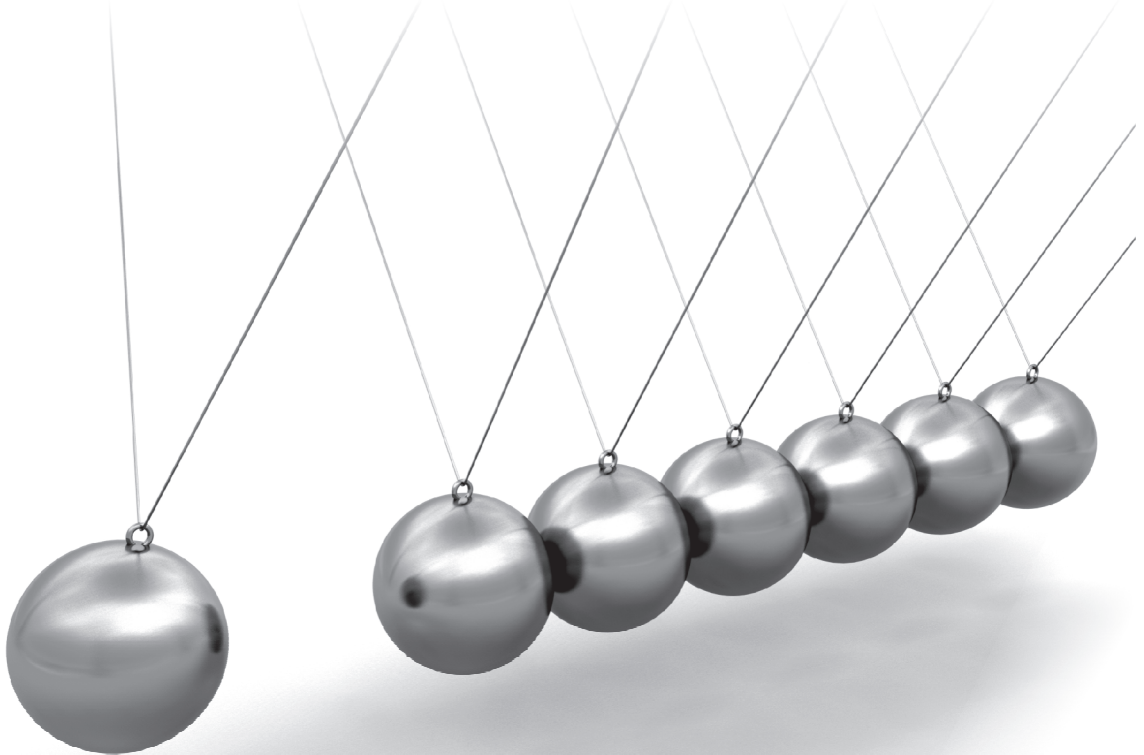


Death, Illness, Body and Soul in Written and Visual Culture in Byzantium and Late Medieval Balkans

Edited by Vlada Stanković



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Jelena Erdeljan*

ON DEATH AND DYING IN MEDIEVAL SERBIA. WRITTEN SOURCES AND VISUAL CULTURE

Abstract: Textual and visual evidence is plentiful for the study of issues related to death and dying in medieval Serbia. Being a part of the Christian Orthodox Byzantine *oikoumene*, all rites and rituals pertaining to death, dying, burial and remembrance in medieval Serbia must firstly and necessarily, although not exclusively nor too insistently, be regarded within that context. The particularities and specificities brought on, on the one hand, by the multicultural and multiconfessional affiliation of the population which made up the society of medieval Serbia, and, on the other, by the enduring remnants of Slavic pagan funerary practices and beliefs particularly among the majority rural Orthodox population should always be kept in mind. This text offers an overview and insight into the sophisticated rhetoric of death and dying in both the written sources and visual material related to funeral art in medieval Serbia that should be the subject of further research.

