

ties with feudal relations and the ambition to show heroes as descendants of more famous heroes or rulers does not prevent a belief in the truthfulness of genealogical legends in general and their ability to serve as credible knowledge about the past as an “oral popular chronicle”.

Evidence of oral tradition and performance in medieval Serbia

From the beginnings to the end of the Serbian medieval state (4th–14th centuries)

Specific historical, social and cultural development in Serbia brought about some particular characteristics in the development of oral and written literature. The oldest testimony about the oral tradition originates from the common

³¹ In Serbian tradition Janos Hunyady, governor of Hungary and father of King Matthias I Corvinus (1400–1456), is known as Ugrin Yanko Voyvoda or Sibirjanin Janko.

³² Despot Stefan Lazarević (1402–1427) ruled after his father, Prince Lazar (1371–1389). After the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, in which Lazar was killed, Stefan accepted vassal obligations to Sultan Bayezid I Yildirim (the “Thunderbolt”, 1389–1402, son of Murad I), while managing to remain partly autonomous. In 1414–1427 Janos Hunyady was in the service of Despot Stefan, possibly in the fortress Bešće.

³³ Despot Stefan died young and did not leave any children to succeed his throne. In spite of the great glory that he had won in many wars, he was linked to the motif of the uselessness of the struggle against the Turks. It is said that Stefan expelled the Turks down to the sea, and then he threw mace into the sea and said: “When this mace comes out of the sea, then Turks will return here”. But the mace came to the surface straight away, confirming God’s will that Turks would take over the kingdom because of Christian sins.

³⁴ Zmaj Despot Vuk or Zmajognjeni Vuk (“The Dragon Fire Wolf”) is the epic name of Vuk Grgurević (c. 1439–1485), grandson of Despot Đurađ Branković and Serbian Despot in Hungary 1465–1485, cf. JAKOBSON & RUŽIČIĆ 1950.

Slavic period (fourth to seventh centuries).³⁵ Having settled in the Balkans in the seventh century on the territory that was under Byzantine administration, Slavs became part of a rich legacy of Mediterranean Greco-Roman civilisation. The shift from oral into written forms of communication may be observed from the ninth century, which was marked by the Christianisation of Slavs (867–874), the mission of the Slavic educators Cyril and Methodios, and the creation of the first alphabets (Glagolitic and Cyrillic). Parallel to the expansion of Christianity and literacy, there are testimonies about the use of the musical instrument *gusle*³⁶ that speak about the condemnation of the pagan songs of the common people. In the twelfth century, an anonymous Presbyter from Dioclea wrote a pseudo-historical *Chronicle* based on oral and written sources, indirectly including folk motifs and narrative patterns.³⁷

The Serbian prince Stefan Nemanja founded the independent state Rascia,³⁸ and his son Rastko – St Sava, the first archbishop (c. 1175–1200) – founded the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as its literature. The Nemanjić dynasty³⁹ ruled until 1371 and its legitimacy and spiritual strength endured, spreading out long after the fall of the Serbian medieval state in 1459. Nemanja's second son, Stefan Prvovenčani (Stefan the First Crowned King) received the royal crown from the Pope in 1217. With these two of Nemanja's sons the original national literature actually began. The transplantation of Byzantine inheritance into medieval Serbian literature has contributed to its inclusion into the world cultural heritage. On the other hand, since medieval Serbian literature arose from an Old Slavic literary tradition, it entered *Slavia Orthodoxa*, the Russian-Bulgarian-Serbian cultural and historical area integrated with the tradition of Old Slavic language and Orthodoxy.⁴⁰

³⁵ In the fourth century Wulfila in his translation of the Bible uses the Slavic loan word *plinsjan* 'to dance'. In the sixth century Procopius from Caesarea mentions that Greeks attacked the Slavs who fell asleep exhausted by singing on the feast. In the seventh century Byzantine historian Teophylactos Simokata tells about an event in 592, when Byzantines caught three men on the Propontidian Coast who had *zither* (which could be *gusle*) instead of weapons. They introduced themselves as Slavs and stated that they, as well as their compatriots, would rather sing than go to war.

³⁶ *Gusle* can be described as a "simple one-stringed fiddle with deeply rounded body, held upright on the knees when played upon; they were chanted by the *guslari*, the national bards", SUBOTIĆ 1932, 4. However, the *gusle* is not essential equipment for the Serbian bard because he can sing without any instrument or simply narrate the song.

³⁷ Dioclea is the Latin equivalent for Duklja, which was an independent kingdom in the territory of present-day Montenegro; see the extract in MATEJIĆ & MILIVOJEVIĆ 1978, 27–32.

³⁸ Rascia (Raška) is the name of medieval Serbia in the period of the first *zhoupan*s. It was made after the city of Ras, the capital of Rascia (in present south-west Serbia).

