

HOLY ARCHBISHOP SAVA: THE EHLIGHTENER AND HEAVENLY PATRON OF SERBIA¹

Abstract:

The article discusses St Sava of Serbia (c. 1170–1235), the greatest figure in the history of religious and cultural life of the orthodox Slavs in the Balkans from the late 12th century to the first third of the 13th century. He was the creator and Archbishop of the autocephalous Serbian Church, the distributor among the Serbs of first codes of church and secular laws and the first known Serbian translator and writer. After his death, Sava was proclaimed a saint, became one of the main heroes of Serbian literature and folklore, and became honored as a heavenly defender of Serbia and protector of Serbian education.

Keywords:

Serbia, St Sava, autocephalous Serbian church, hagiography, first Serbian lives of saints, services and chants, spiritual relations between South and East Slavs.

Аннотация: И.И. Калиганов. «Просветитель и небесный защитник Сербии, св. архиепископ Савва».

В статье рассказывается о св. Савве Сербском (ок. 1169–1236) — крупнейшей фигуре в истории религиозной и культурной жизни православных славян на Балканах в конце XII — первой трети XIII в. Он являлся создателем и предстоятелем автокефальной Сербской церкви, первым распространителем среди сербов сводов церковных и светских законов, первым известным сербским переводчиком и писателем. После смерти Савва был провозглашен святым, сделался одним из главных героев сербской литературы и фольклора, стал почитаться как небесный защитник Сербии и пособник сербского образования.

Ключевые слова:

Сербия, св. Савва, появление самостоятельной Сербской церкви, начало сербской переводной и оригинальной литературы.

St Archbishop Sava was the leading figure in the history of the religious and cultural life of Orthodox Slavs in the Balkans from the late 12th century to the first third of the 13th century, the founder of the autocephalous Serbian church, its first archbishop, the first distributor of church and secular laws among the Serbs, the first famous Serbian translator and writer. He was canonized as a saint immediately after his death, was one of the main heroes of Serbian medieval literature and folklore, and was revered as the patron saint of education and the defender of Serbia.

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Rastko (such was the secular name of the future St Sava) was born into the family of the unifier of the Serbian lands, the Great Zhupan (Prince) Stefan Nemanya (1113–99). Just like his brothers Stefan and Vukan, he was destined for the typical life of the sons of a ruler: marriage and inheriting from the father's estate. However, at the age of 16, the book-loving and devout Rastko secretly fled to Mount Athos, where he took monastic vows under the name of Sava. There he settled for a long time in the monastery of Vatopedi, worked in several Athonite monasteries and set up a cell for two to three monks and in it the Church of Sava Sanctified. He translated from the Greek language for them and provided his own additions to the so-called *Karyes Tipicon* — a set of strict monastic rules for the Serbian inhabitants of this cell, which then became the basis for the provisions of monastic life in the monasteries of Serbia. With the generous donations of his father, Sava built three temples on Athos and residential buildings for monks and pilgrims. In 1197 his father voluntarily handed the throne over to his son, Stefan, took monastic vows under the name of Simeon, and retired to the “zaduzhbina”² he had built: the monastery of Studenitsa. A little later he came to Mount Athos at the invitation of Sava, after which a flood of donations poured into the Athos monasteries. For this, Sava was called the “second donator,” the first being the Byzantine Emperor. In 1197 the father and son of the Nemanich dynasty asked the Byzantine emperor, Alexis III Angel, to grant them the Hilandar monastery, which had been abandoned after a pirate attack, in order to rebuild it for Serbian monasticism. Later, around 1200, Sava translated for this monastery the Greek charter of the Constantinople monastery of the Virgin Mary Evergetissa, providing his translation with the necessary changes and additions. Thus his famous *Hilandar Tipicon* was born. After that time Hilandar became one of the main centers of spiritual life of medieval Serbia. On 13 February 1199, Sava's father died, and was almost immediately thereafter proclaimed a saint, becoming the first Serb elevated to the rank of sainthood. For his canonization, Sava wrote the Life and service of St Simeon, the first hagiographic and hymnographic memorial, laying the foundations of Serbian original literature.

In 1204 Sava was placed in the archimandrites, but he did not remain on Mt. Athos for a long time thereafter. In the same year, crusaders seized Constantinople (where they remained until 1261), and there was a real threat of the capture of Athos by the “Latins.” Additionally, his brothers Stefan and Vukan were engaged in an internecine struggle in Serbia. Therefore, in 1207 Sava left Athos together with the myrrh-flowing relics of his father, St Simeon, and moved to the Studenitsa monastery, becoming its abbot. A year later the saint created the *Studenitsa Tipicon*, based on his earlier translation of the Tipicon for the Hilandar monastery. Thanks to his moral authority, Sava was able to reconcile his brothers and peace in the country was restored, but the ascetic was very worried

² The monastery, which the Serbian rulers usually built as their own tomb in commemoration of their souls.

about the strengthening of the Latin influence in Serbia. The Latin Empire was established on a sizable part of the Byzantine possessions. His brother Stefan, the supreme ruler of Serbia, received the royal crown from the Pope and acknowledged himself to be a papal vassal.

