

GESTE OR JOVAN VLADIMIR'S BIOGRAPHY

UDC 821.163.41-94 St Jovan Vladimir

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Abstract. *The Chronicle of the Priest of Doclea included, among other things, the life of St Jovan Vladimir. The Chronicle itself indicates that there was a geste, a story of heroic deed of Jovan Vladimir, where the information about him was taken from. On the other hand, the writing style indicated a biography. The very part describing his life, in the literature, was called an epic, a deed, a myth, an oral legend or a novel. It was this sort of curiosity that led us to resolve whether it was a geste or biography. Literature prescribes which parts a biography has to have, so a piece of text talking about Jovan Vladimir was compared with the elements of a biography, and the following was found: nine of the elements are present in their totality, two in their summarized form while four are missing. Two of the missing four were not even significant enough to be included – one where the author of a biography was supposed to talk about himself in a humble way and another that was supposed to state the source of the information. The celebration of the saint's homeland is not given in its direct form, but the entire Chronicle could be taken as an honor to Doclea, i.e. his homeland. The only element which could not even be assumed to have existed is the question of Vladimir's name. On these grounds, therefore, we are of the opinion that there was a regular biography whose shortened version was included in the Chronicle. A scribe introduced it under the term geste, as his cult had more of a local character and the saint was not even canonized by either the Pope or the Patriarch. The fact that he occurs as a motif in literature indicates that there must have been some secular works about his.*

Key words: *St Jovan Vladimir, Doclea, biography, geste.*

In Serbian and once in Yugoslav historiography, for over one hundred years, there has been a polemic on whether the text about Jovan Vladimir is a history of heroic deeds, a *geste*, or a biography. Once again we point out that the text itself uses the term *geste* which the literature interprets as a folk epic, but also as acts, a legend, oral tradition or a novel (Djekic, 2013). An analysis of the text, however, showed that it was a cult text introduced in its shortened form into the Chronicle of the Priest of Doclea (Djekic, 2013).

So the question of what sort of cult text it was remains. The Divine Service¹, a canon² and a hymn contain little biographical information and is primarily of a liturgical character. As the part that talks about St Vladimir provides information about his life, the aforementioned type of cult texts should be rejected. Those could not have been either the acts, which in fact used to be a record from the trials and punishment of a saint, or the martyrologies, describing the torture and death of a saint (Trifunović, 1990: 47-50).

A eulogy, a written tribute has several possible forms. One contains: a country, a city or a nation that outlines its hero, his family, then his birth, his natural characteristics, upbringing, childhood, what sort of life he led, his deeds, his fate and parallels. The other has: an introduction, a subject, setting and comments on the saint's homeland, his parents, military service, persecutions, confession or avowal of his creed, dispute with his torturers, tortures, various prayers, execution and a miracle (Trifunović, 1990: 274-275).

In the relevant literature, it is considered only to be a hagiography. However, it has never been resolved whether it is a full hagiography or a synaxarium. The synaxaria first appear in Byzantium back in the early 11th century, and with the form of a short hagiography (Trifunović, 1990: 317-321) which did not include all the elements of a proper hagiography. It is the reason why we are first going to examine whether it is a proper hagiography. If it turns out that there are too few elements of a proper hagiography, then we should determine whether it is a synaxarium biography or a eulogy or the like.

Chrissant Lomparev established the constituent parts of a full hagiography. However, a pattern that is not characteristic for monks was chosen, as St Jovan Vladimir was not a monk, a hermit, but a ruler (Trifunović, 1990: 65-68). Making a comparison of the hagiography part with the Chronicle text could help us provide an answer for whether it is a proper hagiography (*Geste I* 2009: 124-139).

The first part of the biography is at the top, recording the day and month when the saint manifested himself (Trifunović, 1990: 65). The Chronicle states that he was beheaded and then manifested on 22 May (*Geste I* 2009: 136-137).