³⁹ There were ten members of the Nemanjić dynasty on the Serbian throne: "magni iupanus" i.e. Great *Zhoupan* Stefan Nemanja (1168–1196), Stefan the First Crowned (1196–1228), Stefan Radoslav (1228–1234), Stefan Vladislav (1234–1243), Stefan Uroš I (1243–1265), Stefan Dragutin (1265–1282), Stefan Uroš II Milutin (1282–1321), Stefan Uroš III Decanski (1321–1331); Emperors Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (1331–1355) and Stefan Uroš V (1355–1371). In turbulent times, after the death of Emperor Dušan, other rulers emerged: King Vukašin Mrnjavcević (1365–1371), his son Marko (1371–1395), i.e. Marko Kraljević "son of the king", the national hero who rose above national borders and became the epic hero of all Balkan peoples, and Tvrtko I (1377–1391), Prince Lazar (1371–1389), Despot Stefan Lazarević (1402–1427) and Despot Đurađ Branković (1429–1456).

⁴⁰ PICCHIO 1963; 1973.

Parallel to the development of medieval Serbian literature, in the early thirteenth century there are testimonies of an intense presence of orality in all social classes. In the introductory note to his translation of the Psalter from Greek into Old Serbian, St Sava requested that the monks sing the integral text of Psalms for 24 hours, five days a week. Teodosije, hagiographer of Stefan the First Crowned, mentioned that the king used to sit at the head of the table, sing during the dinner and entertain nobles and landed gentry, accompanied by drums and *gusle*. In the thirteenth century, there are records of professional singers, musicians and artists who travelled and entertained those who could afford it. In the early fourteenth century, the Byzantine historian Nikephoras Gregoras (1295–1359) observed on his journey through Serbia the sad monotony of melodies sung by soldiers in his escort, but also their singing and dancing in a special round dance, *kolo*, that is preserved up to the present day.

During the existence of the Serbian medieval state, and even when it began to collapse after the battles against the Turks on the river Marica in 1371 and on the Kosovo field in 1389, oral and written literature permeated one another constantly. Despite the invasion of the Turks, Đurađ Crnojević, ruler of Zeta (present Montenegro), established the first printing shop in the South Slavic lands at Cetinje that printed four liturgical books in the period between 1493 and 1496. In the first half of the sixteenth century there were printing shops in Venice (Božidar Vuković, 1519), at Gorazde (Đurađ and Teodor Ljubavić), in the monasteries of Rujno, Gračanica and Mileševa, and in Belgrade (1552), and production was dedicated exclusively to the normal performance of the rite.⁴¹ The influence of the printed book would intensify in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Parallel to the rise of printing technology, the earliest record of oral poetry is noted in 1497. The text of the poem and a description of its performance were presented by the Italian court poet Rogeri de Pacienza di Nardo. On June 1, 1497, the refugees from Serbia who settled in the village of Gioia del Colle near Bari on the southern Italian part of the Adriatic coast, sang and danced in *kolo* in honour of the Queen of Naples, Isabella del Balzo, and her retinue. The song was performed by some thirty Slavs, men, women and children. The names of the singers that Pacienza fortunately noted are common Serbian names. Analysis of the theme (an historical event), similar epic variants and names of the singers leaves no doubt that the song was brought over from the state of Despot Đurađ Branković. The performance was described in detail: adults and children were leaping about and jumping “like goats” and singing at the same time. Since Pacienza did not understand the language of the singers, he recorded the text he had heard or, perhaps, he was given the text after the performance. This text was incorporated in the poem *Balzino*, and reconstructed in the following way:

An eagle flew in a circle over Smederevo city.
No one desired to speak to it,

⁴¹ SUBOTIN-GOLUBVIĆ 1999, 282.

Only Yanko voyvoda spoke from the prison:
 I pray thee, eagle, descend a little lower,
 So that I may talk to thee: I take thee as blood brother,
 Get thee to the gentry of Smederevo and ask them to beseech
 The glorious Despot to set me free from Smederevo prison;
 And if God aids me and the glorious Despot sets me free
 From Smederevo prison, I shall feed thee
 Crimson Turkish blood, white knightly flesh.⁴²

The song refers to the short confinement of Janos Hunyady by the Serbian Despot Đurađ Branković that took place in the autumn of 1448. After his army was fully defeated in the so-called second Battle of Kosovo on 17–19 September, Hunyady retreated secretly from the battlefield, passing through the Serbian territory. Nevertheless, he was recognised and arrested. The Despot kept Hunyady imprisoned for less than a month in order to obtain war reparation since the united Christian troops had ridden through Serbia towards Kosovo as through a hostile country.

Artistically perfect, the ten recorded lines testify to a completely formed poetic language, motif and style register. The subject of the poem is the widespread motif of a hero who tries to escape from detention and seeks help. On an ideological and symbolical level, the opposition is formed between the enslaved captive and the free eagle, which is also an emblem of both the Serbian medieval state and Byzantium.⁴³ The short chronological distance between the actual event (1448) and the performance (1497) suggests that the principle of creating epic songs was contemporary, that is that epic songs on historical events were sung relatively soon after the occasion that inspired them.

Later evidence of the continuity of oral tradition

Since the end of the fifteenth century, the Serbs have migrated widely carrying on their tradition to the north and east towards Hungary and Romania, and

⁴² Some changes were made in D. Bynum's original translation; in line 1: "An eagle circled over Smederevo city"; line 3: "Save only Yanko, leader of troops, who spoke to it from (where he lay in) prison"; line 5: "I have thee (as my) brother"; lines 6–7: "Get thee to the noble folk of Smederevo, let them beseech / The famous Despot to set me free from Smederevo prison"; line 10: "Crimson