

METHODS OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATION IN MEDIEVAL SERBIA BASED ON THE LIFE OF SAINT SAVA WRITTEN BY DOMENTIAN³

Abstract. *Communication is essential in all aspects of social life and one of the most important factors in the formation of states. Written communication skills reached the medieval Serbian state from the Eastern Roman Empire. However, only a few traces of written communication from the Middle Ages in Serbia have survived. The Life of Saint Sava written by Domentian is significant for researching medieval Serbian correspondence. This hagiography mentions correspondence approximately twenty times, and it consists of epistles, short messages or orders, and messages delivered orally by messengers. Furthermore, information about the people included in the correspondence, as well as the method by which letters were sent, is essential. The paper examines the methods of communication mentioned in this hagiography to show how correspondence was carried out in Serbia in the 13th century.*

Key words: *Communication, epistolography, Domentian, The life of Saint Sava, Serbia, the Middle Ages*

1. Introduction

In its basic form, the term communication implies the exchange of information between people. It is a feature of all forms of social life and a prerequisite for the formation of any social community or state. It can be verbal, nonverbal, written, pictorial, symbolic, or any combination of these. All of this highlights the significance of its study in modern historiography.⁴

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⁴ Historians' interest in studying communication methods in the context of historical events began after the end of World War II, with the development of the media, political propaganda, and commercial advertising. Medievalists have also focused on this issue (Dumolyn, 2012: 33-55; Mostert, 1999: 15-37; Riehle, 2020: 1-30; Сметанин, 1979: 58-93).

Communication had these properties in the Middle Ages as one of everyday human activities in various forms at different times (Dumolyn, 2012: 36). These forms were more modest and had a lower scale than nowadays. The ruling class had a crucial role in receiving and transmitting information, as well as shaping the mode of communication (Dumolyn, 2012: 41-43; Menache, 1990: 9-11). A system of communication was developed through oral and written methods, but it also appeared and developed through works of art, monuments and physical contacts, which bear the mark of communication. However, these types of nonverbal communication are not the focus of this research.

During the Middle Ages, communication was mostly done orally because the living word was better transmitted among the illiterate population (Dumolyn, 2012: 38; Mostert, 1999: 16-17, 22). Written communication - correspondence, was restricted to the social elite, educated people who communicated via letters. When correspondence was conducted between individuals, it was private; when the public interest was represented, it was either public or official (Menache, 1990: 13, 16).

Correspondence was imposed as the only option for long-distance communication. Messengers would deliver a message orally, in writing, or both. These messengers ensured that the message was delivered to the correct person. Insurance of privacy was reached by the seals. When it came to the transmission of information that many people needed to know, the messenger was also responsible for orally presenting the message content in addition to delivering the letter.

A letter is “written communication between the absent persons, a conversation between the sender and the recipient who are spatially separated, which serves to convey thoughts, desires, and feelings, as well as information and messages” (Maricki-Gadžanski & Deretić, 1986: 561). Epistolography refers to the skill of writing letters, or correspondence in the Greek term for *a letter* (Riehle, 2020: 6; Сметанин, 1979: 58; Суботин-Голубовић, 2001: 9). Correspondence was nurtured as a special part of rhetoric in antiquity, and letters had artistic qualities, too. Consequently, the epistolary genre or epistology emerged as a distinct and well-represented style in literature during the Middle Ages, as well as later epochs (Сметанин, 1979: 59-60).

Letters were compiled using patterns found in special collections or forms known as epistolars (Кашанин, 1975: 84; Трифуновић, 1990: 44; Maricki-Gadžanski & Deretić, 1986: 562; Riehle, 2020: 179). They contained five required parts: salutation, preamble (exordium), narration, petition, and conclusion (Menache, 1990: 16; Суботин-Голубовић, 2001: 9). The most important components of each letter are those that provide information about the author, the sender (title and signature), the intended person or institution, or the recipient (inscription), and the address with the date of writing (Порчић, 2012: 41, 283-284). There were distinct and well-defined patterns for various types of letters, which were formed based on function, purpose, etc. The correspondence quality was reflected in the adherence to the established patterns and the use of high literary style. In the case of short letters with notification functions, the emphasis was on the goal of the transmitted message rather than on style.