In the foreword, the author talks about himself and his education in humble way. Then follows the source of information for the text (Trifunović, 1990: 65). At the end of the account of Vladimir, the Chronicle says, "What kind and how many miracles God has granted us through his servant, blessed Vladimir, who wishes to learn about them, let them read this history", i.e. *librum gestorum*. This section does not state the source of the information the author of the text about St Jovan Vladimir used, but the source the author of the Chronicle used, so we cannot say that those are the elements of a hagiography (*Geste I* 2009: 122-135).³

The biography then talks about the saint's homeland in a praising manner (Trifunović, 1990: 65 – 66). The Chronicle says that Vladimir succeeded his father Petrislav on the throne, and that Petrislav ruled over Zeta (*Geste I* 2009: 122-125), without any praise, however.

What follows is a part about the name of the saint, an etymology (Trifunović, 1990: 66), but this part does not exist in the Chronicle.

¹ The oldest Divine Service in the Old Slavic language is the Service to Cyril by an unknown author (Trifunović, 1964: 133-143). On the Divine Service as a literary genre see: Trifunović, 1990: 327-329.

² The oldest canon in the Old Slavic language was dedicated to Cyril and Methodius (Trifunović, 1964: 209-219). On the canon as a literary genre see: Trifunović, 1990: 129-130.

³ For interpretation see: *Geste II* 2009: 261-262

The biography then states the information about the sanctification of the child (Trifunović, 1990: 66). The Chronicle, on the other hand, contains only one sentence, "*Puer autem Vladimirus acceptio regno crescebat decoratus omni sapientia et sanctitate*" (*Geste I 2009: 124 – 125*).

What follows is the part about his education (Trifunović, 1990: 66), but in a rather short form, "*decoratus omni sapientia*", that he possessed all knowledge (*Geste I 2009: 124-125*).

Marriage and the saint's attitude towards marriage takes up a significant part. Typically, a hagiography recounts that a saint would avoid marriage, sometimes even the mere company of women, while some would flee from home after a wedding. Last but not least, there is an account when after a child was born, the spouses part (Trifunović, 1990: 66). Historical circumstances of Jovan Vladimir's marriage were quite different, so none of the above stated models could have been considered. However, we should bear in mind that marriage, as given in the New Testament, was one of the seven sacraments (The Gospel of Mark, Chapter 10, verses: 6 – 9; The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, Ch. 5, verses: 31-32). Then, Apostle Paul compares Christ's relationship with the church to the relationship between a husband and wife (Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, Ch. 5, verse: 23). So marriage is not to be frowned upon.

The history of Jovan Vladimir considers marriage and the relationship with a wife at length (*Geste I 2009: 130-137; Djekic, 2013*). It gives an account of how they first met, how Kosara was inspired by the Holy Spirit to visit Jovan in the dungeon. The account about Kosara, though rather short, tells a lot about her, as the Holy Spirit dwells only within true believers (Gospel of John, Ch. 14, v.: 16-17). Then the Chronicle tells about solemnizing the marriage and how they lived holy and virtuous lives (*Geste I 2009: 130-131*). To be holy means to believe in Jesus Christ and to suffer for that (Acts of the Apostles, 9:13, 32). The New Testament orders a marriage to be honorable (The Epistle of St Paul to the Hebrews, 13: 4), the spouses are to fulfil their duties (Epistle of Apostle Paul to the Ephesians, 5: 23-33), forbids adultery (Gospel of Mathew, 5:32; 9:9; Gospel of Mark, 10: 11-12). An honorable marriage, free of adultery and fulfilling duties are all signs of virtue. When Vladimir receives an invitation from Vladislav to visit him, Kosara makes an offer to go instead and if need be to die. Christ says that there is no greater love than giving one's life for another (Gospel of John, 15:13). It is her readiness to die for her husband that manifests her greatest love.

