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*Death, Illness,  
Body and Soul in Written  
and Visual Culture in  
Byzantium and Late  
Medieval Balkans*

*Edited by Vlada Stanković*

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in Written and Visual Culture in Byzantium  
and Late Medieval Balkans*  
Edited by Vlada Stanković  
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Jakov Đorđević\*

LESSENING THE DREAD  
OF THE HOUR OF DEATH:  
INTRODUCTORY MINIATURES IN  
THE TWO LATE MEDIEVAL SLAVIC PSALTERS

**Abstract:** The aim of the present paper is to show that the introductory miniatures in the Tomić Psalter and the Serbian Psalter in Munich, being the tools for meditation on human mortality, were devised to lessen the dread of the moment of death while simultaneously conveying the Christian forewarning. It is argued that, though representing the similar scene, the one in the Tomić Psalter was designed as a model of a good death, while the one in the Serbian Psalter was offering the message of hope through the dreadful pictorial narration.

**Keywords:** moment of death, remembering death, Tomić Psalter, Serbian Psalter in Munich

Depicting the hour of someone's death is always a highly charged image. Regardless of the culture and its conceptualized views on human mortality, the representation of a dying person is inevitably devised to instigate a reaction. Whether the reaction is manifested through certain emotion(s) or involuntary sensation, it is often paired with further reflections. Those reflections are in essence intimate reexaminations of one's belief system, values, hopes, and fears, with the power to reaffirm or challenge cultural norms.

The late medieval Western culture left an abundance of visual testimonies of such ponderings. If we limit ourselves to depictions of the deaths of "ordinary" people, i.e. to exclude divine or deified mortals or

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\* Jakov Đorđević is research associate at the Department of Art History, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy. jakovdj@gmail.com

quintessential sinners, we will be able to discern a particular human need that brought about those images at the time. For example, Gloria K. Fiero noticed that the period after the first four waves of the plague pandemic (1347–1375) saw a great increase in realistic representations of funerals in prayer books for laypeople (the Books of Hours). Observing that illuminations in question were not allegorical, she argued:

I perceive this unprecedented attention to death, especially as it is represented in those scenes of death ritual that adorn the prayerbooks of the period, as a manifestation of the intense psychological need within European society to restore the religious and social traditions of funeral and burial that were disrupted by the Black Death (Fiero, 1984, p. 271).

Moreover, she remarked:

Even as they describe a society to which ritual had been restored, the miniatures of funeral and burial in fifteenth-century prayerbooks contributed to a new sense of confidence and security (Fiero, 1984, p. 291).

This means that after the period when people were faced not only with the fear of horrible death but also with the uncertainty of receiving the necessary ritual which secured the desired rite of passage, depictions of a proper burial instilled a sense of order and security.

On the other hand, the late medieval period, even before the first outbreak of the Black Death in Europe (1347), gave birth to macabre imagery which spread over the pages of manuscripts for personal devotion as well. Once again, the pictures of decaying corpses were not devised in order to immerse viewers in the fear of unavoidable human fate, but were imagined as tools for conquering it, ensuring a certain comfort and social stability. The miniatures of the Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead were frequently painted in private psalters and books of hours to remind owners to pray for the departed members of their families while simultaneously prompting repentance as a means of preparation for the “good death” (Kinch, 2013, pp. 126–144). Even the personal “encounters” with the menacing personification of Death in the guise of a putrefying cadaver were meant to set the stage for practicing the future “confrontation” instead of passive reception of a mere *memento mori* message. The ultimate goal was not to subdue the opponent but to resist its violence. Preserving dignity in the form of acceptance was a feature of the good death as was the timely confession of every sin (Ђорђевић, 2013, pp. 26–33).

Still, it might be that *ars moriendi* manuals offer the most direct access to the late medieval psychological investment in the moment of one’s death and the attempt to normalize it. This fifteenth-century guide to the “craft of dying”, often incorporating images, is envisioned as a drama at

the deathbed, where angels and demons are contesting over the soul of a dying person. The soon-to-be-dead is subjected to the five temptations which would decide their fate. Therefore, this treatise provided valuable pieces of advice for the last hour of someone's life, together with the appropriate protocols at the deathbed (Gertsman, 2007, pp. 64–65). Thus, by offering a “script” to be performed at the end of one's (physical) life, *ars moriendi* manuals had the power to lessen the anxiety of the dreaded hour of reckoning.

