

Radovan Pilipović

Archive of the Serbian Orthodox Church

Kralja Petra 2, 11000 Belgrade

E-mail: prijan079@gmail.com

CONTAGIOUS DISEASES, FAITH, SUPERSTITIONS AND THE CULT OF SAINT CHARALAMBOS

Abstract: Since the first half of the 16th century until almost the middle of the 19th century, the part of Balkan Peninsula inhabited by Serbs was hit by waves of deadly infections, most often of the plague type. The high mortality rate and epiphenomena of the disease: fear, mutilation, loss of loved ones influenced the social-religious construct, placing the Church in a horizontal social plane and confronting it with particular challenges in the process of its missionary work. The sought-after protection from the effects of infections, a pronounced prayerfulness and emphasized forms of piety also influenced the formation of the cults of saints. The cult of St. Charalambos, an early Christian martyr from the 3rd century, stands out as a protector from plague and infections, whose mediation was invoked and further encouraged the picturesque ideological world that emerged from dogmatic and liturgical texts and corresponding forms of behaviour.

Keywords: Diseases, Natural disasters, Famine, Astronomical phenomena

Non MeSH: Protective power of the saint's cult, St. Charalambos

Wars, diseases and natural disasters have attracted the attention of authors of past centuries. The compilers of old Serbian inscriptions and writers of ancient chronicles paid attention to diseases and portrayed them as accompanying phenomena of other social and natural disasters. Serbian written sources, created by monks and people connected to the Orthodox Church and its ideological world, create a feeling of eschatological tension in the reader when they mention diseases, which ultimately leads to the tension and strain of the apocalyptic expectation of the Last Judgment.

The fear of the unknown led literate people to also understand astronomical phenomena as heralds of the misfortunes that were befalling the Serbian land. Shooting stars would often "announce" illnesses, sometimes comets were interpreted as omens of "changes of empires and governments", and eclipses and other manifestations of the "great luminaries" – the Sun and the Moon – were taken as indications of war.

In Serbian language, the term “čuma” is used to designate plague, as well as other serious, deadly infectious diseases, and it has a mythological connotation. It refers to the evil mythical creature that lurks at night to scratch its victims and infect them with its dirty nails, or shoots poisonous arrows from a green pot. According to some beliefs, it also sneaks into the house at night through the chimney and attic in order “to take away the children”. During the time of the Jakšić brothers, who ruled Syrmia, one chronicle records that there was “drought and famine and plague” in 1509, and a few years earlier, one “year was faminous, and the other was pestilent”. [1 p259]

The other name “Moria”, which also refers to the plague, with a capital “M”, is also a mythical personification of the disease, and its name comes from a widespread Indo-European root. Moria did not spare people and their treasures, as an inscription from around 1540 testifies: “Moria took sheep on Šar mountain, and on all mountains”, [2 p74] and a note from Cetinje from 1541 says: “Death reigned”... [2 p74] That particular interval of the disease in the Balkans affected the Trojan Mountains, Krstac Gora, Mokrenska Gora and Matora Planina, or, according to today’s nomenclature, Prokletije, Šar, Vodno near Skopje and the Balkan Mountains.

The chronicler’s notes are particularly interesting:

(7060 = 1552) “A comet appeared,

(7062 = 1554) Kyriopascha occurred, (i.e. the Gospel fell on the very day of Easter),

(7063 = 1555) There was a plague spread throughout the Serbian land,

(7064 = 1556) Death reigned,

(7063 = 1555) There was a great earthquake, and the city of Skopje was demolished and other cities and many buildings and temples were demolished”. [2 p76, 1 p265-6]

And in 1585, “a plague broke out throughout the Serbian land,” as one inscription states, [1 p269] and at the same time in another place, it is said that “there was such a great famine and executions by the Ishmaelites that words could not express so much evil and malice,” and all of this is related to the arrival of the “godless Scythians,” who, as “ferocious tongues, came to the inheritance.” [3 p189]

The word čuma (чоума, чюма) in classical Serbian medieval works meant a contagious disease, what would be called *pestis* in Latin. [4 p480] It thus survived and exists among all great and historical Orthodox peoples: Bulgarians, Serbs and Russians, as plague, and it even penetrated the Hungarian and Romanian languages as *csuma* and *чѹмѹ*. [5 p1128]

