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least very rare, in previous times, and particularly in nineteenth-century realist literature. The adventure of reading the *Dictionary of the Khazars* is most exciting for those who, following their imagination, will know how to respond to the author's invitation and to assemble their book, "blazing their own trail" through the forest of its diverse meanings.

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## Rereading the Kosovo Epic: Origins of the "Heavenly Serbia" in the Oral Tradition

Aleksandar Pavlović  
University of Nottingham

The relation between history and poetry in Serbian culture is nowhere as strongly and persistently present as in the case of the 1389 Kosovo battle.<sup>1</sup> Over the centuries, this medieval event acquired a mythical aura in the historiography, literary discourse, and oral tradition of the South Slavs, evolving into one of the central national symbols in Serbian culture and a burning political question. This article traces the origin of one of the central elements of the Kosovo myth, the idea of Prince Lazar's choice between the kingdom on earth and the kingdom of heaven on the eve of the Kosovo battle.

Among hundreds of oral epic songs collected by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić in the early nineteenth century, the Kosovo cycle forms a distinct and separate section, traditionally seen by Karadžić and other scholars as central to the entire Serbian oral tradition.<sup>2</sup> In these songs, the battle of Kosovo that took place on St. Vitus-day (*Vidovdan*) in 1389 is perceived as the decisive battle that the Serbs fought to preserve their independence. The Serbian leader Prince Lazar and other great heroes, we are told, were defeated and killed in the battle, and

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the panel *History and Fiction: The Muse of History in Serbian Prose* at the 42nd National Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), held in Los Angeles in November 2010. I am indebted to my colleagues and friends Vladimir Zorić, Milica Bakić-Hayden, Ivana Đurić, Alexander Dunst, Stijn Vervaet, and editor Lilien Robinson for their insightful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme I*, Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića, vol. 4, Vladan Nedić ed. (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1975), 569; Janko Lavrin, "Historical Preface", in *Kosovo: Heroic Songs of the Serbs*, Helen Rootham ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1920), 9–20; Maksimilijan Braun, *Kosovo: Bitka na Kosovopolju u istorijskom i epskom predanju*, Tomislav Bekić trans. (Novi Sad: Platoneum, 2004), 10 (originally published in German as Maximilian Brown, *Kosovo: Die Schlacht auf dem Amselfelde in geschichtlicher und epischer Überlieferung* (Leipzig: Markert [und] Petters, 1937); Mary P. Coote, "Serbocroatian Heroic Songs," in Felix J. Oinas, *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 263.

the Turks became the rulers and masters of the Serbs for centuries to come.<sup>3</sup> In the literary tradition centering on Kosovo, as well as in Serbian epic songs, there are two explanations of this defeat. Some stories have it that Lazar's brother-in-law, Vuk Branković, committed treason and abandoned his liege and relative on the battlefield. According to the second interpretation, Prince Lazar made a deliberate choice between the kingdom on earth and the kingdom of heaven. Although the Serbs were vastly outnumbered, Lazar and his soldiers decided to die heroically in the battle rather than to subject themselves to the Turkish rule. In other words, Lazar and his army fought to deserve a place in the heavenly kingdom, not to preserve and enlarge their earthly dominions.

This notion of Lazar's deliberate choice of the heavenly kingdom was often taken as the crown of the Kosovo myth and as the driving force behind the entire Serbian national movement. Miodrag Popović, for instance, in his study *Vidovdan i časni krst* (*Vitus-day and the Cross of Honor*), examined the formation of the Kosovo myth and its establishment as a national symbol during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup> The symbolism of Kosovo and of Lazar's commitment to the heavenly kingdom have been frequently used, and more often misused, in recent political discourse.<sup>5</sup> This applies equally to the glorification of the Kosovo myth by Serbian nationalists,<sup>6</sup> who saw it as the confirmation of the idea of the "Heavenly Serbia," that is, the entire nation's commitment to metaphysical values and heroic death, and to Western authors who referred to it as the source and explanation of much

<sup>3</sup> Modern historians confirm some of the information provided by the songs, such as that both rulers, Prince Lazar and Sultan Murad I, were killed. However, they also remind us that the battle had less fatal consequences for Serbian history. Namely, the Ottoman victory in the 1371 Battle of the Maritza already confirmed their superiority in the Balkans, and Serbia continued to exist after the Kosovo battle as a vassal state until finally being conquered by the Ottomans in 1459. See Rade Mihaljčić, *The Battle of Kosovo in History and in Popular Tradition*, (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Miodrag Popović, *Vidovdan i časni krst*, (Belgrade: Slovo Ljubve, 1976). For an illustrative example, see Miloš Đurić, *Vidovdanska etika*, (Zagreb: Srpsko akademsko društvo "Njegoš," 1914).