This last example is maybe the best introduction to the topic of the paper at hand: the role of the introductory miniatures of the two fourteenth-century Slavic psalters with representations of the moment of death. Even though both psalters under analysis here, the Serbian Psalter in Munich (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Slav. 4) and the Tomić Psalter (Moscow, GIM, Muz. 2752), belong to the Eastern Christian tradition, the brief overview of the contemporary Western tendencies can set the starting point in trying to understand the human need for such highly charged images where the viewer was invited to reflect on mortality and conceptually comprehend and accept death. Finally, the moment of death in the late Middle Ages can be characterised the same both East and West as – to use the words of Caroline Walker Bynum – “the moment at which not only one's fate but also one's significance was judged” (Bynum, 1998, p. 592).

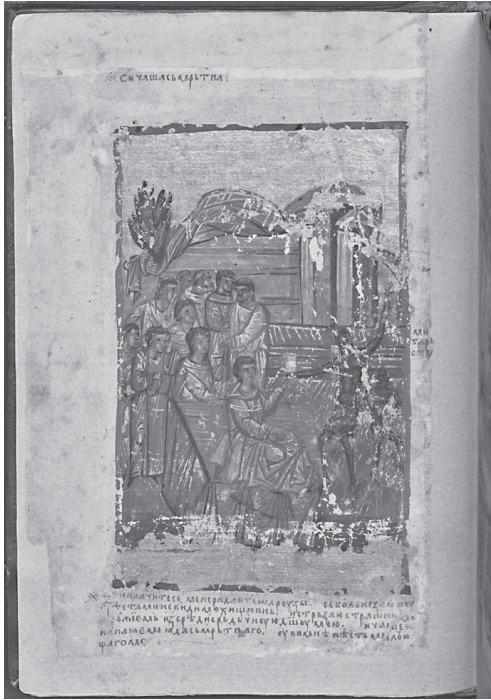
## Visualizing the nature of death

If we try to find an analogy for the Western books of hours in the Byzantine East, psalters might be the most appropriate parallel. Not only did “very few of the medieval psalters now preserved appear to have been read in church” but they also encouraged immediate engagement in personal devotion (Parpulov, 2010, p. 81). Being written in direct speech, the reader was embodying the author's “I” in the psalms, appropriating experiences, needs, fears, and desires delivered throughout the verses. Furthermore, much as the book of hours, psalters often had supplementary devotional texts added to the main corpus and, what is even more telling, were frequently chosen to fit the needs of their owners. Even though a psalter was the absolute cornerstone in the life of a monk, its obvious usefulness granted it popularity among the lay community as well (Parpulov, 2010, p. 80). As a few surviving manuscripts testify by the written instructions, certain psalms were also described as prescriptions for particular unwanted disruptive thoughts or difficult emotional states. Interestingly enough, there is one peculiar example of a psalter with the instructions for intertwining psalms with the practice of divination (Parpulov, 2010, p. 83, 88).

It is not known who the original owners of the two Slavic psalters were (on the two psalters, see Джурова, 1990; Belting, 1978; Радојчић, 1963; Stichel, 1971; Милорадовић, 2017). The Tomić Psalter, which is exhibited today in the State Historical Museum in Moscow (Moscow, GIM, Muz. 2752), is a manuscript of Bulgarian origin, most probably produced in the 1360s (Джурова, 1990). On the other hand, the Serbian Psalter, kept today in the Bavarian State Library in Munich (Cod. Slav. 4) and dated between 1370 and 1395, was created in medieval Serbia and is known to have later arrived at the library of the Serbian Despot Đurađ Branković (Радојчић, 1963). The first miniatures to be encountered in both manuscripts are the full-page illuminations designed to invite their viewers into the meditation on mortality. One twelve-century Byzantine psalter in the Dionysiou Monastery (cod. 6) also has elaborate illuminations devoted to human fate in the afterlife at the beginning of the codex and is established to have belonged to a monk named Sabas (Parpulov, 2010, p. 96). However, if we compare its deathbed scene to those in the Slavic psalters, the apparent difference is that the dying person in the first example is of monastic identity, while the latter depict laymen. Because such images were fashioned as mirrors for their owners, it is logical to suppose that the Serbian Psalter and the Tomić Psalter were ordered by members of the nobility, for it is highly unlikely that someone of lower social status could have afforded such luxurious codices.

