Acts of female cultural and religious patronage became prominent, gaining visibility and recognition, in the medieval Balkans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There are many examples of female patrons such as Jelena of Serres and princess Milica who wrote liturgical poetry, commissioned works of art, and built churches and convents. Princess Jelena Balšić, a Serbian lady of Nemanjadi lineage and daughter of prince Lazar, is an example of women who were related to or in direct contact with the Nemanjadi princely family and played a role in the production of literary works and religious patronage in late medieval Zeta.

After the death of her second husband, Sandalj Hranić, in 1411, Jelena Balšić consecrated herself to a life of piety and to the construction of a church dedicated to the Holy Mother on Lake Skadar in Zeta. Zeta had been a possession of her first husband Djuradj II Stracimirović Balšić and later of her son, Balsa III who died in 1421, at which point the territory was integrated into the Kingdom of Serbia. During her reclusion at a convent on the Isle of Gorica, Jelena Balšić began a correspondence with the well-travelled and erudite monk, Nikon of Jerusalem, who would later become hieromonk of the monastery of St Nicholas on Lake Skadar. Three epistles still exist from their correspondence, of which two can be attributed directly to princess Jelena Balšić (the third epistle is a paraphrase composed by Nikon of Jerusalem). The epistles are consistent with Byzantine epistolary form and are representative of the literary production of the Serbian despot-

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1 Zeta mostly remained under the suzerainty of the Kingdom of Serbia, but was a contested territory throughout the 1430s and 1440s until 1443 / 4 when it was resituated to Djuradj Branković of Serbia. A full bibliography of articles and works on the Goricki Zbornik is provided in: Hieromonka J. Ćulibrk, Nikon Jersalimac: Vrijeme–ličnost–dje-lo. Zbornik radova sa medjunarodnog simposiona na Skadarskom jezeru, 7–9 septembra, 2000, Cetinje: Sveti gorica 2004, and in: B. Bojović, L’idéologie monarchique dans les hagio-biographies dynastiques du Moyen Age serbe, Rome 1995, pp. 177–216.

2 The epistles are contained in a single manuscript located in the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Belgrade: MS 446. Two of the epistles were reproduced in an article by Djordje Trifunović: D. Trifunović, Dve poslanice Jelene Balšić i Nikonova – Povest o jerusalimskim crkvama i pustinjskim mestima, in: Knjizevna istorija, 18, 1972, pp. 289–315. In this article we find a transcription of two epistles in Old Serbian and a translation into Modern Serbian.

ate in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The level of literary expression and the content of the epistles demonstrate princess Jelena Balšić's capacity to engage in theological conversation and her interest and queries regarding monasticism. The three epistles of Jelena Balšić are integrated into the corpus entitled *Goricki Zbornik* (The Corpus of Gorica)⁴ and were inserted by princess Jelena’s “spiritual father”, Nikon of Jerusalem in 1441/2 as framing devices for the articles he wrote for the volume based on Jelena’s queries.⁵ Examples of medieval Serbian epistolography are few,⁶ and the epistles of princess Jelena Balšić are a relatively unknown source describing the literary and book-culture of her monastic community on Lake Skadar.⁷ The authority of the princess in contributing to, commissioning, and directing a literary work derives from the legitimacy conferred to her by kinship with the Nemanjid princely family. Consequently, her literary oeuvre is a demonstration of princess Jelena’s authority as a patron of literature and of a monastic community.

In the first compendium of princely hagiographies in the Nemanjid kingdom, *Vitae regum et archiepiscoporum Serbie* (1223–1375), archbishop Danilo II stresses the ideal of heavenly and earthly harmony, represented by the otčestvo (patrimony) belonging to the saintly Nemanjid lineage that must not be divided. The concept of otčestvo is elaborated in the hagiographies dedicated to Simeon Nemanja. In the *Life of Simeon Nemanja* by archbishop Sava I, the monk Simeon is referred to as the otcь (father) of his people and xτίτορ (founder) of his realm.⁸ The portrayal of women as patrons is very rare in the dynastic literature of the Nemanjids, which generally outlines the role of Nemanjid princes in securing their dynastic legitimacy through acts of cultural patronage that further elucidate the cooperation of the Church in supporting the legitimacy of one Nemanjid prince over another.