<sup>5</sup> See Julie Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started the War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 184–85; Jasna Dragović-Soso, "Saviours of the Nation": Serbian Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism (London: Hurst and Co., 2002), 115–32.

<sup>6</sup> Radovan Samardžić, et al., *Kosovo i Metohija u srpskoj istoriji*, (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1989); Matija Bećković, *Kosovo: Najskuplja srpska reč*, (Valjevo: Glas crkve, 1989); Radovan Samardžić, *Kosovsko opredeljenje: Istorijski ogledi*, (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1990).

of the troubles and atrocities in the Balkans.<sup>7</sup> For both parties, Kosovo songs celebrating Lazar's commitment to the heavenly kingdom were widely popular among the Serbian masses for centuries.

### Commitment to the Heavenly Kingdom in Medieval Literature and Oral Tradition

Returning to a more scholarly context, I will focus on several key contributions central to my discussion of the origins of Prince Lazar's choice of the heavenly kingdom in the oral tradition. Meticulous research by Serbian medievalist Đorđe Trifunović showed that ten works about Lazar and the Kosovo Battle were written by church writers in a short period of only thirty years after the event.<sup>8</sup> By the standards of Serbian medieval literature, this was an enormous output in a short span of time. Only Saint Sava and Saint Simeon, the founders of the Nemanjić dynasty that ruled Serbia for over two centuries, had such an extensive body of religious texts written to celebrate their cult, but these works were created over a much longer period. Thus, the production of texts about Prince Lazar is almost without precedent in Serbian medieval literature.

Inspired by the gospels and by Byzantine hagiography, several of these monastic writers refer to Lazar's choice of the heavenly over the earthly kingdom. Lazar is a martyr who gladly sacrifices himself for the Lord, renouncing all earthly fame and thus earning the kingdom of heaven. For example, only a few years after the battle, Danilo the Younger writes in his *Slovo o knezu Lazaru* (*Discourse on Prince Lazar*) that Lazar decided to leave behind the transience of earthly rule and to align himself with the soldiers of heaven, and that his soldiers, who were faithful to him in the earthly kingdom, all earned blessed life in the heavenly kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

While there is a general agreement that this idea originated in medieval religious texts, little work has been done to identify more precisely when and how it reached the South-Slavic oral tradition. In principle, most scholars support the hypothesis about the ancient origin of the Kosovo songs formulated by Novaković, Maretić, and others in the late nineteenth century and,

<sup>7</sup> Branimir Anzulović, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*. (London: Hurst and Co., 1999); Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth, and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*, (London: Macmillan, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Đorđe Trifunović, *Srpski srednjovekovni spisi o knezu Lazaru i Kosovskom boju*, (Kruševac: Bagdala, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 365–71.



consequently, hold that the Kosovo ethos had become an integral part of the oral tradition centuries before Karadžić's collections.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, authors like Banašević, Bakić-Hayden, and Greenawalt emphasize that the national symbols of the Kosovo epic are essentially a late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century product, and that the Serbian national movement and especially the Serbian Uprising were decisive for their establishment.<sup>11</sup>

The most radical among the hypotheses about the more recent origin of Kosovo songs is Svetozar Matić's "Srem theory."<sup>12</sup> Matić argues that the decasyllabic Kosovo songs collected by Karadžić in the region of Srem originated among local urban Serbs in the late eighteenth century, and that in Karadžić's time there were no other oral Kosovo songs elsewhere. Matić's central claim, conveniently described by Maja Bošković-Stulli as "a net of accurate remarks and arbitrary judgments by the author," has been largely rejected by other scholars.<sup>13</sup> Namely, as Stulli and others indicated, some of the singers who sang the Kosovo songs to Karadžić in Srem were originally from present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. For this reason it seems rather far-fetched to assume that they all adopted these songs during their comparatively short stay in Srem. What is more, the song *Banović*