In older European medical literature, at the turn from the 16th to the 17th century, Turkish soldiers, especially those recruited from the depths of Asian expanses, were identified as the main culprits for the spread of plague and other infections. Thus, a doctor from Syrmia, i.e. the Syrmia County (Comitatus Syrmienensis), Martin Marikowzky, referred to a book by John Pringle, in which he found information that during the wars with the Turks in 1566: “Fide digni namque scriptores testantur, tempore bellorum turcicorum in

patria nostra gestorum, maiorem exercitus christiani partem morbis epidemicis, quam armis Ottomannicis esse interemtam”.¹ [6 p3]

Towards the end of the 16th century, a comet was mentioned, whose tail went from the direction of Constantinople. [1 p269] The biblical representation of the four horsemen from Revelation, i.e. the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, speaks of the horsemen who come out after the opening of the seals, namely: the First Horseman with arrows on a white horse, the Second Horseman on a red horse with a great sword, the Third Horseman on a black horse with scales and the Fourth Horseman on a pale horse, “whose name is Death”. These four horsemen of the Apocalypse represent the Antichrist himself, and are the personifications of war, famine and disease, and finally the terrible death that takes its toll on human souls, following the first three horsemen. (Rev. 6:1-8) All Serbian inscriptions that speak of famine and food shortages, as a rule also record the current price of grain, as if they were guided by the words of the last New Testament book in which it is said about the Third Horseman, i.e. Famine: “a measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny, and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.” (Rev. 6:6)

Atanasije Daskal, who wrote in Russia, could also be called the Serbian chronicler of the Great Migration and the accompanying circumstances of the Great Turkish War of 1683–1699. He compiled a geographical and historical description of the Serbian lands for the Russian princess Sofia Alekseevna (1657–1704), the older sister of the Russian Tsar Peter the Great. Namely, this writer described the situation in the areas populated by Serbs around 1691 in the following way, where a certain stylization of the 6th chapter of the Revelation of John can be seen: “And so the Lord sent all those three plagues, of which David received only one upon his city, at the present time upon the Serbian land; first the pestilence, then the sword and pestilence together, and slavery and severe famine, so that the Serbian people ate canine meat and the flesh of men who had died of hunger. All this was in my days and my eyes saw it. The corpses of the dead Serbian people lay in all the streets of great Belgrade. The dead lay in all its fields and on all its roads, and there was no one to bury them.” [7 p41] Atanasije Daskal provides a theological-intuitive dimension to everything: “Listen, beloved ones, let me tell you what signs and fears there were at that time. In those days, at first, many signs appeared from heaven, and then there was an earthquake, a change in the air, and much confusion and indignation and famine among people. And some strange prophecies were spoken.” [7 p42]

The Roman Catholic chronicler, Fra Stipan Margitić, left testimony that matches the horrors recounted by Atanasije Daskal, namely his record from 1690 was indirectly preserved in the Chronicle of Fra Nikola Lašvanin. The famine and the time of illness in Bosnia are described there in the following way: “Wherever I went, the dead lay: they

¹ “(Merito itaque conqueritur Celeb. D. Ioh. Pringle in cedro dignis Observationibus suis morborum castrensium, pag. 211, scqq. febris castrensis hungaricae, (quae anno primum 1566. in Imperatorio orta exercitu, sparso dein per maximam parte Europae contagio (naturan nondum satis distincte esse enodatam)“.

were not buried, and there was no one who could do it. People ate catkins of the hezel, the bark of trees, the vine, dogs, cats. In Sarajevo, children ate their dead mother; in Banja Luka, whoever was hanged, would have been eaten by the hungry people overnight.”[8 p164-5, 9 p192]

Such difficult times gave birth to superstition, and the practice of superstitions and similar communications with the flock were not foreign to spiritual figures who engaged in this dangerous pseudo-spiritual game, which, for example, could be witchcraft with divination. [10 p173-85]

When we consider the social and political circumstances in the Serbian lands at the end of the 17th century, it is not surprising that apocryphal prayers were used, which often left a much stronger impression on the common people in their daily devotions than the usual Orthodox acolythia. On a Trebnik from the Usora region, which is today kept in Teslić, we find evidence of a “headache inscription” and a pattern of a six-pointed star that was “inscribed” for the sick, as well as the “Solomon’s seal”, i.e., a stylized pentagram, a five-pointed star made from a single stroke. A priest who used this type of medicine gave the impression of a true medicine man (healer), and the effect of his “spiritual” work cannot be traced in more detail in the sources. One can only assume how much he was valued and respected in society if someone, after his “spiritual” activity, for some unknown reason, recovered. The aforementioned Trebnik also contains a previously unknown form of the “Prayer against the Nežit”,² in which this unclean force, i.e. the one responsible for the patient’s disability, responded to Christ’s question by saying that it had decided to “go after the head of a man... to consume his brain and eyes”. The priest himself read the prayer, repeating the words of the Lord, threatening: “Return to the Nežit, to the mountain and to the desert and to the depths of the sea, and you will not be with the people of Christ, and peace will be upon this servant of God and his family. Amen!”[11]