They are both opened on the same scene called the Cup of Death (Stichel, 1971, pp. 17–69; Милорадовић, 2017). It is a scene depicting the personification of Death offering a goblet filled with the bitter liquid to a dying person (Fig. 1, 2). The “cup of death” is a motif that can be found in Byzantine sources. In the long recension of the Testament of Abraham, Death calls itself “the bitter cup of death” (*Testament of Abraham* A, 1983, 16:12). Yet the motif is also reminiscent of Christ’s prayer in Gethsemane, where he asks if the cup can be taken from him (Krugovoy, 1972, p. 67–68). This New Testament allusion is quite telling for the present discussion because the illuminations bear associations with the last communion received before departure from this world (cf. Ердељан, 2004, p. 426). The “cup of death” is also an important feature in the Life of Saint Basil the Younger. Part of this vita describes a vision of the saint’s disciple Gregory who encounters a recently deceased slave woman named Theodora. Theodora narrates to him her terrifying experience of dying, indicating that the bitter drink enabled her soul to leave the body (*The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, 2014, Part II, 8). Thus, the cup of death represents the perfect antipode to the chalice and communion. While the Eucharist provided the bodily union with Christ and gave a hint of the future experience of





**Fig. 1:** The Cup of Death, the Serbian Psalter in Munich, fol. 1v.



**Fig. 2:** The Cup of Death, the Tomić Psalter, fol. 3r.

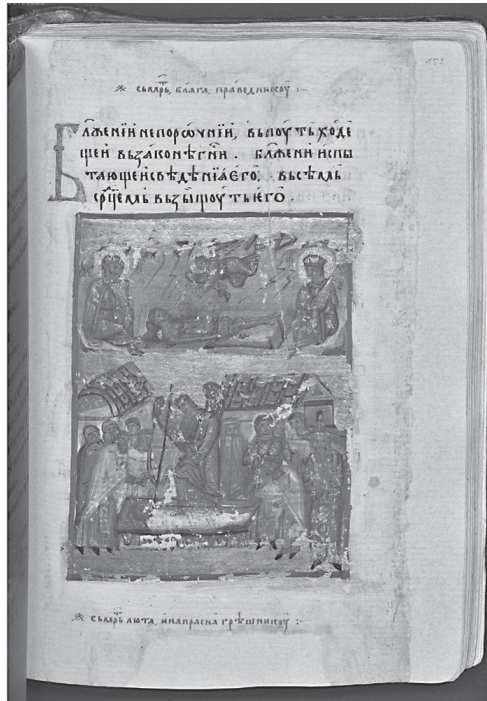
resurrection (Congourdeau, p. 165; Ђорђевић, 2019, pp. 74–83, 118), the deadly chalice was meant to dissolve the psychosomatic marriage of body and soul. Hence, the miniatures of the two Slavic psalters were imbued with the menacing notion of a perverted Eucharist.

Being translated into Old Slavonic, the *Life of Saint Basil the Younger* is the most useful source for understanding the scenes of the Cup of Death illuminated in the two psalters. It is no wonder that the *vita* enjoyed popularity in Byzantium taking into account that the story of Gregory's vision virtually represents the Eastern *ars moriendi* manual. Besides the thrilling nature of the narrative, Theodora's recollection is supplied by an abundance of edifying remarks and practical pieces of advice about what a living person should do in order to prepare for the good death. Moreover, the account reveals in great detail the unavoidable events for the soul after it departs from the body. According to the *vita*, the soul is being led by guardian angels through the aerial tollhouses where demons with prepared records of committed transgressions are waiting ready to contest possession of the soul. This belief in the aerial tollhouses and sinister toll

collectors was never officially recognized by the Orthodox Church, yet it captured the imagination of the churchman and laics alike. Every aerial tollhouse held dominion over a particular sin and the recently deceased person was forced to offer compensation in the form of a good deed performed during their lifetime. Otherwise, the soul would not be permitted to pass further, finishing its journey imprisoned in Hades (see Marinis, 2017, pp.15–46). It is interesting to note that, in the Serbian Psalter, we can clearly distinguish a demon near the deathbed, but there is no trace of the guardian angel. By contrast, one can only discern the heavenly companion in the Tomić Psalter. Still, this is not the only important difference between the two miniatures. The visualization of personified Death is quite different as well.

The personification of Death was very rarely depicted in Byzantine art. In the *Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, its role is explained as the one who is in charge of separating the soul from the body. In Byzantine imagery, this task is most often assigned to angels, demons, or the personified Hades (see Marinis, 2017, pp. 49–66). In literary works, however, Death as a character can be encountered more often, sometimes going by the name of Charos (influenced by the mythological ferryman who transported souls to Hades; Kyriacou, p. 138; see also Angold, pp. 442–453). Still, the representations of Death in the two psalters are similar only at the most basic level – they are both rendered as dark monochromatic figures and, in addition to the cup, they are both holding a weapon. On the other hand, while the Death in the Tomić Psalter is mirroring the angelic form of the heavenly guardian, the one in the Serbian Psalter has taken shape of the demon standing beside it. Does this mean that the nature of Death differs between the two manuscripts, triggering, in turn, two dissimilar experiences in their viewers?