Within the framework of dynastic competition, the role of female patrons such as Jelena Balšić is presented as instrumental in securing the legitimacy of a prince born of either a Nemanjid mother or of a Nemanjid consort during a period of dynastic upheaval. The earliest example of female patronage can be found in the second half of the thirteenth century in Zeta and Trebinje, the appanage of queen Jelena, consort of Stefan Uroš I.⁹ In the *Life of queen Jelena* written by archbishop Danilo II,¹⁰ there is mention of her correspondence with the monks of

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4 Bojović, L’idéologie monarchique (cit. n. 1), pp. 221–238, provides an overview of the corpus and reproduces the table of contents of the corpus.


7 The epistles of Jelena Balšić have only been published in an article by Djordje Trifunović and, to this day, no edition of the *Goricki Zbornik* has been published. Thanks to the help and support of Professor Trifunović, I was able to undertake the examination of the *Goricki Zbornik* in April, 2009. The excerpts from the text that I have produced here are based on an independent palaeographic and philological study of the manuscript in facsimile form. Therefore, any mistakes or omissions in the transcription and translation of the epistles are purely my own.


9 The identity of queen Jelena has been subject of scholarly debate; on the most recent analysis of the question see G. McDaniel, On Hungarian-Serbian Relations in the 13th Century: John Angelos and Queen Jelena, in: Ungarn-Jahrbuch, 12, 1983, pp. 1–12, see especially no. 1. For the historical context of the period see J. V. A. Fine, The Late Medieval Balkans: A Critical Study from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest, Ann Arbor 1994, pp. 137–142.

the monasteries of Jerusalem and Sinai.\textsuperscript{11} These monks are represented in the \textit{vitae} as her \textit{spiritual fathers};\textsuperscript{12} they served as confessors, counsellors and general correspondents, answering her questions regarding various theological topics.\textsuperscript{13} It must also be mentioned that queen Jelena was a prolific founder of churches. Danilo II describes her as the founder of several churches and a convent in her \textit{appanage} Zeta and Trebinje.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, queen Jelena’s personal piety and her pious acts served in the legitimisation of her sons as rulers\textsuperscript{15} and demonstrated the political implication of her pious activities.\textsuperscript{16} Queen Jelena’s role as the ruler of Zeta and Trebinje and as a cultural patron is subsumed by her role as the mother of two Nemanjid kings. Danilo II describes her reputation as that of a God-fearing and Christ-loving woman and a serene ruler ( unlike her husband Uroš I )\textsuperscript{17} creates balance and harmony between her sons; these characteristics are the main considerations in the creation of a saintly Nemanjid queen.

Later, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the women of princess Jelena Balšić’s immediate family, notably her mother, princess Milica, were also involved in acts of patronage.\textsuperscript{18} The princess founded Ljubostinja where she is represented as \textit{ktitor}.\textsuperscript{19} This church experienced a cultural effervescence at the time of the Battle of Kosovo; particularly after the translation of St Lazar’s relics to Ravanica.\textsuperscript{20} Princess Milica, like the celebrated poetess the nun Jefimija,\textsuperscript{21} produced literary works and received praise in the works of both Constantine of Kostenec\textsuperscript{22} and Grigorij Camblak\textsuperscript{23} who mention her political talent as a regent and her piety. Princess Milica is known to have written the \textit{prooimion} to the charter of the monastery of Dečani in Metochija for her son, the despot Stefan Lazarević\textsuperscript{24} and she is believed to have written a \textit{Panegyric to prince Lazar}.\textsuperscript{25} Acts of patronage and an abundant dynastic literature ( dynastic hagio-biographies ) were components of the legitimacy of the reigning dy-

