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Front Cover: London Stone, shown set in the road opposite the door of St Swithin's church, on the "Copperplate" map of London, c.1559. (Photograph: Museum of London.) See within: John Clark, "London Stone: Stone of Brutus or Fetish Stone, Making the Myth," Figure 3.
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St Paraskeve in the Balkan Context

Mirjana Detelić

Abstract

The cult of the great saints is usually much wider and involves more than their hagiographies alone. These, as a special literary genre, have to consider strict compositional principles and an even stricter church canon. Not even the apocryphal hagiographies, although they most often originate in oral tradition, can completely escape the influence of these norms, which come into play as soon as an oral legend starts gaining the form of a literary composition. The cult is rather freer and much less dependent on the Church. Once they become a part of popular religion, the officially recognised saints almost invariably enter a ready-made semantic field that acts as their natural surroundings. Here, by the working of many generations, they build up the multilayered, developed, often unexpected, but always logical connections with the tradition and the culture to which they belong. These fertile and inescapable interactions are reflected in elements of folklore, especially folk literature, from the major prose forms like folktales and epic poetry, to the so-called minor genres (nursery rhymes, incantations, proverbs, and so on). In association with other elements of material and spiritual traditional culture (such as rites, customs and beliefs), stories about the saints tended to spread everywhere, rendering their roots and influences difficult to elucidate.

The Orthodox (Eastern) Church officially recognises three saints called Paraskeve: the “great martyr” Paraskeve the Roman (feast day 26 July), [1] who died by the sword during the reign of the Emperor Antoninus (second century A.D.); the “great martyr” Paraskeve of Ikonion (28 October), ascetic and missionary, who was decapitated during the reign of Diocletian (third to fourth centuries A.D.); and Paraskeve of Epibatas (modern Boyados in Turkey) (14 October), who was born and died in Epibatas in the eleventh century. All were named after the day of their birth—Friday [Παρασκευή], the day of Christ’s death on the Cross, and therefore one of the holiest of days for Christians. [2]

In the Balkan countries the most venerated is the last-mentioned, St Paraskeve of Serbia, [3]—as she is still known in Russia [4]—of Belgrade (called thus in Montenegro; Mirković 1922), or of Tarnovo (as she is called in Bulgaria, where her relics were first translated; Valchinova 1999, 52–66). She is also known as Sveta (“Holy”) Petka [petak, masculine/petka, feminine, “Friday”] to all Slavic speakers of the region, as Saint Veneranda [Šënepremë or Prende] to Albanians, and as Sfânta Vineri to Romanians. [5] This St Petka can be rightfully considered a general Balkan saint, common to all peoples living there, [6] as is often the case with saints whose relics were translated many times and to many places. In her case, this process is worth spelling out: St Petka was first translated from Epibatas to Tarnovo (sometime between 1204 and 1230), when the greatest of all Bulgarian
kings, John Asen, bought her relics from the Latin invaders of Constantinople. When Tarnovo was conquered by the Turks (in July 1393), the relics were brought to Vidin. Ten years later when the Turks took Vidin also, the Duchess Milica of Serbia bought the relics from the Sultan Bayazit, and they were translated to Belgrade in 1398. There they stayed until 1521 when Belgrade, too, was taken by the Turks. From Belgrade, they were brought—as booty—to Istanbul, where they rested until 1641. Then they were taken from the Christian community in Istanbul by the Moldavian duke, Vasily Lupul, who brought them to his capital town, Yashi. There the relics of St Petka remain to this day (Mirković 1922; Popović 1973 S.V. „Oktobar 14“; Geary 1986).

In spite of this wide veneration, there is nothing particularly interesting about the life of St Petka from the standpoint of hagiography, until the moment of the revelation of her relics. When her life, spent in the Jordanian desert, was reaching its end, she was told by an inner voice to go back to the place of her birth—where nobody recognised her after her many years of absence. Thus, on her death she was not buried in the graveyard but outside it, as could happen to unknown strangers when they died abroad. Many years later, when she had been completely forgotten about, it transpired that:

Near the place of her burial a stylite was living in prayer on his pillar. It happened that one day a body of a drowned sailor was cast ashore. The rotting corpse started to smell so terribly that even the stylite could not bear it any more, and asked some people to dig a deep hole and bury the corpse in it. Digging the hole, those men—by the plan of Our Lord—found an intact body lying in the soil, and they were very much amazed by it. But, as they were simple and ignorant people, they did not realise the importance of this event. [...] So they buried the intact body again, together with the rotten corpse. That same night one of them, named George, who was very pious, saw in his dream a empress sitting on a shining throne, surrounded by a multitude of radiant soldiers. On seeing that, George became so stupefied that he fell to the ground, and was not able to look at such brilliance and beauty. And one of the radiant soldiers took him by the hand and said to him: “George, why have you degraded the body of St Paraskeve and buried her together with the rotten corpse? Go at once and take her body out and lay it in an honourable place, for God wants his servant to be praised on Earth.” Then the shining empress also spoke to George. “Hurry up,” she said, “take my relics out and put them in an honourable place. I cannot stand the smell of that corpse any more. For I am human too, and my homeland is Epibatas where you live.”

