

Revival of Early Christian Model of Martyrdom in the Ottoman Central Balkans¹

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Abstract: This paper analyses the cultic texts for St George of Kratovo, a martyr who died in Sofia in 1515. The hagiography of George of Kratovo differed from those of other martyrs that suffered during the Ottoman conquests of the Central Balkans by mirroring the evangelical model and the martyrial tradition of Asia Minor (possibly also the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*). This shows that different models of martyrdom co-existed throughout the centuries and that they could influence new experiences of holiness in the process of premediation. The evangelical model was revived because of the specific social and political circumstances, thus again demonstrating that nurturing the memories of saints was a dynamic process, closely connected to present realities of life, which were reflected and given meaning in cultic texts.

Keywords: martyrdom, martyrial traditions, premediation, Sofia, Central Balkans, St George of Kratovo, Polycarp of Smyrna

The period from the last decades of the fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century was a notable period in the history of the Central Balkans. The Central Balkans included the medieval Serbian lands, western Bulgaria, and southern Hungary, all of which were gradually incorporated into the Ottoman Empire.² Steady Ottoman

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² On the Ottoman conquest see J. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans, A Critical Survey from the Late*

conquests left their mark on various aspects of social, cultural, and religious life, including the veneration of saints. Inasmuch as every saint lived in a particular time and place, the memory of them reflected universal Christian ideals as well as the contemporary worldviews and social and political circumstances. In that way, the saints' representation gave meaning to various realities of life. This connection with present realities was even more profound in periods of transformations, thus making the cults of saints an interesting subject of research.³

This “social logic” of the cults of saints is the reason why in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, two martyrial cults emerged in the Serbian Principality and Despotate – those of Prince Lazar (r. 1371–1389) and King Stefan Uroš III of Dečani (r. 1321–1331).⁴ Prince Lazar gave his life fighting the Ottomans at the Battle of Kosovo, and King Stefan was the victim of a court conspiracy. Both cults combined the universal ideal of martyrdom and the contemporary feeling of suffering as a feature of everyday life – a consequence of the increasing Ottoman presence. The celebration of the new martyrs made it possible to invert the notions of victory and defeat, life and death. However, the rulers' historical actuality limited the tailoring of their image to this type of sainthood.⁵

At the time these cults emerged, Bulgaria lost its independence: Tarnovo fell in 1393, Vidin in 1396. Since there were no rulers who could exemplify the contemporary ideal of sanctity, only “ordinary” people could suffer martyrdom for Christ. In 1437, a young soldier recruited in the Ottoman army, George of Sofia, suffered death by burning in Edirne. He received a hagiography in Greek which reflected the early Christian Acts of the Martyrs.⁶ Perhaps the language of the

Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest, Ann Arbor, 1987, p. 345-612; C. Finkel, *Osman's dream. The Story of the Ottoman Empire 1300–1923*, London, 2006, p. 16-133; O. J. Schmitt (ed.), *The Ottoman Conquest of the Balkans: Interpretations and Research Debates*, Vienna, 2016.

³ On the veneration of saints during the Ottoman conquests of the Central Balkans and their “social logic” see M. Васиљевић, *Култови светих на централном Балкану у време османских освајања*, Belgrade, 2021.

⁴ For the late medieval cults of Serbian martyrs see in: S. Marjanović-Dušanić, “Patterns of Martyrial Sanctity in the Royal Ideology of Medieval Serbia. Continuity and Change”, *Balkanica* 37, 2006, p. 69-79; eadem, *Свети краљ. Култ Стефана Дечанског*, Belgrade, 2007, p. 182-194, 361-369; M. Васиљевић, *Култови светих...*, *passim*.

⁵ Gabor Klaniczay noted that the complex relationship between hagiography and historiography (and biography within it) is particularly interesting when the saints are protagonists of political history, such as missionaries, bishops, or rulers, G. Klaniczay, “Hagiography and Historical Narrative”, in J. M. Bak and I. Jurković (eds.), *Chronicon. Medieval Narrative Sources. A chronological guide with introductory essays*, Turnhout, 2015, p. 116-117.

⁶ On George of Sofia in the context of late Byzantine martyrdom and Ottoman religious policies, see P. Karlin-Hayter, “La politique religieuse des conquérants ottomans dans un texte hagiographique”, *Byzantion* 35, 1965, p. 353-358; M. Detoraki, “Greek Passions of the Martyrs in Byzantium”, in S. Efthymiadis (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography, 2. Genres and Contexts*, Aldershot, 2014, p. 89-91.

hagiography was the reason why his cult did not spread beyond Edirne, the European seat of the Ottoman sultans. Furthermore, the Ottomans would have hardly allowed the cult of a Christian martyr to flourish in the vicinity of the Sultan's palace. At that point, the Ottomans were yet to prove themselves as a major European power, with the conquest of Constantinople (1453) and most of the Hungarian kingdom (first half of the sixteenth century).

