A broad research field such as that offered by the issue of royal sanctity may be approached in a number of ways. Without losing sight of different aspects of royal cults and their place in medieval piety, we have chosen to focus on the political role of a particular cult, that of the royal martyr. The holy king cult to which, in a broader sense, that of regnans-martyr also belongs, proves to be a European-wide phenomenon. Reflecting both ideological continuity and change, it varies revealingly with the epoch and cultural environment of the protagonists involved.

Seeking to define the type with more precision, modern scholarship has looked at the personalities of rulers, the realia associated with their reigns, and the very acts of martyrdom. Hagiographic portrayal of a ruler and of the style of his rule is based on standardized imagery, that is, on the principles of ideal kingship found in Christian moralizing literature such as Pseudo-Cyprian’s treatise and mirrors of kings, a type of writing increasingly popular from the ninth century on. This literature took shape under the powerful influence of the monastic ideal, which profoundly marks the typical portrait of a holy king. Almost as a rule, the hero of a hagiographic narrative is characterized by traditional virtutes: noble descent and strict Christian upbringing, a proclivity for asceticism, Davidic humilitas, generosity towards the poor, protection for the weak and the sick, the gift of

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1 The phenomenon of royal saints has been much written about. G. Klaniczay, Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses. Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe (Cambridge, 2000), offers a very good and detailed overview of the ample relevant literature on the subject.

teaching showing the true path to salvation, temperance in every way, and exceptional pietas. It is this piety that leads the ruler to choose the monastic way of life or practise ascetic discipline. A distinctive group of royal martyrs are those who suffered pro patria et gente propria. Notwithstanding this early and very old function of kingship, which finds expression in early ruler cults, the royal martyr primarily is a favourite with the Church and his devotion is expressed in erecting churches, giving donations to monasteries and protecting the clergy. His concern for justice ensures perfect peace, harmony and quietness, the ideals of God’s kingdom on earth. Since such conduct confers certain clerical functions upon his kingship, early types of holy kings may be rightly classified as conform to the rex-sacerdos pattern.

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In that respect, especially important for the development of the holy king concept with the Serbs appears to be the early period of Serbian sovereignty, initially in Zeta, and subsequently in Raška under Stefan Nemanja and his descendants. We shall try to show that Serbian societies, their many distinct features notwithstanding, sought to build the cults of their own holy kings in much the same way as most of Europe. The eleventh century of Serbian sovereignty finds expression in early ruler cults, which finds expression in erecting churches, giving donations to monasteries and protecting the clergy. His concern for justice ensures perfect peace, harmony and quietness, the ideals of God’s kingdom on earth. Since such conduct confers certain clerical functions upon his kingship, early types of holy kings may be rightly classified as conform to the rex-sacerdos pattern.

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S. Marjanović-Dušanić, Patterns of Martyrial Sanctity

century proves to be “formative” in that respect. It was then that the earliest
cult of a holy ruler was shaped, that of Jovan Vladimir of Zeta. Despite
a significant ideological gap between the need of the emerging European
nations to ensure their place in sacred history by elevating a national ruler
to the rank of saint and the situation in Constantinople, certain traditions,
central to understanding the ways in which the holy king cult was designed
and put into practice with the Serbs, were under a tremendous influence of
the ideologically prestigious empire on the Bosporus.

It cannot be a coincidence, then, that it is in the eleventh century that
new patterns of the ruler’s image rise to prominence. As shown by well-
studied Byzantine examples, the link between the cult of saints and authority
becomes obvious, and publicly proclaimed in contemporary hagiography.7
We can observe holy men’s increasing repute and importance, their way
up on the social ladder, the influence they begin to exert in the field of
active politics.8 Holy men act as spiritual fathers of the leading figures of
the secular hierarchy, and their prophetic visions and advice have an effect
on the actions of the political elite. The popularity of a monastic vocation in
the Eastern Christian world leads to the monastic ideal being embraced by
representatives of the highest political circles as early as the tenth century,
and it even leaves its mark on the development of the emperor cult.9

