

Sava Nemanjić and Serbia between Epiros and Nicaea

Abstract: The authors analyze Serbia's position and politics in relation to the Greek states of Epiros and Nicaea which emerged after the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1204. The available sources show that Serbia under Stefan the First-Crowned and his successors wisely used the rivalry between the two Greek states, which both sought to present themselves as the lawful successor of the fallen Empire of the Romans, and thus safeguarded her independence. Acting as an adviser to Stefan the First-Crowned and his successors, his brother Sava played a prominent role in conducting this realistic policy.

Keywords: Sava Nemanjić, Stefan the First-Crowned, Serbia, Nicaea, Epiros, Byzantine succession

The Fourth Crusade, ending in the disintegration of the Byzantine Empire (in April 1204) brought about significant political changes in the Balkan Peninsula. In what once was Byzantine territory new states emerged, ruled by Latin rulers or by what was left of the elites of the fallen Empire. Of the newly-created Greek states, two gained some stability and survived through this period: Nicaea under the Laskaris dynasty, which soon became an empire (1208), and Epiros, which took considerably longer to rise to the same status (1225–27).¹ Virtually from their very inception, the two rivals sought to present themselves as lawful successors of the Empire of the Romans and to get the upper hand in the struggle for its restoration.²

Of course, the other Balkan states could not escape the maelstrom of upcoming events. Serbia found itself in a very delicate position which required a review of foreign policy and considerable diplomatic skill. And

¹ On these changes, see Ivan Dujčev, "Le grand tournant historique de l'an 1204", *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 16 (1975), 63–68; Božidar Ferjančić, "Les états et les rapports internationaux", in *The 17th International Byzantine Congress, Major Papers* (New York: Aristide D. Caratzas Pub., 1986), 639–66. On local lords after 1204 Cf. Radovoj Radić, "Oblasni gospodari u Vizantiji krajem XII i u prvim decenijama XIII veka", *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 24–26 (1986), 222–278.

² On the struggle between Epiros and Nicaea for Byzantine legacy, see Alkmini Stavridu-Zafraka, *Νίκαια και Ήπειρος τον 13 ήαιώνα, Ιδεολογική αντιπαράθεση στην προσπάθειά τους να ανακτήσουν την αυτοκρατορία* (Thessaloniki: Βάνιας, 1990), which cites the relevant literature.

it was at that time that she managed to gain two extremely important international recognitions which strengthened her position and status fundamentally: in 1217, Grand Prince (*veliki župan*) Stefan was crowned king by Pope Honorius III, and in 1219 his younger brother, Archimandrite Sava, secured autocephaly for the Serbian Church in Nicaea and was ordained as its first archbishop.

These achievements testify to the political skills of both Stefan Nemanjić and his brother Sava, who was directly involved in shaping Serbia's foreign policy for decades, and "to whom Stefan [...] entrusted matters of the utmost political sensitivity."³ The famous letter of protest against Sava's consecration as archbishop filed in May 1220 by Demetrios Chomatenos, Archbishop of Ohrid, seems to provide clear evidence for Sava's diplomatic activity: "Love of his country has taken hold of him and tore him away from the fortress of the Holy Mountain [Mount Athos], and so he returned to Serbia; it has turned a hermit into an administrator of worldly affairs, and made him an ambassador to the neighbouring rulers, and so he sacrificed the seclusion of monastic life to secular intercourse. He is immersed utterly in worldly concerns and worldly vanity, and he takes [...] many servants with him, struts around in cavalcades [...] with his diverse retinue."⁴ These lines clearly show how embittered Chomatenos was, his pride hurt by the secession of the Serbian Church, but they also give a glimpse of the real political role of Sava, who led many diplomatic missions in a completely secular fashion.⁵

These missions certainly formed part of Serbia's relations with the Byzantine successor states, and it is only natural to assume that such relations were first established with neighbouring Epiros. In this area, however,

³ Dimitrije Obolenski, *Šest vizantijskih portreta*, trans. Nada Ćurčija-Prodanović (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga: Prosveta and Novi Sad: Budućnost, 1991), 126. On the position of Serbia under changing circumstances, see Sima Ćirković, "Serbien im 13. Jahrhundert", in Vojislav J. Djurić, ed., *L'art byzantin du XIII^e siècle. Symposium de Sopoćani, 1965* (Belgrade: Filozofski fakultet, Odeljenje za istoriju umetnosti & Naučno delo, 1967), 117 ff; Günter Prinzing, "Die Bedeutung Bulgariens und Serbiens in den Jahren 1204–1219 im Zusammenhang mit der Entstehung und Entwicklung der byzantinischen Teilstaaten nach Einnahme Konstantinopels infolge des 4. Kreuzzuges", *Miscellanea Byzantina Monacensia* 12 (1972); Božidar Ferjančić, "Srbija i vizantijski svet u prvoj polovini XIII veka (1204–1261)", *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 27–28 (1989), 103–148.

⁴ Jean-Baptiste Pitra, *Analecta sacra et classica spicilegio solesmensi parata* VI (Paris – Rome 1891), no. 86, col. 383; Georgije Ostrogorski, "Pismo Dimitrija Homatijana sv. Savi i odlomak Homatijanovog pisma patrijarhu Germanu o Savinom posvećenju", *Svetosavski zbornik* 2 (1938), 100 = *Sabrana dela* IV (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1970), 177.