Martyrs appeared next at the time of stable Ottoman rule in the Central Balkans. All died in Sofia, a seat of the Beylerbeylik of Rumeli. Silversmith George of Kratovo (1515), shoemaker Nicholas of Ioannina (1555), and another George, of whom almost nothing is known, gave life for their faith. Of the three, only George of Kratovo received a cult that spread not only in the Central Balkans but also among the Greeks and Russians.

Two things could have caused the different fates of these cults. The death of George of Kratovo occurred at the time the city's visual identity was undergoing change and Christians were increasingly converting to Islam. As a result, his cult reflected the changes Christians experienced. Besides, his hagiography and office were written in a simple language and carried universal messages understandable in every part of Christendom. Therefore, their meaning could be conveyed easily. The hagiography of Nicholas of Ioannina, on the other hand, was complex, influenced by the hesychast tradition which was inaccessible to ordinary people.⁷ Also, at first, his relics were placed in the reliquary with the remains of the holy Serbian King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282–1321), in the church of the Holy Archangels.⁸ Perhaps Milutin's cult overshadowed the veneration of the new martyr Nicholas.

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At the beginning of the sixteenth century, everyday life in Sofia was marked by Islamisation, including the city's changing visual identity with numerous mosques and conversions of Christians.⁹ These processes were probably reinforced by the

⁷ The hagiography of Nicholas the New, written by Matthew the Grammarian, is a mosaic containing a history and geography of Sofia, a treatise on marriage, a work on Duke Mircea of Wallachia, etc. It was probably intended for individual reading rather than for the liturgy. It survives in a single copy, dating from 1564, A. Милтенова, "Култовете към новомъчениците", in A. Милтенова (ed.), *История на българската средновековна литература*, Sofia, 2008, p. 705-707. See also R. Gradeva, "Apostasy in Rumeli in the Middle of the Sixteenth Century", *Arab Historical Review for Ottoman Studies* 22, 2000, p. 29-73.

⁸ И. Гергова, "Култът към св. крал Милутин „Софийски“ в България," in Д. Бојовић (ed.), *Манастир Бањска и доба краља Милутина*, Зборник са научног скупа одржаног од 22. до 24. септембра 2005. године у Косовској Митровици, Ниш, Косовска Митровица, Манастир Бањска, 2007, p. 250. On the cult of the holy King Milutin in Sofia following the translation of his relics (before 1469), see M. Vasiljević, "Holy King Milutin – Protector of 'All Serbian and Bulgarian Land'", in *Краљ Милутин и доба Палеолога* (in print).

⁹ A. Милтенова, "Култовете към новомъчениците...", p. 701. For an overview of the issue of

fact that Sofia, as a seat of the beylerbey of Rumelia, had become an important political, social, and economic centre of the Ottoman Empire. Simultaneously, an interest in early Christian martyrs grew – narratives of their martyrdom took a prominent place not only in the liturgy but also in the private reading.¹⁰ The Acts of the Martyrs offered the faithful examples of how to behave if faced with a choice between conversion and keeping their own faith – they were prototypes for new sufferers. That these endeavours fulfilled their purpose was shown by the courage and endurance of the silversmith George martyred in Sofia on February 11, 1515. A local priest, presumably one of the central participants in these events, composed an office and extensive hagiography soon after.¹¹

The office reflects the earlier hymnography in form and content and introduces motifs from old Byzantine sermons for martyrs.¹² It contains an acrostic which reveals the name of the author – priest Peja.¹³ With the acrostic the writer situated himself within the cult, recasting his writing not just as a record of devotion, but as devotion itself, thus seeking the saint’s blessing.¹⁴ He interpolated parts of the offices for Stefan of Dečani and John of Rila,¹⁵ thereby placing the new martyr among the Serbian and Bulgarian saints.

Father Peja points out that George was of Serbian descent, and that he had left his homeland and moved to Sofia.¹⁶ He mentions the humiliation of the “Hagarene chiefs,” the interrogations George endured, and the admiration of Orthodox witnesses he received.¹⁷ As expected, George’s suffering was seen as a part of the eternal

conversion to Islam under the Ottoman rule in Bulgarian historiography, see R. Gradeva, “Conversion to Islam in Bulgarian Historiography: An Overview”, in J. Nielsen (ed.), *Religion, Ethnicity and Contested Nationhood in the Former Ottoman Space*, Leiden, 2012, p. 187-212.

¹⁰ А. Милтенова, “Култовете към новомъчениците...”, p. 701.

¹¹ It was written between 1523 and 1539, the date of the Russian version of the vita of George of Kratovo. On dating of the cultic texts and the cult of St George of Kratovo in the context of other Central Balkan cults see М. Василев, *Култови светих...*, p. 150-167.

¹² Д. Богдановић, *Историја старе српске књижевности*, Belgrade, 1980, p. 245.