Keywords: death, dying, medieval Serbia, texts, visual culture

A number of preserved written sources from the corpus of texts of various genres produced over centuries in the Serbian cultural milieu and in Old Church Slavonic of the Serbian redaction offer testimony of the final hours and funerals of historical figures who played decisive roles in the life and politics of medieval Serbia from the 12th to the 15th century, from the time of first Nemanides to the end of the Middle Ages and the fall of Serbian lands under Ottoman rule. Together with the visual material, a significant number of preserved mausolea of rulers, members of the ruling dynasties, dignitaries of the state and church prelates and the per-

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taining monuments marking their graves, as well as a vast count of tombstones, arcosolea and other forms of funerary monuments of both high ranking noblemen and simple peasants, along with funerary portraits and inscriptions on walls and gravestones, textual and visual evidence is quite plentiful for the study of issues related to death and dying in medieval Serbia (Ердељан, 2004). Over the past several decades, beginning with the the project supervised in the 1980's by professor Jovanka Maksimović and realized at the Institute for Art History of the Department of Art History, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, funerary monuments of various types, belonging to kings and emperors, patriarchs and bishops, as well as to the ordinary man of the lower ranks of medieval society have been the most thoroughly studied and extensively published aspect of all things sepulchral in medieval Serbian culture (Поповић, 1992; Ердељан, 1996; Поповић, 2019). Still, much remains to be studied and considered regarding the sophisticated rhetoric of death and dying in both the written sources and visual material related to funeral art in medieval Serbia.

To be well prepared for death and dying is the prime goal and task of all good Christians. In the life of *homo medievalis* the moment of burial represents the end of earthly, corporeal and corruptible existence but even more so the inception of a path leading towards life everlasting, the eschaton. It is the first, preparatory step on the journey towards a new, eternal life in Christ resurrected which is the hope of every Christian throughout his life on earth, the apogee of salvation for which he is diligently preparing throughout his lifetime, through life in the Church and partaking in its sacraments, from birth to the final eucharist and anointment (Constas, 2010; Marinis, 2017). As part of those preparations and hopes in the life of the world to come, it was customary in the Middle Ages for all those who had even the least possibility to prepare their places of eternal rest in their lifetime. The place and manner of burial, as well as all pertaining aspects of material and visual culture, i.e. type and visual identity of funerary monument, were determined by the social status of the deceased and was prescribed, in effect, by the society and community to which he belonged. Still, regardless of rank and wealth, before the body of the deceased would be able to reach his "true fatherland", as Domentijan referred to the grave in his Life of St. Sava the Serbian (Доментијан, 1988, p. 224), there were steps to be taken and rites to undergo that would grant the dying a "good death" and a safe passage of return into the bosom of Abraham.

Being a part of the Christian Orthodox Byzantine *oikoumene*, as well as heir and part-taker in the Orthodox Byzantine theology and liturgical practice, all rites and rituals pertaining to death, dying, burial and remembrance in medieval Serbia must firstly and necessarily, although not exclu-

sively nor too insistently, be regarded within that context. The particularities and specificities brought on, on the one hand, by the multicultural and multiconfessional affiliation of the population which made up the society of medieval Serbia – above all a strong Catholic presence especially in the coastal Adriatic area in cities such as Kotor and Bar (Живковић, 2020), as well as in the inland cities such as Novo Brdo or Belgrade (Поповић, 2019), and, on the other, by the enduring remnants of Slavic pagan funerary practices and beliefs particularly among the majority rural Orthodox population (Ердељан, 1996), should always be kept in mind.

The Saxon church of Santa Maria in Novo Brdo (Novomonte), a flourishing Serbian medieval town founded at the beginning of the 14th century in the days of king Stefan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282–1321) that was a paramountly important center of mining, trade and culture in late medieval times (Поповић & Симић, 2020) stands out as a well studied case in point regarding visual culture as testimony of non-Orthodox Christian customs related to death and dying in medieval Serbia. The rapid development of the city was undoubtedly accompanied by an active religious life, first of the Saxon or Sassi miners, followed by numerous merchants from Adriatic towns, primarily those from the "King's City" of Kotor, and subsequently also from Dubrovnik. Santa Maria in Novomonte was built in the last decade of the reign of King Stefan Uroš II. Together with the remains of a three nave basilica in Stari trg i.e. medieval Trepča, Santa Maria in Novomonte thus offers insight into the life of Catholic communities in mining centers in medieval Serbia such as Brskovo, Srebrenica or Rudnik (Поповић, 2019).

