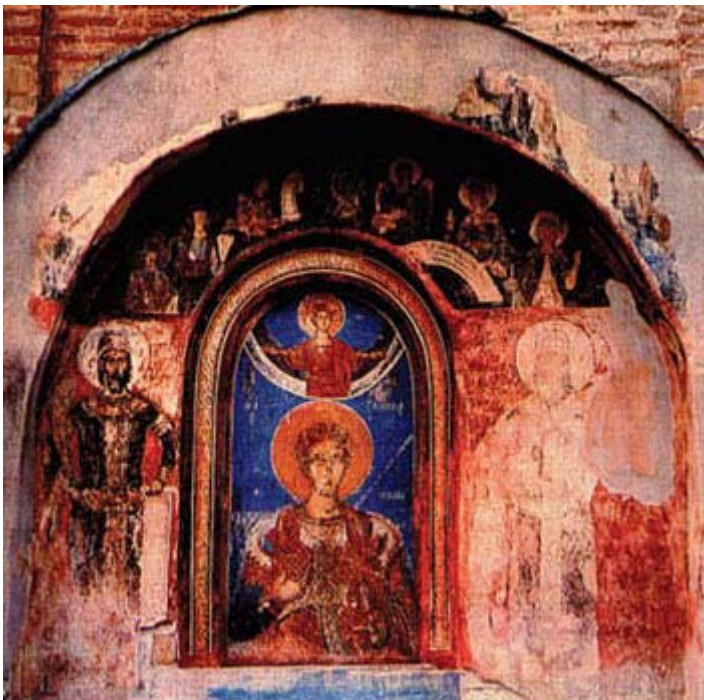


## KRALI MARKO: BETWEEN HISTORICAL REALITIES AND MYTHOLOGY

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Krali Marko is so much connected with the folk songs and legends that his existence as a real historical figure seems paradoxical to a lesser or greater extent. Yet he was real – a ruler from the last quarter of 14<sup>th</sup> century about whom the historical sources contain scanty, though explicit enough and eloquent facts. Any way, the mythic hero from the folklore of Bulgarians and Serbs is at least as popular among historians as a number of other historical persons from this tumultuous and dramatic epoch: Tsar Ivan Shishman, Tsar Ivan Sratsimir, despot Dobrotitsa, etc.

Not to mention that Krali Marko is far more popular than many other local Balkan rulers in the period of the Ottoman invasion, whose names are just mentioned in passing in inscriptions, notes in historical works. Indeed, this is what the period was like: the centralized sovereignty from the time of the classical Byzantine-Balkan Middle Ages had dispersed in dozens territorial principalities; in addition, there were no historians comparable to Procopius of Caesarea, who could reflect on the new tendencies in the



A portrait of Krali Marko, painted in the 1370s on the facade of the village church of Sushitsa, Skopje district. Marko is depicted on the right and on the left side one can see the almost annihilated posthumous portrait of his father king Valkashin.

region development from the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Who was actually Krali Marko? He was the son of king Vulkashin – one of those Serbian rulers who during the Serbian expansion in the second quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Macedonia recognized it as his second native country. It seems that somewhere between Prizren, Skopje and Kostur Krali Marko himself was born. The year of his birth is not known but we'll certainly not make a huge mistake if we assign it to the early or mid 1350s. In any case round the end of the 60s of

the century he was of age according to the medieval understandings: about 16 years of age. As such he could perform important errands appointed by his father and even to be appointed his co-ruler titled "young king". Thus he is mentioned on the inscription in the church 'St Sunday' in Prizren.



Georgi Mashev, "Krali Marko", 1932

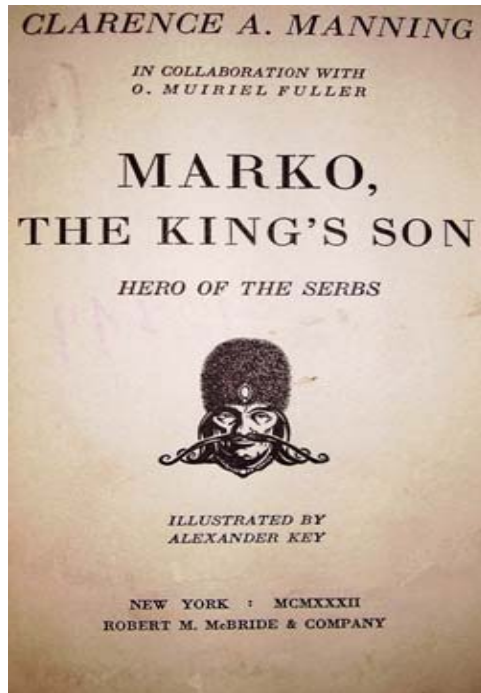
By the way why a "young king"? In order to explain this we should run back over the process of decline of the Serbian kingdom when King Marko's father – Vulkashin – not only got a title from the last Serbian tsar Urosh V, but together with his brother – despot John Uglesha – detached from the Serbian state vast territories in Macedonia. There in the

second half of the 1360s they set up their own "family state" stretched to Prizren in the North, to the lower course of the Mesta River in the Southeast and in the South to Kostur and the Cherna River. Despot Uglesha ruled in the Serres region and King Vulkashin in the valley of the Vardar River and there was no strictly determined boundary between the two. Obviously the two brothers had the intention to establish their own dynasty and in the process of accomplishing this task they take measures to deal with the succession to the throne.