The treatment of those infected, according to the advice of Grigorović’s collection, which dates back to the 17th century, looked like this: “When a person has a pimple, rub it until it becomes large. Take a piece of soap and a little pepper and garlic, fresh sage and red chicken dung and mix everything and stick it on the pimple and let it stand for a night or more. It will not grow”. [12 p59] This kind of alternative medicine, seen from today’s perspective, was prevalent. One therapy for how to treat a toothache is also written in the book “History of Montenegro” by Metropolitan Vasilije Petrović Njegoš, which was published in Moscow in 1754, and it all comes down to mixing “salt, pepper and brandy spirit” and applying the balm to the affected tooth. [13]

Writing for the Russian princess, the Serb Atanasije Daskal confirmed a manner and Christian Orthodox intuition that was also characteristic of Russian chroniclers. All Russian chronicle news about diseases has the formulation “бистъ моръ” [lit. there was death, i.e., death reigned] and always goes along with other catastrophic reports: strange astronomical phenomena, earthquakes and everything in between. On the other

² Type of a demon from Slavic folklore.

hand, in the Russian chronicle tradition, the “Novgorod Mor[ia]” is famous, through which a description is given of both natural celestial phenomena and the condition of people-sufferers affected by diseases. Through the Christian prism, they received a well-known deserved punishment for their persistently sinful state. [14 p304-9] The lunar eclipse is perhaps best and most directly described for Serbian lands in the record from 1661: “the Sun was eclipsed at noon and the stars were visible, on the second of March on Wednesday of the week of the Veneration of the Holy Cross of the Holy Lent and it was dark for an hour and more”. [15 p156]

The impossibility of regular church life, the destruction of churches and the suffering of the clergy during the Great Turkish War of 1683–1699, have become etched in the folk tradition of Western Serbia, which says that a hieromonk from the ancient Peter’s Church in Ras would go to a hill from where he would pray to the Lord: “God, let everyone who has been born be baptized; let everyone who has been betrothed be married, and let everyone who has died be served funerary rites. Amen!” [16 p190]

A couple of decades later, the chronicler of Ravanica describes the difficult situation after the war year of 1739, that is, after the record of the Srem plague in Ledinci. He tells the story of a serious disease that left people crippled: “On January 24, 1740, there was an earthquake, twice, at noon and midnight, very strong. That summer, there was a great disease (болѣзань крепкая) and bitter bone pain (горкая костоболя), and many people and women and young men and maidens lost their legs and arms, and many were left crippled and without arms. At that time, there was great sorrow (скорбь) among the people and sadness and inconsolable crying, and many homes were wasted by the plague.” [1 p317-8, 2 p159] Four years later (1744) “a sign appeared in the sky: a comet moved in the evening to the west, and its tail to midday (!?), and so it rose and shone until it set, from the of December 25 to February 15. Then at dawn this star appeared in the east, its head upwards, and its tail towards the north, and so it rose for seven days at dawn and shone until daylight overtook it (overpowered it).” [1 p318, 17 p1-22]

The description of the plague and other accompanying disasters is indicative, because one evil never comes alone, as in the case of Livno: “In the year of our Lord 1743, in the month of June, on the 30th, it was by God’s permission that the earth shook and the old city of Livno collapsed, and in other places as well, and the shaking of the earth was so great that the old people said that they had never seen anything like it. Then the plague also came to the city of Livno in the year written above.” [18 p349]

News of the plague in the Balkans, which was raging from the central regions, was heard in Bosnia as early as 1759, when a Roman Catholic monk wrote: “A severe plague has been raging in Turkish territory since last year, and it has reached as far as Ušćup (Skopje) and closer to here...”. [2 p172, 19]

According to the Sarajevo chronicler Mula-Mustafa Bašeskija, the plague raged in Sarajevo and its surroundings in 1784, and the disease first appeared in the “village of Slatina near Goražde”. This Janissary veteran believed that the inevitable signs and heralds of this disease were the following: “when many people are born, when quarrels

begin in the neighborhoods, when the sky turns red, when old customs are not respected". And it is precisely then that one should not be surprised that the infection does not stop. [20 p69-70]