The remains of the Saxon church in Novo Brdo offer a rare, practically unique example of an urban Catholic church in the continental parts of medieval Serbian lands which makes them all the more important in the study of this part of the population of medieval Serbia. Santa Maria in Novomonte, the Saxon church of Novo Brdo, is also of prime importance for the study of burial customs and funerary visual and material culture of the Catholic population of inland cities and towns of medieval Serbian lands as it had served as the resting place of Saxon miners and merchants from Dubrovnik, Kotor, Venice, Hungary and other Catholic communities within and outside medieval Serbia who traded and dealt in the rich and valuable mining resources and other goods exported from the Balkans to other parts of Europe and the Mediterranean world. Their tombstones, as well as several finely constructed underground funerary vaults, cover the floor of Santa Maria in Novomonte and span the entire period in which the church functioned, from the first decades of the 14th to the end 17th century. Together with the grave finds, they provide excellent and so far

best studied material related to the issue of death and dying of the Catholic inhabitants of urban centers of medieval Serbia and the Ottoman Balkans prior to the Great Austro-Turkish War (Поповић, 2019).

The aspects of material and visual culture, type of burial and form of graves and grave goods and their pertaining funerary markers, slabs and a single *stećak* like monument, in Santa Maria in Novomonte show little or no difference at all when compared to coeval burials and funerary monuments of the Orthodox population of medieval Serbia. Indeed, in their own way they testify of the common origins of Orthodox and Catholic beliefs and practices associated with death, burial, and remembrance in the late medieval and early modern period, dating back to the dawn of Christianity and the period of Late Antiquity, which were only set on divergent theological and eschatological paths with the formulation of the doctrine of purgatory in the Western church that was formally declared at the Second Council of Lyon in 1274 and its rejection in the Orthodox *oikoumene*. Unlike the dogmatic approach of the Roman Church, Orthodox theologians were content with a fluid, even nebulous, understanding of the transition between this life and the next: despite the obvious importance of these themes, the nature of the human and its fate after death were never authoritatively defined or formalized by an ecumenical council, nor were they the subjects *per se* of systematic theological inquiry (Chitwood, 2021, p. 199). Thus, throughout the Byzantine world one finds an assortment of eschatologies strewn somewhat carelessly about. As Vasileios Marinis rightfully noted: “From the outset it should be said that, for all their reputed and professed preoccupation with the afterlife, the Byzantines never produced a systematic theology on the postmortem fate of the soul. Or, rather, they did so only in the fifteenth century, under duress at the Council of Ferrara– Florence, whose goal was the union of the Byzantine and Latin Churches (Marinis, 2017, p. 2).

Being a part of the Orthodox Byzantine world, Serbian medieval attitudes towards death, dying and *memoria* were certainly theologically and liturgically grounded in the centuries-long Christian Orthodox tradition of the Byzantine church. Byzantine *typika* of the Komnenian era, such as, firstly, the *Typikon* of the Pantokrator monastery in Constantinople from 1136 as the dynastic mausoleum (Pantokrator, 2000), as well as the *Typikon* of the monastery of the Virgin Kosmosoteira at Pherrai from 1152, the burial church of sebastokrator Isaac Komnenos (Kosmosoteira, 2000), offer elaborate descriptions of funerary provisions and *memoriae*. Apart from those of the ktetors and imperial family members, Byzantine *typika* of the Komnenian era also offer regulations for the burial of the monks (e.g., Kosmosoteira) outside the monastic enclosure perimeter but within the broader sacred space, of the monastic foundation. Moreover, the extraordinarily elaborate commemorative practices and descriptions

of tombs that are related in the *typika* of the Georgian general Gregory Pakourianos in the 11th century for Bačkovo in Bulgaria and of Emperor John II Komnenos (r. 1118–1143) for the monastery of Christ Pantokrator in Constantinople can be compared with the archaeological evidence at both sites (and indeed the former is still a functioning monastery) (Pakourianos, 2000; Chitwood, 2021, p. 203). They offer direct and invaluable insight into attitudes towards death, dying and remembrance in the Middle Byzantine period and thus provide us with the prerequisite historical and theological background significant for understanding the first preserved Serbian medieval written sources, monastic *typika* and hagiographies, related to the subject and produced at that time and as an expression of belonging integrally to the world of the Empire of the Romans in the era of the Komnenoi (Stanković, 2016).

