

## THEODOSIUS, A SERBIAN SCRIBE OF THE LAST DECADES OF THE 13th CENTURY TO THE FIRST THIRD OF THE 14th CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

---

### **Abstract:**

The article describes the literary activities of the Serbian scribe Theodosius who lived in the last decades of the 13th century — the first third of the 14th century. He penned hagiographic writings, lives, praises, services and canons in honor of Serbian saints. At the end of the 14th century, while in the Athonite Hilandar monastery, he created the lengthy Life of the Holy Archbishop Sava of Serbia. Based on the facts of the life of this saint, written earlier by his predecessor Domentian, the scribe created an independent work, characterized by his literary style and the depth of psychological analysis.

### **Keywords:**

Hagiography, Athos, the Serbian scribe Theodosius, Longer Life of Archbishop of Serbia St Sava, Psychology of storytelling.

**Аннотация:** Л.К. ГАВРЮШИНА. «ФЕОДОСИЙ, СЕРБСКИЙ КНИЖНИК ПОСЛЕДНИХ ДЕСЯТИЛЕТИЙ XIII — ПЕРВОЙ ТРЕТИ XIV в.»,

В статье рассказывается о литературной деятельности жившего в последних десятилетиях XIII — первой трети XIV в. сербского книжника Феодосия. Его перу принадлежат агиографические сочинения, жития, похвалы, службы и каноны в честь сербских святых. В конце XIII в. он, находясь в афонском Хиландарском монастыре, создал пространное житие святого архиепископа Саввы Сербского. Опираясь на фактографическую основу жития этого святого, написанного ранее его предшественником Доментианом, книжник создал самостоятельное произведение, отличающееся беллетристичностью и глубиной психологических характеристик.

### **Ключевые слова:**

Агиография, Афон, сербский книжник Феодосий, пространное житие св. Саввы архиепископа Сербского, беллетристичность и психологизм повествования.

Theodosius is a Serbian scribe, writer, junior contemporary of Domentian. Information about him as an individual is extremely limited. Most scholars assume that he was a hieromonk and an elder of the Hilandar Monastery in Mt. Athos, whose name was mentioned in the archives of 1302–27. It was also suggested that he was the spiritual father of the Serbian King Milutin (1282–1321).

Theodosius wrote hagiographic works: lives of the saints, praise, services and canons in honor of Serbian saints. The scribe's most famous work is the Life

---

<sup>1</sup> The work was carried out with the financial support of the RFBR (grant № 18–512–76004).



of the first national Archbishop St Sava of Serbia (1219–35), which was apparently written by him at the end of the 13th century at the Hilandar Monastery. Theodosius borrowed the actual outline of the work from the life of the saint in the edition by Domentian, but abandoned the complex symbolism and theological constructions of his predecessor.

Aside from Domentian's writing, the scribe used Byzantine archetypes. He borrowed the introduction to the work from the *Life of Sava the Sanctified*, written by the sixth century Byzantine hagiographer Cyril of Scythopolis, and there are parallels in some portions of the main part of the memorial with the *Life of St Demetrios of Thessalonica*, who lived in the third and fourth centuries. Theodosius offered the reader his own vision of events and interpretation of St Sava's image. He sought to create the image of a true Christian ascetic who prevails over human delusions and transforms a "world" that has become estranged from God. The scribe was able to realize the value of the individual human person and the value of its unceasing striving for spiritual perfection. With respect to Sava's spiritual development, he dwells in detail on a turning point of the fate of his hero — his choice of life path. The hagiographer reveals in detail Rastko's conversation



*St Sava of Serbia, Tsar Constantine and Tsaritsa Helena,  
fresco at the monastery of Grachanitsa, c. 1338.*



(such was the ascetic's secular name) with a Russian monk who came from Athos. Unlike Domentian, who was very laconic in this episode, Theodosius shows how strongly impressed the young man was by the old man's tale of the lives of the venerable fathers who lived in the desert, surrounded by wilderness, as well as the maturity with which the young man had chosen to embark on a monastic path.

