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THE 'POLITICAL' LIFE OF ST. JOHN — VLADIMIR'S RELICS

Abstract: In this paper, I am studying various discourses on the burial, reburial and spread of St. John Vladimir's relics, as revealed in the saint's two *vitae* and in the material culture associated with the veneration of the saint's relics. Considering each of these texts referring to the aforementioned events as discursive representation of their historical and political frame, regardless of their historicity, I am approaching them with the Critical Discourse Analysis method (CDA). This method interweaves three forms of analysis: text analysis, analysis of the discourse practice (text production process, its spread and uses) and analysis of events or rituals with cultural and political content linked with the text. Furthermore, this method researches the cultural and political effects of various texts on the burial, reburials and spread of St. John Vladimir's relics, broadly relying on an adaptation of the Katherine Verdery's research design in her seminal work *The Political Life of Dead Bodies. Reburial and Postsocialist Change*.

Texts on the translations of St. John Vladimir's relics belong to a genre of texts dedicated to important persons or princely saints and their relics' translations. Practices and discourses related to the burial and reburial of important persons have appeared since antiquity, with the translation of Theseus' relics from the island of Skyros to Athens. Sophocles in his well-known tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus* describes the contest between Athens and Thebes over Oedipus, whose residence and burial in either city would make it rich, after a legend. St. Francis of Assisi is another interesting case of contest over relics, his remains being carted at various religious centres hoping to benefit from them. After all, stealing holy relics was big business throughout middle ages, when such practices and discourses became considerably widespread in the Slavic world, too, as for example in the case of Sts. Boris and Gleb, the brothers of the Prince of Kiev, or in the case of St. Igor Olegovich, whose relics were transferred from Kiev to Chernigov, his birthplace.

This paper discusses: First, the burial and texts on the burial of St. John Vladimir in the church of *Prečista Krajinska*, after certain authors, or in the monastery of St. John Vladimir at Shijon, Elbasan, after others. Second, it looks at the supposed 1215 translation of the saint's relics to Durrës by Despot Michael I of Epiros and the third (supposed) translation of the relics to the saint's monastery at Shijon, Elbasan, before 1380. During Albania's communist regime the relics of St. John Vladimir were transferred (for a fourth time) at the ca-

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thedral of the Dormition of the Virgin in the Castle of Elbasan, while, after communism, his relics were translated to Tirana, where they are kept to date. At an unknown period, certainly before 1768, parts of the saint's relics were placed in separate reliquaries. This paper discusses the political significance of these translations.

In this paper, I am studying various discourses on the burial, reburial and spread of St. John Vladimir's relics, as revealed in the saint's two *vitae* [Akolouthia 1690; Papageorgiou 2012] and in the material culture associated with the veneration of the saint's relics [Giakoumis 2015 (1) & (2)]. Considering each of the texts referring to the aforementioned events as a discursive representation of its historical and political frame, regardless of their historicity, I am approaching them with the Critical Discourse Analysis method (CDA). This method interweaves three forms of analysis: text analysis, analysis of the discourse practice (text production process, its spread and uses) and analysis of events or rituals with cultural and political content linked with the text [Fairclough 1995, 2001]. Furthermore, this method researches the cultural and political effects of various texts on the burial, translations, reburials and spread of St. John Vladimir's relics, broadly relying on an adaptation of the Katherine Verdery's research design in her seminal work *The Political Life of Dead Bodies. Reburial and Postsocialist Change* [1999].

The saint's appeal has been recorded in historical sources, John Skylitzes [2010], his copyist, George Kedrenos, and bishop Michael of Devol [Prokić 1906, No. 14, 29; No. 22, 31; No. 31, 32; Pirivatrić 2013], which reciprocally enhanced this appeal. At the end of the 13th century the Cistercian monk Rüdiger, commissioned by one of the most powerful men of his time, Pavle Subić, compiled the *Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja (Dioclea)* to serve the political ambitions of his patron who wished to establish a Croatian Kingdom of Southern Slavs; Chapter 36 of the Chronicle incorporated the *vita* of St. John-Vladimir for didactic purposes and as a gesture of approach by Subić towards Bulgarians [Papageorgiou 2012, 12–23]. The veneration of saint John Vladimir is attested in hagiological sources in a liturgical manuscript copied ca. 1300, while mentions to an earlier Bulgarian manuscript, on whose basis the saint's *akolouthiae* were compiled, have not been confirmed by research to date [Trajković-Filipović 2013, 276; Giakoumis 2015 (1), 608, n. 7]. The saint's *vita* was further elaborated and his honour enhanced especially during the prelacy of Joasaph II, Archbishop of Ohrid (1719–1745); two *akolouthiai* were published in Venice (1690, 1774; reprint 1858) and another one in Moschopolis (Alb. Voskopojja) (1742), Joasaph's birthplace [Bryer 2005]. According to the 1690 *akolouthia*, printed in Venice at the expenses of Ioannis Papas from Elbasan (Gk. Neokas-

tron), some of the printed copies are "...for them [i. e. the monastery monks] to keep ..., others to give to pious persons in the provinces of the Ohrid region, or anywhere else needed ... so that the saint's name and miracles be preached to other places" [Akolouthia 1690, 2–3].