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Danilo II, \textit{Životi kraljeva} (cit. n. 10), pp. 61–65.
\item Danilo II, \textit{Životi kraljeva} (cit. n. 10), p. 65.
\item Danilo II, \textit{Životi kraljeva} (cit. n. 10), p. 65.
\item Danilo II, \textit{Životi kraljeva} (cit. n. 10), pp. 65–72.
\item Danilo II, \textit{Životi kraljeva} (cit. n. 10), pp. 71–72.
\item B. Krekić, La Serbie entre Byzance et l’Occident au XIVe siècle, in: Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Oxford 1967, pp. 62–65. In 1242 and 1247, Uroš I had a strong following amongst his Catholic subjects in Zeta and Primorje since he supported their claim to an autonomous archbishopric against the political initiative of Pope Innocent IV who attempted to integrate the Catholic Church of Bosnia under the Archbishop of Hungary as a strategic step in the Hungarian Dominicans’ battle against the Bogomils. This balanced political structure was later upheld by queen Jelena when she became the sole administrator of these regions.
\item See the \textit{Life of Uroš I}, in: Danilo II, \textit{Životi kraljeva} (cit. n. 10), pp. 42–45.
\item Bogdanović/Mihajlić, Istorija (cit. n. 5), pp. 208–210.
\item The definitive work on the subject of Jelena of Serres and her oeuvre remains: L. Mirković, Monahinja Jefimija (Hrišćanski život, 5), Sremski Karlovci 1922, pp. 3–35.
\item P. Ivč/M. Grković, Dečanske hrisobulje, Novi Sad 1976, pp. 280–282.
\item D. S. Radojičić, Antologija stare srpske književnosti (XI–XVIII veka): izbor, prevodi i objašnjenja, Belgrade 1960, p. 128.
\end{thebibliography}
nasty and had contributed to the recognition and even to the sanctification of a Nemanjid king or queen. In the third section of the Corpus of Gorica, Nikon of Jerusalem elaborates an article on the “Ancestors of princess Jelena”, insisting on her Saintly Lineage. Nikon cites the vita of the founder of the Nemanjid dynasty, St Simeon by Stefan Prvovenčani and the Life of St Sava by the monk Theodosios and draws a historical genealogy of princess Jelena’s saintly ancestors. This section of the Corpus of Gorica presents the first Nemanjid “great zoupan” Stefan Nemanja as the founder of the monastery of Hilandar on Mount Athos where he retired in his old age and as the first ktitor of the Nemanjid dynasty by which he set the precedent for future acts of religious patronage which were almost exclusively undertaken by his descendants. Princess Jelena Balsić was a descendant of this saintly family through her mother and while her estate was neither a kingdom nor a vast demesne, she acted with liberality towards the religious institutions in Zeta and founded a small church dedicated to the Holy Mother, intended as her burial place, on Lake Skadar near the convent where she had retired in 1435. The church was constructed ca. 1439 near the church of St George that was founded by princess Jelena’s first husband, Djur-}

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27 Bojović, L’idéologie monarchique (cit. n. 1), p. 229, wherein this section of the corpus is described.
28 Ms 446: fols. 110v–134r, wherein the author insists on the “saintliness” of the descendants of Stefan Nemanja.
29 Boško Bojović edited the section relating the life of Stefan Nemanja (Ms 446: fols. 110v–134r) with commentary: Bojović, L’idéologie monarchique (cit. n. 1), pp. 240–300.
30 Bogdanović/Mihaljić, Istorija (cit. n. 5), pp. 375–376.
31 Ms 446: fols. 107–110v, in which the ancestors of princess Jelena are described.
Jelena Balšić’s role as a literary patron is derived from two documents: her testament, written between 1405 and 1442 by Nikon of Jerusalem and conserved with the Archives of Dubrovnik in the second document, the Corpus of Gorica.36 The testament lists Jelena Balšić’s possessions and her fortune; it shows her to be a great benefactor and piously inclined. In her will, princess Jelena bequeaths part of her personal library to her pious institution, the church of the Holy Mother, and another part to that of her first husband, the church of St George.37 Unfortunately, we do not have a list of the contents of princess Jelena’s library; we do however know that she commissioned a large volume on a variety of subjects, the Corpus of Gorica, to which she contributed the three aforementioned epistles. The Corpus of Gorica is unique in that it contains original pieces penned by this female literary patron. In this case of literary patronage, the patron is established as an individual and her intellectual and religious pursuits are described in the corpus that she commissioned for her religious foundation. Two of the three epistles attributed to Jelena are believed to have been written by her hand because of their stylistic and linguistic distinction from the text written by Nikon of Jerusalem. The style shows great aesthetic balance and has a high literary quality; Trifunović noted that the language and sentence structure reflect the “artistic literary style” of Old Serbian as it was practised in courtly circles in the later medieval period.38 The difference between Nikon of Jerusalem’s contribution to the Corpus of Gorica and his patron’s becomes evident once we remark the various hellenisms39 that he employs, probably due to his long sojourn at the monastery of the Holy Archangels in Palestine.40 The epistles follow the general conventions of Byzantine epistolography, specifically the “question-answer” form of ἐρωτοαποκρίσεις (вьпрос(ъ)и от(ъ)вть), a common patristic mode.41

