

**Dominika Gapska, *Women, Church, State. Cults of the Female Saints in the Writings of Serbian Orthodox Church*, Wydawnictwo “scriptum”, Cracow 2021, 207 pp.**

<https://doi.org/10.14746/bp.2023.30.21>

In order to gain the requisite insights into the historical, linguistic, and ethnic complexities of the Balkan region, it is necessary to have an understanding of the religious context that underpins many historical and contemporary debates. Accordingly, in providing a succinct overview and analysis of the role of female saints within the Serbian Orthodox Church, *Women, Church, State. Cults of the Female Saints in the Writings of Serbian Orthodox Church* contributes greatly to wider discussions on this relevant topic. The author is Dr Dominika Gapska, a Serbian studies scholar based at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, where the research for this study was conducted under the auspices of a prestigious Polish National Science Centre grant. Running to just over 200 pages, this slim but concise hardback volume draws on a wealth of primary and secondary sources written not only in the South Slavic languages but also in Polish, Russian, English, and Italian.

The work’s Introduction offers an overview of the relevant historical context and additionally defines the scope of the analysis, which is founded on a case-study approach of the various medieval female cults that “have played leading roles in the creation of Serbian spiritual culture and national identity” (p. 11), particularly under the centuries of Ottoman rule. In presenting a mix of locally focused as well as nationwide cults, the nine saints (often linked to certain dynasties important in Serbian history) which have been chosen as case studies therefore represent both the well-known and the under-researched. Each saint is accorded her own chapter, and the case studies are presented largely in chronological order; however, Part One (chapters 1–6; pp. 19–156) largely comprises the better-known cults, whereas Part Two (chapters 7–9; pp. 157–180) outlines those cults which have generally received less scholarly attention to date.

The opening chapter presents St Anastasija (Ana), who lived from the 1120s until the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. She was the wife of Grand Prince Stefan (St Simeon), founder of the influential Nemanja dynasty, and the mother of St Sava and St Stefan the First-Crowned. Noting that “until the 1970s, the cult of Anastasija can be regarded as local, limited only to the place of burial and the subsequent deposition of the relics, i.e. to the monastic communities in Toplica (Kuršumljija), Studenica and Chilandar” (p. 24), nowadays Anastasija is viewed as “the caring and benevolent mother of all Serbs” (p. 42). In tracing the saint’s trajectory over the centuries, Gapska presents and analyses those writings that refer indirectly or directly to Anastasija, including hagiographic works written by her sons immedi-

ately after her death, Orthodox songs about her, and even her presence in modern-day popular culture.

The cult of St Helen of Anjou (born in the 1230s and died in 1314) is the subject of Chapter II. Of royal heritage, St Helen was Catholic for most of her life, and Gapska presents the origins of her cult which began promptly after her death. Aside from some modern observations (e.g., regarding hymnography), the main source analysed here is the medieval-era text of Archbishop Danilo II, which Gapska utilises to locate St Helen within broader contemporary discussions of national and religious identity.

In a similar manner to the other case studies, Chapter III opens with the biographical details of St Jevgenija-Euphrosine/Jefrosinija (Princess Milica) (c. 1335–1405). Though her historical importance is clear, Gapska observes that “the question of establishing an official cult of the saint remains unresolved” (p. 70) and uses medieval and contemporary documents to underline the cult’s importance with particular reference to the Battle of Kosovo (1389) and its ramifications.

The royal theme continues in the fourth chapter, which details the cult of St Angelina of Serbia (1440–1520), a member of the Branković dynasty. As “one of the most important Serbian cults in the liturgical calendar” (p. 87), the necessary historical details about her life are provided, including her marriage to the last ruler of independent Serbia and her subsequent exile. This precedes the analysis of the relevant hagiographical texts, as well as references to the importance of the final resting place of the saint and other family members, which represented an enduring symbol against Ottoman dominance.