Texts on the translations of St. John Vladimir's relics belong to a genre of texts dedicated to important persons or princely saints and their relics' translations [Folz 1984, 23–67; Klaniczay 2002]. Practices and discourses related to the burial and reburial of important persons have appeared since antiquity, with the translation of Theseus' relics from the island of Skyros to Athens [Cagriota 1992, 7]. Sophocles in his well-known tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus* describes the contest between Athens and Thebes over Oedipus, whose residence and burial in either city would make it rich, after a legend. St. Francis of Assisi is another interesting case of contest over relics, his remains being carted at various religious centres hoping to benefit from them. After all, stealing holy relics was big business throughout middle ages [Verdery 1999, 1], when such practices and discourses became considerably widespread in the Slavic world, too. The Anglo-Saxon tradition is particularly rich in pre-ninth century saintly kings, including such examples as Sts. Edwin and Oswald, martyrs of Northumbria; St. Oswin, king of Deira; St. Sigbert the Good, king of the East Saxons; St. Ethelbert, king of East Anglia; and St. Edward the Martyr, king of Essex [Klaniczay 2002, 69, 78–80]. From the tenth century, the fashion of saintly rulers sanctified by means of martyrdom spreads and can be encountered in Anglo-Saxon England, Scandinavia, Kievan Rus' and Bohemia [Bartlett 1993, 18–23; Geary].

In the newly Christianized areas of Europe saintly rulers played an important role in positioning these areas into the map of the known Christian world. One can quote such examples, as St. Olaf in Norway, St. Wenceslaus in Bohemia, St. Vladimir in Kievan Rus' and Sts. Stephen and Emeric in Hungary [Klaniczay 2002, 122]. Following earlier examples [Klein 2006 & 2010], the *vitae* of some of these saintly kings or princes is also accompanied by stories of their relics' translation, as in the cases of Sts. Boris and Gleb, the brothers of the Prince of Kiev, and St. Igor Olgovich, whose relics were transferred from Kiev to Chernigov, his birthplace [White 2016]. Such burials and reburials, as well as practices and discourses associated with them are believed to mark political change and the appropriation of local traditions by elites aiming at politically strengthening their public profile. By looking at the politics of the eight supposed burials and/or relics' translations of St. John Vladimir, I shall attempt to answer two interrelated research questions:

1. Why has there been so much activity around St. John Vladimir's relics?
2. What does the politics concerning it signify?

As I hope to demonstrate, because political order relates with spatiality and history, the translation of St. John Vladimir's relics reconfigured symbolical reference points in space and temporally captured particular values in it, thereby playing a noteworthy role in the stabilization of particular spatial and temporal orders.

By the term 'political' life of St. John Vladimir's relics, I am referring to a form of concerted activity among social actors, relating the saint's relics and involving stakes in particular goals. Such goals might be controversial, intentional or unintentional to various degrees; they may involve policy, justifying actions, claiming or contesting the authority claims of others, constructing or manipulating cultural and religious symbolical references, within which all relics-related activities were pursued [Verdery 1999, 23]. Hence, politics was not confined to political leaders, but it may involve others, who present their goals as *public*; hence, after Verdery, politics can be viewed "as a realm of continuous struggles over meanings, or signification" [Verdery 1999, 24].

Where do the translations of St. John Vladimir's relics figure in the study of political history of the Balkans? I am arguing that they provide a cultural dimension to West Balkan politics, contribute in viewing political transformations beyond the level of technical processes by looking at "meanings, feelings, the sacred, morality and the non-rational — all ingredients of "legitimacy" or "regime consolidation,"" to quote the words of Katherine Verdery [1999, 25]. Hence, the study of the translations of St. John Vladimir's relics makes us think about politics both "as strategies and manoeuvring and also as activity occurring within cultural systems." [Verdery 1999, 25] Relics were very important in their materiality, in their symbolism and in their ambiguity, polyphony and polysemy.

The *vita* of St. John Vladimir (ca. 990–22 May 1016) is a mixture of legend and reality. John Skylitzes [2010, 335–6; cf. Pirivatrić 2013], his earliest source, mentions the dynastic intermarriage of Samuel's daughter Kosara / Theodora with John Vladimir. At the end of the 13th century the Cistercian monk Rüdiger, commissioned by one of the most powerful men of his time, Pavle Subić, compiled the *Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja (Dioclea)*, whose Chapter 36 is taken up by another *vita* of St. John-Vladimir [Papageorgiou 12–23]. The similarities of these two *vitae*, as Srđan Pirivatrić [2013] has demonstrated, go beyond intertextuality. The saint's later biographies, vaguely quoting earlier Serbian or Bulgarian *synaxaria* [Akolouthia 1690, 39, "Εἰς δὲ τὰ βιβλία τὰ σέρβικα σώζεται καλλίτερα ὁ βίος, καὶ τὰ θαύματα τοῦ ἁγίου" (The Life and Miracles of the saint are better preserved in the Serbian books)], are even more problematic to historical research. They present quite a different version of the saint's

identity (father's name Petroslav vs. Nemanja), marriage story (Kosara pleaded her father to get married to him, although he was a prisoner vs. his parents having him married with Samuel's daughter) and reason for being put to death (John Vladislav being afraid that his brother-in-law and husband of his sister, Vladimir, would side himself with Byzantines in reaction to Radomir's assassination vs. John Vladislav putting Vladimir to death to spread the heresy of Bogomilism, himself being a heretic) [Giakoumis 2015 (1), 608, Table 1]. Expectedly, the iconography of the saint developed in the form of illustration of his vita and the 1690 *akolouthia* became a textual source of drawing iconographic models.