The said model undoubtedly influenced the cult of emperor Nikephoros
II Phokas (963–969), increasingly popular in the Slavic world from the
thirteenth century.10 Owing mostly to the widely-read “Eulogy on emperor
Nikephoros II Phokas and his spouse Theophano”,11 the emperor’s cult
becomes the preferred prototype of the ruler-monk. Contemporary western
Lives of martyred rulers meeting their end while praying, at the church
door, or performing ascetical practices as emperor Phokas did by sleeping

7 For Byzantine examples, see the exceptionally useful volume The Byzantine Saint: Uni-
versity of Birmingham Fourteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, ed. S. Hackel
(Birmingham, 1981), and therein, esp. E. Patlagean, “Sainteté et Pouvoir”, 95–97; and R.
Morris, “The Political Saint of the Eleventh Century”, 43–50. The elevation to sanctity
of highest-ranking members of the secular and church hierarchies in Byzantium is ob-
servable in the thirteenth century as well; see, in the same volume, R. Macrides, “Saints

8 On the concept of the holy man, see A. Cameron, “On defining the holy men” in The
Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Essays on the Contribution of Peter

9 As shown by the research of P. Magdalino, “The Byzantine Holy Man in the Twelfth
Century”, in Byzantine Saint, 51–66.


II Phocas et de son épouse Théophano (Thessaloniki, 1976).
on jagged stones, as a rule contrast the hero of the Life with his murderer who profits from the crime and takes power. A well-liked *topos* in such texts is the murderer’s repentance and his assumption of the leading role in the ensuing process of canonization. In the abovementioned Byzantine text, the pattern is applicable to John Tzimiskes, who subsequently also receives a cult, cultivated especially on Mount Athos along with that of Nikephoros Phokas. In the eleventh century Phokas receives an office, read on 11 December, the day of his death, honouring him as a martyr, an ascetic, and the bringer of victory spreading the glory of the Romaion arms. Relevant to the shaping of the emperor’s cultic image was the fact that the monk Athanasios acted as his spiritual father. An emphasis on this new spiritual lineage and the ascetical tradition embraced by Phokas accommodate the celebration of the emperor’s sanctity to the frame of current piety and popularity of the cult of ascetics and martyrs. Subsequent Serbian hagiography and especially the fashioning of the popular ruler-monk pattern undoubtedly drew upon the related literary genre cultivated in the Byzantine cultural orbit. It cannot be an accident that the popularity of the *Eulogy* and *Office* to the emperor, composed at the Great Lavra and honouring him as an ascetically inclined ruler close to the Athonite monastic circles, coincides with the growing popularity of royal monkhood which from the time of Manuel Komnenos becomes an accepted model in Nemanjić Serbia.

During the eleventh century, cults of royal martyrs arise across the Slavic world, receiving a most enthusiastic response connected with the spread of the martyrial and monastic ideals in Byzantium. Careful comparative analysis of the eleventh-century royal martyrs’ cults reveals significant similarities in the manner of shaping the contemporary cults of

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St Vaclav, Sts Boris and Gleb, and St Jovan Vladimir, knez of Zeta. The cult of St Jovan Vladimir is the earliest royal saint’s cult with the Serbs, and it is rightfully set apart from the ideologically consistent whole encompassing the subsequent cults of the Nemanjić rulers. The Life of Jovan Vladimir written shortly after his heinous murder in 1016 is now lost. The surviving version, known as the “Legend of Jovan and Kosara”, is incorporated into the twelfth-century Latin chronicle The Annals of a Priest of Dioclea. The writer of Vladimir’s original Life, or the anonymous priest of Bar who composed the chronicle, offers a standard description of the saint’s image conforming to the example set by Christ in all of its major points. Although the act of ultimate sacrifice is the main requirement for martyrdom, the Lives of royal martyrs as a rule “introduce” the reader, or the listener, to their prospective sanctity. The Life of Jovan Vladimir also makes use of well-proven mechanisms based on recognizable topoi. They begin by describing the hero as a child “endowed with all manner of skills and holiness”, on whom miraculous signs are manifested. The king is described as a “holy man” and, as such, he refuses to confront the enemy directly, but “withdraws humbly” to the hill of Oblik before Samuil’s attack. Even then, besieged on Oblik, the king begins to work miracles (the miracle with a snake). This type of miracles, “performed during lifetime”, falls among the expected topoi when it comes to the “holy man’s” attributes; obviously familiar with the rules of the genre, the writer knowingly builds up the image of a future martyr. Possibly as a result of subsequent interpolations into the original text of the Life, there are surrounding this miracle references to contemporary legends about how Vladimir saved his people with his prayer which God heard and granted. As there is no martyrdom without sacrifice, and no