<sup>10</sup> Armin Pavić, *Narodne pjesme o Boju na Kosovu godine 1389*, (Zagreb: Naklada Akademije knjižare L. Hatmana, 1886); Tomislav Maretić, "Kosovski junaci i događaji u narodnoj epici", in *Rad Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti*, vol. 97 (1889), 69–181; Stojan Novaković, *Kosovo: Srpske narodne pjesme o Boju na Kosovu*, (Belgrade: Državna štamparija, 1876); H. Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 313–19; Dragutin Subotić, *Serbian Popular Balads: Their Origin and Development*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932); Vojislav Đurić, *Naša narodna epika*, (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1963); Jelka Redep, *Priča o boju kosovskom*, (Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet, 1976); Nenad Ljubinković, "Kosovska bitka u svome vremenu i u viđenju potomaka", in *Kosovo u pamćenju i stvaralaštvu*, Nenad Ljubinković ed. (Belgrade: Raskovnik, 1989), 127–64; Thomas Emmeth, "Kosovo Legacy", in *Kosovo*, William Dorich ed., (Alhambra: The Kosovo Charity Fund, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Nikola Banašević, "Poreklo kosovskih pesama kratkog stiha", *Prilozi za književnost, jezik, istoriju i folklor* 20: 3–4 (1954), 327–32; Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Kosovo: Reality of a Myth and Myth of Many Realities," in *Serbien und Montenegro: Raum und Bevölkerung, Geschichte, Sprache und Literatur, Kultur, Politik, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft, Recht* (Wien, Berlin: LIT, 2006), 133–42; Alexander Greenawalt, "Kosovo Myths: Karadžić, Njegoš, and the Transformation of Serb Memory," in *Spaces of Identity* 3 (2001), 49–65.

<sup>12</sup> Svetozar Matić, *Naš narodni ep i naš stih*, (Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1964), 95–151; Matić, *Novi ogledi o našem narodnom epu*, (Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1972), 285–304.

<sup>13</sup> Maja Bošković-Stulli, "Svetozar Matić: Naš narodni ep i naš stih", in *Narodna umjetnost*, 4: 1 (1966), 259 et passim; Nikola Banašević, "Vukov rod i pesničko predanje o kosovskim junacima", in *Kovčez* 2 (1959), 32–41; Nenad Ljubinković, "Da li su religiozni elementi u kosovskoj legendi o knezu Lazaru nastali u Sremu u XVIII veku," in *Kovčez* 6 (1964), 106–10; Redep, *Priča*, 264–67.

*Strahinja*, which Karadžić collected in central Serbia from a Montenegrin singer who had never been to Srem, essentially also belongs to the Kosovo cycle. In addition, references to the Kosovo battle, its outcome, or its distinguished heroes are also found in the decasyllabic songs from the *Erlangenski rukopis* (*The Erlangen Manuscript*), compiled in the first decades of the eighteenth century, or *Pjevanija Crnogorska i Hercegovačka* (*Montenegrin and Herzegovinian Songbook*), collected between 1826 and 1828 by Sima Milutinović Sarajlija. Finally, the oral Kosovo songs documented by anonymous collectors and preserved in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century manuscripts from the Adriatic coast can hardly be excluded from consideration simply because they were sung in longer syllable verse.

Nonetheless, certain elements of Matić's theses deserve more attention. For example, it is beyond dispute that Karadžić did collect the majority of the Kosovo songs in Srem and among its local singers, that Kosovo songs predating Karadžić's collections are rare and, *stricto sensu*, absent from such voluminous collections as the *Erlangenski rukopis* or *Pjevanija*. In other words, while Matić's principal claim that *all* decasyllabic epic songs about the Kosovo battle originated and existed solely in the Srem region is not very convincing, his arguments do question commonly held views that the folk songs celebrating Kosovo heroism and Lazar's commitment to the heavenly kingdom "have had huge audiences over the centuries."<sup>14</sup>

So where do we actually find the idea of Lazar's choice of the heavenly kingdom in oral epics? There are seven Kosovo songs documented before Karadžić, all of which remained unpublished at the time, and approximately fourteen songs about Prince Lazar and the Kosovo battle included in his collections. We find this motif only in one of them, the rightly famous "Propast carstva Srpskoga" ("The Downfall of the Serbian Empire").<sup>15</sup> The song begins with a falcon, which turns out to be Saint Elias, sent from the holy city of Jerusalem with a letter from the Virgin Mary to Tsar Lazar. In the letter, she offers him the choice between the earthly and heavenly kingdom—if you choose the earthly kingdom, she says, take your army in the battle and you will win; if you choose the heavenly kingdom, build a church in Kosovo and give communion to your soldiers, because all of you will die. Lazar decides that the earthly kingdom is ephemeral, while the heavenly kingdom is eternal, chooses the latter and dies in the battle. Other songs, if they mention the defeat at all, simply say that Lazar was outnumbered and that Vuk Branković betrayed him. What is more, at the end of "Propast carstva Srpskoga" the