The easiest way, according to the practice of that epoch, was by appointing a co-ruler. Following the Serbian state tradition, with whose ideas he had been brought up, King Vulkashin appointed his eldest son Marko to be his co-ruler and honored him with the title "young king". Many rulers in the Serbian state of Nemanichi had acted like that in the 13<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The personal burden of the young king Marko increased due to the circumstance that his uncle despot Uglesha had no male heirs. In the summer of 1371 in a series of charters of his, issued in favour of the Athos monasteries, he presumes to be succeeded by his nephew. In order for the future successor to the throne to have high enough international prestige, according to the practice of the period he had to have family relations with a famous Orthodox dynasty. There was hardly anything more desirable by any Balkan ruler without traditions than a family relation with the Byzantine dynasty of the Palaeologus? In the summer of 1371 despot Uglesha negotiated with Constantinople over a series of problems, among which a potential marriage between

King Marko and a female representative of the Palaeologus dynasty. By the way the Byzantines still proudly demonstrated their confidence of being the followers of a great empire and declined the proposal of the "unworthy", as they called him, ruler of Southeast Macedonia, without giving it a thought.



Krali Marko's myth crossed the ocean. The title page of Clarence Manning's book which appeared in 1938 in USA. The text of the book which is wonderfully illustrated by Alexander Key is available on <http://markokralievic.uzice.net/>.

Leaving the details aside, we can safely say that in the end of the 1360s and the beginning of the 1370s, good opportunities presented themselves to Vulkashin's son Marko. He seemed to be the legal successor in huge territories from South Serbia to South Macedonia. The future ruler of these territories also inherited the political influence of his father and uncle in Montenegro, the Ohrid region and other territories, the rulers of which were already in some relations with them. Tormented by plague, Ottoman raids and political internecine wars people from these regions were waiting for the new ruler in the hope that he would be ruling over a territory larger than that of Byzantium and than any "average" Balkan principality from the last quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

This indeed happened after the tragic death of King Vulkashin and despot Uglesha, defeated by the Ottoman invaders near the fortress of Chernomen on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1371. On that fatal date King Marko was not near Chernomen and there are no traces in any of the legends about him relating him to the Christian doom by that fortress. During his father and uncle's campaign, he, as their legal heir, had been ordered to rule over their huge territories. From 26<sup>th</sup> September 1371 onwards he was the legitimate king ruling over the territories he inherited from his father and his uncle.

In the years after the Chernomen battle King Marko demonstrated enormous confidence as a ruler. At that time he was portrayed with the royal symbols of a legal ruler, something more: on one of the portraits he was as a tsar from the Old Testament holding in his right hand the horn of plenty. Most of the local rulers in Macedonia, Albania and Serbia even acknowledged his royal dignity and even minted their own coins in the mint of Ohrid under his jurisdiction. King Marko

himself already minted his own coins. It is mentioned in post-Byzantine and Western sources that he was a central political figure together with the Bulgarian tsar Ivan Shishman: together they tried to establish on the Byzantine throne the Byzantine pretender Andronikos IV. That favourable period in King Marko's biography came to a close very soon, by the end of the 1370s. Having understood that Krali Marko's ambitions as a ruler are only on paper, the rest of the local rulers detached territories from Vulkashin's heritage. Eventually, Vulkashin's son ended up as a ruler of a small principality with Prilep as its centre. Doubtless he became a Byzantine vassal as well, though no one can say when and under what circumstances. According to the legends he took part in the prominent battle at Kosovo in the summer of 1389 on the side of the Ottoman suzerain; however, there is no historical evidence for such a claim. King Marko died in May 1395 as an Ottoman vassal in a campaign against the Wallachian voivode Mircho Stari somewhere in the valley of the Ardzhesh River.

Although interesting, neither the life, nor the political fate of this ruler at first sight explain why he has become a hero in the South Slav folklore. This is the reason why the "Krali Marko case" is usually considered as an example of the bizarre twisting of the folk memory. As if it neglects what the academic history has established and instead of praising some of the great Bulgarian tsars or Serbian kings, it praises some "insignificant" local ruler from the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This is the case just at first sight.