In Theodosius's narration, as noted by many researchers, one finds some unusual medieval hagiographical "fiction." It consists of the presence of "realistic" elements of the type of medieval "novel" in which the characters experience life crises. Speaking as a preacher, Theodosius, through the behavior of his characters, invites the reader to compare two systems of values: the devoted Saint Sava and the laity, who try to interpret the gospel commandments in ways that favor human passions and affections. In this regard, the behavior of the parents of the saint, the Great prince Stefan Nemanja (1113–99) and his wife Anna, who do not want to "release" their son to embark on the harsh path of a monastic life, is very revealing. In Theodosius's interpretation, Sava's father is a man whose soul is still so strongly attached to secular life and worldly ideas that it is difficult for him to grasp the meaning of his son's leaving them. This is why he seeks to oppose his offspring's decision by any means, and he sees God's providence in this. The description of the parents' heartache and despair upon learning of the sudden disappearance of their son who had gone hunting is very realistic. In fact, he had not gone to hunt but had fled to Athos.

The account is full of drama and of attempts to return Rastko to his parental home. A commander with "noble youths" is sent in pursuit of the young fugitive, who is overtaken when he is already on Athos. But Rastko managed to lull the vigilance of the voivode's men who were guarding him, to elude them and to persuade the monks to secretly tonsure him under the name of Sava. Voivodeship servants demanded that the monks give them Rastko, threatening them and resorting to beatings. And when the next morning he appeared before them, the monk Sava in monastic investments, instead of Rastko, they began to pour out their bitter feelings and resentment against him, considering themselves cruelly deceived. They wept for themselves too in fear of their master's wrath for not doing his bidding. In describing this scene, the hagiographer may have used folkloric sources and a folk song about Sava's departure to Athos.

Unlike Domentian, who saw God's hand in everything, Theodosius attaches great importance to the workings of the human soul, and acts as its expert. The scribe preaches religious truths by depicting the exploits of Sava against the backdrop of secular life. For this purpose, Theodosius shows the transformation of the inner world of the "reigning" holy father, Stefan Nemanja.

The son's deed has a strong impact on him: from despair and grief he gradually comes to the idea of renouncing power and earthly goods and moving to Athos to carry out feats with his son. A major role in his making such a decision is played by Sava's letter to him and his mother from the Holy Mountain, appealing to him to part with earthly goods and devote the rest of his life to serving



God. This edifying letter causes confusion in his parents' souls and admiration for their son's spiritual feat, whom they begin to praise as their intercessor and "spiritual father." After this letter, they no longer dream of their son's return, but only timidly ask him to visit his father's house, at least for a short time.

A peculiar dialogue between Stefan Nemanya and his relatives, noblemen and people at the council convened by him deserves attention. Stefan informs those present about his decision to leave them, and they beg him to stay, mourning the loss of their "father" and lord. Theodosius emphasizes that the main motive for Stefan's decision to become a monk and leave for Athos is his fatherly love for his son and desire to be with him. The scribe shows that his characters' behavior depends on external circumstances, and he reveals the psychological motivations for their actions. He is interested in the complexity of the problem of choice and the relationship of human and divine will in man's path to spiritual perfection. The tortuous nature of such a path, according to Theodosius, is also determined by the diversity of earthly reality itself. This complexity was not realized by Domentian, because he thought in terms of archetypical symbols and sculpted majestic figures of saints who were godlike in their feats.

Theodosius's descriptions of the wonders of St Sava's miracles are full of psychological details. They are very diverse — from the fermentation of milk through the saint's prayer to the killing of the wicked feudal Stresz by his prayer. The story of the death of this villain takes several pages to narrate. Escaping from the persecution of Bulgarian Tsar Boril, Stresz flees to Serbia and finds refuge at the court of Sava's brother, King Stefan the First Crowned (1217–28), but he repays his benefactor with dark ingratitude: he treacherously gathers an army and turns against Stefan, who, not wanting to shed blood, turns to Sava for spiritual help. But Stresz does not heed the saint's admonitions, and then, through his prayer, the wicked man is struck by an angel in a dream. The hagiographer borrowed the plot of this miracle from the *Life of St Demetrius of Thessalonica*, and it is relatively traditional; this part of the life of the saint is interesting, first of all, due to the "psychological portrait" of the villain. Stresz is incapable of spiritual change and repentance. Domentian sees in Stresz only the "son of the devil," but Theodosius seeks to show the depth of the feudal's moral decline and how he becomes "stone-hearted," losing the ability to repent and act mercifully. Power is to blame, for it has corrupted this wicked man and spawned in him monstrous arrogance and pride.