The most extensive chapter in the volume, Chapter V (pp. 99–131), is devoted to St Paraskeva-Petka. With her relics now found in the Romanian city of Iasi, St Petka is “one of the most venerated women saints in Slavic lands (including Poland and Russia), and in Romania” (p. 99). Accordingly, this chapter provides a thorough overview and analysis, including discussions of the origins of the cult and of St Petka’s many nicknames (“of Serbia, of Belgrade, of Epivates, of Tarnovo, of Bulgaria, of Jassy (Iasi), the Young, of the Balkans” [p. 99]), as well as references to the “exceptionally rich corpus of hagiographies and hymns” (p. 101). This is complemented by information from writings detailing the passage of the saint’s relics through various locations in the medieval and early modern era, before providing perspectives on the role of the cult of St Petka up until the present day, including reference to folk testimonies and her particular importance in the Serbian religious tradition.

The final chapter of Part One (Chapter VI) analyses the cult of St Zlata (Chrysa) of Meglen, about whom very little is known. Against the background of the saint’s voluntary martyrdom in October 1795, Gapska observes that the founding of the cult at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century coincided with challenging political and religious tensions across the Balkan Peninsula, as “centuries of Turkish rule in the Balkans meant that Christianity in the region took the form of a folk religion, quite distant

from the classical theology of the Church Fathers” (p. 134). As such, the cult of St Zlata became “a token of religious affiliation” (p. 137) which has endured over the centuries, with notable periods of activity after World War II and subsequently in the 1970s. Accordingly, this historical information is supplemented with detailed analysis of the relevant liturgical texts.

As observed previously, the three cults outlined in Part Two of the book have received much less attention from scholars, and thus these chapters are significantly shorter. Chapter VII profiles the cult of St Helen of Dečani (1277–c. 1346). Little is known about her life and canonisation, and “no comprehensive biography [...] has been written” (p. 162) to date; in fact, “no texts related to the saint’s worship existed until the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (p. 163). Nonetheless, despite the paucity of resources, Gapska analyses the 2020 text of an unofficial service in the saint’s honour to provide pioneering insights into this understudied cult. In the eighth chapter, Gapska analyses references to St Jelisaveta-Jevgenija, who was also known as Helen of Bulgaria and who married the Serbian king (later tsar) Dušan in 1332. She was distinguished by her close links with Mount Athos and was even called a “saint” by the monks there while she was still alive (p. 167). The final chapter, Chapter IX, focuses on St Jelisaveta (Jelena Štiljanović), details of whom mostly appear in historical works dedicated to her husband, the nobleman Stefan Štiljanović (died 1543). Accordingly, references to the saint in relevant archival sources are explored.

The book’s Conclusion reiterates the interlinkage between and the importance of the female cults in the Serbian context, especially with regard to their dynastic aspect and to the survival of the Serbian Orthodox Church under the years of Ottoman rule. These concluding remarks also restate the volume’s contribution to the research literature by offering a perspective on these female cults drawn from many types of liturgical literature. Accordingly, this illustrates how the “importance of female saints, their image and functions, relate to the whole spiritual and political life of Serbia and remain valid to date” (p. 186).

As demonstrated above, Dominika Gapska’s monograph *Women, Church, State. Cults of the Female Saints in the Writings of Serbian Orthodox Church* offers a wide-ranging examination of the relevant historical context and the role of women in the Serbian religious context. With the case studies synthesising information written in a range of languages and genres, this volume is to be recommended not only for theologians, medievalists, and other specialists in Serbian, Balkan, and Slavic studies, but also for anyone seeking to obtain further insights into and deeper understanding of Serbian religious and national identity and the role of women therein. In addition, the fact that this volume is written in English should also increase its international appeal for a wider readership. Though the use of quotations in Serbian without translations may seem slightly daunting to those approaching the book from other disciplines, for the most part each quotation is fully contextualised and discussed in English, thus ensuring that the key findings and observations contained within this volume remain

accessible. Accordingly, in recognising the enduring role of female cults in the Serbian Orthodox Church and their fundamental role in constructs of Serbian national identity, *Women, Church, State. Cults of the Female Saints in the Writings of Serbian Orthodox Church* represents an important contribution to discussions and debate on religious heritage not only in Serbia, but also in the broader Balkan context.

Antony Hoyte-West

e-mail: [antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com](mailto:antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4410-6520>