During a time of infectious diseases and plagues on the Balkan Peninsula, the common people expressed their belief in St. Charalambos, an early Christian saint, and the trans-temporal ability of this saint to protect against the evil influence of infectious diseases. His cult, nurtured and spread by monastic circles – icons of unknown authors from the 18th century, made in the style of the Holy Mountain and Italo-Crete tradition, can be seen in monasteries such as Gomionica and Žitomislić, unexamined in the history of art, and exhibited in local treasuries, further testify to the church-folk, clerical-popular piety and prayerful invocation of the early Christian protector. Old people, perhaps not too chronologically distant to be antiquated and placed in the objective past, emphasized the overlap of natural disasters (major earthquakes, for example) and the development of epidemics. This was the case with some epidemics of the 18th century and later. [21 p153] The traditional culture of western Bulgaria, leaning on Serbian lands and incorporated into the jurisdiction of the Peć Patriarchate until 1766, up to the line that encircles Ćustendil and the Rila Monastery, and leaving outside Samokov and Tatar Pazardžik, is filled with prayers, folk songs and incantations, and actions related to St. Charalambos. [22 p80-2] This saint captured the people's imagination and collective hopes in difficult times of the spread of infections. In the village of Trypi near Sparta, there is a monument stating that "God Almighty and St. Charalambos" stopped the plague that raged there in 1753. [23] Periodic pulsations of the plague were evident in the Balkans and in the following years, as in 1762 when a Sarajevo priest wrote: "In the summer of our Lord 1762, November 12, a *моровое новемпие*³ (pestilence) appeared in Sarajevo and on that day we left our home in Sarajevo and came to Gacko for the čitluk in the village of Garevo on the 18th day of that month"... [24] Collection of icons from the old Orthodox church in Bašçaršija of St. Archangel Michael and Gabriel has several copies with iconographic representations of St. Charalambos.

St. Hieromartyr Charalambos was a bishop in Magnesia who died in 202, during the persecution under the Roman emperor Septimius Severus. This early Christian saint eventually received the epithet of protector from pestilence and plague in the piety of the Balkan Orthodox peoples. At the end of March of 2020, and by decision of the Holy Municipality of Mount Athos, on March 27, an all-night vigil was served in all monasteries, sketes and monastic cells in memory of St. Hieromartyr Charalambos, "for protection from the coronavirus pandemic." During this service, special priestly prayers were read to stop infectious diseases.

Saint Charalambos is particularly revered on Mount Athos. Namely, there is a tradition that is connected with the plague epidemic, "sometime during the time of

³ It is interesting that the Russified phrase "моровое новемпие" is used here, which was unusual for the contemporary Serbian literary and liturgical language.

Turkish slavery”, when the infection struck the Holy Mountain, the surroundings of Thessaloniki and the southern Macedonian regions and when the monks, fearing for their lives, left the “Garden of the Virgin”. Tradition says that a monk was preparing to leave Mount Athos, but he had a vision of an old man with a long gray beard in episcopal robes. He said that the Most Holy Mother of God had sent him to stop death, that she had counted all the steps of the monks in the litanies they had made and that if they obeyed him, i.e., if they remained in the places of their monastic vows, joy would light up their faces. Hearing the words “joy” and “light”, in Greek “ΧΑΡΑ και ΛΑΜΠΗ”, realizing that he was speaking with Saint Charalambos, the monk made a great bow, but the saint disappeared before his eyes.

In southeastern Europe, outbreaks of plague of varying intensity were documented throughout the 17th century, and Mount Athos was struck by the plague in 1622. [25,26] In the same century, Europe was hit by a plague so severe that it reminded us of the time of the “Black Death” of the 14th century. The London Plague (1665–1666) and the Moscow Plague (1654–1655) are remembered as “моровое поветрие”. The first found its place in literature, in Daniel Defoe’s novel *Journal of the plague year* (1722).

The first treatises on the plague, printed in a wave of printed and distributed incunabula, also give some advice on how the disease can be treated, prevented, and what the ways of its spread would be. In essence, all this advice, whether coming from retired alchemists or from official clergymen of the Catholic Church, was reduced to some kind of frivolous alternative medicine. Thus, the doctor Guglielmo Gratarolo in his manual advises to use aromatic herbs in the diet, which has a good effect on human immunity. [27] In 1641, the Orthodox priest Synadenos in Serres described the plague in the city with authentic insight into the problem, providing certain advice based on folk medicine, adding that the plague killed Bulgarians, Serbs, Vlachs and Albanians. The Ravanica Chronicle left heartbreaking notes about the plague in Srem that killed cattle and people in 1738 and 1739. At the end of December 1739 it said: “there was an earthquake, at the time of Asr, at night, at midnight, and many houses collapsed from the shaking, and many city walls collapsed. At that time, many people died of the plague in the village of Ledinci.” [17]