⁵ On Sava's diplomatic activity, see assessments in Konstantin Jireček, *Istorija Srba* I (Belgrade: Slovo ljubve, 1978), 162; Obolenski, *Šest vizantiskih portreta*, 160.

our knowledge amounts to next to nothing. It has been proposed by more recent research to date the wedding between an unknown sister of Stefan Nemanjić and Manuel, brother of the ruler of Epiros Michael I Angelos,⁶ to 1207/8. Since earlier scholarship placed this wedding around the year 1216, the reference point being the date of a synodal act of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, this change in the timeline would shed a new light on the nature of Serbia's relations with the founder of the Epirote state, Michael I Angelos (1205–1214).⁷ Namely, it would mean that the wedding took place at a time when, after the death of the Bulgarian Tsar Kaloyan in October 1207, Serbia secured an ally in the southeast, his nephew Strez, which would all suggest that Serbian diplomacy had been gathering strong momentum.

Yet, we are treading on uncertain ground here. Serbia's earliest reliably documented contacts with Epiros were hostile, as both states laid claim to territories in Albania. The expansion plans of Michael I Angelos were directed towards the north, and in 1212/3 he conquered most of Albania, including Durazzo and Scutari.⁸ Since Stefan Nemanja had already permanently conquered Upper and Lower Pulati, as well as Doclea (Duklja), it is not surprising that Stefan the First-Crowned, in his *Life of Saint Simeon*, describes how Michael, "of Greek imperial lineage", has risen up against him. With the south-eastern border of his realm attacked by the Latin and Bulgarian emperors, Henry I and Boril, Stefan Nemanjić tried to persuade his new enemy to give up the conquered territory, but to no avail. It is not quite certain who acted on behalf of the Grand Prince in this endeavour, but it is known that Archimandrite Sava was still in Serbia at the time, before leaving for Mount Athos again. Having realized the futility of his efforts, Stefan asked his sainted father, St Simeon, for help. St Simeon, in turn, prayed for the intercession of Saint George, and so, in late 1214, it came to

⁶ There is a reference to this marriage in a synodal act of the Archbishopric of Ohrid which also describes the intention of Stefan Nemanjić to marry Maria, daughter of the late Michael I Angelos, but the intention was impracticable due to the degree of kinship between the Grand Prince of Serbia and the Epirote Princess. Cf. Pitra, *Analecta Sacra*, no. 10, col. 49 ff.

⁷ For the earlier dating of the marriage (1216), see Marin Drinov, "O nekotoryh trudah Dimitria Homatianana", *Viz. Vremennik* 1 (1894), 331, n. 2. This dating was accepted by Ljubomir Kovačević, "Žene i deca Stevana Nemanjića", *Glas SKA* 60 (1901), 6 and 8, and Jireček, *Istorija* I, 167. For the dating to 1207/1208, see Miodrag Purković, *Princeze iz kuće Nemanjića* (Windsor: Avala, 1956), 12 ff; Ferjančić, "Srbija i vizantijski svet", 107 ff.

⁸ For the timeline of the conquest of Durazzo, see Donald M. Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1957), 38 and 45, n. 28; Alain Ducellier, *La façade maritime de l'Albanie au moyen âge: Durazzo et Valona du XI^e au XV^e siècle* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1981), 150 ff.

pass that Michael I Angelos was murdered by a slave,⁹ which was almost a re-enactment of an event that had taken place earlier that year: Strez, a local lord in Macedonia, died mysteriously after a failed diplomatic mission of Sava Nemanjić.¹⁰

Michael was succeeded by his half-brother Theodore I Doukas Angelos Komnenos (1214–1230), an energetic and ambitious ruler whose ultimate goal was to recapture Constantinople and restore the Empire of the Romans. By then, Epiros had been significantly enlarged with territories in Thessaly and Macedonia, so now the attention of the new ruler turned to Thrace.¹¹ In such circumstances, understandably enough, the mighty Epirote ruler wanted peace on his border with Serbia. As the other side wanted more or less the same thing, relations between Serbia and Epiros were about to undergo a radical change.

The conciliatory character of this change is attested by a piece of information contained in a document originated by the Archbishopric of Ohrid. It speaks of the wish of Stefan Nemanjić — this time dated with greater precision — to establish marital ties with the Epirote house of Angelos. Namely, Stefan made steps to arrange the marriage of his firstborn son, Radoslav, and Theodora, the daughter of the late Michael I Angelos, during the tenure of Archbishop John Kamateros, i.e. between 1214 and 1217, most likely in 1216/7. Therefore, an embassy of Serbian noblemen (*archontes*) was sent to Ohrid.¹² No churchmen were mentioned, which suggests that Sava was not a member of the embassy. Presumably, he had already been on his way to Mount Athos. Moreover, it is unlikely that the Serbian clergy were not aware that this marriage would have been in contravention of canon law, since the would-be spouses were related. As the document clearly states, the Archbishop of Ohrid denied his assent, stating that he had forbidden the marriage between Stefan and Maria, the daughter of Michael Angelos, for the same reason.