The three epistles introduce the three sections of the corpus, each longer than its prede-
cessor. The sections are thematic and are mediated by Jelena Balšić’s open-ended queries. The first epistle is damaged; we can only read the introduction (the first seven lines), but we can infer its contents from Nikon of Jerusalem’s response: an introduction including a rather extensive exchange of salutations and biblical citations regarding spiritual life.\(^\text{45}\) The second epistle entitled *Correspondence on the Love of God (ΩΤΠΙΣΑΝΗΕ ΒΟΓΟΛΟΥВΝΟ)\(^\text{46}\)* starts off with an account of princess Jelena and the value of his presence and conversation:

> Да вѣсть твоа с( ве )тинïа· ωтнелиже спод[ о ] бих’ се ь б(о)гомь познати те , порадовах’ се вес(е)леïмь δ(о)у(в)ховнïм нь въмалѣ и въкратïръ бянс(т)ъ нам’видеïнъ , іАжок(е) би кто рѣцялъ въ зрыцалъ образ оузрѣхомъ , или въ нѣкиъ сьнь тьнькъ сьнѣсеноу ми бывшоу. И скорости дѣлïа не полоучи мое окаан’ство желаема миѣ. Нь оваче еже тогда слышахом ωт твоего прѣпод[ о ]вïа словеса δ(о)у(в)ховна и еже възмогохωм постигноути , и ωт срѣд моее д(оу)ше любезно и въсеср[ь]д[ь]чно , паче же и вѣрнѣише вспрïехомь и тѣмъ б(о)ж(ь) ст’вими словеси еже слышахом тогдашнïе връм(е) , окрыленïе δ(о)у(в)ховно имѣхомъ дж(дь) й А(в)и(ъ)съ и слышах твоее δ(о)у(в)ше б(о)голюбныи ир’равъ , и невещество атт(е)льское прѣбыванïе и еще ж[ е ] ωт нас(ь) коньчное оудаленïе.\(^\text{47}\)

> Your Saintliness must know that from the time you spoke [to me] of God, spiritual happiness and joy have become known to me. And since we were able to meet only for a short time, it was, as it is said, like a sudden apparition traced by the sun’s glare or as if I had been awoken from a dream. And due to the rapidity [of that meeting] my need was left unsatisfied. But what we heard from your teachings, your spiritual words, and what we were able to comprehend [from them] immersed my soul with loving kindness and filled my heart.

As in other medieval male-female epistolary relationships,\(^\text{48}\) Nikon of Jerusalem assumes the role of “spiritual father”, “teacher” and “guide” in matters of religion and monastic life.\(^\text{49}\) Furthermore, the beginning of the letter serves as a panegyric to Nikon of Jerusalem – who appears to have recently visited princess Jelena at her convent, to her great pleasure – coupled with an admonition to her spiritual guide to visit her again.