The table below juxtaposes the two accounts of St. John Vladimir's martyrdom:

<p>Immediately before the doors of the church he was struck down by the soldiers; he was beheaded on the 22nd May. The bishops carried his body into the church [340] and buried him amid hymns and paeans. Henceforth the Lord revealed the merits of the blessed martyr Vladimir, since on entering the church and praying at his tomb people with many afflictions were cured, and by night all could see a divine light as if many candles were burning there. His wife wept copious tears for St. Vladimir, more than can be told for many days. When the emperor saw what miracles the Lord performed there, he repented and so filled with terror [Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja after Stephenson]</p>	<p>“He [Vladislav] pretended that he loved him [i. e. John Vladimir], but concealed his malice ... and incited by Dalida, his [John Vladimir's] most cunning wife and ill-mannered woman. Both were heretic and maintained the roots of the evil heresy of the Bogomils and Massalians, who wished to venerate no icons, but were iconoclasts and enemies of the Cross. One typical day, as he was descending from Ohrid by his God-cursed brother-in-law to come here, at the <i>derben</i>, the tramp pulled out his sword and suddenly stroke his groom; but, as he was not successful [in killing him], he decapitated the saint with the same sword [John Vladimir] gave him...” [Akolouthia 1690, 30].</p>
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The political transformation which Vladislav wished to effect was symbolized through manipulating St. John Vladimir's body and decapitating him. The Chronicle informs that Vladislav was deeply concerned that Vladimir would side himself with Basil II, in reaction to his assassination of Radomir, Samuel's legitimate heir to the throne and an ally to the Byzantines. The reaction to the unjust assassination of John Vladimir and fear of retributions must have been a serious challenge to Vladislav's rule, as concealed in the Chronicle's passage “he repented and so filled with terror” [Stephenson]. He was therefore in need of a plan to appease angry grievances by all those who supported John Vladimir against the throne's usurper; the more so, “since, on entering the church and praying at his tomb people with many afflictions were cured, and by night all



Fig. 1: Anonymous, *Southeastern view of the interior of St. Achilleios' basilica*, St. Achilleios Island, Prespa, 10th–11th century. © P. Androudīs & N. Theodoridis.

could see a divine light as if many candles were burning there” [Stephenson]. Allowing an honourable burial for the saint must have been part of his plan to reverse negative impressions. According to Nikolaos Moutsopoulos [1989], the first burial place of St. John Vladimir is Tomb D of the funerary complex of St. Achilleios' basilica [Figs. 1–2] on the isle of St. Achilleios, Lake Prespa. Moutsopoulos' hypothesis, however, is based on assumptions, while no concrete evidence was presented in support of this theory [for an early assumption that he was not buried in Ohrid, see Marjanović 1925, 48; reprint, 178].

Equally shaky are the grounds of “traditions” regarding the saint's first reburial. One of these traditions claims that the saint was buried in Vladimirovo [Marjanović 1925, 40; reprint, 170; likely misplacing the *Akolouthia's* toponym Vladimir from Bulgaria to Macedonia, *Akolouthia* 1690, 22 and 36], while another suggests he was reburied in Shijon [Marjanović 1925, 48; reprint, 178; Lukić 1974, 28; reprint 232], although no evidence of the saint's relics or name can be found there before 1381. In spite of these myths' historicity, they are