¹³ Acrostic was not fully implemented, Б. Ст. Ангелов, “Служба на Георги Софийски”, in *Из старата българска, руска и сръбска литература* 3, Sofia, 1978, p. 138-155. It is possible that priest Peja was the ktetor of the same name of the church of St. Nicholas in the border village of Trnovo near Kriva Palanka, as evidenced by an inscription from 1505, Љ. Стојановић, *Стари српски записи и натписи* 4, Belgrade, 1923, p. 38; С. Душанић, “Презвитер Пеја. Писац службе и биографије св. Ђорђа Кратовца”, *Хришћанско дело* 5/1, 1939, p. 55-61. On Peja, see also А. Милтенова, “Култовете към новомъчениците...”, p. 703.

¹⁴ D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness. The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East*, Philadelphia, 2004, p. 63-93. Acrostics do not contradict the topos of unworthiness because one cannot hear them during singing, *ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁵ Б. Ст. Ангелов, “Служба на Георги Софийски...”, p. 133-137.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145, 149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138-140, 145.

war between God and the devil. The author likens George to the Apostle Matthew and earlier great martyrs. The silversmith was the soldier of Christ for whom he triumphed and whose name he celebrated. Armed with his faith as a weapon, he was invincible. The hero's physical torments – imprisonment and burning – are one of the most important motifs of the office. Peja explicitly invites the faithful to listen to, admire and celebrate his struggle, which expresses mimetic and didactical intentions of every cultic text.

Unlike the office, the extensive hagiography of George of Kratovo does not reflect local saints' vitae.¹⁸ The author called his work an "oration" and "suffering/martyrdom."¹⁹ This terminological fluidity – between "oration," which could refer to several different genres,²⁰ and "martyrdom," which referred to the *Acta martyrum* – implies that the writer was aware of the difference between his text and conventional local hagiographies.²¹

The hagiography of George of Kratovo consists of a prologue, an account of George's martyrdom, and an epilogue. The prologue and epilogue differ from the main part of the narrative not only in topics but also in the style and manner of storytelling. In the prologue, the author recounts salvation history from Adam to "the end of days." Here, he describes two ways of life: in virtue or in sin. Life in virtue, which leads to eternal existence next to God, and life in sin, which leads to eternal torture, are the first points of reference for interpreting George's suffering. Also, the author establishes the primacy of eternal flames over earthly fires.

Priest Peja points out that only a handful are worthy of sainthood, among whom are the holy apostles, patriarchs, martyrs, and venerable. They are miracle-workers and healers of those who approach them with faith. The author singles out those whom others wanted to deprave of remembrance by burning them to death but failed to do so. Thus, he implicitly states that the purpose of his work is to preserve

¹⁸ The Orthodox practice of celebrating saints distinguishes between extensive and short hagiographies/lives/vitae. The role of extensive hagiographies in the veneration of saints is not clear. Even so, since they were written, they were read, and they had some place in the church ritual. They were often used as a source for the office and the short vita. Short or synaxarial vitae were read during the office. Therefore, they were necessary for the liturgical commemoration of saints. On hagiographies in the contexts of the development of the cult see М. Васиљевић, *Култови светих...*, p. 31-39.

¹⁹ Д. Богдановић, "Житије Георгија Кратовца", in В. Ђурић (ed.), *Зборник историје књижевности 10. Стара српска књижевност*, Belgrade, 1976, p. 230, 235, 265.

²⁰ "Slovo", which may be subsumed under the genre of oration, is an umbrella term whose attribute usually reveals the true content of the text, Ђ. Трифуновић, *Азбучник српских средњовековних књижевних појмова*, Belgrade, 1990, p. 323-326. Interestingly, most orations were written for the cult of the martyred Prince Lazar, М. Васиљевић, *Култови светих...*, p. 39-78.

²¹ The author also stated that he heard "in the hagiography" of Despot Stefan Branković (r. 1458–1459; d. 1476), Д. Богдановић, "Житије Георгија Кратовца...", p. 232. Therefore, he seems to have been aware of the difference between the hagiography of George of Kratovo and the one devoted to the Serbian Despot.

the memory of George's passion. He later explicitly states that George's "suffering for Christ would be surrendered to oblivion" without his writing.²²

The writer points out that God chooses on whom he will perform the miracles. He mentions an early Christian bishop of Nicomedia, who was set on fire with his flock in his church, and Prince Lazar, the sufferer of the Battle of Kosovo. Although all who died with them are holy, God performed miracles only with the bishop and Prince Lazar. Furthermore, the former example introduced the motif of God's power to undo the effect of the fire into the narrative, while the latter established the contemporary martyrial tradition.

Following these lines, Father Peja points out that, besides secular and religious leaders, ordinary people also achieved sainthood. So as to be able to set a precedent for George he finds it important to point out that a common man can achieve sainthood. The precedent is embodied in the martyr Sophronius – an ordinary man, initially a priest and then a monk – who was killed by a blow to the head. The prologue is concluded with this example.

