

TAISIYA LEBER, *Stifterinnen und ihre Stiftungen auf dem Balkan des Spätmittelalters* (Mainzer Veröffentlichungen zur Byzantinistik 17). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2023. xii+490 pp. – ISBN 978-3-447-12089-0

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TAISIYA LEBER has dedicated to her mother ELENA BELYAKOVA a study of the religious foundations in Dalmatia, Montenegro (Zeta), Serbia (Rascia), Macedonia, and Epirus sponsored by women between ca. 1000 and ca. 1500. Her work raises a complex question: can patronage be differentiated in terms of gender (women versus men), denomination (Roman Catholics versus Eastern Orthodox), or ethnicity (Slavs versus Greeks)?

It would be easiest to tackle these categories one by one. First, gender. Society in the mediaeval Balkans was, needless to say, invariably dominated by men. One may safely guess (even if LEBER offers no statistics on this point) that male founders far outnumbered female ones. Often (in twenty-six out of the fifty-seven cases listed on pp. 395–397) sources name women as patrons together with their husbands and/or sons. The twenty-four ladies who acted fully in their own right (pp. 395–396) were mainly royal or princely spouses and daughters, alongside a few rich widows such as one Pelegrina de Grisogonis in fourteenth-century Zadar (pp. 93–100). While the primary, purely religious motives of these pious women did not differ from those of their male counterparts,¹ the secondary, economic ones sometimes did: in 1066, for instance, a widowed Dalmatian noble sought to preserve her property from the encroachment of male relatives by founding a nunnery where she and her elder daughter took the veil (pp. 60, 100). Certain documentary sources stress the special concern that women felt for the commemoration of their deceased kinsmen or for the well-being of monks: LEBER sees in this a peculiarly ‘female manner of expressing sympathy and love of one’s neighbour’.² Women’s handiwork, mostly embroideries,

1. Man stiftete ‘Kirchen für das eigene Seelenheil, um die Memoria zu bewahren und um eine ständige Kommemoration zu garantieren’ (p. 290).

2. ‘Diese direkte Verbindung zwischen der „Liebe“ der Zarin Elena... und der Armut und Vernachlässigung des Klosters scheint typisch zu sein für die weibliche Art der Wahrnehmung von Empathie und Nächstenliebe’ (p. 324).

could likewise form a ‘gender-specific gift’ to churches and monasteries.³ In general, female patronage bespeaks women’s desire for social visibility.⁴ A second issue is that of religious denomination. To her great credit, LEBER discusses with equal competence Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox patrons. She does not explore any possible motivational differences between the two groups but stresses, rather, the role of noblewomen as ‘double agents’ for Eastern and Western Christianity. A prime example is King Stefan Uroš I’s wife Helen († 1314) who sponsored both Orthodox and Catholic (Benedictine and Franciscan) convents (pp. 145–161). Jelena Balšić († 1442), in her turn, tried and failed to build outside the walls of the Catholic city of Dubrovnik a small Orthodox church where she wished to be buried (pp. 165–167). Another case is mentioned in passing (pp. 113, 175 n. 225, 220 n. 206): Anna, the half-Hungarian spouse of Tsar Ivan Sracimir of Vidin, commissioned in 1360 an Orthodox collection of women-saints’ lives (now Ghent University Library, MS 408)⁵ but is known from a papal letter of 1370 to have abandoned both ‘the schism and heretical errors’.

The third problem, that of ethnicity, is not really raised by our author – with good reason, since ethnic identities in the Middle Ages were often fluid or uncertain. Even so, students interested in the topic will find in LEBER’s monograph helpful starting points for further research: she remarks, for example, that in Serbia, unlike Byzantium or Western Europe, widowed royal women would remain politically active despite having taken the veil (pp. 135–136). As a whole, the book presents a valuable *Materialsammlung* for the social history of the late mediaeval Balkans: its bibliographic list alone runs to over seventy pages (pp. 399–471). While LEBER’s knowledge of Church Slavonic, Serbian, and Croatian is evidently excellent,⁶ her dependence on secondary literature is at times a bit excessive. Though the city of Leipzig is not all that distant from LEBER’s place of residence, viz.

3. Frauen ‘konnten ihre eigenen Fähigkeiten als Näherinnen nutzen, um wirklich persönliche Schenkungen vorzunehmen und ihre Kreativität im Dienste der Kirche zu betonen’ (p. 334). See also the discussion of pearls as a gender-specific gift on p. 163.

4. ‘Zu den Hauptmotiven mittelalterlicher Stifterinnen gehörten auch in dieser Region [Makedonien und Epirus] die Frömmigkeit von Witwen, das Streben der Frauen nach Sichtbarkeit und Memoria sowie die soziale Erfordernis, sich von geistlichen beschützen zu lassen’ (p. 308). See also the English summary on p. 365.

5. Cf. LEBER’s detailed discussion of another manuscript copied for a woman: the fifteenth-century Gorica Miscellany, Belgrade, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, MS 446 (pp. 175–180).

6. MIRCEA ELIADE’s *Le sacré et le profane* is cited not in French or in German but in its Croatian version (pp. 12, 15).

Berlin (p. xi), she was regrettably unable, she says, to consult a manuscript kept there.⁷ LEBER writes in German, but more than once quotes *in extenso* other scholars' English-language translations or summaries of primary sources (pp. 242 n. 69, 292, 298, 327 n. 120). When discussing works of visual art (it is unclear if she actually saw any of these herself), she unfailingly repeats observations made by various art historians (pp. 156 n. 103, 227, 265 n. 212, 274–278, 293–294, 301–307).⁸

In any case, LEBER's excellent monograph is the product of extensive and diligent research. It is a great pity that, according to WorldCat, less than twenty libraries currently own a copy of her useful book.

Keywords

gender studies; endowment studies; patronage; medieval Balkans

7. 'Der Autorin ist es leider nicht gelungen, diese Handschrift *de visu* zu untersuchen, obwohl sie laut K. Günther noch immer in der Leipziger Stadtbibliothek zu finden ist' (p. 318n.56). Unbeknownst to LEBER, the manuscript in question has been available online since 2021.

8. LEBER is unaware that the 'epitaphios' she discusses on pp. 252–253 is now kept in Sofia: ANDREAS RHOBY, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Ikonen und Objekten der Kleinkunst* (Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung 2). Vienna 2010, pp. 369–371, 482 (cat. Te1).