The answer may lie in the parallel analysis of the illuminations set to introduce Psalm 118 (119). The role of the miniatures paired with psalms was not so much to directly illustrate, but rather to problematize the verses. They were meant to bring about allusions to theological concepts or distinct events of the sacred history, deepening the meaning of the text and inviting the reader to ponder it further (cf. Barber, 2007). Certain images even forged connections to the services in which particular psalms were sung. Being associated with the funeral service, it is not surprising that at the beginning of Psalm 118 we encounter funerary-themed images in the two Slavic psalters (Parpulov, 2017, p. 302; Иванић, 2003). In the Serbian Psalter, one finds a double miniature representing the death of a righteous man and the death of a sinner (Fig. 3). In the upper scene, set amidst a rocky landscape, an angel is peacefully lifting a winged soul from the body of a ragged man. In the lower one, however, the angel is strik-



**Fig. 3:** Introductory miniature to Psalm 118, the Serbian Psalter in Munich, fol. 153r.

ing the dead body wrapped in a shroud with a spear, implying a violent separation of body and soul. The contrast between the two moments of death is further accentuated by the figures gathered around the deceased. While in the lower scene the deceased is surrounded by a large number of attendants at his deathbed, even including a priest who is blessing the dying, in the upper scene, the lonely pauper is accompanied by King David and King Solomon. The presence of King David is particularly revealing because, according to a story from the *Apophthegmata* (see Stichel, 1971 p. 23; Marinis, 2017, p. 53), on one occasion he was sent by God with his lyre to aid the departure of the soul that was unwilling to abandon its former “housing”. In the end, the soul happily left the body. The double miniature also bears an unmistakable resemblance to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The moments of death of the two characters from the parable are juxtaposed in the Dečani Monastery, comparing once again the peaceful departure of the soul to the painful separation by the angelic weapon. This association with the story of the rich man and Lazarus underlines the redundancy of the funeral pomp in the case of unrepented sins. In the Life of Saint Basil the Younger, when describing her passage

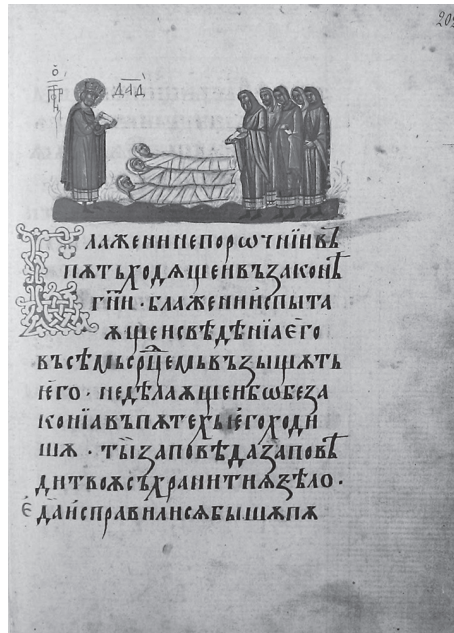


Fig. 4: Introductory miniature to Psalm 118, the Tomić Psalter, fol. 202r.

through certain aerial tollhouses – that of pride and the one of ennu and vainglory – Theodora explains why the demons were not able to charge her with anything. She states: “for how could I, who was a poor slave from infancy, seek to show pride toward anyone?”; “for how and why was I, as a slave, going to be vainglorious?” (*The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, 2014, Part II, 17, 20). Remembering that the Serbian Psalter was originally owned by an aristocrat, the introductory illumination of Psalm 118 must have been especially disturbing, because it emphasized the dangers of the life lived in wealth and power.

In the Tomić Psalter (Fig. 4), on the other hand, we do not encounter a depiction of the moment of death. The miniature at the beginning of Psalm 118 represents three corpses accompanied by the group of laics on the left and King David on the right (Джурова, 1990, 107). King David is not carrying his lyre, but a scroll, just like the first man on the other side of the miniature. It is not unintentional that the deceased are facing the gathered laypersons instead of the celebrated Old Testament figure. It seems that the scene represents prayer (service) for the dead and that the gathered living, gathered as a community, are supposed to mirror King David. Since in medieval images scrolls insinuate the act of speech, it can be presumed that the group of laics is delivering words of Psalm 118 –

King David's verses – for the salvation of their departed loved ones, reminding the reader of the manuscript to do the same.