With these lines, the author laid the basis for interpreting George's martyrdom. The polarised image of the world presented the structure and driving forces of Christianity. As a text without a plot, it is not interested in the end but in the beginning; the basic question was not "how did it end?" (it was obvious from the title), but "where did it start from?".²³ The prologue also reveals and explains various phenomena important for the pages that follow: eternal versus earthly life, eternal and earthly flames, and miracles as a sign of holiness. Noteworthy are also the motifs of the body unharmed by the fire and of the death from a blow to the head. The mentions of the Serbian Prince Lazar and members of other Serbian ruling dynasties (Nemanjić and Branković) situate George among the Serbian saints.

The author added a subheading, "the Martyrdom/Suffering of George the New," to mark the beginning of the central part of the hagiography.²⁴ Most of the text consists of dialogues, which required the use of simple language. Also, this part of the hagiography is interspersed with biblical quotations and allusions. The difference between the prologue and the epilogue and the rest of the text sometimes indicates what the author wanted the majority of his audience to understand.²⁵

²² *Ibid.*, p. 235.

²³ Jurij Lotman defines texts with or without the plot based on whether they violate the established order, i.e. binary semantic oppositions, J. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, Michigan, 1977, p. 231-239. Therefore, the extensive life of George the New belongs to texts without the plot because it establishes boundaries between the Christians and Muslims and makes them fast. On the introduction, which defines the genre, the style and the art codes activated to make the text understandable, see *ibid.*, p. 209-214.

²⁴ Д. Богдановић, "Житије Георгија Краговца...", p. 233.

²⁵ S. Efthymiadis, N. Kalogeras, "Audience, Language and Patronage in Byzantine Hagiography", in S. Efthymiadis (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, 2. *Genres and*

In order to explain George's defence of Christianity, priest Peja insists that George's parents were pious and that he was instructed in the Holy Scripture from the age of six. He became a craftsman only after he understood the holy book. After he moved to Sofia because he feared he would be taken to the sultan's court (possibly to join the janissaries), he continued to live a pious life. Since "a town built on a hill cannot be hidden," "Muhammad's priests" decided to convert him.²⁶

"Muhammad's priests" offered George to accept Islam and listed what he could gain from the conversion. When he refused, describing Muslim life as a life in sin, "the priests" brought him before a local judge (reportedly for some work). The author uses both conversations to contrast the Christian worldview, which aims at eternal and heavenly life, and the Islamic worldview, which aims at earthly glory. George repeats the lines from the prologue about miracles as signs of sanctity and the equality of kings, bishops, and ordinary people in holiness. He portrays Christ as an eternal judge whose supremacy over the Persian people was confirmed by the Adoration of the Magi. He describes Muhammad as a false prophet and his teaching as appealing to those inexperienced in faith.

George's steadfastness, superiority, and attacks on Islam and its adherents were the reasons for his confinement. With the imprisonment – demanded by a "multitude of Hagarenes" – his passion began.²⁷ The exchange between a Christian priest (presumably the writer himself) and the people who imprisoned George also presents two opposite worldviews, the same as in the first two dialogues. Here the priest promised to persuade George to do what was good for him. Both had in mind an outcome that stemmed from their respective cultural and religious heritages: the first to encourage him to accept suffering and become a martyr, and the second to encourage him to convert and save his life.

The conversation between George and the priest, the final examination, and the account of his death constitute the backbone of the hagiography.²⁸ The priest announced to George that he would become a martyr and likened him to Stephen the Protomartyr and Stephen the New, a martyr from the period of Iconoclasm.²⁹ In doing so, he established a history of martyrdom from the first, probably legendary, martyr figure. The silversmith expressed his fear of his physical weakness, but the

Contexts, Aldershot, 2014, p. 248-253.

²⁶ Д. Богдановић, "Житије Георгија Кратовца...", p. 236. Author quoted the famous lines from Matthew, 5: 14-15.

²⁷ Д. Богдановић, "Житије Георгија Кратовца...", p. 243. Confinement and prolonged physical punishment belong to the *topoi* associated with martyrdom, T. Pratsch, *Der hagiographische Topos. Griechische Heiligenviten in mittelbyzantinischer Zeit*, Berlin – New York, 2005, p. 310-315.

²⁸ Д. Богдановић, "Житије Георгија Кратовца...", p. 244-256.

²⁹ Stephen the Protomartyr was the prototype of all martyrs; see S. Mathews, *Perfect Martyr. The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity*, New York, 2010, p. 16-24. On Stefan the New (Younger), see M. Detoraki, "Greek Passions of the Martyrs in Byzantium...", p. 85.

priest uplifted him by promising God's help. He also encouraged George to trust the Apostle Paul's words on martyrdom: that nothing can separate him from Christ and that the present sufferings are transient and insignificant when compared to the glory that will be revealed.³⁰ He told the silversmith to prepare to "endure the devil's punishment manly."³¹ The priest said that George did not ask for this, but God decided to celebrate him. In other words, his potential would be realised in death. At the end of their conversation, George begged his spiritual father to rescue him so that he could perform other good deeds. If that was not possible, he would accept what God intended for him: "Let it be God's will."³²

The last examination before the judge came after George spent eight days in prison. On this occasion, George repeated many of the priest's words and quotes from the Holy Scripture about rejecting earthly glory and possessions so as to achieve the eternal one. Moreover, he stated a condition to the judge: that he let him remain a Christian, send him to Christ, or that Muslims change their faith and so escape eternal tortures. After yet another criticism of Islam as a false religion, the angry crowd attacked George and demanded that he be burnt to death. Although hesitant, the judge allowed them to do what they wanted.