2. Epistolography in Medieval Serbia

The skill of writing letters was valued in the Eastern Roman Empire. Apart from personal communication, epistology was popular and many writers used this genre.⁵ These letters were distinguished by a high rhetorical style, metaphors aplenty, and frequent teachings and philosophical thoughts (Riehle, 2020: 180, 185, 255).

The Eastern Roman Empire cultural influence was very strong in the medieval Serbian state. There is no doubt that the skill of correspondence with the epistolary genre was passed down from that state to the Serbian milieu.

In the old Serbian language, the term *pisanije* (писаније) was used to refer to anything written, which could also refer to specific documents. Furthermore, the term *book* (књига) was frequently used to refer to various types of public and private documents (Ћирковић, & Михальчић, 1999: 301-302, 513-514). Both terms could also be used to refer to the letter as a form of written communication (Трифунковић, 1990: 131, 239).

The term *poslanije* (посланије) was used in the sense of the letter as a literary work, *epistolae* or *epistle* (Трифунковић, 1990: 264; Ћирковић, & Михальчић, 1999: 184-185, 558). This literary genre first reached Serbian medieval literature via the New Testament, which contains apostolic epistles with interpretations of Christian dogma, and then via translations of works by the Eastern Roman Empire writers. The epistles were also part of the literary genre known as questions and answers, which discussed theological, secular, and social issues (Трифунковић, 1990: 244-248).

There is no doubt that epistolars were translated into Serbian, but none of them were preserved from the medieval Serbian state.⁶ Saint Sava's letter to the Studenica's hegumen Spiridon, which he wrote while he was in the Holy Land in 1234/5 is the oldest preserved work of epistolary literature in Serbia, as well as the oldest preserved private letter (Кашанин, 1975: 81; Суботин-Голубовић, 2001: 10-11; Ћирковић, & Михальчић, 1999: 184).⁷

Letters were also a form of Serbian royal documents. It was official correspondence when the ruler issued orders to his officials at all levels of government. Letters were written to carry out the ruler's will and would take the form of notifications, requests, orders, appeals, decisions, etc. Furthermore, these letters were used in official diplomatic correspondence with foreign rulers, popes, and nobles (Бубало, 2009: 112-113, 186-200; Порчић, 2012: 238, 335).

Depending on the correspondent's nationality, these letters were written in Serbian, Latin, or Greek. Documents that have been preserved in their original form

⁵ Numerous letters by the Eastern Roman Empire writers and scholars, both private and public, have been preserved. In terms of quantity, the letters of Michael Psellos and Demetrios Kydones stand out (Riehle, 2020: 125-173).

⁶ The oldest preserved Serbian epistolar is from the middle of the 16th century from the monastery of St. John the Baptist, known as the Slepče monastery. It was transferred to Russia, where it is still today (Ћирковић, & Михальчић, 1999: 183).

⁷ This letter is preserved in the transcript and has been extensively researched.

attest to the use of parchment and paper in their writing. Until the end of the 13th century, parchment was the dominant material; in the 14th century, it was paper, which was cheaper due to simpler manufacturing technology (Бубало, 2009: 27; Порчић, 2012: 17-18).⁸ Even after the prevalence of paper usage, solemn royal documents, such as monastery charters, were written on parchment. Despite the low number of preserved letters, it's safe to assume that they were mostly written on parchment until the end of the 13th century, and afterward they were written on paper.

The hagiographies of Serbian rulers and ecclesiastical magnates provide valuable data on correspondence in medieval Serbia (Кашанин, 1975: 81-82). Based on them, it is possible to determine the system of written communication of that period to some extent; these hagiographies provide information about the social categories that maintained correspondence, the manner of writing and delivering letters and the types of conveyed messages (Бубало, 2009: 18, 216; Суботин-Голубовић, 2001: 10-11). Since only a few letters from the 13th century have been preserved, the majority of which are diplomatic correspondence, biographies are the primary sources of correspondence in general. This type of information can be found to varying degrees in all Serbian hagiographies known today.