⁹ “Žitije Stefana Nemanje od Stefana Prvovenčanog”, ed. Vladimir Ćorović, *Svetosavski zbornik* 2 (1938), 63–65. The assassination of Michael Angelos was also recorded by the Nicaean historian Akropolites: *Georgii Acropolitae Opera* I, ed. Augustus Heisenberg (Leipzig, 1903; repr. Stuttgart 1978), 25. On the whole episode, see Prinzing, “Die Bedeutung”, 110; Franjo Barišić & Božidar Ferjančić, “Vesti Dimitrija Homatijana o ‘vlasti Druguvita’”, *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 20 (1981), 55, n. 44; Ferjančić, “Srbija i vizantijski svet”, 110.

¹⁰ On Strez, his rule and his relations with Stefan Nemanjić, see esp. Radić, “Oblasni gospodari”, 223–234 (with relevant earlier literature).

¹¹ On Theodore I Angelos’ policy of conquest, see Nicol, *Despotate*, 59 ff; Kosta Adžievski, “Potčinuvane na Makedonija od strana na Teodor I Angel i formirane na Solunskoto carstvo”, *Istorija XVIII/2* (1982), 125 ff.

¹² Pitra, *Analecta sacra*, no. 10, col. 49 ff.

These failed attempts to establish marital ties between the two ruling families did not, however, discourage Grand Prince Stefan. Having been made king, he managed to marry his son Radoslav to Ana, the daughter of Theodore I Angelos. It is obvious that the purpose of this political marriage was to secure the protection of the increasingly powerful Epirote ruler for the heir to the Serbian throne. How important this marriage was for Serbia can be clearly seen from the fact that it is explicitly mentioned only in the Serbian sources. Setting aside Teodosije (Theodosios), who only parenthetically — and erroneously — says that Radoslav is married to the daughter of Theodore I Laskaris, Domentijan (Domentianos) explicitly reports as significant the news that it was Sava who married Radoslav to Ana.¹³ Domentijan's claim has tended to be interpreted as the loyal disciple's desire to extol his teacher in every possible way.¹⁴ But if the whole body of source materials on Sava's diplomatic activity, which is the focus of our interest here, is taken into account, it seems that Domentijan's words should be given more credence. Even more so as the more recently proposed and already widely accepted date of the wedding of Radoslav and Ana make Sava's active role in the event more plausible.

The prevailing view in older scholarship was that the wedding ensued after the conquest of Thessalonike by Theodore I Doukas Angelos in 1224.¹⁵ A more recent careful study of the correspondence of John Apokaukos, Metropolitan of Naupaktos and Theodore's close associate, has opened the way to new lines of interpretation. The Metropolitan's letters suggest that the wedding of Radoslav and Ana was celebrated in late 1219 or early 1220, and certainly before the Great Lent, which began on 9 February 1220. The betrothal had probably been celebrated a year before (late 1218 or early 1219).¹⁶

It should be noted that the degree of kinship between the spouses would have been an obstacle to their marriage under canon law. However, if it is self-explanatory that Theodore I paid no heed to such matters in pursu-

¹³ Domentijan, *Život svetoga Simeuna i svetoga Save*, ed. Djuro Daničić (Belgrade 1865), 261 [hereafter: Domentijan]; *Životi svetoga Save i svetoga Simeona*, trans. Lazar Mirković (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruha, 1938), 149 [hereafter: Domentijan Translation]; Teodosije, *Život Svetog Save*, ed. Djuro Daničić (Belgrade: Društvo srpske slovesnosti, 1860), 126 [hereafter: Teodosije]; Teodosije Hilandarac, *Život Svetog Save*, trans. Lazar Mirković (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruha, 1984), 122 [hereafter: Teodosije Translation].

¹⁴ Jireček, *Istorija I*, 171, n. 48. Mihailo Laskaris, *Vizantiske princeze u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji* (Belgrade: F. Bah, 1926) = Mihailo Laskaris, *Srpske kraljice* (Belgrade: AIZ Dosije, Orion Press and Novi Sad: Dobra vest, 1990), 40 ff.

¹⁵ Laskaris, *Vizantiske princeze*, 41 ff.; Demetrios Polemis, *The Doukai. A Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography* (London: Athlone P., 1968), 93, no. 47.

¹⁶ Sotiris Kisas, "O vremenu sklapanja braka Stefana Radoslava i Ane Komnine", *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 18 (1978), 131–139.

ing his political interest, the silence of Chomatenos, Archbishop of Ohrid, is quite unusual, and quite telling. He did not object to the marriage, but he was to object to the autocephaly of the Serbian Church, although the two events were obviously interconnected and practically simultaneous. And it is exactly this interconnection, i.e. a purely political rationale that made the Archbishop of Ohrid's restraint on the issue of the marriage a more recommendable stance. But the Archbishop could not display the same restraint when it came to the autocephaly of the Serbian Church. On the other hand, Sava's part in the marriage of Radoslav and Ana, whatever it may have consisted in, was probably more effective than Chomatenos' silence, which may be taken as a quite clear indicator of a predominantly political rationale behind, and complexity of, the course of action Serbia followed in the crucial year of 1219.

The new dating of the wedding of Radoslav and Ana is invaluable for better understanding the principles of foreign policy pursued by Stefan Nemanjić and Sava, and the complexity of their political manoeuvres. The effort put into reaching an understanding with Epiros does not mean that Serbia lost sight of the importance of Nicaea. Although still relatively distant from Serbia at the time, Nicaea was exceptionally important in the Orthodox world because it held the imperial and patriarchal crowns. It is not surprising therefore that, in 1219, Sava set off for Nicaea to negotiate autocephaly for the Serbian Church.

