the phrase the “emperor and autocrat of Serbia and Romania”. It is also obvious from the intitulations of his charters that there was a distinction between Serbian and Greek lands. Owning and governing Greek territories was considered a prerequisite for being elevated from a kingdom to an empire. Multiple sources indicated the existence of two parts of the empire – the Serbian and the Greek. Roughly speaking, we could say that *Serbian land* was considered to be the one-time lands of the Nemanjić dynasty, extended during King Milutin’s rule, whereas Greek land referred to the former Byzantine Empire territories which were conquered by Stefan Dušan.

The period of weakening and fall of the Serbian empire during the rule of Dušan’s son Uroš (1355–1371) had practically no accounts in biography literature. Still, one of Danilo’s successors, the author of the notes on Patriarch Sava IV (1354–1375) and Patriarch Jefrem (1375–1379; 1389–1390/1391) provided valuable information about the collapse of the Serbian Empire. According to him, one part of Uroš’s empire was claimed by Prince Lazar, the other by Vukašin, who even dared to take the title of king, whereas the *Greek territories* and cities were seized by Uglješa. This is yet another piece of information that stands witness to the fact that Greek lands were treated as a special part of the Empire, different from other Nemanjić lands. This comes as no surprise because it was specifically the governing of these territories that gave rise to schism, when Patriarch Callistus of Constantinople anathematised Emperor Dušan, Patriarch Joanikije and his bishops. The authors of some older Serbian chronicles also stress that Stefan Dušan declared himself emperor once he had subdued *Greek land*. It can be seen that they renounced the territories which actually remained within the Serbian state for a very short time.

The term *Serbian land* is again found in the iconic texts about Prince Lazar, written in the period between 1393 and 1419/1420. In *The Oration of Saint Prince Lazar*, written around 1393, Patriarch Danilo III indicates in one statement that the territories conquered by Stefan Dušan could not be included in the fatherland (*otačastvo*). This author consistently refers to the territory governed by Prince Lazar, who was killed in 1389 in the Battle of Kosovo, and subsequently by his son Stefan Lazarević, as *Serbian land*. The authors of other cult texts wrote in a similar manner when referring to the territory governed by prince Lazar. The data provided by the authors of the cult texts are essentially in accordance with what can be found in the intitulations and signatures of Prince Lazar’s charters. Admittedly, the terms Podunavlje (the Danube River basin lands) and Pomorje (maritime lands) can also be found in reference to Serbian land. However, the absence of their mention in the iconic writings is understandable since the mentioned lands did not have any particular identity.

The Life of Despot Stefan Lazarević by Constantine the Philosopher was written in the 1430s and it stands for one of the most significant narrative sources in the first half of the 15th century. Constantine the Philosopher uses the term *Serbian land* for the territories governed by the Lazarević family. On the other hand, Balša III (1403–1421), who ruled the territory of Zeta, was mentioned as an Albanian lord. The name “Albania” is known to have become accepted and used for Venetian lands in the South Adriatic region from the late 14th century. The term later became a part of the Latin version of the title of Despot Đurađ Branković (1427–1456), heir to despot Stefan. It seems quite certain that “Albania”, i.e., Zeta, was treated as a special part of the state territory, which was apparently not perceived as *Serbian land*. It should be noted that this had nothing to do with the ethnic structure of this region. On the whole, it can be said that Constantine thought of other territories added by Despot Stefan to his state as his fatherland, although he treated the territory governed by the Branković family in the same manner. Wanting to stress the border position of Belgrade, which was Despot Stefan’s capital, Constantine said that, although the city lay in Serbian lands, it was located in the heart and on the shoulders of *Hungarian land*.

The anonymous author of a text about the transfer of the relics of Holy Evangelist Luke to the Serbian capital of Smederevo on 12th January 1453 mentions maritime towns, regions around the Sava and Danube Rivers, as well as some parts of Hungary and Bosnia as special territories under the rule of Despot Đurađ Branković. What was meant by parts of Bosnia was Srebrenica, which Despot Stefan Lazarević in all likelihood got in 1411 from Hungarian King Sigismund, as well as estates in the region of Usora, which Despot Đurađ Branković succeeded in conquering in 1433. The last narrative source to be highlighted in this research is the *Account of the Transfer of the Relics of Saint John of Rila from Tarnovo to the Rila Monastery*, known as *The Story of Rila*, which was written around 1469 by Vladislav the Grammarian, born in Novo Brdo (present-day Kosovo) in the 1430s. As was the case with Danilo’s disciple, this scribe did not consider *Serbian land* the territories conquered by King and Emperor Stefan Dušan.

Based on the analysed sources, we could say that the expanse of *Serbian land* until the rule of Stefan Dušan grew and matched the entire territory under the rule of this king. Byzantine lands which were conquered by King and Emperor Dušan were indicated as *Greek land* and were in this manner perceived all through the end of the Middle Ages. In the late 14th and the early 15th centuries, the term *Serbian land* was equated with the territory governed by Prince Lazar and his son, Prince and Despot Stefan. The lands acquired by the Serbian despots in Zeta and Bosnia were not perceived as *Serbian land*.

Keywords: Serbian land, borders, fatherland, Greek land, biographies, Byzantine Empire, territory