According to the forty-sixth canon of the Synod in Trullo, members of religious communities were allowed to leave the community in extraordinary circumstances (such as to visit an ill relative); however, it appears that princess Jelena did not leave her convent to visit her spiritual guide at his monastery.\(^\text{50}\)
Jelena Balšić is a secular figure, a noble widow; in her relations with Nikon of Jerusalem she is a student, showing her interest in theology by posing numerous questions, stating Бсеч(ь)стномоу ω[ть]цуучителю с(ве) т(а)го іев(аг)теліа, нам’же о г(о)спод и д(оу) ховномоу наставнику (To the Glorious father, teacher of the Holy Gospels, our guide to the Holy Spirit). Jelena Balšić played a productive part in the spiritual life of her religious foundation since many of her questions relate to the settling of debates that had arisen in her convent regarding the nature of monastic life. She begins by asking Nikon of Jerusalem to clarify the notion of humility and charity towards the afflicted and poor and how these concepts relate to monastic solitude. It appears that the main debate at the convent revolved around whether coenobitic or eremitic life was the appropriate model to follow, therefore princess Jelena asks како нѣцїи хвалет м(и)л(о)стиню къ трѣбоующим , м(и)л(о)ст паце инѣх добродѣтѣлієи вѣсѣх. или же истин’ное иноцьское житїе и цинь бл(а)жь. мно жае (How do some praise charity towards the indigent, since charity is above all other virtues; yet others praise genuine monastic life and divine status above all else). Following the theme of monastic solitude, she asks Nikon of Jerusalem’s opinion regarding St Basil the Great and his guidelines regarding monastic community life: и пакы дроузи г( лаго )лют(ь), како с(ве) тьи Вѣлікыи Василяе, похвалает оп’щаа житїа и сь множѣм прѣвыманіе имѣті - овы же ошьл’ство и безмльвиїе вымѣніше б(о) гоугодно житїе, и самомуо ω себе внимати. And still others say that Saint Basil the Great praises communal life and that one ought to live among the many. And yet others believe that solitude and silence are essential to a godly life along with attending to the self. Thus we beg to know the most correct [way of living] to settle this heated debate and to dispel our ignorance and lead us towards the light of understanding. And we beg the graciousness and industriousness of your heart and to God we dedicate our unlimited love, to enlighten our minds. Furthermore, may your saintliness know that we should [thus] be awakened from our laziness and our ignorance become [knowledge].

She begs him to и къ свѣтоу наставити (guide [her] towards Holy Wisdom) and to просвѣти се мыслию , и ина елика вѣсть твоа свѣтость, еже нашоу лѣность вьзбоудити , и гроубости прѣмѣнити (enlighten [her] with [his] thoughts, since [his] holiness is very great, and it can rouse [her] from her sloth and dispel her ignorance) on these matters. Although princess Jelena asks a general question regarding how monastic communities are commonly organized based on the various monastic models, her mode of expression is augmented by the rhetoric of friendship, within the accepted conventions of address: to address one’s correspondent as a superior and to make allowances for one’s shortcom-
ings. Indeed, the depiction of one's correspondent as superior involves their virtue as a friend and, in this case, as a spiritual guide. Since, it is out of charity and commitment to the amelioration of princess Jelena's “ignorance” of these and other matters that Nikon of Jerusalem's advice is requested and deserved.

In the third epistle (епистолïа третïа), Nikon of Jerusalem paraphrases the content of princess Jelena’s letters, referencing the completion of the church of the Holy Mother (which dates this correspondence to 1439 at the earliest), and outlines the rules to be followed at the convent where Jelena Balšić resided. The third section of the corpus provides insight into a great variety of questions and preoccupations of the princess. This section includes articles or answers (отвъть) regarding: universal history, monastic life, natural history, geography and pilgrimage sites in the Holy Land; most of the articles correspond to a specific question (въпросъ) posed by the princess. The various subjects incorporated into the corpus provide an “universal knowledge” composed of instructional and religious texts meant to educate the reading public. The concluding sections of the corpus include a short letter by Jelena Balšić dedicating the Corpus of Gorica to her church, followed by a prayer.