What happened in Nicaea was of historical importance for Serbia — the Serbian Church was granted the status of autocephalous archbishopric, and Sava was ordained as its first archbishop. The extensive descriptions of the event by both of Sava's biographers, Domentijan and Teodosije, match up in many respects. Both claim that the central figures were Emperor Theodore I Laskaris and Sava, who obviously headed the Serbian embassy. Sava, who was received with great respect and honours, told the Emperor of Serbia's troubles caused by her not having her own archbishop, and asked him pleadingly to order the Patriarch to ordain one of the attendant ecclesiastics as archbishop. The Emperor believed that Sava himself was the worthiest of the office, and Sava agreed, albeit after some prodding. The rite of ordination was performed by Patriarch Manuel Sarantenos, erroneously referred as Germanos by the biographers, and in the presence of Emperor Theodore. As Domentijan puts it, Sava was ordained as archbishop "by the hand of His All-Holiness Patriarch of Constantinople Germanos and by the command of the Emperor Kyr Theodore Laskaris".¹⁷

¹⁷ Domentijan, 217–222; Domentijan Translation, 113–117; Teodosije, 126–131; Teodosije Translation, 122–125. For basic literature, Cf. Ferjančić, "Srbija i vizantijski svet", 120, n. 87.

It has been widely accepted that Sava was instrumental for the success of the mission.¹⁸ It is beyond doubt, however, that it was a diplomatic and ecclesiastical step undertaken as part of a policy agreed upon between, and led by, sometimes literally jointly, the two sons of Stefan Nemanja. It may even be assumed that Sava's embassy to Nicaea was preceded by an exchange of letters between Stefan Nemanjić and Theodore Laskaris.¹⁹ The leadership of Serbia were wise enough to realize that ecclesiastical independence could not be obtained from the Archbishopric of Ohrid, since some bishoprics in Serbia were under its jurisdiction. Nicaea, on the other hand, could gladly meet Serbia's aspirations, seeing such a gesture as a proper way of continuing the political and ecclesiastical ideology of the shattered Empire of the Romans. Nicaea confirmed her right to this ideological legacy, and Serbia significantly elevated her international position and prestige.²⁰

The obtainment of autocephaly from Nicaea and Prince Radoslav's marriage to Ana Doukaina, the daughter of the ruler of Epiros, should be viewed as a consistent expression of Serbia's balanced policy towards the politically fragmented Byzantine world. Serbia needed to preserve good relations with all of them, to get each of them to help her achieve her goals which were realistic and attainable, and which certainly were of vital importance for her. There is no doubt that Stefan and Sava pursued a wide-ranging and flexible policy, and the results of such a political strategy were soon visible. On the other hand, Serbia's Byzantine partners — Epiros and Nicaea, in competition for the Constantinopolitan legacy and threatened by

¹⁸ This has been clearly outlined by Joanis Tarnanidis, "Koliko je sv. Sava kao ličnost mogao da utiče na avtokefalnost srpske crkve", in Vojislav Djurić, ed., *Sava Nemanjić – sveti Sava, istorija i predanje: međunarodni naučni skup, decembar 1976* (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1979), 55–63.

¹⁹ Cf. Stanoje Stanojević, "Sveti Sava i nezavisnost srpske crkve", *Glas SKA* 161 (1934), 220–223; Djoko Slijepčević, *Istorija srpske pravoslavne crkve* I (Munich: Iskra, 1962), 87; Tarnanidis, "Koliko je sv. Sava", 58; Obolenski, *Šest vizantijskih portreta*, 154, n. 146.

²⁰ The twofold effect of this important act is highlighted by Obolenski (*Šest vizantijskih portreta*, 155 ff): "Eager to prove their claim to the Byzantine succession, Nicaean authorities saw the Slavic peoples in Eastern Europe as not only their natural but also necessary allies. By granting ecclesiastical privileges to Serbia, Bulgaria, and Russia, the emperors of Nicaea achieved two objectives: they strengthened the loyalty of these churches to the Patriarchate, and gained precious support against the challenge posed by the rulers of Epiros." As for Serbia, she now had a church which was "de facto if not entirely de jure autocephalous, which immensely increased her international prestige and status. King Stefan the First-Crowned himself strengthened the ties with the ruler of Nicaea, recognized by most Greeks and Slavs as the lawful Emperor of Byzantium."

the Latins and the Bulgarians — necessarily sought to secure support from the rising Serbian power.²¹

Sava could obtain autocephaly for the Serbian Church, as the necessary spiritual counterpart of the Serbian Kingdom, only from Nicaea, the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the time. And the holders of power in Nicaea did not miss the opportunity to expand their influence. But, as has already been pointed out, it was the Emperor, Theodore I Laskaris, rather than the Patriarch, who played the leading role in receiving, and conferring honours on, the Serbian spiritual leader. It was him who first conversed with Sava, and it was him who made the decision with which the Patriarch concurred. As so many times in Byzantine history, the Church abided by the reason of State.