<sup>14</sup> Anzulović, *Heavenly Serbia*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme II, Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, vol. 5, Radmila Pešić ed. (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1976), 219–21.

singer also says that Lazar would have overcome the Turks if Vuk had not betrayed him, which somehow contradicts the opening scene.<sup>16</sup>

### The Kosovo Tradition and the Link to Srem

As indicated, the idea of Lazar's choice of the heavenly kingdom is clerical in origin and found only in one song collected by Karadžić, where it merges with and somehow contradicts the alternative notions of Vuk Branković's treason and an overwhelming force of the Turkish army. It seems appropriate, then, to examine more thoroughly how, where, and from which singer Karadžić documented this particular song.

Hardly anything is known about the identity of the singer of the "Propast carstva Srpskoga." Karadžić refers to her as the blind woman from Grgurevci, and specifies that he published four of her songs; notably, all but one belong to the Kosovo cycle.<sup>17</sup> Yet, we know a bit more about the documentation of her songs. Immediately upon his return from the Šišatovac monastery in Srem in 1815, Karadžić asked Lukijan Mušicki, the hegumen of the Monastery, to collect Kosovo songs about Lazar from a particular blind singer. As Karadžić explicitly says: "we will hardly find these songs anywhere else."<sup>18</sup> In the following period, he persistently reminds Mušicki to collect three Kosovo songs from the blind woman from Grgurevci; finally, in late 1816, Mušicki informs Karadžić that she was brought to the Šišatovac monastery, and that deacon Stefan wrote down the songs from her.<sup>19</sup>

If these songs were widespread, why does Karadžić say that it is unlikely that they would be found anywhere else, and why his insistence on their documentation from a particular singer? Apparently, Karadžić suggests that these particular songs about Lazar were not at all widely popular and known. His later collections confirm the point made in this letter. Namely, although in the following decades Karadžić established a network of associates in Serbia proper, Montenegro and Herzegovina, he later published only one more song

about Lazar, which describes the building of his endowment Ravanica.<sup>20</sup> This indicates that, rather than being widely popular at the time, the songs about Prince Lazar were mostly confined to the Srem region.

It seems that there are particular reasons why the song with the motif of Lazar's choice was collected in Srem and, with more geographic precision, in the narrow area of Fruška Gora. After the so-called Great Migrations in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the centers of the Serbian Orthodox Church moved from Kosovo and central Serbia to the north, and Fruška Gora, with important Orthodox monasteries, became the center of Serbian religious life. Moreover, in 1697 the monks from Lazar's endowment Ravanica moved his relics to the Vrdnik monastery in Fruška Gora. The monastery annually celebrated the day of Lazar's death, and medieval texts such as the mentioned *Slovo o knezu Lazaru* were read on that occasion.<sup>21</sup> A description of the 1854 celebration of St. Vitus-day in Vrdnik by Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja, although of a later date and thus probably influenced by Karadžić's published collections, nonetheless serves as a convenient illustration of how these celebrations might have looked like in the past:

One can see how during the service the church is so full of people that it is impossible to go around it or to approach the doorway, because the entire churchyard is overcrowded by the worshipers.... One notices here and there a blind singer, surrounded by listeners, male and female, young and old, with notable pride on their faces while listening to folk songs about the Serbian heroes and their deeds. And is it not that the singer sings how an angel came to Prince Lazar in his sleep and asked him if he wants the heavenly or the earthly kingdom?<sup>22</sup>

This shows how keeping Lazar's relics in an area abundant with Orthodox monasteries might have contributed to the popularity of his cult in that particular region, and offers a plausible explanation for the similarities between Prince Lazar's cultic texts and local oral tradition.

<sup>16</sup> This contradiction was noticed already in the nineteenth century; see Andra Gavrilović, "Priložak proučavanju srpske narodne poezije," in *Godišnjica Nikole Čupića* 19 (1899), 122–27.

<sup>17</sup> Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme IV, Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, vol. 7, Ljubomir Zuković ed. (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1986), 403.

<sup>18</sup> *jerbo ćemo teško one pjesne na drugom mjestu naći* Karadžić, *Prepiska I (1811–21)*, *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, vol. 20, Golub Dobrašinić, ed. (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1988), 250.

<sup>19</sup> Karadžić, *Prepiska I (1811–21)*, 320, 334, 353, 365, 366.