17 “The child Vladimir, having ascended to the throne, was growing up endowed with all manner of skills and holiness”, *ibid.*, 125.
18 “The king, who was a holy man, humbly withdrew with his men and ascended to the hill named Oblik”, *ibid.*, 125.
19 For a detailed account of the power of working miracles during lifetime as an important attribute of “holy men”, see P. Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity”, in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, (Berkeley–Los Angeles, 1982), 103-152.
20 Legend has it that even at the time the chronicle was written “indeed, even today, if a man or an animal gets bitten by a snake on that hill, both the man and the animal come
sacrifice without betrayal, following this biblical pattern, the traitor was found in the figure of the local lord who denounced Vladimir to the tsar; he is explicitly described as being “like the traitor Judas”. Bidding farewell to his people, the king proclaims himself a good shepherd giving up his soul for his flock. “So my brethren, I would rather give my soul for you all and willingly let my body be mutilated or killed than let you be imperilled by famine or sword.” Quite in the spirit of contemporary Lives of martyred rulers, emphasis is not only on making a sacrifice for the people, but also on willingly accepting the sacrifice and consciously choosing the death of a martyr. But Vladimir was not to suffer death immediately; he was shackled and thrown into the imperial dungeon. Even in those conditions, he exercises the exemplary Christian virtues, fasting and praying day and night. Unsurprisingly, a divine messenger appears to him. God’s angel announces the course of future events and their fortunate outcome, namely that he is to earn the Kingdom of God and be rewarded with the unwithering wreath of eternal life.

In the cultic veneration of the royal saints of the martyr type, the dramatic climax of the hagiographic narrative is their passive acceptance of a violent death. The underlying idea of this hagiographic pattern is the saint’s identification with Christ or the repetition of the sacrifice of Christ, and an identical *imitatio* consistently recurs in the accounts of their style of ruling and catalogue of virtues. Not at all infrequently, even the list of posthumous miracles includes some that in fact are recognizable New Testament motifs.

The scheme of the hagiographic narrative about St Jovan Vladimir shows much resemblance to the contemporary biographies of martyr-saints. At emotional level, the reader’s compassion elicited by Gleb’s words, “This is not a murder, this is the felling of a young forest,” finds its counterpart in the romantic background against which unfolds the love story of prince Vladimir and his rescuer princess Kosara. The description of their marital love is carefully devised: “And thus king Vladimir lived with his wife Kosara in absolute holiness and chastity, loving and serving God out alive and unharmed. On that hill, ever since the day the blessed Vladimir prayed till this day, snakes seem to be venomless”, *Ljetopis*, 125.

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day and night." The king’s virtuousness, a common motif in the accounts of a prospective saint’s reign, also reveals itself in his perfect rule over his people, consistent with David’s psalm about the fear of God as the beginning of all wisdom. This is not only the wisdom of a monk, but indeed of a statesman. In the twelfth century, when the *Annals of a Priest of Dioclea* was composed, the image of a martyr-ruler gradually becomes accommodated to the then popular chivalrous ideal. In the text itself this process is observable in the description of the late ruler as an avenger garbed in knightly armour. Instead of a knight, it is God’s angel that delivers coup de grace to the enemy, whereby the saint’s murderous image becomes sublimated, which is a well-known hagiographic motif. Typical of the eleventh century in all of its details, and comparable with similar cults from the Slavic world, the cult of this royal saint undergoes a change in the twelfth century as regards the image of the exemplary ruler. The martyrial cults of holy kings emerge in medieval Serbia only in the fifteenth century, under the influence of completely different motives. They become fitted into a changed cultic framework and bear little resemblance to the eleventh-century cults of martyrs.