That the Byzantine world primarily saw Sava's success in Nicaea as a political phenomenon belonging to the realm of state interest can be seen from the conduct of Epiros. Of course, Demetrios Chomatenos, the Archbishop who lost jurisdiction over the Serbian Church, vehemently protested and cited violation of canon law (in May 1220). But, on the other hand, even before this vehement reaction, Theodore Angelos had given his consent to another contravention of canon law: the engagement, and then marriage, of his daughter Ana to Radoslav (in late 1219 and early 1220 respectively). Thus, Chomatenos' somewhat belated reaction remained restricted to canonical issues. The discrepant attitudes of the two Epirote loci of power were undoubtedly facilitated by the fact that the Archbishopric of Ohrid, although the most important Church in Epiros, was not the state church in the sense in which the Church of Nicaea and, from that time on, the Church of Serbia were.²² The only reason Theodore I was crowned emperor by the Archbishop of Ohrid was that the Metropolitan of Thessalonike, Constantine Mesopotamites, refused to do it in spite of all pressures, claiming that the Empire and the Patriarchate had already existed.²³

Political interest, i.e. *raison d'état*, also determined the conduct of the Serbian side in church relations within the Orthodox triangle Nicaea–Epiros–Serbia. Obvious both prior and immediately before the decisive year of 1219, Serbia's effort to maintain good relations with both Greek

²¹ The rivalry between Epiros and Nicaea is discussed at length by Stavridu-Zafraka, *Νίκαια και Ήπειρος*, but apart from a few cursory facts, this useful book accords no special attention to the position of Serbia between the two opposing sides.

²² In the early thirteenth century, there were several mutually independent ecclesiastical centres in Epiros: Ohrid (autocephalous archbishopric), Naupaktos (metropolitanate), Thessalonike (metropolitanate), Kerkyra (metropolitanate); Cf. Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros*, 77 ff.

²³ Cf. Stavridu-Zafraka, *Νίκαια και Ήπειρος*, 71 ff.

states did not abate; it remained a political constant. Its spiritual component was not a *conditio sine qua non*, even though a crucial role in it was played by a spiritual leader, Sava. By the way, Chomatenos himself, in his already mentioned statement about Sava's neglect of monastic vows, observed that the spiritual dream of the leading Serbian figure could not hide the political motivation of his approach.

If it might have seemed in 1219/20, and especially after Chomatenos' protest, that Serbia had turned to Nicaea, and primarily for ecclesiastical reasons, reality soon proved to be more complex than that. The establishment of marital ties between the ruling houses of Serbia and Epiros did not go without effect. Whether a mere coincidence or not, the Epirote son-in-law Radoslav became, probably soon afterwards, the co-ruler of Serbia with his father, King Stefan Nemanjić.²⁴ As the King himself pointed out, he issued his second charter to Žiča: "with Our most beloved firstborn son Radoslav, whom We have blessed as King of all of this state."²⁵ This was a novelty in the structure of supreme authority but then again the royal title itself was a novelty. Therefore, positing a direct causal link between Radoslav's marriage and his new title would seem too bold, especially because he, as the King's firstborn son, was destined for the highest honours. But, as some of Radoslav's subsequent actions show, it is certain that his marital ties with the house of Angelos could only contribute to good relations between Serbia and Epiros. The stage for further developments was set. Taking this as the point of departure, and in order to present a comprehensive picture of relations between Serbia, on the one hand, and Epiros and Nicaea, on the other, in the period between the obtainment of autocephaly and Radoslav's accession, we shall now turn to two particularly significant points: 1) relationship between Sava and Radoslav; and 2) the royal ideology of the wall-painting in the monastery of Mileševa.

1) As is well known, Serbian historiography had long assumed, at times even claimed with certainty, that the reason for the Archbishop Sava's long journey in the Christian East in 1229 was his discontent with the Grecophile policy of the new king, Stefan Radoslav. The assumption was, however, inferred from a somewhat later correspondence between King Radoslav and the Archbishop of Ohrid, Demetrios Chomatenos, concerning

²⁴ For a comprehensive overview of how the notion of such a status of Radoslav grew to maturity, see Ferjančić, "Srbija i vizantijski svet", 123–126.

²⁵ Dušan Sindik, "Jedna ili dve žičke povelje?", *Istorijski časopis* 14–15 (1965), 312 and, for comments on the meaning of this formula, 312 ff; Dušan Sindik, "O savladarstvu kralja Stefana Radoslava", *Istorijski časopis* 35 (1988), 23–29.

some canonical matters, and from the even later signature *Στέφανος ῥήξ ὁ Δούκας*.²⁶

The fallaciousness of the arguments explaining a chronologically earlier phenomenon via a later one set aside, it is clear today that none of these arguments is valid in the proposed sense. Sava's biographers give no ground whatsoever for speculating on Sava's indisposition towards King Radoslav at the time of his departure for the Holy Land. On the contrary, they highlight the harmonious relationship between the uncle and the nephew, without giving us any reason to doubt the truth of their claims.²⁷ The alleged correspondence between King Radoslav and Chomatenos has been brought into question both in recent and older studies, be it by casting doubt on its authenticity or, at least, by challenging its usefulness for drawing inferences about the main directions of the King's foreign policy.²⁸ As for the signature containing the name Doukas, its very date (Radoslav was already a king in exile) *a priori* reduces the possibility of speaking of its political significance.²⁹ Its ideological significance, on the other hand, is unquestionable and far more important than any possible link it might have had with what