Therefore, whereas the miniature in the Serbian Psalter is staging a serious warning that emerges from contrasting the first lines of the Psalm (“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord”) to the depiction of the fate of the “defiled”, the one in the Tomić Psalter is inviting its viewer to engage in uttering the same words as the bereaved assembly, without any hint of potential rebuke. It becomes quite clear that those two introductory illuminations of Psalm 118 differ from one another in notion as much as the two personifications of Death. Can it be, then, that the choice of the angelic form given to the personification of Death in the Tomić Psalter was driven by the deliberate intent of lessening the horror of its experience – the horror which is also absent from the previously discussed miniature of the same manuscript?

The Testament of Abraham may provide the appropriate answer. Existing in longer and shorter form in Greek, this apocryphal text is also preserved in a short recension in Slavonic. As the final part of the narrative goes, “when the days of Abraham’s death drew near”, God decided to send Archangel Michael to “adorn Death with great youthful beauty” before sending it to Abraham (*Testament of Abraham B*, 1983, 13:1–3). During the encounter, Death revealed its identity to the Old Testament patriarch saying:

Do not think, Abraham, that this youthful beauty is mine, or that I come thus to every man. No, but if anyone is righteous as you are, I take crowns thus and go to him. But if he is a sinner, I go in great decay; and from their sin I make a crown for my head, and I trouble them with great fear, so that they may be dismayed (*Testament of Abraham B*, 1983, 13:12–14).

In the Life of Saint Basil the Younger, Theodora also attests to the shapeshifting ability of Death who appears first as a “roaring lion” and then as a “young barbarian” (*The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, 2014, Part II, 8). Nonetheless, her account of the words of the two angels witnessing the divorce of her body and soul is even more important. They said to Death: “Why do you stand there? Loose her bonds and treat her with moderation, for she has no great weight of sins” (*The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, 2014, Part II, 8). Hence, what becomes apparent from both texts is that Death adjusts its approach to dying people in accordance with their virtuous or sinful nature.

Therefore, it is beyond doubt that the angelic appearance of Death in the Tomić Psalter was devised to insinuate positive aftermath in the hereafter of the man on the deathbed and, by the “mirroring effect”, of the viewer as well. Contemplating the miniature, the viewer was supposed



**Fig. 5:** The Naked Bones, the Serbian Psalter in Munich, fol. 2r.

to identify with the dying man and gain a glimpse into the unavoidable future experience. Though represented as a difficult and painful experience indeed, particularly by its allusion to the “perverted Eucharist” whose drink is always bitter, the dread of the hour of death is lessened by hopeful implications. Furthermore, the illumination was not designed as a forewarning, but as the model of the “good death” that should be followed. The depicted man has obviously prepared for his departure and he is granted the tendance of his guardian angel. However, does this mean that the owner of the Serbian Psalter, where we find the personification of Death in demonic guise, was encountering the miniature divorced of any hope, which only amplified the dreaded moment further?

## Cry for help

The harsh message about the necessity of repentance and preparation for the good death is undoubtedly embedded in the Serbian Psalter. Even the introductory miniature of Psalm 118 lends itself to this notion. Yet, the initial reflection on human mortality at the begging of this codex does not

end with folio 1v. Unlike the Tomić Psalter, the meditation on death in the Serbian Psalter continues on the following page. On folio 2r, the viewer encounters an illumination that, at first glance, seems to represent two separate scenes (Fig. 5). In the upper part, one sees the famous parable from the Romance of Barlaam and Joasaph, i.e. the story about a man who was chased by a unicorn, while the lower portion, named “the naked bones” by the inscription at the bottom, shows the prophet Isaiah accompanied by a young man before an opened tomb. However, the lack of any drawn border between the two depicted events unifies them as much as the very posture of the prophet who is looking upward, thus implying that the parable should be understood as a vision (Милорадовић, 2017, pp. 266–267).

The concise version of the story about the man and the unicorn is written above the illumination:

A man chased by a wild beast, called a unicorn, fled to a tree. And forgetting all about the chase of the wild beast and the sudden death and the deep chasm under the tree, he saw amidst that very tree honey drops for his pleasure, namely [the delights of] this vain world (Stichel, 1971, p. 49; Милорадовић, 2017, pp. 262–263).

The tale, as it is interpreted in the romance, is the allegory of human life. The unicorn embodies death that is always pursuing the living in order to seize them; the tree stands in for the duration of human life (in the original story the tree is nibbled by two mice – night and day); and, finally, the drops of honey represent delights of this world whose alluring nature makes people forget about their own salvation (Варлаам и Јоасаф, 2005, pp. 86–87). The moral of the parable is clear, straightforward, and particularly convenient for someone of high social status who can afford earthly pleasures, indicating once again that the Serbian Psalter belonged to a person from the aristocratic milieu. It represents the foreshadowing of the unwanted fate.