The cults of national royal saints associate domestic dynasties with the Old Testament-based traditions of God-chosenness, which play a central role in the processes of securing political legitimation for ruling houses. At the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we can see both the national and universal relics being used for raising an awareness of chosenness, observable in expanding the sacred realm as the fatherland’s prayerful shield. In that sense, all-Christian relics, especially those of Constantinopolitan provenance, become integrated into domestic traditions. Such processes are widely observable in the Byzantine commonwealth: in shaping the concept of the capital city; in the cults of patron saints adopted; in a changed piety the public display of which is very well documented in texts created for the

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56 For the Serbian example, see Marjanović-Dušanić, *L’Idéologie*, 60 and passim.


purposes of ephemeral spectacles;\textsuperscript{30} and especially in an insistence on the concept of a polysemic \textit{translatio} recognizable as central both in the political and in the religious shaping of a new world. This concept of “translation”, variedly viewed, and distributed over a vast area from Venice to Moscow, is expressed in the translation of both the sacral essence and of its various manifestations. It is observable in the widespread practice of translating relics – ranging from the relics of patron saints of cities to \textit{palladia} of states, and from constructing new capital cities to translating the idea of a New Jerusalem\textsuperscript{31} and a New Constantinople,\textsuperscript{32} proper to the Slavic inheritors of Romaion Orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{33}

It is against this historical background that in the Serbian society of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries new cults of royal saints emerge and become included into martyrologies as the then prevailing literary genre. The most interesting issue here is the manner of creating the holy kings’ \textit{memoria} in conformity with the notion of cult proper to the late medieval sensibility.\textsuperscript{34} Expressive of the interests of the environment that is creating the cult, the carefully constructed \textit{memoria} reflects most of all a coupling of the highest church hierarchy and political authority. In the case of a particularly popular cult of a martyr saint, prince Lazar


\textsuperscript{31} Claims to the role of a New Jerusalem were laid, apart from Moscow, by Tirnovo and Preslav or Prague and Aachen. On Kiev seen as the second Jerusalem, see the interesting recent study by V. Richka, \textit{Kiiv – Drugi Yerusalim} (Kiev, 2005), 95-96.


\textsuperscript{33} Telling are the well-studied examples of the \textit{translatio Hierosolymi} idea related to Tirnovo and Moscow, two capitals shaped on the model of Constantinople. Cf. V. Tăpko-

– celebrated sufferer of the Battle of Kosovo – the *memoria* draws upon two crucial points: the violent death of the hero murdered after the battle, and the halo of martyrdom acquired by a death suffered in defence of the fatherland against the infidel; both elements derive from the practice of emulating Christ, so important in founding a saintly cult. Another significant phase in the veneration of saints involves manifestations of miracle. A change, both in structure and in manners of expanding the area envisaged for miracles, is observable in a changed model of sanctity. An integral and essential component of the medieval mentality is the fundamental belief in the omnipresence of the supernatural and its continual intervention in the world of the living. Thus miracles are the most important manifestation whereby a close connection between the earthly and the heavenly comes to be defined. Devotional compositions written for the intended founding of his cult associate his posthumous *miracula* with instances of healing, and with his role as his successors’ intercessor before the heavenly assembly of martyr saints coming to aid and ensuring victory in the field of battle. The prince’s hagiographers and writers of offices insist on the martyr’s crown that his death, and especially his decapitation, earned him. His powers as a saint are expected in prayers.