<sup>20</sup> See "Opet Zidanje Ravanice," in Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme II*, 154–60.

<sup>21</sup> Popović, *Vidovan i časni krst*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> "Vidio si kako je pri službi crkva dupkom puna narodna, da ni na vrata doći ne možeš,— niti oko crkve proći, jer je svu portu bogomoljni narod pritisnuo.... Vidio si kako je ovde i onde kakvog slepca, koji uz gusle koju narodnu pesmu peva, opkolila gomila slušaoca obojeg pola, starih i mladih, pa peva li se junačstvo kakvog srpskog junaka, to ćeš primetiti izraženi ponos na licu slušaoca. A peva li pjevac kako je knezu Lazaru anđeo na san došao i pitao hoće li carstvo nebesko ili hoće carstvo zemaljsko?" in Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja, *U Fruškoj Gori 1854* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1985), 71–72.



Residing in a region with a much more developed cultural and literary life than Serbia proper, the singers from Srem were apparently influenced by the written Kosovo tradition, as represented by the manuscript *Priča o boju kosovskom* (*Tale of the Battle of Kosovo*) and the literary epic *Sraženije strašno i grozno između Srbljima i Turcima na Polju Kosovu* (*Terrible Calvary of the Serbs and Turks on the Field of Kosovo*), published by Gavriilo Kovačević in Budim in 1804 and republished eight times during the nineteenth century. A copy of *Priča*, transcribed in the monastery Vrdnik sometimes after 1722, and some twenty-five other eighteen-century manuscripts of this work, also testify to the rising interest in the Kosovo tradition by the literate South Slavs during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Striking similarities between these three instances of the Kosovo tradition, scrutinized in earlier scholarship, can be illustrated by several short examples:<sup>24</sup>

To your health, Miloš my son!	To your health Miloš, friend of mine and traitor!
...	...
Drink this wine that I offer to you, And keep the golden goblet as my gift	So to your health, drink it up, And keep the golden goblet as my gift to you. My thanks to you O glorious Lazarus,
My thanks to you for that fine toast,	My thanks for that fine toast, Fine toast and for your handsome gift,
But not for the words you spoke The traitor sits right beside you Tomorrow is Vitus-day And all of you shall see Who is loyal and who is not!	But not for those words you spoke. The traitor sits beside you Tomorrow, on Vitus-day, At the Kosovo Field, we shall see Who is loyal to you and who is not!
Kovačević, <i>Sraženije</i>	Karadžić, <i>Srpske narodne pjesme</i>

To your health Miloš my servant be loyal and drink the wine and keep the golden goblet as a gift and do not be a traitor and take all as a gift. My thanks to you sir Lazar on your toast but not on those words you spoke ... the traitor sits besides you ... Tomorrow is Sunday, glorious Vitus-day and your patron's saint's feast day, we shall see then who is loyal to you and who is not.

*Priča o boju kosovskom*

Zdrav da si mi, moj sine Milošu!	Zdrav Milošu, vjero i nevjero!
...	...
Vino popi koje ti napijam, a na dar ti zlatan pejar dajem	Zdrav mi budi, i zdravicu popij, vino popij, a na čast ti pehar!
...	Vala tebe, slavni knez-Lazare!
Hvala tebe na ovoj zdravici,	Vala tebe na tvojoj zdravici, na zdravici i na daru tvome:
al' ne hvala na toj poslovinci.	al' ne vala na takoj besjedi!
...	...
a nevera t' do kolena sedi.	Nevjera ti sjedi uz koljeno,
...	...
a sutra će Viden danak biti, i svi ćete očima videti, tko je vera, tko mu je nevera.	Sjutra jeste lijep Vidov-danak, videćemo u Polju Kosovu, ko je vjera, ko li je nevjera!
Kovačević, <i>Sraženije</i>	Karadžić, <i>Srpske narodne pjesme</i>

... zdrav mi si slugo Milošu i budi veran i vino popi i na dar ti zlatni pehar i ne budi neveran i primi sve u dar. Hvala gospodine Lazare na zdravici što mi napi a ne hvala na besedi ... nevera kod kolena ti sedi ... sutra, nedelja Vidov dan slavni a tebe krsno ime videćemo tko je veran tko li neveran.

*Priča o boju kosovskom*

What is more, in the manuscript songbooks collated by literate Serbs from Vojvodina like Avram Miletić and Timotije Nedeljković, *Priča o boju kosovskom* and Kosovo epic songs are found side by side, and other manuscripts occasionally contain Gavrilović's *Sraženije*, transcribed in prose and labeled as the medieval genre of hagiography.<sup>25</sup> This all shows the proximity

<sup>23</sup> Popović, *Vidovdan i časni krst*, 58.