The science of folklore has long found out that in the cycle about Krali Marko exist several layers, the oldest of which dates back before his lifetime and even before the emergence of the Balkan nations which have praised his character. This fact explains only the variety of subject-matters but not the very fact of being grouped around a particular historical figure. As soon as the portraits of Krali Marko had been found in the churches of the village of Sushitsa and of Marko's monastery in Prilep there were people who made haste in claiming that his cult was due to his extraordinary appearance. Indeed on them we see a man in his prime with an impressive physical appearance. The same holds for other church donors' portraits, for example those of Sebastocrator Kaloyan in the Boyana Church, of the Serbian king Stefan Dragutin in the church of Arile or of despot John Oliver in Lesnovo. None of them has been praised the way Krali Marko is.

Other researchers suppose that while King Marko ruled in Prilep, he became an Ottoman vassal under conditions which secured peace for his subjects for a long period of time. In a somewhat odd way they were not affected by the Ottoman raids and became part of the Ottoman state in the summer of 1395 without being victims of any conquering campaigns. For this statement there are no sources, but it

also sounds incredible. The Ottoman members of the advanced-guard cavalry were loosely controlled by the central power in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and there was no one capable of restraining their predatory instincts. Taking into consideration the specificity of the period, the existence of so-called "islands of peace" seems more than improbable.

Science would never relate the basic subject-matters of the epic about Krali Marko to what we know from historical sources. In most of them there are distant allusions to the period. Thus, for example one of them narrates Krali Marko's reaction when he sees a firearm. Actually, he lives at the time when this wonder of the medieval technology emerged on the Balkan territory. The very reaction is made up by the imagination of the folk author and as a whole is in line with the assumption that in using the new arm, the face-to-face confrontation typical for the medieval heroes will be replaced by a fight at a distance. At that time there were chain-gangs as far as the Ottoman invasion brought to life the trade with human beings forbidden by the Christian churches. This does not mean in any case that the ruler of Prilep actually set "three chain-gangs" free. This subject-matter is indicative of the fact that the affected were really hoping that someone would really crush the chains.

In such a case there should be two conditions for the emergence of such epic cycles. The first one is a dramatic confrontation of civilizations between Christianity and Islam which would aggravate to an extreme the sensibility of the people to everything that happens in that context. In this intense sensibility of the people waiting for something significant comes to the fore and very often it shades reality. Thus in the conditions of a continuous border-line of a Byzantine-Arab confrontation in Asia Minor emerged the Byzantine epic of Digenis Akrit. In that epic one can trace subject-matters similar to those of the Balkan epic about Krali Marko. In a similar continuous confrontation on the Iberian Peninsula emerged the European epic about Roland. By the way it also drifts far from reality and the death of the main character Roland. King Marko also lived in such a period when the Balkan people stood face to face with Islam and its followers – the Ottoman Turks. In such a dramatic period the historical figures were very likely to be praised due to the great expectations of their actions. Let's recall that no Bulgarian tsar was praised in so many songs and legends than Tsar Ivan Shishman of Tarnovo. Folklore characters are the Serbian prince Lazar ("the martyr of Kosovo"), Yanosh Huniadi (Janko Sibirian) and a great number of Bulgarian (Momchil), Serbian (Milosh Obilich), Hungarian (Pippo Spano), Albanian (Skanderbeg) and other nobles participated in confronting

Islam. In most cases of praising what dominates is waiting for something significant rather than reality.

In such a case what might some of the Balkan Christians have been expecting from King Marko? We should keep it in mind that, from a psychological point of view, he became a ruler in an extremely hard period of the Ottoman invasion. The invaders had crushed the first Christian coalition which attempted to stop them and even to drive them out back to Asia Minor. Hunger was raging on the Balkans as well as the latest wave of the Black Death pandemic. One of the contemporaries - Isai, the man of letters from Serres, depicts the situation after the Chernomen battle in the following way: "Some of the Christians were slaughtered, others were taken prisoners, those who remained there were also mown down by wretched death, for they perished in hunger...Those who survived that scourge were in God's name were eaten up by wolves...Neither a prince, nor a leader, nor a guide among the people was there left to rescue and save them...". And in that apocalyptic situation on the Western Balkans came a king who was ruling over probably the largest principality, south of the Danube River and who with a great self-confidence tried to restore the past glory of the royal dignity by presenting himself as a tsar from the Old Testament. Apparently, he managed to arouse some hopes but not to materialize them. Yet the point of reference for the creation of this cult is there and it is called "excessive expectations" under the conditions of an extreme psychological crisis and the lack of a real perspective for escape from the evil. Apart from that, the image of Krali Marko allows a cross-border treatment – he was brought up with Serbian state tradition but spent his life and ruled in Bulgarian ethnic atmosphere. After it was given an impetus at the Chernomen battle, the cult of Krali Marko evolved according to the genie-and –the –bottle principle. Once out of the reach of the creative imagination, he could act under his own rules and depart from the historical context in which he had emerged. In similar circumstances were created the legends about Tsar Ivan Shishman who tried in vain to stop the Ottoman invasion along the Iskar River.

Of course, such phenomena cannot be explained entirely on the basis of the historical logic and through common sense. There always remains part of inexplicable events. They can be safely included among the historical enigmas the inexplicability of which creates the peculiar charm of the historical knowledge.