²⁶ Cf. Jireček, *Istorija* I, 172 ff; Laskaris, *Vizantiske princeze*, 4; Stanojević, "Sv. Sava i nezavisnost srpske crkve", 242 and 245 ff; Stanoje Stanojević, *Sveti Sava* (Belgrade: Državna štamparija Kraljevine Jugoslavije, 1935), 62 and 73 ff; Stanoje Stanojević, "Kralj Uroš I", *Godišnjica Nikole Čupića* 44 (1935), 1–3; *Istorija naroda Jugoslavije* I, (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1953), 308 ff and 316 (B. Ferjančić); Konstantinos Varzos, *Η γενεαλογία τῶν Κομνηνῶν II*, (Thessaloniki: Κέντρο Βυζαντινῶν Ερευνῶν, 1984), 569, n. 61.

²⁷ Domentijan, 262; Domentijan Translation, 150; Teodosije, 166; Teodosije Translation, 159. Cf. Ferjančić, "Srbija i vizantijski svet", 137, n. 63 (literature).

²⁸ Its authenticity was called into question by Filaret Granić, "Odgovori ohridskog arhiepiskopa Dimitrija Homatijana na pitanja srpskog kralja Radoslava", *Svetosavski zbornik* 2 (1938), 150–152 ff, and Nikola Radojčić, "Sveti Sava i avtokefalnost srpske i bugarske crkve", *Glas SKA* 179 (1939) 42, n. 1. For views that do not question the authenticity of the correspondence, but do not consider it proof either of Radoslav's Grecophilia or of his submission to Chomatenos' authority, Cf. Slijepčević, *Istorija* I, 104 ff; Dušan Kašić, "Sveti Sava", in *Srpska pravoslavna crkva 1219–1969: spomenica o 750-godišnjici autokefalnosti* (Belgrade: Sveti arhijerejski sinod Srpske pravoslavne crkve, 1969), 28; Sima Ćirković, "Pravoslavna crkva u srednjovekovnoj srpskoj državi", in *Srpska pravoslavna crkva 1219–1969*, 40; *Istorija srpskog naroda* I, 321 (D. Bogdanović); Obolenski, *Šest vizantiskih portreta*, 164; Ferjančić, "Srbija i vizantijski svet", 135 ff.

²⁹ The charter of 4 February 1234 has several editions: Franc Miklosich, *Monumenta Serbica spectantia historiam Serbiae, Bosnae, Ragusii* (Vienna 1858), 19; Tadija Smičiklas, *Codex diplomaticus regni Croatiae, Dalmatiae et Slavoniae* III (Zagreb 1906), no. 342; Aleksandar Solovjev, *Odabrani spomenici srpskog prava – od XII do kraja XV veka* (Belgrade: Izdavačka knjižarnica Gece Kona, 1926), no. 18. Radoslav is addressed as *Στέφανος ὁ Δούκας* in Chomatenos' famous letter too, Cf. Pitra, *Analectasacra*, no. 180, col. 686. On account of the "tardiness" of the signature, Ferjančić, "Srbija i vizantijski svet", 132–134,

was the current political orientation. The fact that Radoslav issued the coinage bearing the name Doukas, thereby emulating his grandfather Alexios III Angelos and not some other contemporary emperor of the Romans,³⁰ as well as the fact that this name had been used much earlier on his engagement ring, mean nothing more than that he was proud of his descent from the imperial family.³¹ This was in full conformity with the Byzantine tradition and did not imply any particular political attitude.

2) Apart from the usual portraits of Constantine the Great and his mother Helena, there is in the monastery of Mileševa the portrait of yet another Byzantine emperor, which is quite unusual in Serbian monumental painting. His attire is identical to Constantine's, but the fresco is damaged around the head and the identifying inscription is illegible, which has given rise to a number of different suggestions as to the emperor's identity.³² What seems certain, however, is that the presence of this portrait did not come as the result of relations existing in the sphere of practical politics, but rather that it was a materialization of a more general ideological vision of the hierarchy of rulers, and in an area which was especially important to Serbia and her ruling dynasty. This approach, which the Byzantine world would have found so easy to understand, is of especial importance for grasping the reality of relations in the triangle Serbia–Epiros–Nicaea.

Various attempts to determine the identity of the imperial figure portrayed in Mileševa have apparently ended in identifying the emperor as John III Vatatzes (1222–1254).³³ This identification is favoured by the youthful appearance of the portrayed figure — for Vatatzes was thirty or a little younger at the accession — and by the prestige Nicaea gained in Serbia by having granted autocephaly to her Church. The reigning emperor of Nicaea or, from a formal legal standpoint, of the Roman Empire, would therefore figure in Mileševa as the supreme, ideal protector of the Serbian Church. This seems to carry even more weight in the light of a recently proposed hypothesis that the first Serbian Archbishop, Sava, was the true

points to a more general ideological rather than political background to this form of address.

³⁰ Cf. Laskaris, *Vizantiske princeze*, 44–46; Marko Popović, “Nalazi novca kralja Stefana Radoslava”, *Novopazarski zbornik* 1 (1977), 40–44.