1. Domentian's *Life of Saint Sava* as a source of written communication

In the middle of the 13th century, hieromonk Domentian of Hilandar wrote the *Life of Saint Sava* in Karyes on Mount Athos, by the order of King Uroš I (1242-1276).⁹ Based on the autobiographical data he entered in Sava's hagiography, there are few known facts about Domentian. He certainly held a low church position, implying that he wasn't of noble birth. He was a student of Saint Sava and, judging by his writing style, a very talented and learned man, which recommended him to the Serbian king. He also wrote the *Life of Saint Simeon* (Кашанин, 1975: 152-154).

Domentian's *Life of Saint Sava* is recognized as one of the greatest achievements of old Serbian literature, both in terms of style and structure, as well as its historical documentary content that evolves into mythical-biblical allegories (Јухас-Георгиевска, 1998: 141-142). It was written to glorify Saint Sava as the founder of the autocephalous Serbian church and the Nemanjić dynasty as the ruling family of Serbia (Кашанин, 1975: 158, 160). It created a ruling ideology in which the holy ruling family guides the Serbian people to salvation.

Domentian's *Life of Saint Sava* combines historical and fictional elements into a cohesive whole. Its documentary nature and importance for the study of

⁸ From the middle of the 13th century, the first documents on paper were written. The oldest preserved letter on paper was sent in 1301 by King Milutin to the nobility of Dubrovnik. The letter was written in old Serbian, with the king's signature in red. The subject of the correspondence was the Dubrovnik citizen Pir Haščić (Petar Kaščić), who was still indebted to the Serbian king and had to pay that debt (Јиречек, 1892: 2; Порчић, 2012: 17, 378, 391).

⁹ Domentian's life of Saint Sava is preserved in three transcripts. The year of completion of writing in the Vienna manuscript is 1242/3, in the Jagić or St. Petersburg's manuscript it is 1253/4, and in Šafarik's manuscript it can't be read due to damage. Although the precise date of creation of this biography can't be determined, scientists are leaning toward the year 1253/4 (Јухас-Георгиевска, 1998: 141; Кашанин, 1975: 154-155).

Serbian medieval history have already been established scientifically (Кашанин, 1975: 90, 155). One of the valuable elements of this work is the information about the characters' correspondence. Written communication primarily refers to the correspondence between members of the ruling family with clergy and foreign rulers (Бубало, 2009: 18).

In *Life*, correspondence is frequently based on epistles, which, regardless of the literary form, also have a documentary character (Јухас-Георгиевска, 1998: 148). In addition to the information contained in these letters, data that is unrelated to their content and hasn't been examined thus far is important. These are secondary sections that provide information such as how to send and receive letters, the distance between correspondence participants, etc. In the available literature, these data are minimally examined, and the following chapter is devoted to them.

2. Correspondence mentioned in Domentian's *Life of Saint Sava*

Domentian's *Life of Saint Sava* is replete with information on written communication. Correspondence, which consisted of epistles, short messages or orders, and messages transmitted orally by messengers, was mentioned in about twenty places. These epistles were high literary compositions of various types and volumes; there were six of them in total, and they pertained to the communication between the most important characters in this work: Stefan Nemanja, Sava, and Stefan Nemanjić (Јухас-Георгиевска, 1998: 148-149). Letters could travel short or long distances, they were frequently sent from one state to another, accompanied by gifts. Letters played an important role because they actively participated in the plot of the action by causing emotional or miraculous reactions (Vukašinović, 2018: 56).

The text was not cited in several places, and the letter or message was only mentioned. Places related to letters could be identified based on the context. They were shortened or elaborated, and in some cases, reduced to comments that could be developed into full-text letters, multiplying the number of exchanged letters (Vukašinović, 2018: 57). The letters attest to regular correspondence between separated members of the ruling family (Бубало, 2009: 225).

The first letter was mentioned in the context of Rastko's departure to Mount Athos. Stefan Nemanja (1166-1196), the grand župan, dispatched the *chosen soldiers* to return Rastko to his parents (Доментијан, 1988: 60). By the order of Emperor Isaac II Angelos (1185-1195), soldiers from the Thessaloniki region joined them because Mount Athos was part of the Eastern Roman Empire. The cooperation of the two armies had to be agreed upon in advance, which meant that Nemanja had to seek permission from the emperor for his soldiers to travel to Mount Athos. He could only do this by sending letters and messengers exposing the problem. There was no mention of this letter in the text, but it was necessary because the arrival of a foreign army would be interpreted as an attack, endangering the security of the population. As a result, diplomatic correspondence had to be included (Vukašinović, 2018: 62). A letter was mentioned in the text that forbids the protos, the elder of Mount Athos, and the monks from providing Rastko with refuge. It was a letter of order marked as the *great writings* (велико писаније) (Доментијан, 1865: 124). It was unclear who

issued the order, but it was most probably issued at the request of the Serbian grand župan by Emperor Isaac II.