Setting up the new saint’s *memoriae* also involves creating an appropriate sacral space essential to the cult. Not only a matter of a space in the church, it is a three-layer phenomenon comprising a particular way of marking the place of death, a carefully designed funerary whole centred on the original grave, the translation and deposition of the body in another grave, and, finally, the composition of eulogies outlining the main features or type of the sanctity in the making. This drift away from the previous martyr-ruler patterns in Serbian tradition has its reasons, and is basically a result of the establishment of a new pattern. The new cult does not fall within the familial or dynastic type of sanctity, because it is not intended as a source of a new holy dynasty. What Lazar acquires through his martyrdom is personal sanctity. It is to do with the legitimation of his successors and their consolidation in power. Prince Lazar’s grave, in his foundation at

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37 Relevant sources for this issue have been published in Vol. 3 of *Stara srpska književnost* [Old Serbian Literature] (Novi Sad–Belgrade, 1970): Povesno slovo o knezu Lazaru (p. 118); Pohvala knezu Lazaru od monahinje Jefimije (p. 126).
Ravanica, thus becomes a “holy place”, a sacral space of the highest order where an unrepeatable act of martyrdom is commemorated.\(^{13}\)

The new holy ruler type takes on a well-defined martyrial character. Into that mould, shaped for the cult of prince Lazar, is fitted the newly-established cult of Stefan of Dečani (\textit{Stefan Dečanski}), initiated by the monastic community of Dečani and its hegumen Gregory Tsamblak. Tsamblak wrote the king’s Life after 1402, the year he had arrived in despot Stefan’s Serbia from Moldavia and become hegumen of the monastery of Dečani (until 1414, when he was appointed metropolitan of Kiev).\(^{14}\) Given that by the time Tsamblak accessed to the hegumen’s throne the relics of Stefan of Dečani deposited in his foundation had become the centre of a cult for which the existing “dynastic” Life from Danilo’s Collection was not fully appropriate, Gregory wrote the necessary liturgical compositions, above all a new Life and an office eulogizing a martyr ruler. Students of Old Serbian literature have long ago observed the unity, in terms of literary fashioning and internal cohesion, of the Kosovo writings and the contemporary compositions written for the purpose of two new cults, those of the holy prince Lazar and the holy king Stefan of Dečani. The view that it is the same martyriological inspiration of Serbian post-Kosovo literature resulting in the historical and spiritual motivation for the simultaneous cultivation of both cults\(^{15}\) should be fitted into the bigger picture of current “historiographic” trends, into the time of the first genealogies, precursors of historical genealogies,\(^{16}\) or the first Serbian annals – \textit{skazaniye} – distinguished by their chronographic style.\(^{17}\)

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the cult of royal martyrs in medieval Serbia assumes features found in the hagiography of the Slavic world. While arising under the influence of similar developments in Byzantine hagiography, they form part of broader processes of forming sacral kingship, which in the underlying ruler cult requires the ruler’s

\(^{13}\) On the prince’s tomb at the monastery of Ravanica, see D. Popović, \textit{Srpski vladarski grob u srednjem veku} (The Royal Tomb in Medieval Serbia) (Belgrade, 1992), 121-127.


\(^{15}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 207.

\(^{16}\) The short text of the first Serbian genealogy appeared in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, between 1374 and 1377. Devoted to the ancestral trees of the Serbian rulers, it seems to have been written for the purpose of legitimizing king Tvrtko’s claims to the legacy of the Serbian kings.

\(^{17}\) Earliest Serbian annals appear in the mid-fourteenth century as Serbian versions of the then translated Byzantine chronicles. On the genre, see Bogdanović, \textit{Istorija}, 210-211.
identification with Christ on several levels, including the level of martyrdom and sacrifice bringing about collective salvation. During the late medieval period, under the impact of historical circumstances turning Serbia into a shield against the infidel, this ideal gradually undergoes transformation into an elaborate programme of the sainted martyr king, whose most important function other than healing is to assure his successors victory in battle. The ideal of the martyr ruler thus conforms to the chivalrous inspiration of ideal kingship in general, but shows distinguishing features connected with the emergence in Serbia of new historiographic genres – genealogies and annals as specific historical chronicles of the early modern age.

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UDC 929.731.271.2-34-36/(497.11)"653"