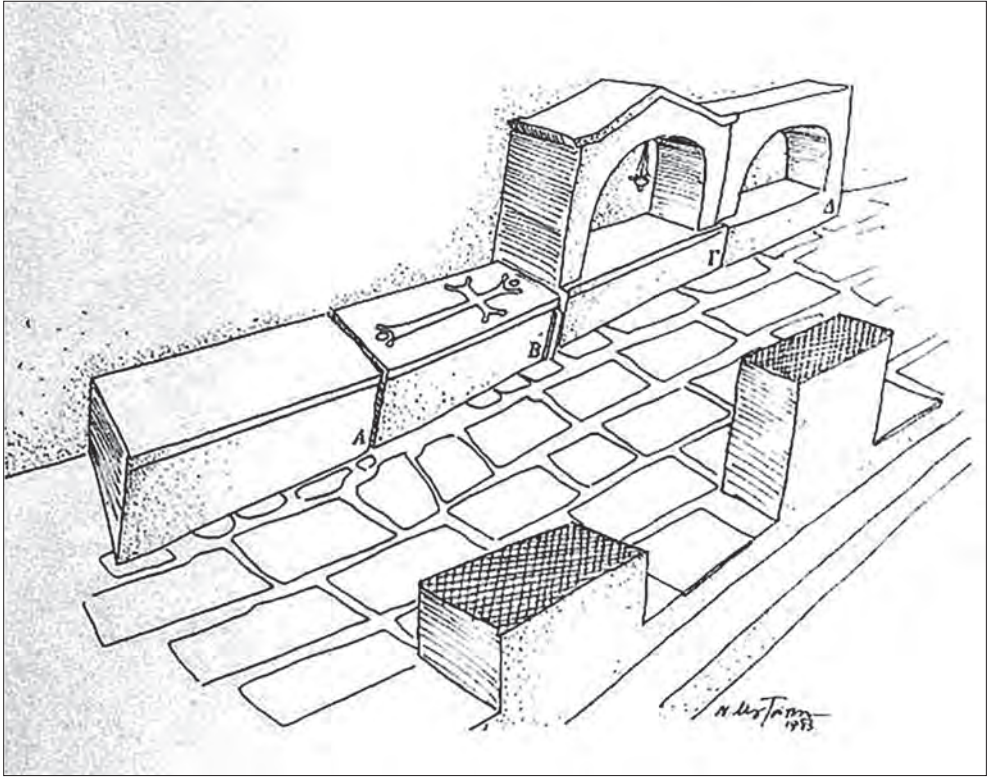


Fig. 2: N. Moutsopoulos, *Drawing of St. Achilleios' Royal Funerary Ensemble*, St. Achilleios basilica, St. Achilleios' Island, Prespa, 10th–11th century.

indicative of how the attraction of the faithful towards the saint's relics' compelled different places contest over the saint's burial place.

Be this as it may, Vladislav's change of plans vis-à-vis St. John Vladimir's relics, i. e. his permission to enable Kossara/Theodora — herself a Bulgarian and relative to the saint's assassin or instigator to assassination — to take his relics at the saint's place of origin [Figs. 3–4] is indicative of power reconfigurations impacting symbolical systems. This seems to be the first documented (re)burial of the saint's relics, based on the following excerpt of the Chronicle [Stephenson; cf. Marjanović 1925, 40; reprint, 170; Lukić 1974; Bukićević 1925, 54; reprint 236]:

...he [Vladislav] allowed his cousin [Kossara] to take his body and bury it wherever she wished. So she took his body and transported it to a place known as Krajina, where his [Vladimir's] court was, and interred him in the church of St. Mary... His body lies intact and smells



Fig. 3: Anonymous, *Northeastern view of the monastery of Bogorodica Prečista Krajinska, Ostros, 14th–15th century*. Legend has it that St. John Vladimir's first (re)burial took place here. © K. Giakoumis

as if it were perfumed with many scents, holding the cross which he received from the emperor in his hand. Each year on his feast day many folk congregate in that church, and by his meritous intercession many benefices are granted to those who pray with a virtuous heart, right until the present day. Kossara, the wife of St. Vladimir, impelled by her moral purity, lived a pious and holy life, and at her death was entombed in the same church at the feet of her husband.

[341] At the same time that the body of St. Vladimir was transported from Prespa to Krajina, the emperor Vladislav mustered an army and marched out to conquer the land of the blessed Vladimir and the city of Dyrrachium, which the emperor Basil had promised him in return for the murder he had perpetrated. One day, while he was encamped before Dyrrachium, he was tucking into a feast when a vision of St. Vladimir as an armed soldier appeared before him. He was shaken with fear, and began to cry at the top of his voice: "Guards, come at once, run and defend me from Vladimir, he wants to kill me". Saying this he leapt to his feet to flee. Immediately he was struck by the an-

gel. He fell to the ground and both his body and soul expired. His nobles, soldiers and all of his people were struck with terror and foreboding. Setting fire to their camp they all fled that very night and made for their homes. So it came to pass that this most worthless killer, who had ordered that Vladimir be beheaded and thus made a martyr while he was sitting down to dine, was himself struck dead and joined Satan's angels at suppertime.

If we are to take the Chronicle as a reliable historical source, Vladislav's permission to the saint's reburial at his home region served a dual political objective. It is related both to his plans to set the Duklja region under his control, in line with his secret agreement with Basil II, as well as to contain public outcry against him. His death in Durrës, most likely within the territory of Duklja at the time, may well be viewed as an assassination by locals, who at the sight of the dead body of the saint, got infuriated. If this might be plausible, then, the legend of a miracle that put Vladislav to death may conceal either the story of his assassination or an instigation to commit suicide after terrorization. If the story holds true, it is unknown where Kosara buried St. John Vladimir's relics. Since the end of the 19th century the monastery of Bogorodica Prečista Krajinska is celebrated as St. John Vladimir's reburial place, where Kosara was also buried [Marjanović 1925, 40; reprint, 170; Lukić 1974; Bukićević 1925, 54; reprint 236; cf. Čilikov 2012, 78, 80, 83, 194, 196 and 201]. Archaeological excavations in the zone, however, revealed no 10th or 11th century objects, apart from some movable items, such as a bronze cross and a seal dating 11th–12th century [Čilikov 2012, 76, 77, 79, 83, 184–5, 186 and 187]. For this reason others have placed the burial place in Svač (where 9th to 12th century findings were found) [Zagarčanin], at close vicinity to Vladimir (Alb. Katërkollë), toponym said to echo the relics translation [Yankovich 2007 261]. If the Chronicle is not to be taken as a reliable historical source, then, the creator of the myth would seem desirous to establish a new values reference to the Duklja region.