Kosara's attitude to marriage is evident after her husband, Vladimir died. St Paul the Apostle advises young widows to remarry and have children (St Paul's First letter to Timothy, 5:14). But Kosara chooses another way, the way of Anna, daughter of Phanuel, who was married for seven years and then became a childless widow. Kosara and Vladimir were also childless, and she never remarried but served God in the church, fasting and praying day and night (Gospel of Luke, 2:36-38).

Kosara duly mourned her husband, moved his body to his court and buried him in the Church of the Holy Virgin Mary. When she died, she was buried at her husband's feet (*Geste I 2009: 136-137*). In the end we may conclude that the words, "A loyal woman is like a garland to her husband, but when she disgraces him, she is like a rotting bone" (Stories of Solomon, Ch. 12, v. 4) refer to her. Her character is made to celebrate Vladimir's grandeur and owing to her he became a greater saint. So it has been noticed justifiably that Kosara also gains an aura of sanctity (Ingham, 1990:890).

A hagiography also has to contain various examples of asceticism (Trifunović, 1990: 67). The retreat with the army to the Oblik hill before Samuel could be one such example (*Geste I 2009*: 124-125). As Christ says about humility, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Gospel of Luke, 18:10-14). He manifests care for his soldiers by sacrificing himself, so that only he would die and not his men (The First Epistle General of John, 3:16).

Upon surrendering, Jovan Vladimir is taken to Samuel's dungeon in Prespa (*Geste I 2009*: 126-127), like Christ was taken to prison upon his arrest (Gospel of Mathew, 26:47-56; Gospel of Mark, 14:43-49; Gospel of Luke, 22:47-54; Gospel of John, 18:3-12). It is recorded that Jovan Vladimir prayed four times, once while fasting. The first time, in tears, so that the Lord would save his soldiers who were bitten by snakes (*Geste I 2009*: 124-127), then while in the dungeon, where he spent time in prayer and fasting, and when an angel presented himself, he went on a rigorous fast and stronger prayers until deliverance (*Geste I 2009*: 128-129). When he received a wooden cross from Vladislav, he knelt, kissing the cross and said prayers (*Geste I 2009*: 132-133). In the end, coming to Prespa, Vladislav's capital, he prayed to God as customary (*Geste I 2009*: 134-135). Further on, the text states that the prayers took place in church.

A hagiography has its historical part (Trifunović, 1990: 67) and here they are numerous. First, the war between Samuel and Jovan Vladimir, then Vladimir's capture, Samuel's attack on Ulcinj, Samuel's death, Gabriel Radomir's skillfulness and negotiations and the killing of Jovan Vladimir, and finally, Vladislav's campaign to Durres (*Geste I 2009*: 130-139).

Morals expressed at the time of death as a part of a hagiography (Trifunović, 1990: 67) are also present in the case of Jovan Vladimir. Thus, prior to being beheaded, he says, "*Orate pro me, domni mei, et haec venerabilis crux una vobiscum sit mihi testis in die Domini, quoniam absque culpa morior*", (*Geste I 2009*: 134-137). As we can notice, he does not judge them in his last hour, which the Gospel forbids (Gospel of Mathew, 7:1-2), but rather tries to evoke their shame (Book of Daniel, 9:7-8).

Since the whole life of a saint has to be a special one, a hagiography emphasizes the moment of death (Trifunović, 1990: 67). Vladimir was beheaded, like John the Baptist had been (*Geste I 2009*: 136-137; Gospel of Mark, 6:16-29). Thereby he was granted martyrdom.