Before they made the stake, the crowd physically abused George, whereas the priest approached him and encouraged him to persevere in order to "rejoice with Christ for ages."³³ George endured this ordeal as patiently as the previous. The priest then sent a "Saracen,"³⁴ who was secretly Christian but could not profess it, to listen to the conversation between George and the crowd. The Muslim crowd put George to flames several times, offering him to change his mind, but he remained steadfast. Even though he was not bound in the fire, he did not try to escape. After he repeated Christ's words on the cross: "God, into your hands I commit my spirit,"³⁵ he was killed by a blow to the head. With this, the writer presented George's death not as God's but as a human decision. Afterwards, God sent a cloud that brought dew over the fire and thus embarrassed the crowd.

The judge allowed the priest to take George's body, but the crowd wanted to burn it throughout the night. In the morning a priest called Jovan stole the intact body which was then taken to the church of St. Marina the Great-martyr in Sofia. The author thus built another (local) martyrial genealogy in order to establish continuity between the early and new martyrs in their role in the preservation of identity.³⁶

³⁰ Д. Богдановић, "Житије Георгија Краговца...", p. 245; Romans 8: 18, 35.

³¹ Д. Богдановић, "Житије Георгија Краговца...", p. 245.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 255; Luke 23: 46.

³⁶ On the functions of the genealogy of martyrdom, see C. R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*.

The priest described the deposition of the body in the church to the judge as God's miracle, after which the judge said, "He is holy."³⁷ Therefore, the Muslim representative indirectly admitted defeat. The author concludes the account of George's suffering by describing his physical appearance and character.

The epilogue of the extensive hagiography of George the New is a lesson in fasting because his death (February 11) took place right before Great Lent. Here, the author states that fasting is the highest of virtues. In other words, after describing a real-life episode, he returns to modelling the Christian world by using appropriate themes for the liturgical cycle.³⁸

At first glance, it appears that the author sought to depict Sofia as it was at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Islamic protagonists – "Muhammad's priests," the judge, and the crowd – have distinct roles in the narrative. "Muhammad's priests" initiated the events, the judge tried to maintain peace between the opposing communities, while the crowd demanded and executed punishment. As for the Christians, clerics and people constitute two separate groups. The clerics are also initiators because it is under their guidance that George becomes an exemplary Christian, while people are observers and passive participants.

However, the presumed polyphony is, in fact, dominated by the Christian perspective.³⁹ This point of view is visible in the use of Christian terms for Muslims: "Muhammad's priests" for religious figures (it cannot be known whether this included imam, muezzin, mufti, etc), "judge" for the qadi and "Hagarenes" for Ottomans. More importantly, only one side emerged victorious from the exchange: George humiliated the priests, the judge, and the crowd. Since the craftsman inspired by the Holy Spirit was able to outwit educated persons, he undermined power structures.

As is the case with any hagiography, the text's foremost purpose was didactic. George's death was educational and mimetic; he embodied the paradigm the author held out to the Christians to emulate. Simple language devoid of rhetorical decorations confirms this. Detailed dialogues served as a framework for imparting the fundamentals of the Christian dogma, whilst the repetition of key lines indicates that the writer sought to facilitate their memorisation.

Through comparisons, choice of a burial site and numerous quotations, the author invoked much older martyrial traditions and created new continuities. Some researchers have noted that the author departed from the pattern of the *Acta martyrum* because, unlike early Christian martyrs who had wholeheartedly accepted

Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions, Yale, 2012, p. 163-164.

³⁷ Д. Богдановић, "Житије Георгија Краговца...", p. 259.

³⁸ The end of the text speaks about the construction of the world, J. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text...*, p. 214-217.

³⁹ The term "polyphony" was first used by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study on Dostoevsky: M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Minneapolis, 1984.

the prospect of sacrificing themselves for Christ, George felt fear and doubted his strength, prayed for rescue, and hoped for deliverance from suffering.⁴⁰ However, he prayed, hoped, and accepted God's decision like Christ had. The examination of George echoes the examination of Jesus: the judge was reluctant to condemn him and gave up the responsibility to the crowd. It was the crowd that directed the events and executed the punishment.⁴¹ Before his death, George repeated Christ's last words. Therefore, the text depicted an evangelical death. Textual formatting also attests to the imitation of this model. Many quotes and allusions, mostly from the Gospel of St. Matthew and the epistles of St. Paul (both martyrs themselves), served to present the Christian worldview. Thus, the new hagiography continued the Bible by becoming its mimesis.⁴²