However, as has already been noted, the depiction of the man and the unicorn is designed as the vision of the prophet Isaiah. He is witnessing it while in the company of a youth as if to recreate the role of the hermit Barlaam who told the parable to the young prince Joasaph in the romance. It goes without saying that Joasaph was so inspired by the teachings of the recluse that he decided to leave everything behind and become a hermit himself. In this pictorial “rendition” of the story, the depicted young man is gazing at the bones in the open tomb with gestures of deep emotional disturbance. The inscription beside him reads: “The man wonders while looking at the naked bones” (Stichel, 1971, p. 53; Милорадовић, 2017, p. 266). Hence, the vision of the prophet Isaiah is the lesson on the transience of human life that explains the object of wonderment for the “new Joasaph”.

Still, while this interpretation of the miniature may seem neat and persuasive, the text on the prophet's scroll challenges it, though it might not appear like that at first. One can still discern the words in his hands: "and I saw naked bones". They are taken from the *idiomela* for funeral services of John of Damascus:

I recalled the prophet who cried "I am earth and ash" and again I looked into the graves and saw naked bones [...] and I said "for who is king or poor, who is just or sinner?" But, o Lord, give rest to your servant with the righteous, for you are the lover of mankind (Stichel, 1971, pp. 53–54; Милорадовић, 2017, p. 270).

First of all, the cited passage, mentioning "the prophet" and "the naked bones", appears to be a direct inspiration for the lower part of the illumination. The prophet from the hymn is identified as the prophet Isaiah in the miniature. Secondly, even though the notion of the transience of human life imbues most of the paragraph, the last lines indicate that we are dealing with the intercessory prayer for the salvation of the dead. Is this connection to the verses of John of Damascus actually implying a different notion behind this image in the Serbian Psalter? To put it simply – are we dealing with the representation of mere forewarning for the viewer?

Art historians have already noticed that the figure of prophet Isaiah on folio 2r closely resembles the one of the same prophet on folio 195v (Милорадовић, 2017, pp. 270–271). The latter is illuminated next to the Ode of Isaiah (*King James Bible*, 2017, Isaiah 26:9–20). The Odes (or canticles) are the nine poetic excerpts from the Bible that were positioned after the Psalms in the Byzantine Psalters (Parpulov, 2017, p. 300; Walter, 1990). They are fervent expressions of prayer toward God, much as the Psalms, and there are examples of the miniatures attached to them which were supposed to instigate readers' embodiment of the verses by offering suitable performative models (Nelson, 1989, pp. 151–152). However, this is not the case with the depiction of the prophet Isaiah in the Serbian Psalter. He is represented as receiving the cleansing coal by an angelic figure during his vision (*King James Bible*, 2017, Isaiah 6:6–7). While this choice underlines the prophetic character of the Ode (Walter, 1990, p. 51), it also connects the two figures rendered on different pages. The process of reading that illuminated devotional manuscripts in the Middle Ages, particularly the private ones, was marked by contemplation. The text was "studied" and experienced together with the miniatures, but not always limiting the reader/viewer to unearthing the word-image relation. Miniatures could also allude to other images and thus bring additional (sometimes unexpected) meanings and possibilities to the "game" (cf. Đorđević, 2019). If we consider the mnemonic potential of illuminations – the abil-



ity of “tying” a text or part of the text to a particular image in one’s mind – the figure of prophet Isaiah in the depiction of the Naked Bones could inspire an association in the reader’s mind (the reader who had already read the whole Psalter) with the Ode to which the similar figure of the same prophet is attached. In the Ode of Isaiah, unsurprisingly, one can indeed find verses that can be related to an image of a tomb with “naked bones”:

Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise.  
Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and  
the earth shall cast out the dead (*King James Bible*, 2017, Isaiah 26:19).

Therefore, just like the reference to *idiomelon* of John of Damascus, this is another association of the miniature on folio 2r with the text that conveys the message of salvation. This can also explain the choice of the prophet Isaiah to embody “the prophet who cried ‘I am earth and ash’” from the hymn because otherwise the connection with the Ode of Isaiah would be lost. However, the inclusion of the notion of the potential salvation of the dead in the miniature of the Naked Bones somewhat undermines the forewarning effect. Hence, one may justifiably question the true purpose of the illumination in the Serbian Psalter.