³¹ On the ring, see Franjo Barišić, “Veridbeni prsten kraljevića Stefana Duke (Radoslava Nemanjića)”, *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 18 (1978), 257–268. On the betrothal and the wedding, Cf. Kisas, “O vremenu sklapanja braka”, 131–139.

³² Cf. Ferjančić, “Srbija i vizantijski svet”, 128–130.

³³ For the most recent paper on this issue, see Vojislav J. Djurić, “Srpska dinastija i Vizantija na freskama u manastiru Mileševi”, *Zograf* 22 (1992), 13–27, and specifically on the identification of the Emperor John III Vatatzes, 19–20.

architect behind the construction and fresco programme of Mileševa, the foundation whose creation may best be explained by its intended purpose as the archiepiscopal mausoleum.³⁴

However convincing, and hence widely accepted, the proposed interpretation may seem, it is not the only possible one. Given the fact that Byzantine emperors, except Constantine the Great, were not portrayed in Serbian medieval painting, it is reasonable to assume that the Mileševa exception depicted an emperor held to be of special consequence in the eyes of the Nemanjić.³⁵ When it comes to Nicaea's merits, the young John Vatatzes in the early years of his reign could not be a "rival" to Theodore I Laskaris. If the young age of the depicted person is an undisputable fact, the latter would, due to his age, have to have been represented in a different way after the illustrious year of 1219, i.e. with a much longer and more prominent beard. Of course, such iconographic details could not be taken as relevant if the portrayed person is not the Emperor of Nicaea, but some other, either contemporary or close to the date of the fresco. But, is such a hypothesis deducible at all?

On the north wall of the narthex, exactly opposite the mysterious emperor, is the portrait of Stefan the First-Crowned in royal attire, with a partially preserved inscription describing him as "son of Saint Simeon Nemanja, son-in-law of the Greek Kyr Alexios".³⁶ In this way Stefan, some twenty years after the downfall of Alexios III Angelos (1203), continued the tradition set by the circular inscription in the dome of the monastery of Studenica (1208/9), where Nemanja himself is posthumously referred to as "*svat* [father-in-law of the daughter] of the Greek Emperor Alexios" five years after the latter's downfall.³⁷ Radoslav would also continue this tradi-

³⁴ Ibid. 23–25.

³⁵ The uniqueness of the Mileševa portrait is not contradicted by the fact that the Byzantine emperors Andronikos II, Andronikos III and John V were portrayed in the narthex of the *katholikon* of the Monastery of Hilandar. For these portraits and their meaning, see Gordana Babić, "Ikonografski program živopisa u pripratama crkava kralja Milutina", in *Vizantijska umetnost početkom XIV veka* (Belgrade: Filozofski fakultet, 1978), and her text in *Istorija srpskog naroda* I, 480 ff. The three emperors were also portrayed in an Athonite church, which is to say in the territory of the Empire and under the general jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople (from 1312). In making concrete political moves in that area, the Serbian rulers Milutin and Dušan were always careful to take into account the concrete imperial and ecclesiastical rights of Byzantium. Mileševa, situated in the middle of Serbia, was completely unaffected by corresponding ideological connotations.

³⁶ Djurić, "Srpska dinastija i Vizantija", 18.

³⁷ Cf. Ljubomir Maksimović, "L'idéologie du souverain dans l'Etat serbe et la construction de Studenica", in Vojislav Korać, ed., *Studenica i vizantijska umetnost oko 1200*.

tion of invoking Alexios III, albeit in a slightly different manner. He would issue the coinage modelled after that of Alexios, occasionally mentioning St Constantine, just as his grandfather had. In Mileševa, Radoslav is depicted next to his father Stefan, wearing the crown of a co-ruler, but the inscription is not legible any more.³⁸ Therefore the question remains unanswered: do the first Serbian king and his heir stand facing the emperor, their father-in-law and grandfather respectively, to whom the dynasty owed so much? The dynasty which, it should not be forgotten, considered itself virtually from the very beginning as self-governing and hence de facto independent of the rulers of Epiros and Nicaea.³⁹

Both issues discussed above show — and that is why we have dwelt on them a little longer — that the scarcity and incompleteness of the available sources may require that a note of relativity be introduced into the discussion. Yet, from whatever aspect the overall situation is looked at, there is no corroborative evidence for the claim that Serbian policy towards Nicaea or Epiros, shaped by Sava to a large extent, gave a preference to one or the other claimant to the Byzantine legacy. The key to understanding the whole situation is the ideological and statehood legacy of Byzantium after its disintegration in 1204.

In that divided and fragmented world — without taking into account the distant and quite distinct Trebizond which staked no claim to universal Roman dominion — for almost twenty years there was only one orthodox emperor, in Nicaea, and one ecumenical patriarch at his side. It was therefore understandable — moreover, it could not be any other way — that Sava looked to Nicaea in matters that were considered to fall under the jurisdiction of the emperor and/or the patriarch. When it came to political matters, however, the approach was far more pragmatic.

The situation became more complex when, after 1225/6, another emperor, albeit without a patriarch at his side, arose in Thessalonike: Radoslav's father-in-law, Theodore Doukas Angelos.⁴⁰ Serbia's reaction to the new

godine: međunarodni naučni skup povodom 800 godina manastira Studenice i stogodišnjice SANU, septembar 1986 (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1988), 44 ff (with earlier literature).