It is probable that Theodosius created his panegyric to Sts. Simeon and Sava at the same time, since it is often found together with it in Serbian and Russian lists of the memorial. This work was based on examples of the Byzantine genre of encomium. It reflects the author's desire to unite the cults of the two aforementioned patrons of Serbia.

Theodosius dedicated his second hagiographical work to Peter of Korish, a saint who labored in the vicinity of Prizren in the second half of the 13th century. He compiled it around 1310 on the basis of oral stories of the ascetic's students and local traditions about him. Theodosius personally visited the places



where Peter of Korish lived his life of ascetism and towards the end of his life recounted his impressions of what he had seen. This narrative is also full of drama, especially in the place where the scribe traces the saint's consistent rejection of all that binds him to the world — his birthplace, a comfortable home, and even his own sister, who for a time was his companion. The external conflict between the hero and the world develops into a dramatic confrontation between the monastic ideal and the earthly desire to sympathize with one's loved ones.

Theodosius significantly enriched and expanded not only the genre of Serbian hagiography, but also hymnography. Between 1307 and 1310 he wrote the service of St Simeon (the monastic name of Serbian Prince Stefan Nemanya), which superseded the service to the same saint compiled earlier by St Sava. The same thing happened with the service composed by him in honor of the first Serbian archbishop St Sava. It was created at about the same time and replaced all previous versions of the service to the saint compiled in the 13th century. Both services were written by Theodosius in accordance with the provisions of the Jerusalem Church Charter, to which the Serbian church began to transition in the beginning of the 14th century. Their compositions contain two original canons. In many troparia, two saints are often glorified at the same time — St Sava and his father, the monk Simeon the Myrrh-Streaming. Another service was composed by Theodosius in honor of Peter of Korish. It appeared at the same time as Theodosius's life of this ascetic. In addition, Theodosius compiled many canons: a Common Canon to Christ, saints Simeon and Sava, Common Canons to Simeon and Sava for eight voices with an acrostic, and a Common Canon to Simeon and Sava for four voices.

Theodosius's *Life of St Sava* had a significant impact on the development of ancient Russian hagiography. Its widespread use began on Russian soil from the first decades of the 14th century. Currently, there are about 100 copies of this document, stored in the largest book depositories of Russia, Ukraine and Lithuania. In 1545, the Russian scribe and monastery head Irodion Kochnev used his text in compiling the *Life of St Alexander of Svir'*. The Russian hagiographer borrowed from Theodosius extensive passages describing the childhood and youth of the ascetic, which later migrated to other lives written in the Russian North in the 16th – 17th centuries. In terms of influence, the short story about Rastko's flight to Athos, created in late 17th century Russian literature on the basis of Theodosius's work, is also interesting. The anonymous Russian scribe was attracted to this episode by the presence of elements of "fiction" in it: the entertaining presentation of the material, an abundance of dialogue and dramatic scenes. This story was in keeping with the tastes of Russian readers of that time. After reworking this episode, the Russian author presented the hagiographic hero as the beloved son of his parents, who suddenly lost hope not only for Rastko to marry, but also that he would become heir to the throne. The Serbian land in this story is referred to widowed.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Müller-Landau C.* Studien zum Stil der Sava-Vita Teodosijes. München, 1972.  
Srbljak. Službe. Kanoni. Akatisti. Belgrade, 1970. T. 1. S. 139–217; S. 219–93.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

1. The Hilandar monastery. Mount Athos, Greece.
2. A brief edition of the Life of St Sava of Serbia by Theodosius. St. Petersburg. RNL. Collection of N.P. Pogodin, a handwritten collection of mixed content, s. 138. 16th century.
3. The Flight of Rastko to Mount Athos, detail at the icon of St Sava and St Simeon of Serbia, the Monastery of Moracha, 1645.
4. Service of the St Sava, written by the Serbian scribe Theodosius. Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade, No. 26, s. 122a. 16th century.
5. St Sava of Serbia, Tsar Constantine and Tsaritsa Helena, fresco at the monastery of Grachanitsa, c. 1338.
6. Praise of Sts Simeon and Sava of Serbia. St. Petersburg, RNL. Cyrilo-Belozersk collection, No. 30/1269, the first third of the 16th century.
7. The death of Stresz through the prayer of St Sava of Serbia, detail from the icon of St Simeon and Sava, fresco at the monastery of Moracha, 1645.
8. Jesus Christ, St Simeon (Nemanya) and St Sava of Serbia. Colour Triodion, Mrkshina Church, 1566.