<sup>24</sup> Ređep, *Priča*, 252–62, Miodrag Maticki, *Ponovnice: tipovi odnosa usmene i pisane književnosti* (Novi Sad: Književna zajednica Novog Sada, 1989), 52–55.

<sup>25</sup> Ređep, *Priča*, 21, 23, 28.



and exchange between these religious and secular, oral and written discourses, with a rather permeable boundary.

### The "Irig Academy" and the Institutionalization of Oral Singing

Another important local institution in Srem in the late eighteenth century was the so called "Irig School" or "Irig Academy," where blind singers from the area were trained in singing epic and other songs, aided by the local community and the nearby Hopovo monastery. Although the evidence about its character is scarce, Matija Murko in the 1930s concluded that "Irig Academy" certainly existed and had an important role in the local oral tradition, and recent scholars like Miodrag Maticki have also confirmed his conclusions.<sup>26</sup> Irig would have been a favorable place for oral singers since it was the urban center of Fruška Gora, and all local monasteries were easily accessible from it. There is valuable evidence about the "Irig school" in the 1780 document from the Habsburg Court about its abolishment, the reasons of which are telling. Namely, the monks from the neighboring Roman-Catholic Ilok monastery complained that "in Irig Serbian guslars promote songs that celebrate Serbian heroes and their battles against the Turks, and they spread heresy."<sup>27</sup> Although the school was officially abolished by an imperial decree in 1780, it appears that the blind singers from the area continued this tradition far into the nineteenth century. Several prominent early nineteenth-century writers, such as Lukijan Mušicki and Sima Milutinović, make references to it, and it is also mentioned in some German and Hungarian sources.<sup>28</sup> As Maticki explains, the "Irig Academy" should not be understood as an official educational institution. Actually, the very title of school or academy is a pejorative term given to the blind singers by the urban and literate locals who looked down on these songs and their singers. According to a few available sources, "the school" actually consisted of a basement or an abandoned building where blind singers practiced during the winter. A report from 1826 testifies that "these blind singers form a sort of a guild among themselves, like the German *Meistersingers*; older singers educate the younger ones, and that is how these

<sup>26</sup> Matija Murko, *Tragom srpskohrvatske narodne epike*, vol. 1 (Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 1951), 212 et passim; Miodrag Maticki, "Jezik u jeziku slepih guslara," in *Sima Milutinović Sarajlija: književno delo i kulturnoistorijska uloga*, Marta Frajnd ed. (Belgrade: Institut za književnost i umetnost, 1993), 169–74.

<sup>27</sup> Maticki, *Jezik u jeziku*, 170.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 170.

wonderful songs are preserved. Those blind singers perform mostly on fairs, gatherings, and other similar occasions."<sup>29</sup>

Although Karadžić himself gives no account of the "Irig School," the biographies and repertoire of his singers from Srem nevertheless tell us much about this particular local oral tradition. The singers typically frequented nearby monasteries and churches, and often performed on religious holidays and in churchyards. Thus, it is no surprise that their epic songs often contain religious elements, and that their repertoire comprised religious songs and so-called *klanjalice* sung during *slava*, which is the celebration of a church or family patron saint. This applies to most of Karadžić's singers from Srem, such as blind Jeca, blind Stepanija, blind Živana, and the blind woman from Grgurevci.<sup>30</sup> In addition, "Propast carstva Srpskoga" in particular was collected in the Šišatovac monastery where the singer was brought and where she resided for some time; Lukijan Mušicki, the prior of the monastery, organized its documentation, and Deacon Stefan wrote it down. Finally, the fact that the blind woman who sung this song resided in Grgurevci is also significant. The village of Grgurevci is surrounded by a number of important monasteries, eight of which she mentions in her song "Obretenije glave kneza Lazara" ("The Miracle of Tsar Lazar"). The monastery of Šišatovac, where she was brought to sing, is some four miles, and Vrdnik (where Lazar's relics were kept) six miles from Grgurevci.