In the first centuries of Christianity, the idea of martyrdom varied from region to region, always adapting to local settings. This led to a diversity of theologies and practices of martyrdom: those specific to Asia Minor, Rome, Gaul, North Africa, and Alexandria have been identified.⁴³ Among them, the tradition of Asia Minor also incorporated the evangelical model of death.⁴⁴ Heroes associated with this tradition suffered the same way as Christ had. By reflecting Christ's figure, new sufferers also sacrificed themselves for him. They had the qualities and attitudes the authors wanted their audiences to reproduce.⁴⁵ Texts belonging to this tradition undermined the existing order and established the Christian one instead.⁴⁶ The hallmark of this tradition was not the pursuit of martyrdom, but its acceptance by individuals faced with a choice between renouncing their faith and suffering. It was only natural that George belonged to the tradition of Asia Minor and Byzantine Christianity. The examples the author cited – martyrs from Nicomedia, Stephen the New, martyred under Iconoclast emperors, and George's namesake, St. George of Lydda – indicate that he placed George in this tradition.

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* could have been a model for the new hagiography.⁴⁷ Polycarp was the second-century bishop of Smyrna who was killed

⁴⁰ А. Милтенова, "Култовете към новомъчениците...", p. 704.

⁴¹ On the "audience" that plays a decisive role in these texts, see E. A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory. Early Christian Culture Making*, New York, 2004, p. 120.

⁴² D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness...*, p. 15-32.

⁴³ On adapting the idea of martyrdom to the cultural and intellectual heritage of different regions, see C. R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49-76.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74-76.

⁴⁶ E. A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory...*, p. 39-41; C. R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom...*, p. 76.

⁴⁷ This text, along with the *Letters of Ignatius*, shaped the ideology of martyrdom in Asia Minor. The history of research on the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is long; see bibliography grouped by topics in B. Dehandschutter, "Research on the Martyrdom of Polycarp: 1990–2005", in J. Leemans (ed.),

for refusing to offer a sacrifice to the Roman emperor. The story of his passion, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, is in fact a letter sent by the church at Smyrna to the church at Philomelium. It was considered the first martyrdom account, but this view has recently been challenged.⁴⁸ It is preserved in eight Greek menologia dating from the tenth to thirteenth century. Eusebius of Caesarea recorded a shorter version in his *Ecclesiastical History*.⁴⁹

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is a much shorter text than the hagiography of George of Kratovo, but there are parallels in the sequence of events and references. Both saints were examined three times, both were supposed to be burnt at the stake but died at the hands of men (Polycarp was stabbed with a dagger, George was hit on the head), and in both cases God performed a miracle after their death (Polycarp's blood extinguished the fire, dew from the cloud extinguished the flames licking round George's body). Both texts abound in biblical allusions and quotations, mostly referring to the writings of the Apostle Paul and the Gospel of Matthew. With them, the miracles, and theological interpretations, the texts recreated, in a way, the evangelical narrative itself. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* even claims that the bishop's death was "in accord with the gospel."⁵⁰ Furthermore, the authors insist on the difference between eternal and earthly fires. God said to Polycarp to "act like a man"⁵¹ and the priest said to George to prepare himself to endure the devil's punishment in a manly manner. Both martyrs said: God's will shall be done. The ease with which both angry crowds gathered firewood for the stake is striking. Moreover, the crowds tried to prevent Christians from taking the saints' bodies by burning them, but they failed (Polycarp's bones were collected from the stake, and George's body was stolen and taken to the local church). Miracles, as signs of holiness, received the greatest attention. Finally, each text reflected its binaries.⁵²

Polycarpiana. Studies on Martyrdom and Persecution in Early Christianity. Collected Essays, Leuven, 2007, p. 85-92; idem, "The Martyrium Polycarpi: A Century of Research", in J. Leemans (ed.), *Polycarpiana*, p. 43-83.

⁴⁸ For new interpretations see C. R. Moss, "On the dating of Polycarp: Rethinking the Place of the Martyrdom of Polycarp in the History of Christianity", *Early Christianity* 1/4, 2010, p. 539-574; eadem, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom...*, p. 58-73. A translation of the text see in M. W. Holmes (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers. Second Edition*, Leicester, 1989, p. 135-144.

⁴⁹ Based on Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* it was translated into Syriac, Armenian, and Coptic. The Latin translation, however, is independent and paraphrastic.

⁵⁰ *The Apostolic Fathers...*, p. 135, 143. The celebration of Polycarp also belonged to the period of Great Lent (February 23), which may suggest a further link with the hagiography of George of Kratovo.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁵² In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the binaries are patient/enthusiastic martyrdom, evangelical/unevangelical, and Catholic/non-Catholic (C. R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom...*, p. 74); in the hagiography of George of Kratovo they are virtue/sin, eternal/temporal, and Christians/non-Christians.

The hagiography of George of Kratovo is not an (extended) reproduction of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Each text originated in particular social and political circumstances, and these hold the key to their understanding. For example, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* participated in the contemporary debate about the nature of martyrdom (enthusiastic and voluntary versus stoic and patient); this made it possible for the author to emphasise that Polycarp did not seek death but he accepted it. This notion echoed in the hagiography of George of Kratovo but was not stressed. Also, Polycarp was a bishop, who foresaw his death and showed no fear; George was an ordinary man, a silversmith, and he needed his spiritual father's guidance.