The first epistle was a letter to Rastko from his parents: he had already become a monk named Sava, in which they expressed their request for their son's return home (Доментијан, 1988: 66). It was determined that this epistle was written in the literary style and had no documentary value (Јухас-Георгиевска, 1998: 150-151). Regardless of the veracity of the content, the context in which it was presented was intriguing. Along with the letter, the parents sent their son a *large amount of gold* to donate to churches and monasteries (Доментијан, 1988: 67). This indirectly attested to a large group of people who were required to bring gifts and a letter to Sava. Aside from those in charge of transmission and delivering the letter, there were undoubtedly soldiers, people in charge of the group security.

The answer to this letter came after the story about Sava's efforts on Mount Athos. It was written in the form of an epistle and it was the most extensive text of its kind in *Life* (Доментијан, 1988: 72-80). It was presented on several pages and written in order to introduce the reader to the program determinations that would follow in the text through the description of Stefan Nemanja's personality (Јухас-Георгиевска, 1998: 151-153). Sava addressed only his father, persuading him of the fleeting nature of life and inviting him to join him on Mount Athos. There was no information on how the letter was delivered. Only at the outset was it stated that Sava *wrote* (въсписа) to his father (Доментијан, 1865: 139).

Simeon responded to his son's call and went to Mount Athos to the Vatopedi monastery after becoming a monk. At one point, most likely in late 1197 or early 1198, the hegumen of Vatopedi was supposed to travel to Constantinople to consult with Emperor Alexios III Comnenos (1195-1203) on monastic matters.¹⁰ Since he was unable to travel, he dispatched Sava to Constantinople (Доментијан, 1988: 87-88). In this case, Sava was a delegate tasked with delivering *the hegumen's letter* (игоуменово посъланије) to the emperor and exposing the monastery's problems (Доментијан, 1865: 161). He did, however, have a letter of power of attorney recommending him as a delegate and negotiator (Бубало, 2009: 203; Порчић, 2012: 338). During this meeting, he requested permission to rebuild the Hilandar monastery. Sava returned bearing gifts of gold and a charter, which the emperor used to present Hilandar to Vatopedi (Доментијан, 1988: 88). According to the text, the emperor met all of the requirements because Sava was his *friend*, and they also discussed Simeon. It was a family relationship. Evdokia, the daughter of Emperor Alexios III, was married to Sava's brother Stefan. That was the reason why the hegumen didn't travel to Constantinople. To ensure that the requests were met, the hegumen dispatched an envoy who was both a respectable monk and the emperor's cousin. He did not travel alone, and on his return he was certainly assigned an armed escort because of the lavish gifts.

¹⁰ This conclusion is indicated by the founding charter of Hilandar, issued in 1198 by Emperor Alexios III Angelos.

Hearing their request, the hegumen and monks of Vatopedi granted Hilandar to Sava and Simeon. When the monastery renovation was finished, Simeon dispatched Sava to Constantinople, to his *friend* Emperor Alexios, to confirm the work and establish a monastery estate (Доментијан, 1988: 92-93). Sava found himself in the role of an envoy once more, carrying Simeon's letter (написаць къ любовьномуу си сватому царю кирь Алексию) in which everything about the monastery fortification and necessities was presented (Доментијан, 1865: 166). The letter was not mentioned in this case, but its content was deduced from the context in which it was written. Sava again accomplished his goal and returned with gifts and the founding chrysobull.

The correspondence between two brothers, Stefan and Sava, was the next mention of written communication. Stefan begged his brother to transfer his father's relics to Serbia, and Sava agreed (Доментијан, 1988: 112-113). Domentian based these two letters on identical epistles from Stefan the First-Crowned's *Life of Saint Simeon*, which he used as sources (Јухас-Георгиевска, 1998: 153, 155). The contents were given in full, but instructions on how to send the letters were missing. The text of Stefan's letter was provided along with the notification that Stefan wrote it, whereas Sava was said to have written to his brother. In addition, Sava's letter began, "I received your epistle..." (Доментијан, 1988: 113). Both letters were brief and written in the form of epistles (Јухас-Георгиевска, 1998: 153).