Maticki explains why Karadžić himself makes no mention of the "Irig School": emphasizing that this institutional and professional way of epic singing would compromise his idea of the collectivity of the oral tradition and its popular basis.<sup>31</sup> Thus, while Karadžić praises the oral tradition among the highlanders of Montenegro and Herzegovina, "where almost every house has a *gusle*" (the traditional one-string instrument that typically accompanies the oral epic performance), he claims that the Srem and other northern regions have almost no living oral tradition and rely almost exclusively on blind singers.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Karadžić's works undoubtedly confirm his awareness of this particular oral tradition. For, as he explicitly says, even these blind singers as the only oral singers in the Srem region needed to learn how to perform orally with the accompaniment of the *gusle pa i oni moraju učiti uz nji*

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>30</sup> See Vladan Nedić, *Vukovi pevači*, (Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1981).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>32</sup> "po Bosni i po Ercegovini i po Crnoj gori ... gotovo u svakoj kući imaju po jedne gusle ... i teško je naći čoveka da ne zna guđeti ... U Srijemu pak i u Bačkoj i u Banatu gusle se danas mogu videti samo u slijepaca [pa i oni moraju učiti u nji udarati]." Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme I*, 559.

udarati.<sup>33</sup> This means that they needed formal induction into the world of oral singing; consequently, their oral technique and repertoire are not the result of a living oral tradition as in Montenegro and Herzegovina, but arise from a professionalized and institutionalized procedure.

It seems that this professionalization and institutionalization of the oral tradition in Srem gave birth to one exceptionally long epic poem centered on Prince Lazar. In his *Srpski rječnik* (*Serbian Dictionary*) from 1818, Karadžić acknowledges the existence of a long poem sung by the blind singers who called it *Lazarica*, and specifies that "all other Kosovo songs are only parts of *Lazarica*."<sup>34</sup> Novaković and others scholars understood this claim as an early misunderstanding of a still inexperienced collector,<sup>35</sup> but Karadžić's manuscripts actually do contain one lengthy Kosovo epic poem. In 1820, a local priest informed Karadžić that he had collected one large Kosovo song from the blind singer Prodanović from Ležimir,<sup>36</sup> a settlement situated in Srem only a few miles from Grgurevci. The manuscript of the song, called *O boju kosovskom* (*About the Battle of Kosovo*), contains exactly 2439 decasyllables,<sup>37</sup> but the original version was even longer, since the priest informed Karadžić that he had lost a large sheet ("ceo tabak") of the beginning of the song and tried to reconstruct at least some of the lost verses.<sup>38</sup> By its size, *O boju kosovskom* is unique in the Serbian oral tradition. Typically, the Serbian epic songs collected by Karadžić, Sima Milutinović, or Njegoš in the first half of the nineteenth century seldom exceed several hundred verses. Only rarely would Karadžić's most accomplished traditional singers perform songs exceeding seven hundred verses in length, and even "Ženidba Maksima Crnojevića" ("The Wedding of Maksim Crnojević")—by far the longest song

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 559.

<sup>34</sup> "Lazarica, f. Tako zovu slijepci onu veliku pjesmu od Kneza Lazara i od Kosovskog boja. Lazarica se počinje:

'Car Murate u Kosovo pada,  
'Kako pada sitnu knjigu piše  
'Te je šalje ka Kruševcu gradu –

A sve su ostale Kosovske pjesme samo komadi of Lazarice." Karadžić, *Srpski Rječnik 1818, Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, vol. 2 Pavle Ivić ed., (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1966), 360.

<sup>35</sup> See Novaković, *Kosovo*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Karadžić, *Prepiska I*, 794, 984.

<sup>37</sup> See "O boju kosovskom", in *Srpske narodne pjesme iz neobjavljenih rukopisa Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, Živomir Mladenović and Vladan Nedić eds. (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1974), 63–115.

<sup>38</sup> Karadžić, *Prepiska II (1821–25)*, *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, vol. 21 Golub Dobrašinović ed. (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1988), 570.

published by Karadžić—is less than half the size of the preserved part of Prodanović's *Lazarica*.

To summarize, there appear to be good reasons why the motif of the heavenly kingdom was documented in the oral songs from Srem. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century this region experienced the increasing influence of the written Kosovo tradition in the form of popular works like Kovačević's literary epic *Sraženije* and *Priča o boju kosovskom*. Accompanying the institutionalization and professionalization of the oral tradition by blind singers who frequented Vrdnik and other local monasteries where Lazar's cult and the Kosovo tradition were promoted, it enabled this originally medieval clerical motif to enter into the local oral tradition.