³⁸ Cf. Gordana Babić, "Vladislav na ktitorskom portretu u naosu Mileševe", in Vojislav Djurić, ed., *Mileševa u istoriji srpskog naroda: međunarodni naučni skup povodom sedam i po vekova postojanja, 1985* (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1987), 14; Djurić, "Srpska dinastija i Vizantija", 18, and fig. 5.

³⁹ Cf. Maksimović, "L'idéologie du souverain", 36.

⁴⁰ Theodore Doukas Angelos seized Thessalonike towards the end of 1224, but was proclaimed emperor later, towards the end of 1225 or sometime in 1226, perhaps even after September 1226, and was crowned only in late May or early June 1227. For this

situation had to be cautious and flexible. Although no details of a consistent conduct are known, Sava's journey to the East in 1229/30 provides a good glimpse of what its essence was.

Having made his pilgrimage to the holy Christian places in Palestine, the Serbian Archbishop left for Nicaea, and then, on his way home, visited Thessalonike. The political motivation of such an itinerary, meant to express respect to both important Greco-Byzantine centres, is quite obvious. The warm reception with which Sava was met in both was not only a sign of respect for his person; it was also an expression of concurrence with Serbia's balanced political approach, i.e. an attempt to exert an influence on it. According to Domentijan's extensive, and Teodosije's somewhat more concise, account, the expressions of goodwill towards Sava were numerous, and generously supported.⁴¹ A remark made by Teodosije deserves special attention: *многа же нже въ любви и въ мирѣ благочестовоу Радославу кралоу съ ниди прѣбывати царь и митрополитъ светолоу изглаголаста* [The emperor and the metropolitan spoke much to the holy man [Sava] about the devout king Radoslav living in love and peace with them].⁴²

This remark has already been discussed in scholarship and interpreted in the light of the difficult position Emperor Theodore was in at the time of Sava's visit; namely, shortly before his conflict with the Bulgarians which ended in his shattering defeat at the Battle of Klokočnica in 1230.⁴³ We believe, however, that a different interpretation may be offered, since, as we have already mentioned, all indications in the sources suggest that the ruler of Epiros, unlike the Archbishop of Ohrid, was friendly disposed to Serbia. In this perspective, it may be indicative that during Sava's visit to Thessalonike Theodore was not in company with Demetrios Chomatenos, who had crowned the ruler of Epiros, but with the Metropolitan of Thessalonike. It is believed today that just as indicative is the chronology of changes on the throne: some time after the fall of Emperor Theodore of Thessalonike, his son-in-law, Radoslav, was also deposed.⁴⁴

On the other hand, the difference in the way in which Domentijan and Teodosije, accurately quoting the basic regnal titles, refer to the rulers

dating, after much controversy in Byzantine studies, see Stavridu-Zafraka, *Νίκαια και Ηπειρος*, 69–71 (with earlier literature).

⁴¹ Domentijan, 276–279; Domentijan Translation, 161 ff; Teodosije, 171 and 173; Teodosije Translation, 163 and 165. Cf. comments by Ferjančić, “Srbija i vizantijski svet”, 137–139.

⁴² Teodosije, 173.

⁴³ Stanojević, *Sveti Sava*, 72; Slijepčević, *Istorija I*, 114; Mirjana Živojinović, “O boravcima svetog Save u Solunu”, *Istorijski časopis* 24 (1977), 70 ff.

⁴⁴ Cf. Ferjančić, “Srbija i vizantijski svet”, 139.

mentioned in connection with Sava's journey may also be of some significance. For Domentijan, Emperor John Vatatzes, his predecessor Theodore Laskaris and King Radoslav are *pious*, while Emperor Theodore Doukas is a *friend* (of Sava's).⁴⁵ For Teodosije, Emperor John Vatatzes and King Radoslav are *devout*, while no epithets are attributed to the emperors John II Asen and Theodore Doukas.⁴⁶ It should be noted that in 1243 Domentijan concludes Sava's *Life* with the statement that he has written it in the reign of "devout Emperor Kyr Kaloioannis of Greece", just as he will conclude Nemanja's *Life* in 1264 with the statement that he has written it in the reign of "devout Greek Emperor Kyr Michael Palaiologos."⁴⁷

The key to understanding Teodosije's remark on the talks in Thessalonike would, therefore, lie in the ideological sphere rather than in the sphere of so-called *Realpolitik*. In other words, Theodore Doukas Angelos in all likelihood advised Sava that Serbia recognize his ascension to the imperial throne. What such a demand might have entailed is an open question, but making assumptions is an unrewarding task, unnecessary in fact; for the Battle of Klokotnitsa solved any dilemma that there may have been. When King Vladislav, protégé of the Bulgarian Emperor John II Asen, made his appearance on the stage, Serbia's relations with Epiros and Nicaea were temporarily relegated to the background. Consequently, there are no original reports on such relations from the period of his reign. But, some kind of Sava's political legacy seems to have lived on in the fact that King Uroš I pursued a pragmatic policy of balance of power towards Epiros and Nicaea.

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⁴⁵ See n. 41 above.

⁴⁶ See n. 41.

⁴⁷ Domentijan, *Život Svetoga Save*, 344; Domentijan Translation, 216; *Život Svetoga Simeuna*, 116; Domentijan Translation, 317.

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