Upper Syrmia, the surroundings of Irig, the town itself, then the surrounding villages of Neradin, Grgeteg, Rivica, Jazak, Krušedol, Šatrinci, Veliki Radinci, Grgurevci, Bešenovo and Sremska Kamenica, but also Vukovar were hit by a new plague outbreak in 1795 and 1796. This more famous “Syrmian plague” entered history thanks to the doctor who worked on its suppression, Franz Schraud (1761–1806), and who described it in the two-volume book *Historia pestis sirmiensis*. According to official Austrian statistics, 3,435 citizens died of the plague in Srem, and 2,548 people in Irig itself, which amounted to 53% of the population of the town, and out of 912 houses there, 402 were burned for hygienic reasons. It is recorded that in the old Irig church, St. Father Nicholas, there was an icon depicting St. Charalambos blessing with his right hand and standing with his foot on a

crouching woman with horns on her head and terrible claws. Such a personification of the plague also existed in the neighboring village of Ledinci. [28] The Irig plague ceased on St. Charalambos' day, 10/23 February 1796, and at that time the custom of giving male children the name Charalambos became particularly widespread, as a sign of gratitude for being spared from illness and for having been saved. This name was certainly given for apotropaic reasons, that is, that in Serbian lands there was already a respect for St. Charalambos, transferred from Mount Athos. In the southern and southeastern Serbian regions, especially in Šopluk, the St. Hieromartyr Charalambos has the prerogative of "Čumnik" (plague doctor). The akathist to St. Charalambos states that "there will be no disease where there are particles of his relics". In the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Podvrh Monastery in the Diocese of Budimlje-Nikšić preserves a particle of the saint's relics.

In Serbian popular belief, and even in folk Orthodoxy, the plague, čuma or Hellenized panukva, from the modern Greek "πανουκλα", was equated with a woman dressed in black, who walks through settlements at night and stalks victims by the notebook to infect them and lead them to their death. The famous Balkan fresco painter DMITAR Krstević, known as Dičo Zograf, a Mijak from Galičnik (Western Macedonia), painted in 1844 the plague as a demon of infection "which was bound by the prayers of St. Charalambos" in the village of Tresonče near Debar in the church of St. Apostles Peter and Paul. An older iconographic source about St. Charalambos as the protector against "the plague or čuma" (Βοηθος εναντιον της πανουκλας; Заступникъ противъ мора или чумѣ), standing triumphantly on the vanquished demon of disease, is found on a copperplate icon carved in Venice in 1764, commissioned at the request of the abbot of the Vatopedi monastery. The bilingual inscription (Greek-Church Slavonic) below the icon reads: "This image was carved on a copperplate at the instigation of the venerable kyrios Gabriel of Vatopedi, at the expense of the honorable lady Jovana Loverdi, for the sake of pious veneration, in the year 1764, in Venice."

Conclusion

Old Serbian chronicle-type records and inscriptions record the occurrence and effects of mass infections and diseases (from the 16th to the 19th century), which decimated the population and sowed fear, placing contemporaries deeper into a psychotic irrational state. Man's need for ontological security and the religious concept provided by church dogma creatively resulted in the strengthening of old cults of saintly figures in which apotropaic and healing power was rediscovered. In uncertain times of plague and disease, marked by mystical signs of astronomical phenomena and similar symbolism of the unfathomable, the cult of St. Charalambos as a protector against disease gained particular importance.

Rezime

Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi hroničarskog tipa beleže pojave i dejstvo masovnih zaraza i bolesti (od XVI do XIX veka), a koje su proređivale stanovništvo i svojom smrtnošću sejale strah postavljajući savremenike sve dublje u psihotično neracionalno stanje. Čovekova potreba za ontološkom sigurnošću i religiozni koncept koji pruža crkvena dogmatika stvaralački je rezultirala pojačavanjem starih kultova svetiteljskih likova kod kojih je iznova otkrivana apotropejska i isceliteljska moć. U nesigurnim vremenima vladanja kuge i bolesti, obeleženim mističnim znamenjem astronomskih pojava i sličnom simbolikom nedokučivog, kult Sv. Haralampija kao zaštitnika od bolesti naročito je dolazio do značaja.

Ključne reči: bolesti, prirodne katastrofe, glad, astronomski fenomeni, zaštitna moć kulta svetitelja, Sveti Haralampije

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