Little — if any — reliability can also be claimed regarding the alleged 1215 third burial of the saint's relics in Durrës. This legend was first held in one of Novaković's early works and thenceforth repeated by other scholars [1893, 232; Jireček 1911, 198; cf. Marjanović 1925, 40; reprint, 170; Lukić 1974, 28; reprint 232; Plamenac 2012, 10; reprint 304; Bukićević 1925, 54; Slijepčević 1974, 18, 22; reprint 346, 350; Ingham, 1990, 877; reprint 371; Nedeski 2016, 35]. Novaković's departure point was a piece of information provided in Chapter 36 of the Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja, used *as terminus post quem* and the date of the inscription in the monastery of St. John Vladimir (1381) used



Fig. 4: Northwestern view of the Svač/Shas fort, 6th century onwards. Archaeological findings dating 11th and 12th century have recently archaeologists suggest that the first (re)burial of St. John Vladimir should have taken place here [Zagarčanin]. © K. Giakoumis

as a *terminus ante quem*, to interpret excerpts from the 1690 *akolouthia* of the saint. The related excerpts are provided below:

<p>Νυνὶ εὐφραίνεται πιστῶς, πόλις ἡ Δυρραχίου, Τριβαλλῶν ἔνθα κεῖται, τὸ σῶμα σου τὸ ἱερόν, μακάριε τὰς ἐκεῖ, νόσους πάντων ἀσθενῶν ἰώμενον. [Hymn of the Third Ode of the Saint's Feast's Matins, Akolouthia 1690, 21]</p>	<p>Now Durrës, the city of Triballians, rejoices. There lies your sacred body, blissful [man] curing the diseases of all sick people.</p>
<p>Νῦν εὐφραίνεται πόλις ἡ Δυρραχίου φαιδρῶς, σὲ προστάτην καὶ ῥύστην, ἔχουσα πάνσοφε. Νέος γὰρ αὐτῇ ἀνατείλας ὡς ἥλιος, ταύτην καταυγάζεις, ὑμνοῦσαν σε θεόφρων. [Hymn of the Eighth Ode of the Saint's Feast's Matins, Akolouthia 1690, 44]</p>	<p>Now Durrës, the city of Triballians, happily rejoices with you being its patron and protector. Because you rose as its new sun, you illuminate it [i. e. the city], which praises you, godly-minded.</p>
<p>Λιμένα θεῖον μάρτυς κατέχουσα, τοῦ Δυρραχίου πόλις Ἰωάννη μακάριε, πρὸς Θεὸν νῦν προβάλλεται πρόμαχον, ῥύοντα τῶν κινδύνων καὶ περιστάσεων, πιστεῖ τε καὶ πόθῳ, ἀκλινεῖ ἀνευφημοῦσά σε. [Hymn of the Ninth Ode of the Saint's Feast's Matins, Akolouthia 1690, 49]</p>	<p>The city of Durrës has a divine port, the blessed martyr John, now displayed to God as defender. He delivers [the city] from dangers and adverse circumstances; [hence the city] lauds you in firm faith and love.</p>

The 1690 service, written few decades earlier [Tapkova-Zaimova 1979], mentions explicitly that the relics of the saint were kept in Durrës and calls St. John

Vladimir as Durrës' patron, protector and divine port. It was precisely on account of these references that many scholars believe that the relics of St. John Vladimir were removed from wherever they were kept before to Durrës. It has further been suggested that the ruler credited for this translation is despot Michael I Angelos of Epiros, who in 1215 occupied Shkodra [Elsie 2001, 139; Novaković 1893, 232; Jireček 1911, 198; cf. Marjanović 1925, 40; reprint, 170; Lukić 1974, 28; reprint 232; Plamenac 2012, 10; reprint 304; Bukičević 1925, 54; Slijepčević 1974, 18, 22; reprint 346, 350; Ingham, 1990, 877; reprint 371; Nedeski 2016, 35]. The date is, thus, between the first hypothetical burial of the relics in Prečista Krajinska and before their transfer to St. John Vladimir's Monastery (1381). In spite of the almost stereotypical reference to this alleged 1215 translation of the saint's relics to Durrës, the primary source of the advance of despot Michael I Angelos of Epiros to Shkodra, the *Life of St. Stephen Nemanja*, mentions nothing of the translation of St. John Vladimir's relics [Hafner 1962, 118–9]. In addition, no particular veneration of St. John Vladimir has been preserved to date in Durrës. Although these could reasonably cast doubt to the very translation of the saint's relics to Durrës, the case of 1719 akolouthia to the Holy Seven saints devoted to the city of Berat on account of the relics of Sts. Gorazd and Angelarios that are kept there, makes a strong case that when the St. Vladimir 1690 akolouthia mentions that in Durrës “lies your sacred body” this is meant literally. We are, therefore, to research when the saint's relics were translated there and whether this was a permanent or some temporary translation in the form of a *zeteia* (peregrination). If, however, the 1215 translation was to be confirmed, it would construct evidence that politics of the despot Michael I Angelos aimed at benefitting from the saint's sanctity; as his aspirations extended to the once northernmost provinces of the Byzantine state, the possible reburial of St. John Vladimir's relics in Durrës demonstrates an attempt to the re-sacralisation of the despot's new political order.