## Conclusion

Today, there is hardly any dispute among scholars about the religious provenience of the idea of the heavenly kingdom. The idea of Lazar's choice of the heavenly kingdom on the eve of the Kosovo battle was formulated and propagated in religious literature as a part of his cultic veneration from the late fourteenth century onwards. In oral poetry, however, it is found in only one epic song, collected from a blind woman who was a professional epic singer and lived near the center of Lazar's cult. More particularly, the song was documented among other Kosovo songs on a narrow territory increasingly influenced by the written Kosovo tradition, in which the Serbian Orthodox church and the local community supported a particular form of the oral epic tradition, and among singers who were often associated with the church and depended on it. In other words, this motif was certainly not a constituent portion of the epic tradition as a whole but a historically conditioned response of a narrow circle of blind singers. It thus seems inappropriate to identify it with the views of the common folk or to ascribe it to the centennial and essential characteristics of Serbian and South Slavic oral tradition and identity.

Two principal objections could be made to this explanation. Firstly, if we can substantiate a certain impact of Lazar's cult on the local oral tradition in Srem, why not suppose the existence of a similar influence of Lazar's original endowment of Ravanica monastery in central Serbia and other monasteries in the region? As indicated, Prince Lazar's cult evolved soon after his death, and was later supported by the Serbian state that existed until 1459 and the Serbian Orthodox church, which enjoyed certain autonomy in the Ottoman Empire. Secondly, it is well known that some of these professional blind singers from Srem traveled frequently and went as far as Bulgaria, spreading their songs and, consequently, such ideas and values amongst the listeners. In the



absence of any other song about Lazar's commitment to the heavenly kingdom, the best way to approach these issues is, I believe, to look at them from the nineteenth-century perspective. In the early nineteenth century, there was a century-long revival of Lazar's cult and an institutional support for the professional blind singers. Nonetheless, this particular idea has been documented in only one local oral song and in specific circumstances, almost as an isolated case. In other words, it appears as if a confluence of forces was needed for this motif to enter the oral tradition—the literary influence of the published literary Kosovo epic *Sraženije* and the manuscripts of the narrative *Priča o boju kosovskom* on the one hand, and the institutionalization and professionalization of the oral epic tradition by blind singers, on the other. Among the predominantly illiterate, Ottoman-ruled population of Serbia, such literary influence and open, institutionalized glorification of Prince Lazar by oral singers in previous centuries would have been far more modest than in the relatively autonomous Habsburg province of Srem. In contrast, in the songs collected on the Christian-controlled part of the Adriatic coast, where both the written Kosovo tradition and several oral Kosovo songs were documented during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the absence of Lazar's commitment to the heavenly kingdom might be said to follow principally from the weaker influence of the Serbian Orthodox church in this mostly Roman-Catholic region and the lack of an institutionalized tradition of oral singing.

Finally, keeping in mind the enormous cultural and political significance of the Kosovo epic, it seems inevitable to point to certain wider implications of this discussion. If this article should have any consequence for these issues at all, it would perhaps lie in the fact that, for centuries, Kosovo functioned as a religious-ethical ideal and much less, if at all, as a national or territorial symbol. Perhaps, in the twenty-first century and in the present political context, it might be worth reminding ourselves of this original meaning.

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## Tesla, a Portrait Among the Masks: A Fragment of the Novel

by  
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Translated by Bogdan Rakić and John Jeffries

### Chapter 116: The Honoree

Birthday cards with best wishes from Albert Einstein, Lee de Forest, Jack Hammond, and Robert Millikan landed in his room like white doves.

"Here's one, and another, and yet another," the maid threw the envelopes on the desk.

With his palm, Tesla flattened the white envelopes. As he put them in a box, he felt a bit embarrassed for desiring more of what he despised.

With a drowsy and blank gaze—like a figurehead on the prow of a ship—he walked down to the hotel lobby at a quarter till noon. A bevy of reporters rushed in at noon.

The seventy-five year old was barely aware of talking to them .... And yet, he talked about the day when women would be superior to men, when his awesome turbine would be vastly improved and his electrical pump implanted into the human body. Then he elaborated on fasting and hard work.

"What do you mean?" inquired the hats, resting their notepads on their knees.

The skinny old man raised his index finger.

"People simply shouldn't eat that much. I stopped eating fish. I stopped eating vegetables. I switched to a diet of bread, milk, and 'factor actus'—a mixture of leek bulbs, cabbage and lettuce hearts, white turnips, and cauliflower. This will make me live for 140 years."

The skinny old man raised his index finger again and told them about his ancestors who owed their longevity to plum brandy, including the one who lived to see 120.

"What was his name? Methuselah?"