Struggling with the strengthening of Latin influence, Sava re-crowned his brother Stefan as king, now in the Byzantine Orthodox rite, and he received the nickname First-Crowned. The ascetic began to consistently push for the creation of an independent Serbian church, and his diplomatic efforts were soon successful. In 1218, at the Council in Nicaea, the Serbian National Church was proclaimed an autocephalous archbishopric, and the next year Sava was elected its head. From his residence, the monastery of Zhicha, Sava sent his disciples to all of the Serbian borders, creating *ex cathedra* in them. Responding to the needs of the Serbian state and the church, Sava confirmed the foundations of church and secular laws in Serbia by translating and adapting the Byzantine *Nomocanon* (or “Book of the Helmsman”). In compiling this code around 1220, Sava involved Serbian and Russian Athos translators and used the already available Slavic translations of the *Nomocanon* (Cyril and Methodius from 9th century and Russian from the 11th century), various Byzantine editions and numerous later interpretations of its text.

In 1229–30 and 1234–35 Sava made pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and before the second trip he voluntarily handed over his throne to his disciple, Arseny. From Jerusalem the ascetic sent letters to the Studenitsa abbot, Spiridon, and thereby laid the foundations of Serbian epistolography, based on Byzantine traditions. While returning to his homeland from his second trip, Sava died in the Bulgarian capital of Veliko Tarnovo and was solemnly buried there. A year later Sava’s nephew, King Vladislav, transferred the relics of his uncle to the Serbian monastery of Milieshevo. There they became the object of worship for the Serbs, who flocked to them from all corners of their native lands for several centuries. The veneration of Sava as the defender of Serbia was especially strengthened after the conquest of the country by the Turks in the mid-15th century.

The fate of the works of Sava of Serbia was largely determined by their purpose. The *Karyes Tipicon* was created for a specific place, a monastic cell or a small monastery, and was therefore preserved in a single old copy during the lifetime of the ascetic (however, it was not written by him). This copy is stored in the library of the Hilandar monastery. As for the communal code of this monastery itself, it was distributed and preserved in several copies, including one dated no later than 1206 and located in the archive of Hilandar. Sava’s *Tipicon of Studenitsa* was addressed to the monastic fraternity and survived in only two copies from 1619 and 1760, stored in the Prague Folk Museum and the National and University Library of Zagreb. The ascetic’s *Nomocanon* gained wider fame in the Slavic world and has come down to us in a considerable number of Serbian copies dating from the 13th century to the 16th century, the earliest of which is Ilovitsky (1262). In the third decade of the 13th century, the translation of Sava’s *Nomo-*

canon came to Bulgaria, and from there forty years later to Russia, where it was called *Book of the Helmsman*. This church-legal collection was often copied in Russia between the 13th and the 17th century by local scribes, thereby creating several new editions. In the middle of the 17th century, Sava's *Book of the Helmsman* was published by the Moscow Printing House with many additions, after which the publication spread to the Balkans and influenced the development of Serbian church law up to and including in the 18th century.

St Sava was also the founder of Serbian hagiography and hymnography. He is the author of the two Lives of his father, St Simeon, and a service to the ascetic. He included the first short Life in the *Hilandar Tipicon*, relating the last days of the life and death of his parent, St Simeon. More interesting from a literary and historical point of view is the second of his Lives. It is more extensive and represents an introduction to the *Studenitsa Tipicon* to introduce the monastery brethren to the circumstances of the monastery's origins and clarify the significance of its existence. Sava compiled it based on Byzantine hagiographic traditions, often using elements of rhetoric, quotations from the Holy Scriptures and drawing parallels between the acts of St Simeon with the actions of illustrious biblical figures. In talking about the secular life of his hero, for the first time in Serbian literature Sava creates the image of the ideal ruler of the state and a true Christian. Stefan Nemanja was able to strengthen Serbian power, to regain all of the previously lost Serbian possessions, and to ensure the country's peace and prosperity throughout his 37-year reign. He was pious and godly, generously endowed the Church, honored the priests, founded four monasteries in Toplitsa, Ras and Studenitsa, was a source of hope for those who had lost it, advocated for widows and orphans, and provided for the wretched and poor. At the same time, he showed indifference to earthly wealth and power and possessed great humility: he voluntarily renounced his throne, gave his possessions to his sons, took monastic vows and became a schema monk. He gave up his soul to God on a bast mat, and insisted that he be brought a stone to place under his head instead of a pillow. Along with the traditional hagiographic topics in this monument of Serbian literature, there are many facts from the Serbs' ancient history that are not presented in other written sources.