A required part of any hagiography are the miracles a hero performs (Trifunović, 1990:67). Examples of miracles occur during a hero's lifetime and after his death. Vladimir's miracle was performed with snakes (*Geste I 2009*: 124-127) and draws its roots in Jesus' promise to the apostles that the snakes they take would not harm them. Here as well, upon Vladimir's prayers, the snakes stopped biting or even if they did, neither the people nor the animals died (Gospel of Mark, 16:18; Gospel of Luke, 10:19; Banasevic, 1971:89; *Geste II 2009*: 266). Another miracle is the appearance of angels in the dungeon, who gave solace to Vladimir, telling him that the Lord would deliver him from the dungeon, granting him the kingdom of heaven (*Geste I 2009*: 128-129). The angels were sent by God himself in order to tell the people His will, e.g. that Jesus' Mother would have a child by the Holy Ghost (Gospel of Luke, 1:26-38). Then on the way to Vladislav, the angels save him from an ambush (*Geste I 2009*: 134-135). The angels in the Old Testament would save the righteous (The First Book of Moses, 19:1-16).

The miracles contributing to the cult of Vladimir also surround his death, as he was killed by an angel, presenting himself to Vladimir as Vladislav (*Geste I 2009*: 138-139).

God also makes the angels instrumental in carrying out the execution (e.g. The Old Testament: Acts of the Apostles, 12:23).

Finally, we have to point to the words in the Chronicle "What and how many miracles and good deeds the Lord granted through his servant, blessed Vladimir, one who is curious may read a history of this" (*Geste* I 2009: 138-139). So, the miracles contained in the *history* (emphasis added by Dj. Dj.) are those related to Jovan Vladimir and are numerous – only a few found their way into the Chronicle of the Priest of Doclea.

Therefore, of all the elements a proper hagiography should have, this text has the following: a heading with the date of birth of the saint, a part referring to his parents, ancestors and homeland. There is little information on his sanctification and education, given in one sentence. However, his marriage seems much more important, and it has been evidenced that it was in accordance with what the New Testament prophecies for the Christians. There are also examples of asceticism, a historical part, morals at the moment of death, martyrdom, and the miracles performed both during his lifetime and after death.

The following parts are missing: a foreword with the author talking about himself in a humble manner, the stated source of information for writing a hagiography, a tribute to the saint's homeland and information regarding his name.

So we have nine elements, two given rather shortly and four are missing. At that, for the Chronicle itself, it was not significant to give a foreword, a note about the author talking about himself in a humble manner, or about the source of the information, or to give a special tribute to his homeland, Zeta, as the entire text is actually dedicated to it. The only element which could not even be assumed to have existed is the question of Vladimir's name.

It is precisely all the above that gives us grounds to believe that there once had been a proper hagiography, introduced into the Chronicle in an abridged form.

Such a conclusion requires at least two answers to the following: 1) Why is it that the Chronicle does not call it a hagiography but a *geste*; 2) Was it that the hagiography was actually used as a source of motifs for subsequently written literature.

The first answer would be that for the Latin translator he was not a saint, i.e. the translator was not acquainted with his cult. He was a local saint and miracle-worker who was never explicitly accepted by either the Orthodox or the Roman Catholic Church, but who was accepted by the people and the clergy of the land he once used to rule over.⁴ Besides beatification which had to be approved formally by Rome and recorded in Rome, there was the one imposed by the clergy and the people, "which the Church silently recognized (*Qui tacet, consuetudo videtur*). There was no formal resolution or a record in Rome ... and by the 12th century it could be declared by a bishop, without seeking approval from the Holy Seat" (Banasevic, 1971: 87).⁵ And it is a proof that the Latin translator of the Chronicle did not come from Doclea, where the cult of the saint existed. Taking the information from his hagiography, the translator could not call it that, because he had a problem with accepting him as a saint.

⁴ It is believed that in the struggle for the Dubrovnik archbishop seat, a saint of royal descent would be a winning asset (Banasevic, 1971: 104).

⁵ Banasevic refers to: Vagant et Magenot II 1905: 494.