Being integrally a part of the Byzantine monastic tradition and its constitutional regulation, *typika* of the first Nemanide foundations from the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century, composed by Sava the Serbian and following the Constantinopolitan Evergetis model, offer similar provisions regarding death, burial and memory of their royal Nemanide ktetors and can be regarded as the first written sources relevant for the study and understanding of death and dying in medieval Serbia (Свети Сава, 2005). Moreover, they are related to the churches dedicated to the feasts of the Introduction of the Virgin to the Temple at Chilandar (Свети Сава, 2005, pp. 99–151) and the Dormition of the Virgin at Studenica (Свети Сава, 2005, pp. 153–161), the first and the final resting place of Symeon Nemanja, the founder of the holy Nemanide family (Fig. 1). Nemanja's death and burial in Chilandar on Mt. Athos in 1199, and



Fig. 1: Church of the Dormition of the Virgin at Studenica

the transfer of his body to Studenica in 1207, are the pivotal points in the process of construction of his saintly identity and the sanctified legitimacy of the state his children and their descendents inherited (Erdeljan, 2013). The passages in his first *vitae* texts composed by his sons, Rastko-Sava (Свети Сава, 1986) and Stefan (Стефан Првовенчани, 1988), which recount those milestones in the life and cult of the first Serbian saint also provide insight into hagiography as the genre of medieval text crucial for understanding the most significant aspects of death and dying in the official, high culture of medieval Serbia and its elites.

A feature that at once grounds the Serbian tradition within the bosom of Byzantine Orthodoxy, hagiographies of Serbian rulers are at the same time a feature of royal saintly cults and a medium of textual communication that stand outside the Byzantine way. While extolling their virtues as champions of Orthodoxy and New Constantines (Марјановић–Душанић, 1997), hagiographies of Serbian rulers, starting with the paradigm model of Stefan Nemanja, the monk Symeon, are in themselves a feature of the Serbian medieval tradition that angles it closer to Western or, more specifically, Central European medieval Hungarian concepts of holy rulers and blessed princesses. Saint Stephen, the first fully Christian king of Hungary, and his son, Saint Emerik, were canonized in 1083. The cult of King Stephen I was initially organized for political reasons, and this laid the basis for his continued importance as a reference point. His hagiography also reflected political trends and the positioning of the Arpadian state among the major political powers of the era, firstly the Papacy and the Empire, through heavenly intervention and the intercession of the Virgin Mary (Klaniczay, 2002, pp. 114–153; Berend et al., 2013, pp. 369–374).

In hagiographies of Serbian rulers we find *ars moriendi* references as well as descriptions and testimonies of dying a “good death” that are not to be found in accounts of deaths of emperors of Byzantium. That accounts of deaths of Serbian rulers are by definition different from those of Byzantine emperors is quite logical and in keeping with the ideas of hierarchy and status of the Serbian rulers within the universal family of nations that is precisely defined in the introduction to the Chilandar charter issued by Stefan Nemanja – “God made the Romans emperors, the Hungarians kings and the Serbs princes” (Хрисовуља монаха Симеона, p. 67). Firstly, as we learn from Serbian royal hagiographies as the key and crucially important written sources, one faces and recognizes the inevitable proximity of death and the hour of departure from this world. Having sensed that the hour of death was upon him, Symeon Nemanja addressed his son Sava and the monks of Chilandar: “Here, the hour of my leave is near, the Lord is already dismissing me in peace, according to His word, so that it may be fulfilled: You are dust and to dust thou shall return” (*King James Bible*,

2017, Genesis 3: 19). (Свети Сава, 1986, pp. 95–119, in particular p. 113). This is especially underlined in *vitae* texts of those members of the ruling house of Nemanjić whose cults are prepared carefully and already during their lifetime.

The entire process of separation of the soul from the body of the dying is described in detail. The apogee, the culmination of that process is the moment of revelation and heavenly vision when the soul is still in the earthly body yet already at the gates of heaven. The death scene of St. Symeon Nemanja, as rendered in the *vita* text composed by his son Sava and as part of the *typonikon* of the monastery of the Virgin Evergetis in Studenica, is the first and paradigmatic example (Свети Сава, 1986, pp. 95–119, in particular p. 113). Given the identity of the author and the political circumstances of its creation, it is so deeply imbued with theological and political testimony, a true and irrefutable testament of the dying Symeon Nemanja as it is at once produced in the presence of earthly witnesses as before the face of God and his holy mother, the Virgin Mary.