The church service which was created by Sava on Mount Athos for the observance of St Simeon's feast day in the temples on February 13/26, is entirely traditional and follows the rules of this very conservative genre. Over the centuries, these rules provide for the use of approved poetic and singing patterns that were created by famous Byzantine hymnographers of the past. Sava chose the service of the Syrian ascetic of the fourth and fifth centuries, Simeon Stylites, as a model for himself, borrowing from it in some parts.

According to legend, a miraculous grapevine grew from St Simeon's empty grave on Athos, the fruits of which relieve infertility. Having created the Life and service of his father, Sava can be said to have, figuratively speaking, planted the "grapevine of the Nemaniches", first through his words and music, and then

through depiction of the grapevine in icons and frescoes by succeeding artists, giving it a three-level essence. For several centuries, artists wove the grapevine into images of the representatives of the Nemanich dynasty, who became the rulers of Serbia and the heads of the Serbian Church and were proclaimed saints after death. The representations of the grapevine, of course, grew in both words and music: the Nemaniches were made the heroes of Lives, services, and various kinds of church chants. Over time, the grapevine grew ever larger, extending its branches of the dynasties and clans of the Serbian rulers Lazareviches-Brankoviches and Yakshiches.

Immediately after his death, the archbishop Sava himself was proclaimed a saint and “woven” into the grapevine of the Nemaniches: in his honor local scribes began to compose Lives, praises, services, canons, troparia and stichera. In the 14th and 15th centuries, famous Serbian scribes such as the hieromonk Domentian, Theodosius Hilandarets, Archbishop Daniel II, Patriarch Daniel III, as well as less prominent anonymous authors wrote about him. The tradition was not interrupted even after 1594, when Pasha Sinan, as punishment for the uprising of Serbs against the Turks, ordered that the Serbian national shrine, St Sava’s relics, be delivered from Milieshevo for public burning on Vrchar hill near Belgrade. However, this act did not diminish the Serb’s veneration of their heavenly protector and patron. Many oral legends about St Sava, associated with his lifetime miracles, spiritual insight and movement on Serbian soil arose. The feeling of the invisible presence of St Sava became part of the Serbian national consciousness and the foundation of a phenomenon called “Svyatosavye.” In Serbia, ships, factories, firms, educational institutions and publishing houses are named after the ascetic. Built in our time on a Belgrade hill, the Cathedral of St Sava is the largest Orthodox church in the Balkans.

St Sava was revered not just in Serbia; between the 14th and 15th centuries his cult existed in Bulgaria and penetrated the Moscow state through Athos. The first information about the ascetic appeared on Russian soil as a result of the distribution of the Verse Prologue with a brief *Life of St Sava*. In the 15th century a service to the ascetic compiled by the scribe Theodosius appeared in Russia. With a list of sanctuaries associated with and named after St Sava, Russian monks would meet to read a manuscript collection by the famous scribe Euphrosyn from the second half of the 15th century, who worked in the Kirillo-Belozersk monastery. In some Russian copies of *Book of the Helmsman* one can find a brief *Life of St Sava*, probably created on Russian soil in the 1460s. The year 1517 can be considered a new milestone in the spread of the ascetic’s cult, when the Athos Elder Isaiah brought to Russia a collection with the *Life of St Sava* and general praise to him and St Simeon: works written by the same Theodosius. The veneration of Sava of Serbia on Russian soil increased in particular after 1550, when the Hilandar abbot, Paisius, brought an icon depicting Saints Simeon and Sava and Sava’s cross, which the ascetic wore before he was tonsured on Mount Athos, as a gift to Tsar Ivan the Terrible. It was also significant that Serbian blood flowed

in the veins of the Russian autocrat (his grandmother was the Serbian Anna of the Yaksheches family). In the 15th–17th centuries, many copies of the works of Theodosius existed in the Moscow state. Facts from his *Life of St Sava* were used by the compilers of the world-historical code: the *Russian Chronograph* of 1516–22. In the fourth decade of the same century, they entered the Nikon Chronicle, and through it into the famous Illustrated Chronicle of Ivan the Terrible of the 1560s–70s.

The great veneration of St Sava on Russian soil is evidenced by the creation by local masters of numerous murals, icons and miniatures with images of the ascetic. The oldest of them, dated 1564, is located on one of the pillars of the Archangel Cathedral of Moscow Kremlin: the tombs of the Russian Grand Princes and Tsars before Peter I. A little later the Moscow artists created miniatures for the Illustrated Chronicle of Ivan the Terrible associated with the iconography of St Sava of Serbia. In addition to Moscow, the icons of the Serbian ascetic were widely distributed in the north and west of the country: in Yaroslavl, Romanov, Vologda, the Pskov lands and other frontiers of the nascent Russian Empire. The veneration of Sava of Serbia has not waned in Russia to this day: every year on 12/25 January the name of this saint is glorified, and the church service dedicated to him is performed in the Orthodox monasteries and churches of the country.

Translated by the author

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