Rather, the text about the bishop of Smyrna could have been a distant model, a mental picture of suffering, which influenced the literary depiction of the death of the silversmith George. The Gospels and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* could have premediated the experience and interpretation of the new martyr's death. Premediation deals with schemata that determine the ways in which events are anticipated, experienced, interpreted, presented, and, finally, remembered.⁵³ It is a largely unconscious and abstract process that often crosses cultural and other borders.

The Slavonic version of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is preserved, as far as is known, in two manuscripts, dating from the fifteenth and the sixteenth century respectively.⁵⁴ However, the older of the two shows philological similarities to the eleventh-century Codex Suprasliensis. These, as well as several archaic expressions, have led to the assumption that this independent translation was done in the tenth century.⁵⁵ If that was the case, it would support the possibility of premediation of the hagiography of George of Kratovo. Since the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* could only be known as a Byzantine liturgical text, this would attest to the Byzantine heritage in the pre-Ottoman and Ottoman Central Balkans. Also, the depiction of Polycarp

⁵³ Premediation, as a mostly unconscious scheme that shapes and adapts new experiences to existing forms, is always present in the formation of a hagiographic narrative, where the author's primary task is to adapt the saint's life to a timeless model of sanctity and where historical circumstances become important only if they played a crucial role. Here, I am talking of immediate premediation, i.e. the influence of few texts on the hagiography of George of Kratovo. On premediation, see A. Erll, *Prämediation – Remediation. Repräsentationen des indischen Aufstands in imperialen und postkolonialen Medienkulturen (von 1857 bis zu Gegenwart)*, Trier, 2007, p. 28-34; eadem, "Media and the Dynamics of Memory: From Cultural Paradigms to Transcultural Premediation", in B. Wagoner (ed.), *Handbook of Culture and Memory*, Oxford, 2017, p. 315-318.

⁵⁴ T. Khomych, "A Forgotten Witness: Recovering the Early Church Slavonic Version of the Martyrdom of Polycarp", in J. Leemans (ed.), *Martyrdom and Persecution in Late Antique Christianity. Festschrift Boudewijn Dehandschutter*, Leuven, 2010, p. 123-133; idem, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp in Church Slavonic: An Evidence of the Academic Menologion", *Vigiliae Christianae* 67, 2013, p. 393-406.

⁵⁵ R. Mathiesen and R. F. Allen, "An Early Church Slavonic Translation of the Martyrdom of Polycarp", *Harvard Theological Review* 72, 1979, p. 161-163. An update to this paper in T. Khomych, "An Early Church Slavonic Translation of the Martyrdom of St Polycarp: Three Decades Later", *Analecta Bolandiana* 130, 2012, p. 294-302.

in churches throughout the Central Balkans suggests that the memory of him was nurtured over the centuries.⁵⁶

Old models of martyrial sanctity thus gained currency during and after the Ottoman conquest.⁵⁷ The new martyrs re-established broken ties with God, the break embodied in Muslim rule over Christian lands. The hagiography of George the New, therefore, strengthened local Christian identity.⁵⁸ To depict polarised and uncomplicated identity, the text became a stage for conflict and competition between different worldviews.⁵⁹ With that, it imposed and maintained boundaries between social groups whose identities would otherwise remain fluid.

Even though both the early texts and the hagiography of George the New promoted boundaries between groups, they also implied constant contacts, cooperation and peaceful coexistence between Christians and non-Christians. The invitation to George to work for a judge is expected, and an offer to convert to Islam and continue to respect Christ possible. Likewise, the mention of a “Saracen” who secretly professed Christianity was not a strange occurrence. Although the text created and promoted impenetrable boundaries, its details testify to their porosity. It goes without saying that in Christian hagiography only Muslims crossed the imaginary boundaries, while Christians were not susceptible to other influences because they professed the true faith. The very existence of this hagiography, however, implies that Christians also crossed them.

This analysis raises the question as to whether the hagiography of St. George reflects real events. The links between the early Christian texts and this hagiography suggest a substantial factual distance from the actual events. This prompts the question of the relationship between the model and individual experience, an ever-present question of Christian hagiography. Finding an answer, however, does not seem to carry much importance. The author adapted George’s life to a particular model of sainthood. Such models are “types of holiness, types of religious thinking and behaviour, religious life in general.”⁶⁰ The historical circumstances and actual life of a saint simply constitute the earthly framework of his spirituality. Therefore,

⁵⁶ On the depictions of Polycarp in the centuries preceding the death of George of Kratovo see M. Васиљевић, *Култови светих...*, p. 160-161.

⁵⁷ Another example is the Muslim conquest and the revival of the martyrial model of sainthood that took place in Syria in the second half of the eighth century. The new social reality led to a return to early Christian ways of preserving identity, C. Sahnner, “Old Martyrs, New Martyrs and the Coming of Islam: Writing Hagiography after the Conquest”, in A. Izdeloski and D. Jasiński (eds.), *Cultures in Motion. Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, Cracow, 2014, p. 89-112.