As an author, princess Jelena displays a fluid and elegant style with an interrogative macrostructure and rhetorical amplifications and figures of speech such as hypokatastasis, parachesis and zeugmas. As in other preserved volumes containing letter collections, princess Jelena's letters contain only one side of her correspondence with Nikon of Jerusalem. His responses are compiled as a series of erudite articles, however the question-answer – containing more answers than questions – exchange provides the structure based on the type of relationship and rank of the correspondents, see M. Grünbart, 'Tis love that has warm’d us. Reconstructing Networks in 12th Century Byzantium, in: Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire, 83.2, 2005, pp. 301–313. On p. 309, Grünbart notes the discrepancy between the rhetorical uses of official terminology and epideictic and the actual contents of a friendly exchange. Grünbart alights upon the uses of “wisdom” and praising a correspondent’s erudition as a formal aspect of the epistolographic genre. See also M. Mullett, Theophylact of Ochrid. Reading the Letters of a Byzantine Archbishop (Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs, 2), Aldershot 1997, pp. 111–123.

58 For the topoi, cf. Letter I of Irene-Eulogia Palaiologina to the Correspondence on the Love of God, Constantinides Hero, Irene (cit. n. 48), letter I. Discussions of epistolographic topoi can be found in: M. Grünbart, Formen der Anrede im byzantinischen Brief vom 6. bis zum 12. Jahrhundert (Wiener byzantinistische Studien, 25), Vienna 2005, pp. 131–136. Grünbart discusses the use of humility in letters; his examples demonstrate that humility before a correspondent was a common trope amongst clerics who referred to their humility, simplicity and servitude before their correspondent. See also Mullett, Theophylact of Ochrid (cit. n. 57), pp. 133–134.

59 Ms 446: fols. 49r–50r.

60 Ćulibrk, Nikon Jerusalimac (cit. n. 1), pp. 151–165.


62 Ms 446: fol. 165r and fol. 189v.

63 Ms 446: fols. 258r–259r.

64 Ms 446: fol. 264r.

65 Ms 446: fols. 266r–271v. Djordje Trifunović transcribed and translated the Old Serbian text from the Corpus of Gorica and pointed out the various examples of hellenisms in Nikon of Jerusalem’s article on the churches and monasteries of Sinai and the Holy Land, see Trifunović, Dve poslanice (cit. n. 2), pp. 305–310 (Old Serbian version) and pp. 312–314 (modern version).


67 Ms 446: fols. 272r–273r.

of the volume. In the correspondence of Jelena Balšić and Nikon of Jerusalem, the role of student and teacher or of holy man and lay figure at first overshadows the relationship of patron and client, which is the basis for the entire correspondence: princess Jelena is directing Nikon’s work through her queries. Princess Jelena refers to her personal relationship with Nikon of Jerusalem frequently, elaborating on the emotions involved in their spiritual friendship. The *topoi* of ignorance and humility before a holy man are found in other letter collections, but it is Jelena’s rhetorical flourishes as well as her references to her meetings and reception of Nikon of Jerusalem’s teachings that are central to identifying the relationship (one of spiritual kinship) and pedagogic network (Nikon’s teachings benefit the entire monastic community) outlined in this correspondence. The connection between epistolography and patronage in this letter collection further demonstrates an inherited tradition of aristocratic female patronage or *matronage* in the late medieval Balkans since, as in other times of dynastic upheaval, women (mainly consorts of rulers) gain visibility in the domain of cultural patronage.

Owing to its polyvalence, the *Corpus of Gorica* is a unique volume in the canon of the dynastic literature of the Nemanjids. Although unique in this period, the *Corpus of Gorica* was the product of a literary milieu composed of women – and animated by her mother, the princess (knjegina) Milica, and her companion, the nun Jefimija – that had formed during a time of foreign conquest and internal strife and was specific to the cultural environment of the fifteenth-century Balkan peninsula. Princess Jelena Balšić was an important and strategically useful figure as a consort and as a political agent in her own right within this context, as the incarnation of the double legitimacy of the saintly Nemanjid kings and of St Lazar the megalomartyr. Furthermore, as a widow, Jelena was allowed to retire to her intellectual pursuits and continue the oeuvre of church foundation and literary patronage that had been the *loci* of power of her forebears. These two practices provided tangible evidence that Jelena was not only wealthy and powerful, but also had a double charismatic legitimacy to commission the production of literary works related to the hagio-biographies of the Nemanjids and become a *ktitorissa* in her own right.

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