The first *vitae* of Symeon Nemanja, composed at the very beginning of the thirteenth century by his sons, Sava the Serbian (Свети Сава, 1986, pp. 95–119, in particular p. 113) and Stefan the First Crowned (Стефан Првовенчани, 1988, pp. 61–101, in particular p. 83), as well that written in 1263/64 upon commission of Serbian king Uroš I, grandson of Nemanja, by Domentijan (Доментијан, 1988, pp. 236–325, in particular p. 294), Chilandar monk and pupil of St. Sava, relate the same story which took place at Nemanja's deathbed. Feeling that the hour is upon him ("the hour of my leave is near"), Nemanja asks his son Sava to bring forth to him the icon of the Virgin so that he could fulfill his vows of committing his spirit into her hands ("Bring to me, child, the mother of my Lord Jesus Christ, so that I can, as I promised, commit into her hands my spirit.") while lying on the ground on a simple straw mat, his head resting on a stone, in utter monastic humility. Teodosije does not relate the act of bringing the icon forth before Nemanja but speaks rather of the emotional and spiritual effect of his contact with this holy icon. He speaks of the fact that in the hour of his death Nemanja's face was "bright and he looked with joy at the most pure eikon of His most pure Mother" (Теодосије, pp. 99–261, in particular p. 144).

Historiography has identified this icon of the Mother of God with Christ into whose hands Symeon Nemanja committed his spirit as the mosaic icon of the Virgin Hodegetria with Christ child, a supreme work of Komnenian icon painting in the luxury medium of gold mosaic, produced at the very end of the twelfth century, around 1198, most probably in Constantinople or Thessaloniki. It was highly revered as patron

and protectress of Chilandar, the katholikon of which was dedicated to the Virgin and the feast of the Introduction of the Virgin to the Temple. As such she was given a highly prominent place within the hierotopical ensemble of the church and kept in the altar or by the iconostasis of the monastery katholikon (Erdeljan & Brajović, 2015).

The act of most intense, spiritual communication with the holy at the hour of death, by physical or visual touch with icons, often of the Virgin Mary, pressing them against the body or holding them before the face of the dying, was part of the *ars moriendi* of monks in the Byzantine world, as attested in visual culture in representations of dying monks. Such a relation between a departing soul and the icon is rendered in Chilandar itself, in the thirteenth century fresco cycle of the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete found in the chapel of St. George located on the storey of the Chilandar pyrgos of the same dedication where a dying monk is shown underneath an icon of the Virgin to whom he directs his final thoughts and prayers (Тодић, 1997; Тодић, 1998). Whatsmore, at the time of death of Symeon Nemanja, and in the Komnenian world in general of which Serbia of Nemanja's day was an integral part, close, personal and emotional, sensory experience of the holy was a hallmark of piety and of both state and private devotion and cult. Most telling in that respect is the development of the cult and ritual of veneration of the palladium of capital and Empire, the holy miracle-working icon of the Virgin Hodegetria in Constantinople under the Komnenoi (Станковић, 2006, pp. 270–288; Lidov, 2004; Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 118–133). As stipulated by the typikon of the monastery of Christ Pantokrator, the dynastic mausoleum of the Komnenoi, “the holy icon of my most pure Lady and Mother of God Hodegetria”, should be taken into the monastery on the days of the commemorations of the ktetors and be set in the church of Saint Michael near their tombs (Pantokrator, 2000, p. 756).

Visions and revelations of the heavenly realm at the moment of death of significant historical figures were experienced not only on the part of the dying but of the entire population – thus offering practically palpable proof of the connection between this world and the awaited eschatological future as well as of the chosen, New Israel, status of the departed shepherd of the chosen people and the land placed by Divine Providence under his care. Such was the apocalyptic vision in the skies over Belgrade in the hour of death of despot Stefan Lazarević in 1427. The sky above his capital, that he had so carefully constructed as the Serbian New Jerusalem and New Constantinople, was filled with lightning, thunder and storm clouds which shrouded the city. His learned hagiographer, Konstantin of Konstantin of Kostenec or Konstantin the Philosopher describes that from the iconostasis of the the iconostasis of the metropolitan church of Belgrade altar icons

rose up and formed the act of Deisis in the air as a final, irrefutable proof of the status of the despot's capital as a God-protected and God-chosen city (Erdeljan, 2017, p. 189; Константин Филозоф, 1989, p. 128).