⁵⁸ The way martyrs’ cults take part in identity creation is exemplified by Stephen the Protomartyr in S. Mathews, *Perfect Martyr...*

⁵⁹ On the example of St. Thecla see E. A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory...*, p. 138-143.

⁶⁰ Д. Богдановић, *Ликови светитеља*, Belgrade, 1972, p. 6.

hagiography builds “the history of holiness, not the history of the world.”⁶¹ The chosen model of sainthood always reflects the community which venerated the saint, its relationship to the present and the future, and its new values and interests, and precisely that is of interest to a researcher of the cults of saints.⁶²

This connection with the communities of the faithful is visible also in the subtle changes the image of a saint could go through over the course of veneration. For example, one manuscript group shows that George of Kratovo was seen as a Serbian saint and one of the Serbian martyrs.⁶³ This is confirmed by an icon from the second quarter of the sixteenth century: it shows Prince Lazar and George the New. From then on, George was depicted in churches in the territory of the Patriarchate of Peć and beyond, such as the church of St. Demetrius in Veria.⁶⁴ In another manuscript group, the prologue and epilogue were either left out or shortened to a greater or lesser extent. This cut George’s association with the Serbian saints. Besides these shortened versions, there is a synaxarial vita which included the last examination and the description of his death.⁶⁵ Since all shorter versions are associated with the Bulgarian lands (except one manuscript), it is clear that George’s image was adjusted to that environment.

The literary image of George of Kratovo, which was a reflection of the contemporary social and other realities, brought about a rapid spread of the cult, not only in the Central Balkans but also among the Greeks and Russians. Already in 1539, the priest from Pskov Elijah wrote a new hagiography, and the monk Basil-Varlaam composed a synaxarial vita and an office.⁶⁶ This further spread the early Christian model of martyrdom and shaped the experience of everyday life.

New realities of political, social, cultural, and religious life in the Central Balkans since the last quarter of the fourteenth century led to the revival of old models of sainthood. The veneration of martyred rulers – Prince Lazar and King Stefan Uroš III of Dečani – occurred in the Serbian Principality and Despotate.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶² S. Efthymiadis, N. Kalogeras, “Audience, Language and Patronage in Byzantine Hagiography...”, p. 247.

⁶³ Overview of the manuscripts which preserve the hagiography of George of Kratovo see in: Д. Богдановић, “Житије Георгија Кратовца...”, p. 205-229.

⁶⁴ Г. Суботић, “Најстарије представе Светог Георгија Кратовца”, *Зборник радова Византолошког института* 32, 1993, p. 167-205; А. Tourta, “The Painters from Linotopi (Greece) and the Serbian Church,” *Зборник Матице српске за ликовне уметности* 27–28, 1991–1992, p. 319-324.

⁶⁵ It is interesting that this version leaves out the miracle of the preservation of the body of George the New, Б. Ст. Ангелов, “Два преписа на житието на Георги Софийски”, in *Из старата българска, руска и сръбска литература* 2, Sofia, 1967, p. 268-279; X. Кодов, “86. Сборник от жития, слова и др. от XVII–XVIII в.”, in *Опис на славянските ръкописи в Библиотеката на Българската Академия на науките*, Sofia, 1969, p. 210-217.

⁶⁶ А. Милтенова, “Култовете към новомъчениците...”, p. 703-704.

However, since Bulgaria fell before the end of the fourteenth century, only ordinary people could become martyrs, which led to the revival of the early Christian model of martyrdom. In the 1430s, George from Sofia died in Edirne, but his veneration did not develop. The next cults developed during the Islamisation in the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, and particularly in Sofia, a seat of the Beylerbeylik of Rumeli. Out of three Sofia victims – two named George and one Nicholas – only George of Kratovo became a prominent saint in the Balkans and beyond.

In keeping the memory of the passion of George of Kratovo, two complementary traditions came together. The office, the “frame” of his extensive hagiography, the manuscript legacy, and visual art testify to his placement in the local traditions – both Serbian and Bulgarian. But, the content of the office and, especially, of the hagiography shows adaptation to the evangelical model and martyrial tradition of Asia Minor (possibly also the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*). This tradition, which represented Byzantine heritage for the Central Balkan Christians, premediated how martyrdom was experienced, interpreted, and presented. Therefore, the hagiography of George of Kratovo re-introduced this tradition’s fundamental characteristics: self-sacrifice, exemplarity, manliness, and mimesis. These features mirrored the needs of the Christian community in contemporary Sofia. The reflection of a centuries-old tradition of martyrdom was probably the reason why George’s cult spread beyond Sofia. Universal themes, which had shaped early Christian identity, got through to anyone who could identify with the sufferer. Therefore, the new cult reflected contemporary realities and gave them meaning by fitting them into the Christian worldview, thus maintaining Christian identity and the belief that the current situation would come to an end, just as the past persecutions had.