The second question refers to why Vladimir and Kosara occur as a motif in so many secular texts. Just to mention that Jovan Vladimir is mentioned in the Song of Roland in the late 11th century. Then they are mentioned in two literary pieces from the late 12th century, in a poetic form *Le Roman de Florimont* by Aymon de Varennes and in a short story *Floire et Blancheflor* (Djekic, 2013:81-97). We are of the opinion that the hagiography could have been the source for the two aforementioned works. It is almost certain that besides the hagiography there had to be songs of him, sung at the court, stressing the relationship between him and Kosara. A motif of Christian love, loyalty of the spouses, the ruler and his wife, was a strong enough and interesting one for the Doclea poets to sing about. Such songs must have been heard by the Normans, it had to be something close to their hearts for them to adopt it along with its motifs and to build up on it. When could this have happened? Based on the information we know, it could have around 1081, when King Michael was marrying his son Bogin to the daughter of Arhirac's of Bari. He was an eminent Norman supporter (Cirkovi, 1981:92). And it is certain that the relationships between the Normans and the Serbs must have been more active and stronger than the sources we have left tell us. So, it must have been the way the Normans got acquainted with the motif, and then others build up on it.

In any case, we can conclude that the character of Jovan Vladimir was very popular as an inspiring and interesting story for his descendants. The cult of the saint was built up around his personage. As the first Serbian saint, the first hagiography written about him, paving the way for other literary works of no cult character, but which represented the love of the two, as a model for the Christian love of spouses. We think that it was the main reason those two were taken as a motifs of so many literary works in the centuries to follow.

COMMENTARY

1. *Gesta regum Sclavorum*, vol II (2009), a comment of Tibor Živković, Beograd, Nikšić: Istorijski institut, manastir Ostrog

TRANSLATOR AND EDITOR

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2. Sveto pismo Starog i Novog zaveta (1950), preveo Stari zavet Đura Daničić, Novi zavet preveo, Vuk Stef. Karadžić, Njujork – London, Savet biblijskih društava.
3. *Ćirilo i Metodije: životja, službe, kanoni, pohvale*, Kliment Ohridski, Konstantin Preslavski i nepoznati pisci (1964), priredio Đorđe Trifunović; prevod Irena Grickat, Olga Nedeljković, Đorđe Trifunović, Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga.

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GESTA ILI ŽITIJE O JOVANU VLADIMIRU

Letopis popa Dukljanina obuhvatio je između ostaloge i život Sv. Jovana Vladimira. Sam Letopis upućuje na postojanje geste o njemu odakle su preuzeti podaci. Sam stil pisanja je takav da je u literaturi ukazivano da je u pitanju žitije. Deo o njemu se naziva sem toga u literaturi i narodnim epom, aktom, legendom, usmenim predanjem i romanom. Upravo nas je to navelo da posvetimo posebnu pažnju da li je ovom vladaru posvećeno gesta ili žitije. U literaturi je ustanovljeno koje delove žitije mora da sadrži te je s toga upoređen sadržaja teksta koji se odnosi na Jovana Vladimira i elemenata koji čine žitije i ustanovljeno je: da je devet elemenata zastupljena u potpunosti, dva u skraćenom obliku, a četiri nedostaju. Od elemenata koja nedostaju dva nije bilo bitno uneti. Prvi, gde autor žitija o sebi govori sa uniženjem i drugi o izvoru informacija. Slavljenje otadžbine svetog nema u direktnom obliku ali ceo Letopis se može shvatiti kao proslavljanje Duljklje tj. njegove otadžbine. Jedini deo žitija za koji se ne može ni pretpostaviti da je postojao je bavljenje Vladimirovim imenom. Upravo na osnovu sveta toga smatramo da je postojalo puno žitije koje je u skraćenom obliku uneto u tekst Letopisa. Gestom ga je nazvao prepisivač jer je njegov kult bio lokalnog karaktera i nije bio kanonizovan ni od pape ni patrijarha. Činjenica da se on pojavljuje kao motiv u književnosti upućuje da su morala postojati sekularna dela o njemu.

Ključne reči: Sv. Jovan Vladimir, Duklja, žitije, gesta