As a proven envoy, Sava traveled to Prosek as a diplomatic representative of the grand župan Stefan Nemanjić to negotiate with the Bulgarian nobleman Strez (Доментијан, 1988: 125-125). The letters were not mentioned in the text, nor was it mentioned that Stefan wrote to Strez. However, because Sava represented the state's interests, he was required to carry a letter of power of attorney as well as a pass that allowed him to complete the task (Порчић, 2012: 338). Information about Sava's escort, which he had to have as the ruler's envoy, was also omitted.

Sava went to Mount Athos after this mission. His brother wrote him a letter requesting that he return to Serbia so that Simeon's relics could pour myrrh once more (Доментијан, 1988: 131). Sava dispatched a disciple to Serbia, Ilaria, who delivered a *letter* (посьланије) to Saint Simeon who was *alive and after death* (живомуу и по сьмрьти) (Доментијан, 1865: 214). Ilaria's task as an envoy was to speak with Stefan and read a letter to Simeon during the liturgy. The letter contents were not disclosed.

Sava returned to Serbia after his stay in Nicaea, where he received consent for the establishment of the autocephalous Serbian Archbishopric and was proclaimed Archbishop. On the way to Serbia, he wrote a letter to his brother (вьсписавь же прѣдьпосьла къ благочьстивомуу братоу своєюму) in Thessaloniki informing him of the agreement reached (Доментијан, 1865: 227). Although there was no information on how this letter was delivered, someone from Sava's entourage was likely in charge of it, possibly Ilaria again. The format of this letter, as well as the overall expressions, are reminiscent of Sava's letter to hegumen Spiridon. This implies that Domentian relayed the text of the letter that Sava sent to Stefan and that Sava established the format for private correspondence (Јухас-Георгиевска, 1998: 156-157).

The following letter was mentioned in the context of negotiations with the Pope regarding the Pope's consent to Stefan's coronation and the sending of the royal crown to Serbia. Specifically, Sava wrote a letter (написао пошланицу) to the Pope and gave it to his student Methodius, who was tasked with delivering the letter as an envoy and reaching an agreement (Доментијан, 1865: 245). There wasn't any travel information. Methodius certainly had an escort and gifts to make the negotiations go smoothly, as this was a diplomatic mission of great importance for the state.¹¹

Sava was in the role of a deputy once more. This time, his brother dispatched him to Hungary to negotiate with the King of Hungary Andrew II (1205-1235) and persuade him not to invade Serbia (Доментијан, 1988: 159). Although there was no mention of the letters, they had to exist as part of diplomatic activities, as in previous cases.

Communication could also take the form of an oral message delivered by a messenger. The *Life* described how Stefan dispatched a messenger to Sava to inform him of his disease (Доментијан, 1988: 166). The letter was not mentioned, but the messenger could have carried a written message for Sava to be certain of his statement. Another messenger soon arrived, bringing news of King Stefan's death. He was said to have come on a fast horse, which demonstrated the way of traveling and delivering the message.

The final group of letters concerns Sava's communication with foreign rulers during his visits to the Holy Land (1227/8, 1234-1236). It was first mentioned that Sava, while in Anatolia, wrote to the emperor of Nicaea John III Doukas Vatatzes (1222-1254), requesting that horses be sent to him so that he could continue his journey (Доментијан, 1988: 180).¹² Sava also wrote to the Egyptian sultan, requesting permission and guides to show him the way to the holy places. Sava sent the final letter from Nessebar to Bulgarian emperor John II Asen (1217-1241) in Trnovo, requesting horses and servants (Доментијан, 1988: 220).