Even if this translation is not historically true, then, I suggest that the 17th and 18th century resurgence of the veneration of the saint in Durrës should be linked with some attempt to reincorporate the city of Durrës into some wider regional geostrategic reconfigurations, which necessitated the establishment of a new and common system of values appealing to the entire region. As I have shown elsewhere [Giakoumis 2015 (1)], whoever wanted to sustainably control the territory of old Duklja (the westernmost dominions of tsar Samuel) had to identify such bonds as to keep together heterogeneous peoples with volatile and resilient interests. The 1690 akolouthia denotes the diversity of populations which St. John Vladimir became king of in the following way: “Ο χαριτεπώνυμος οὗτος Ἰωάννης ὁ βασιλεὺς ... ἔγινε μέγας κύριος εἰς ὅλην τὴν Βουλγαρίαν, Σερβίαν,



Fig. 5: Constantine of Shpat, *Charles Thopia, the ktitor of the saint's holy monastery*, fourth scene on the top of the bottom left detail from the icon of *St. John Vladimir with Twelve Scenes from His Life*, 1739, 77.4 X 52.7 cm, tempera on wood, National Museum of Medieval Art, Korçë. © K. Giakoumis

was the Albanian prince Charles Thopia [Fig. 5]. His ties with Serbs and the West and his rivalries with other local Albanian princely rulers compelled him to make advances towards the Bulgarian population element of the region, thereby becoming a new *ktitor* for the monastery of the Virgin Perivleptos in Ohrid [Mošin 1961, 229–30; Pentkovskiy 2013, 102–4]. After a destructive earthquake destroyed the monastery of the Virgin in 1380, Charles Thopia restored its catholicon as recorded in three commemorative inscriptions written in Greek, Latin and Slavonic in 1381 [Popa 1998, 49–52 (Nos. 2–5)]. The formulation of the Greek inscription, whereby the name of the church is not mentioned the first time in which the word church (ναός) is mentioned [“ΧΡΗ ΓΗΝΩΣΚ (ΕΙΝ) ΟΤΙ Ο ΝΑΟΣ ΟΥΤΟΣ...” (You must know that this church)], but the second time [ΑΝΟΙΚΟΔΟΜΗΣΕΝ ΤΟΝ ΠΑΝΣΕΙΤΟΝ ΝΑΟΝ ΤΟΥΤΟΝ ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ

Ἰλλυρικὸν καὶ Ἀλβανίαν. (This grace-named King John became lord of the entire Bulgaria, Serbia, Illyria and Albania.)” [Akolouthia 1690, 39]. Thus, across times, in the veneration and pilgrimage of St. John Vladimir, every ambitious ruler or state longing to sustainably control this territory found a powerful cohesive element of the sort which they utilized or even manipulated to their benefit [Giakoumis 2015 (1) & (2)].

The next ruler to realize that he could utilize the special attribute of the saint's relics to appropriate local traditions and values in his intent to politically strengthen his public profile and to mark political change

ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΒΛΑΔΗΜΗΡΟΥ (rebuilt this most sacred church of St. John Vladimir)], may, as has been suggested, indicate a re-consecration of the church to the memory of St. John Vladimir, upon a translation of the saint’s relics from Durrës to Shijon, Elbasan, where the saint’s monastery was rebuilt.

Having outlined the shaky grounds of the translation of the saint’s relics to Durrës, it is also understood that this 1381 alleged translation is equally uncertain. For one, there is no source mentioning any translation of the relics to Shijon. Also, because the saint’s *vita* in the very 1690 *akolouthia* which mentions that his relics lie in Durrës mentions no relics translation, thereby implying that the saint was buried from the outset in the monastery of St. John Vladimir at Shijon, Elbasan, as has also been suggested by Novaković [1893, 219; cf. Ingham 1990, 877; reprint 371, n. 6]. The *akolouthia* is therefore inconsistent as it mentions no translation of the saint’s relics; yet, it identifies the saint’s monastery in Elbasan as the place where his relics have always been kept [Akolouthia 1690, 20–1, 23, 27, 30, 38, 40–1]. At another point, however, Durrës is mentioned as the place where his relics lie [Akolouthia 1690, 21]; the possibility of Durrës holding only a part of the saint’s relics, is weakened by the mention of the word “body” in the hymn, implying the entire relic. Thirdly, because the saint’s *vita* recorded in the 1690 *akolouthia* and subsequent editions mentions that the relics were kept at the monastery when Charles Thopia rebuilt it after it was damaged from an earthquake and the passing of the time [Akolouthia 1690, 40].

The Greek version of the saint’s *vita* mentions the story of an attempted robbery of the saint’s relics by some Franks:

... καὶ καθὼς ἔχομεν ἀπὸ παλαιοὺς ἀκουσμένον, πολλάκις πολλοὶ ἐβουλήθησαν τὸ πάνσεπτον καὶ ἅγιον λείψανόν του νὰ τὸ πάρουν, καὶ νὰ τὸ στερήσουν ἀπὸ τὸν τόπον ἐτοῦτον, καὶ ἀπὸ τὴν ἁγίαν του μονήν, καὶ δὲν ἐδυνήθησαν. Μίαν φορὰ οἱ Φράγγοι τὸ ἐπῆραν καὶ ἔσκασαν τότε ἐκεῖ ὅσον νὰ τὸ κατεβάσουν εἰς τὸν τόπον, ὅπου ὀνομάζεται Σκουμβὶ δεκάξι μολάρια, ὥστε ὅπου ῥίχτοντές το μέσα εἰς τὸν ποταμὸν λεγόμενον Σκουμβίον διὰ νὰ κατέβῃ εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, ὧ τοῦ θαύματος, ἐγύρῃσεν ὀπίσω, πλημμυρήσαντος τοῦ ποταμοῦ. Καὶ γυρίζοντας, ἐφάνη εἰς τὴν Κούσιαν, τὸ παραπόταμον οὕτω λεγόμενον, ἢ θήκη μὲ τὸ ἅγιόν του λείψανον, ὅπου πολλάκις ἐφάνη καὶ ἅγιον φῶς εἰς τοὺς ἐγγχωρίους. [Akolouthia 1690, 41]

... As we have heard from elders, many times many people willed to take his most sacred and holy relics, to deprive this place and the holy monastery from it and could not make it. Once the Franks took it and before taking it down to the place called Shkumbin, sixteen mules [used for transport] died out. Hence, they were forced to throw it to the river called Shkumbin so that it descends into the sea. But, what a miracle, it turned back as the river flooded. And as soon as it returned, the reliquary with his holy relics appeared at Kusha, the so-called torrent. Many times, holy light appeared to the locals from that place.



Fig. 6: Constantine of Shpat, *Here they raised the holy relic from the river and put it in the church*, third scene on the top of the bottom left detail from the icon of *St. John Vladimir with Twelve Scenes from His Life*, 1739, 77.4 X 52.7 cm, tempera on wood, National Museum of Medieval Art, Korçë. © National Museum of Medieval Art, Korça

This episode has been illustrated in the 1739 icon from Ardenica [Fig. 6; Drakopoulou 2005], the sole visual testimony of how the translation of relics could have taken place at the time. If true, this can be considered as another (fifth) translation of the saint's relics. It is uncertain what the episode referred in the *akolouthia* might be, as the name Frank in the Ottoman world can mean any inhabitants of the West. It is therefore impossible to determine the political significance of this event, if it is real; it is sufficient, though, to demonstrate that the reputation of the saint was not confined to a narrow local milieu.

The following translation of the saint's relics occurred shortly after the banning of all religious activities and the systematic persecuting of all religious practices, in 1967 [Hoxha 1982, 103–13], when the relics of the saint were taken to the church of the Nativity of the Virgin, Elbasan's old cathedral church in the Castle quarters. Why such a harsh atheist regime would not waste what in its propaganda was presented as "backward custom" is puzzling. The family of the person credited for the protection of much of the religious cultural heritage in Albania in and after 1967 [Kaskadamis 2001], suggested, in personal conversations I had the opportunity to have, that the late Theofan Popa, in direct communications with the communist leader, Enver Hoxha, suggested that a potential destruction of the relics of St. John Vladimir would cause a serious diplomatic incident with Bulgaria, which was to be prudently avoided. Hence, the relics were transferred and kept safe in Elbasan's cathedral, which was proclaimed Monument of Culture and as such was protected by the state. The saint's relics remained there until they were handed to the Orthodox Church in 1994.

The last translation of St. John Vladimir's relics from Elbasan to Tirana occurred shortly after the frenzy of the events in 1997 for safeguarding purposes. The collapse of the pyramidal banking instruments in 1997, which resulted in the majority of the population in Albania losing its properties, was accompanied by unrest and skirmishes, looting of army barracks and robberies of arms and ammunition. Yet, twenty years after these events the saint's relics remained in Tirana, only to translate once per year at the saint's feast day to its monastery in Elbasan. In this it shares similar fate to the relics of St. Kosmas the Aetolian, which were also translated from Fier, where they were once kept and stolen, to Tirana. Although the presence of all of these holy relics in Tirana certainly guarantees greater security, one can likewise view their presence at the ecclesiastical centre in the frame of the strong and rather centralized leadership of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania.

Last but not least, I suggest that one could also view the statue of St. John Vladimir in Bar [Fig. 6] as a visual representation of his body and relics.

Why has there been so much activity around St. John Vladimir's relics? In her study of the political life of dead bodies, Verdery attributed their idiosyncratic effectiveness to their ambiguity, as they do not dictate a single way in which they can be addressed, but offer a multiplicity of possibilities of interpretations [Verdery 1999, 28; Tšerkassova 2014, 218]. Thus, relics and monuments in which they are kept have the power to manipulate meanings and impress feelings and associations to the living on account of their physical disembodiment and physical presence which made the relics of St. John Vladimir as a receptacle of new meanings and political symbolism [Taussig 1997, 3; Tšerkassova 2014, 218]. The post 1768 spread of smaller parts of his relics in such diverse centres of his veneration as in Elbasan (possibly also in Voskopoja or Durrës), as evidenced by two reliquaries which are currently kept at the National Historical Museum in Tirana [Giakoumis 2016, 180 and 194 (No. 19)], the church of St. Nicholas of Gerakomija, Ohrid and Zograf Monastery, Mount Athos [Nedeski 2016, figs. 13–14] is evidence of the physical disembodiment to provide physical presence of the saint to various communities, where the relics underwent processes of re-signification to acquire diverse new meanings and political symbolisms [cf. Giakoumis 2015 (1) & (2)]. After all, such practices had a long tradition and from the 13th century were spread throughout the Byzantine peripheries, as Anthony Eastmond has shown [2003, 212]. Hence, "the symbiotic relationship" between power and relics was well understood not only in Byzantium but also in its peripheries [Eastmond 2003].