The references to the two texts may not be the only indications of a hopeful message. Both the Serbian and the Tomić Psalters have additional inscriptions accompanying their deathbed scenes. These words can be found in both manuscripts:

Mourn and weep for me, oh, friends! For lo, suddenly a brigand appeared invisibly before me [...] tearing out my soul amidst the heart with a terrible weapon [...] and giving me a sip from the cup of deadly bitterness. Woe is me that there is no one to pity me (Джурова, 1990, p. 93; Stichel, 1971, p. 25; Милорадовић, 2017, p. 255).

At the bottom of the page in the Tomić Psalter, one also reads:

Pause and see, oh, man, your life’s end [...] and perceive and comprehend this existence. Weep and see me slain by death [...] for short was our fellowship. The rumble and murmur ceased [...] and the light in my eyes is quenched. And the beauty of my face is withered like a flower. And the grave, that unknown prison, detaches me from friends. Oh, the horror and wonder! Oh, the dreadful mystery! (Джурова, 1990, p. 93; Stichel, 1971, p. 57).

It is interesting to note that both passages are addressed to the on-lookers – in the first case, to the gathered friends surrounding the deathbed, but indirectly to the viewer as well, being the one who is also witnessing the Death’s approach; in the second paragraph, found only in the Tomić Psalter, the viewer is, however, directly addressed (“Pause and see, oh, man, your life’s end”). The second paragraph is actually an invitation

to contemplate one's own mortality through the death of the other. Rainer Stichel pointed out that it is the translation of a Greek poem by Ioannes Kladas, namely an ekphrasis in the form of a grave inscription (Stichel, 1971, pp. 57–59). The main aim behind such funerary inscription was to arouse compassion in the reader (by identifying with the deceased) so that he or she would be moved to intercessory prayer for the dead person (Đorđević, 2018). Furthermore, the words of the Tomić Psalter are imagined as though they are coming from the grave (“that unknown prison”), hence, though there is no pictorial rendering of the “naked bones”, the reader is confronted with verbal imagery of human transience in this manuscript as well as in the Serbian Psalter on folio 2r (Stichel, 1971, pp. 57–59). Being similar in character to the distinct type of sepulchral inscriptions, the text also implies the need for intercessory prayer.

On the other hand, the first cited passage, which is found in both psalters in connection to the deathbed scene, resembles in tone the *Kanon eis Psychorragounta* (*Kanon for He Who Is at the Point of Death*), which was read shortly before one's death as part of a service (Marinis, 2017, pp. 107–110). It describes the painful separation of body and soul, as well as the soul's journey to Hades. The text is delivered in direct speech, filled with troublesome expressions of sorrow and terror such as “mourn and weep for me” and “woe is me”, but also with cries for help – whether to friends, angels, Christ or, in most cases, the Virgin Mary. The verses of the sixth Ode of the *Kanon* are dedicated to the request of the dying man for his (unworthy) dead body to be thrown away to dogs:

What is the benefit to me if my soul is to be dragged into terrible punishments while my body is being read the [funeral] service by you. It is not worthy; rather, drag it out and throw it to the dogs.

Perhaps passing strangers, seeing the bones dragged by dogs, will be moved by compunction and cry: help, mistress [the Virgin Mary], the soul of this wretched body (Marinis, 2017, p. 138, Ode VI, hymns 3–4).

Even though the feeling of despair pervades the text of the *Kanon eis Psychorragounta*, there are also reemerging hints of hope in intercessory prayers. In the case of the sixth Ode, the dying man is obviously insisting for his body to be left unburied as the food for animals in order to enable this horrid spectacle to move the strangers passing by to prayer. Moreover, in the perambulatory that surrounds the chapel of St George in the Chilandar Monastery, where the painted cycle of the *Kanon* is preserved, these exact verses are illustrated representing the accidental onlookers with gestures of amazement (Marinis, 2017, pp. 115–116; Đorđević, 2018, p. 25), not unlike those performed by the young man in the Serbian Psalter on folio 2r.

The salvific properties of the prayers for the dead were debated at length by various Byzantine theologians (see Marinis, 2017, pp. 93–106). Particularly problematic were the dead who died with unrepented sins. Were the intercessory services and prayers effective in those cases? The theological teachings were never officially unified. At the Council of Florence (1438–1439), during the lively dispute on the existence of purgatory between Western and Eastern Churches, Mark Eugenikos (d. 1445) argued for the possibility of salvation for those who died with unrepented sins, but not the mortal ones. They will be cleansed not by the purgatorial fire but through the experience of fear at the moment of death and the temporary imprisonment in Hades (Marinis, 2017, p. 104). Writing one of the treatises on the soul dedicated to the question of purgatory, Eugenikos' disciple Gennadios Scholarios (ca. 1400–1472) stated that church services can indeed accelerate the process of cleansing of the pardonable sins. However, he also mentioned that there are known examples of souls with mortal sins that have been saved from Hades by the intercession of saints (Marinis, 2017, p. 80). On the other hand, in this same period when theologians were struggling to reconcile different teachings and beliefs (mostly stirred by the desire to present purgatorial fire as unnecessary), one peculiar service emerged preserved in a small number of manuscripts – the “Service of the Funeral Unction”. Its main purpose was the remission of sins after one's death (Marinis, 2017, pp. 126–130).