Death itself was a public event in the Middle Ages, a ceremony presided over by the dying. One of the most detailed descriptions of such a public death is found in the vita of Queen Jelena Anžujška, wife of Stefan I Uroš, composed by archbishop Danilo II. The public, anticipated, and highly structured act of death and dying of a royal is also a highly political act. Even more so than that of Symeon Nemanja, the death scene of queen Jelena Anžujška, as re-rendered by her hagiographer, Danilo II, is a masterpiece of medieval literature and a bravado of political astuteness as much on the part of the departing queen as on the part of her trusted and devoted, learned hierarch friend. The scene takes place in Brnjaci, Jelena's residence and entails all the desired elements of a „good death “. First it is announced and proclaimed by the dying queen whereupon she calls for the gathering and attendance of representatives of the church and state elite. Hearing of their arrival, the dying queen utters from her death-bed prayer and words of humble gratitude for the joy of being able to rejoice in the name of the Lord for the last time in their life and through their prayers and the hymns they sang. Danilo II goes on to describe the moment of Jelena's passing, moving on to the translatio of her body to the already prepared mausoleum church of the Virgin in Gradac (Fig. 2) and the funeral itself, crowned by the encomium proclaimed by her grieving



Fig. 2: Church of the Annunciation of the Virgin in Gradac

son and king, Stefan Uroš II Milutin (Данило Други, 1988, pp. 79–107; Ердељан, 2004, pp. 425–426). In this *vita* text, Danilo draws, quite purposefully, both direct analogies between the death scene of Jelena and scenes of Serbian state assemblies, with the words *sabor* and *sinklit* used to denote the participants, the form and even more importantly the purpose of the large scale public gathering at the event of the passing of the Serbian queen (Ђурић, 1991, p. 190) while also, and at the same time, comparing it explicitly with the scene of the death of the Virgin (Данило Други, 1988, p. 99). This written testimony of the death of queen Jelena is multiply significant and signifying, as both her political testament and as an expression of her personal piety and devotedness to keeping the True Faith as an Orthodox queen of Catholic provenance (Erdeljan, 2016).

Present even before the hour of her passing, Jelena's presentiment of the heavenly abode prepared for her soul in its true fatherland, the Heavenly Jerusalem, is beautifully rendered in her hagiography in a poetic masterpiece of Serbian medieval literature penned by the learned archbishop Danilo II in the text of her *vita* (Данило Други, 1988, p. 86). Upon taking the monastic vow in the church of St. Nicholas in Skadar, the ailing queen Jelena, now nun Jelena, addresses her soul in pious introspection, in sweet solace and joy of expectation of meeting the Bridegroom from the Parable of the ten virgins (*King James Bible*, 2017, Matthew 25:1–4): "Oh expiated soul, sin-loving soul, here is the end of thy life in this century and to the other world you shall go, and among other people. For here you leave behind the short-lived beauty, where you had waited to be nourished in centuries, living sweetly. For here the heralds have come and said: They are calling you, rise and do not be late."

*All translations of Serbian medieval sources into English
by Jelena Erdeljan*

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Јелена Ердељан*

О СМРТИ И УМИРАЊУ У СРЕДЊОВЕКОВНОЈ СРБИЈИ. ПИСАНИ ИЗВОРИ И ВИЗУЕЛНА КУЛТУРА

Апстракт: Српски средњовековни писани извори и визуелна култура нуде изванредну грађу за познавање и разумевање свих аспеката смрти и умирања у средњовековној Србији. Будући део и баштиник византијске православне богослужбене традиције и вербо-визуелне културе, и овај део српске средњовековне културе треба свакако разматрати у том контексту. Мора се, међутим, узети у обзир и неправославно, католичко, становништво – нарочито у градовима на приморју али и у централним областима српске средњовековне државе, као и стара предхришћанска пракса и веровања која у свом христјанизованом виду живе у православној популацији, нарочито у руралним областима. Софистицирану реторику смрти и умирања у средњовековној Србији која је предмет овог текста свакако у будућности треба даље проучавати и то управо кроз међусобну повезаност вербалног, литерарног, и слике, визуелног.

Кључне речи: смрт, умирање, средњовековна Србија, писани извори, визуелна култура

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The volume *Death, Illness, Body and Soul in Written and Visual Culture in Byzantium and Late Medieval Balkans* explores the ways in which the Byzantines and the Serbs in the late Middle Ages understood and represented death, illness, the relations between body and soul, and the questions of life and afterlife.

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