In this paper, I tried to demonstrate that it was the renown of St. John Vladimir's relics that united several seemingly unrelated time periods with

each other. Restoring the saint's relics to honour, repositioning them, stealing them, or simply drawing attention to them (as is the case of the patrons of the saint's various reliquaries; cf. Giakoumis 2016) marks a remarkable change in social symbolical representation value systems, as part of larger political processes of transformation. Precisely because at the time of his assassination and after it St. John Vladimir had achieved visibility around certain values, which then receded or surpassed, handling his relics reinvigorates these values in contrast to the ones recently prevailing. We are perhaps to think of phenomena of utilizing the saint's relics as a symbolic vehicles for personal ends with what Taussig termed "spirit possession," i. e. as a foundational act of new political circumstances [Taussig 1997, 138, 183].

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- [2] Ακολουθία 2 = *Ακολουθία του αγίου ενδόξου βασιλέως και μεγαλομάρτυρος Ιωάννου του Βλαδιμήρου και θαυματουργού* (Venice: Glykys, 1742 and 1774).
- [3] Ακολουθία 3 = *Ακολουθία του αγίου ενδόξου βασιλέως και μεγαλομάρτυρος Ιωάννου του Βλαδιμήρου και θαυματουργού τυπωθείσα μεν πρώτον δαπάνη του τιμιωτάτου Κυρίου Ιωάννου Παπά του εκ της πόλεως Νεοκάστρου· νυν δε ανατυπωθείσα κατά την έκδοσιν του Γλυκύ του 1774* (Venice: St. George's Greek Press, 1858).
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Konstantinos GIAKOU MIS

Përmbldhje

Në këtë temë studiohen tregimet e ndryshme mbi varrimin, rivarrimet dhe shpërndarjen e lipsanit të Shën Joan Vladimirit, siç dëshmohet nga dy jetëshkrimet e shenjtorit edhe nga kultura materiale që lidhet me përndarimin e lipsaneve të tij, trupore apo jo. Duke konsideruar secilin nga tekstet e lidhura me ngjarjet e sipërpërmendura si ripërfytyrim diskursiv të kuadrit historik dhe politik të tyre, pavarësisht historicitetit të tyre, i trajtoj me metodat e analizës kritike të ligjërimit (diskursit). Kjo metodë ndërthur tri forma të analizës: analizën e tekstit, analizën e praktikës së fjalisë (procesi i prodhimit të tekstit, shpërndarja dhe përdorimi i tij) dhe analizën e ngjarjeve ose ritualeve të lidhura me tekstin si ngjarje me përmbajtje kulturore dhe politike. Kjo metodë për më tepër hulumton edhe efektin kulturor dhe politik të teksteve të ndryshme mbi varrimin, rivarrimet dhe shpërndarjen e lipsanit të Shën Joan Vladimirit.

Tekstet mbi zhvendosjet e lipsanit të Shën Joan Vladimirit u përkasin një gjinie tekstesh të përkushtuara personave të rëndësishëm ose shenjtorëve princërorë dhe historive të zhvendosjeve të lipsaneve të tyre. Praktika dhe ligjërata në lidhje me varrimin dhe rivarrimin e personave të rëndësishme hasen qysh nga lashtësia me transferimin e lipsanit të Theseut nga ishulli i Sqiros në Athinë. Në periudhën mesjetare praktika dhe ligjërata të tilla përhapen ndjeshëm edhe në botën sllave, si p. sh. në rastin e shenjtorëve Boris dhe Gleb, vëllëzërve

të Princit të Madh të Kievit, ose në rastin e Shën Igor Olegoviç-it, lipsani i të cilit u transferua nga Kievi në Çernigov, vendlindjen e tij. Që të gjitha këto praktika dhe ligjërata besohet se lidhen me përvetësimin e traditave vendore nga elitat me qëllim fuqizimin politik të profilit publik të tyre.

Kjo ligjëratë diskuton: Së pari varrimin dhe tekstet mbi varrimin e Shën Joan-Vladimir-it në kishën e Prečista Krajinska, sipas disa autorëve, ose në Manastirin e Shën Joan Vladimir-it në Shijon, Elbasan, sipas disa autorëve të tjerë. Së dyti, transferimin e supozuar nga Despoti i Epirit Mihail I, të lipsanit të tij në Durrës më 1215 dhe transferimin e tretë (të supozuar) të lipsanit në manastirin e shenjtorit në Shijon, Elbasan, para vitit 1380. Gjatë periudhës komuniste lipsani i Shën Joan Vladimirit u transferua (për së katërti!) në katedralen e Fjetjes së Shën Marisë në Kalanë e Elbasanit, ndërsa pas komunizmit lipsani i tij u transferua në Tiranë, ku ruhet edhe sot. Në një periudhë të panjohur, por para vitit 1768, pjesë të lipsanit u vendosën në një kuti të veçantë lipsanesh. Ligjërata diskuton rëndësinë politike të këtyre transferimeve.