Going back to the Serbian Psalter, it can be rightfully argued that the intent behind the miniature of the Naked Bones was primarily not to forewarn its viewer, but to emphasize the salvific power of the intercessory prayers for the dead. The young man is moved by the sight of the opened tomb, and the vision of the prophet Isaiah can be understood as the recounting of the sinful life of the deceased. However, both the prophet's scroll and the gestures of the youth imply the possibility of his salvation. Furthermore, it seems that the second illumination was necessary in order to handle the immersion of the viewer in fear after encountering the dreadful moment of death on folio 1v. The second miniature brought back the sense of control.

Therefore, while the image of the Cup of Death in the Tomić Psalter functioned as the model of the good death, lessening the dread of the hour of reckoning by employing a positive example, the same scene in the Serbian Psalter was purposefully designed as an ominous admonition emphasizing the “moral of the story”. Still, even in the Serbian Psalter, the harsh Christian didactic approach had to be reconciled somehow

with the need of regaining the sense of security, instead of immersing the viewer in despair. That way, the moral message is preserved together with the possibility of hope even in the darkest scenario. One may even argue that the instigation of fear and its utilization in fashioning the terrifying deathbed scene was done not only to convey the Christian forewarning but also to lessen the already existing fear. What if a person struggled with the fear of forgetting to confess a certain sin before death? We are actually able to sense this anxiety from theological debates, but also the text of the *Life of Saint Basil the Younger*. Theodora herself states that she had forgotten some of her sinful deeds before encountering the neatly bureaucratic demonic records (*The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, 2014, Part II, 18). By perceiving the depictions on folios 1v and 2r as a consecutive narrative, the bones in the opened tomb can be identified as those belonging to the dying person from the previous scene – the Cup of Death. Thus, the terrible uncertainty of the moment of death would be alleviated in the viewer through the process of deep contemplation – the intercessory prayers of the young man and the prophet will be able to help the dead. Finally, the Serbian Psalter is not a unique example of a private devotional manuscript with such a daring, thought-out programme (see Ђорђевић, 2013, pp. 33–52). The medieval images for personal meditation on human mortality were generally envisioned as tools for confronting existing fears that surround death. They had a utilitarian purpose above all.

In the end, one additional point should be addressed. Such strong emphasis on the intercessory prayer in the Serbian Psalter and its implied notion in the words of the discussed paragraph below the miniature in the Tomić Psalter direct also to the care for the deceased loved ones. Besides pondering their own future fate, the owners of the two devotional manuscripts must have been reminded to ensure the salvation of those who died before them. Death in the Middle Ages was always a matter of community, and the established bonds did not cease after departing from this world. Even Theodora's account in the *Life of Saint Basil the Younger* attests to that. Theodora would not have been able to pass certain aerial tollhouses if she had not been supplied with the spiritual gold of her, at that moment, still living spiritual caretaker – Saint Basil (*The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, Part II, 10). Being recognized as a holy man during his lifetime, not only on earth but in heaven as well, he was also able to provide all his deceased followers with a distinguished heavenly residence long before his own death (*The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, 2014, Part II, 46).

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Јаков Ђорђевић\*

## УБЛАЖАВАЊЕ УЖАСА САМРТНОГ ЧАСА: УВОДНЕ МИНИЈАТУРЕ ДВА ПОЗНОСРЕДЊОВЕКОВНА СЛОВЕНСКА ПСАЛТИРА

**Апстракт:** Циљ овог рада је да покаже како су уводне минијатуре у Томићевог псалтиру и Српском псалтиру у Минхену, будући оруђа за медитацију људске пролазности, требало да ублаже ужас тренутка смрти пружајући истовремено и хришћанско упозорење. Упркос томе што приказују сличну сцену, у раду се образлаже да је минијатура из Томићевог псалтира осмишљена као модел добре смрти, док је она из Српског псалтира нудила поруку наде путем застрашујућег ликовног наратива.

**Кључне речи:** тренутак смрти, сећање на смрт, Томићев псалтир, Српски псалтир у Минхену

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\* Јаков Ђорђевић је научни сарадник на Одељењу за историју уметности Универзитета у Београду – Филозофског факултета. jakovdj@gmail.com