Although Domentian did not mention the letter to hegumen Spiridon, we must mention it because it is the oldest known private letter among Serbs. It was preserved in a 15th-century transcript, but this doesn't diminish its value because the transcript was proven to be authentic. Sava's letter to Spiridon doesn't differ much from the literary ones (Vukašinović, 2019: 91). Sava greeted the hegumen and then told him about his trip to Jerusalem and his illness there. He asked Spiridon to pray for him and send him a piece of the Holy Cross, a stone, and a napkin, along with instructions on how to use them. Sava told him about the upcoming trips and his return (Daničić, 1872: 230-231; Vukašinović, 2019: 91). The letter revealed that Sava had an escort, but did not specify the number of people that were present. He dispatched one of his

¹¹ Historiography questions the veracity of this event, which is frequently regarded as a product of the writer. However, at the end of the 12th century, Stefan and Vukan wrote to the Pope, and the text of those letters was preserved in a transcript. This implies that written communication had to exist, which is relevant to our topic. Without delving into the debate over whether Sava wrote to the Pope, we used this section to confirm that communication existed.

¹² The name of Bulgarian emperor Kaloyan, who died in 1207, is mistakenly written in the text.

students to Serbia to deliver a letter to the hegumen of Studenica. This demonstrates that correspondence was possible even in such long distances in the first half of the 13th century. It was also necessary to keep communication open between the archbishop and the first hegumen.

3. Conclusion

Writing and sending letters was a popular form of written communication in medieval Serbia. Domentian's *Life of Saint Sava* allows us to examine how the written communication system functioned in the 13th century, which hasn't been systematically analyzed in modern historiography.

When members of the ruling family were separated, private correspondence was mostly conducted between them. Information on communication between members of the Nemanjić family and foreign rulers or ecclesiastical heads contained important data. This means that the formats of diplomatic letters written in the addressee's language were followed. The ruler's office, which was made up of educated people and experts in international affairs and writing styles, was undoubtedly in charge of writing such letters.

The letters in the *Life* were written in the form of epistles, which had a literary form. The deputies routinely exchanged private letters between members of the Nemanjić family. Such letters typically contained messages with a deeper meaning that supported the concept of hagiography, or the celebration of Saint Sava and his family. In addition to the epistles, there were notifications about the contents of the letters, short messages, or simply a mention of the letter without any further details.

The terms *poslanije* (посланије) and *pisanije* (писаније) were used for letters. However, the letter form was more often deduced from the use of the verbs *wrote-napisa* (написа) and *send-posla* (посла). There was no information provided about the material or language of the letters. Since parchment was most commonly used until the end of the 13th century, it can be assumed that this was also true for letters. The text was written on parchment wrapped in a scroll and sealed like a charter. Correspondence between the Nemanjić family members was undoubtedly conducted in Serbian, while the letters they sent to foreign rulers were probably written in Greek and Latin. It is worthwhile to mention Sava's letter to the Egyptian sultan. It was most probably written in the language spoken in Egypt at the time, so Sava had to enlist the help of a local translator.

Messengers or envoys delivered letters. These messengers had to be excellent horsemen because they had the task of conveying the message quickly. When it came to diplomatic missions and the establishment of important international relations, eminent deputies with escorts were elected. Similar to Sava and his students, they had the authority to speak on behalf of the person who had sent them. They brought with them valuable gifts to achieve this goal. The deputies returned with gifts after the agreement was reached. This implies that soldiers or armed men were present to ensure the deputies' safety.

Correspondence took place over long distances, implying the establishment of a road network. This attests to the good communication that existed between the states of the eastern Mediterranean region during the Middle Ages.

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METODE PISANE KOMUNIKACIJE U SREDNJOVEKOVNOJ SRBIJI PREMA DOMENTIJANOVOM ŽITIJU SVETOG SAVE

Апстракт. Комunikација је обележје сваког облика друштвеног живота и представља један од основних фактора у формирању држава. Вештина писане комunikације доспела је у средњовековну српску државу из Истоног римског царства. Пошто је сачуван мали број извора писане комunikације код Срба, велики значај за истраживање пружа Житије Светог Save од Domentijana. У овом делу се кореспонденција поминаје на двадесетак места и састоји се од посланица, кратких порука или наредби и порука које усмено преносе гласници. Осим тога, важни су и подаци који говоре о личностима између којих се преписка води, начину слања писана и слично. У раду је кроз анализу начина комunikације који су наведени у Житију показано на који начин је спроведена писана комunikација у средњовековној српској држави у 13. веку.

Кључне речи: Комunikација, епистографија, Domentijan, Житије Светог Save, Србија, средњи век