That same night a woman named Eptihimia had a similar vision. The next day they both told their stories, and when people heard them, they all went to St Paraskeve with the lit candles. They took her relics out and rejoiced as if it was some great treasure they had found (Popović 1973, 279–80) (translation by the author). [7]

From that point on, the relics were famous for healing: “the blind saw again, the maimed walked away, various sick and mentally deranged people regained their health” (Mirković 1922, 280). [8]

When this theme reached folklore and popular religion, its binary code (uncorrupted body tied to a rotten corpse in a muddy pit/shining empress on the throne surrounded by radiant soldiers) was the only element that persisted in the new narrative surroundings. Folklore proved to be a very fertile medium of transmission for the St Petka story, and produced two images of the saint—the black and the golden. This connection should not be regarded as a paradox because black and gold, although natural opposites, do not, on the level of myth,
exclude one another, but rather point to the existence of both solar and chthonic hypostasis of a single mythical being.

When she appears in a folktales context, for example, St Petka is always in the role of the hero’s helper, which means that the action expected from her is either supernatural or miraculous. So, St Petka makes the staves of a barrel disappear and children trapped in the barrel are liberated (Čajkanović 1927, 99–101); [9] in the role of the mother of the whole people, she breast-feeds a grown-up hero, who then fulfils the Devil’s request that he should spit out his mother’s milk (Čajkanović 1927, 404–45); [10] she withers a tsar’s arm when he goes to kill his brother (Čajkanović 1927, 292–3); [11] she helps, and gives a gift to a noble stepdaughter and, at the same time, punishes the evil true daughter (Ikonomidou 1958, 88); [12] and so on. On all of these occasions St Petka is decorated with a golden distaff or a golden spindle, [13] and alternates with the Holy Mother of God, even in other folklore genres (for example, charms) (see Detelić 1996, 128–9). [14]

On the other hand, these golden implements connect St Petka with all those distaffs, spindles, and looms made of gold—and also with golden hens, chickens, and eggs—which, without exception, are gifts of the Sun’s or the Moon’s [15] mother in folktales about the search for the lost groom, or rather in those texts where the magical helper is the protector of the bride, her progeny, and her right to a family (compare Čajkanović 1927, 124–31). [16] These women’s gifts, magic objects of gold as they are, belong to the celestial world where gift-giving mothers dwell with their sons (sun, moon, even winds). Whoever is allowed to own such a magical object is ipso facto positioned in the level over the horizon, which easily fits in with the traditional presumption about the location of the saints in space (they live up in Heaven, and come down to Earth).

Looked at from a different angle, interpolation of the attributive action (spinning) and the attribute (distaff) in the ready-made formula (“she spins with the golden distaff”), could be a standard procedure with beings that at least have the attributes—fairy’s wings, dappled horse of Prince Marko, pedum episcopi or—in folklore—the gold crutch of St Sava, and so on. Thus the addition of golden tools to St Petka would be a normal move within the same standard. Thence the gold, otherwise an imperial and kingly privilege, becomes, from the standpoint of the genre, an intervention as necessary in folktales as demonic looks and actions are inevitable in those beliefs and fabulats where St Petka is depicted as black.

Not only in beliefs and fabulats, but mostly in these, St Petka—independently of her background in Christian lore—often appears with the visage and actions of a demon. She is sometimes imagined as a tall woman dressed in black, with teeth so big that they hang from her mouth down to her knees (in Greece: ΠΟΛΙΤΟΥ 1965, 508–9); a black old woman who—with a spindle or a staff in her hand (in Romania: Sveshnikova and Civyan 1973)—punishes disobedience by digging corpses out and making spinning spinners eat them (both in Greece and Romania: Sveshnikova and Civyan 1973); or she cooks their children in the pot for boiling and colouring wool [17] (in Romania: Sveshnikova and Civyan 1973), or she deprives them of eyesight, legs and arms (everywhere); or she kills people by the pricking of a finger with the spindle (in Greece: ΠΟΛΙΤΟΥ 1965, 507), and so on. Such a figure is easily recognised as Gvozdenzuba [“Iron-teeth”], a demon by which children are frightened in Srem (Northern part of Serbia, district of Vojvodina), especially “little spinners, by telling them that she [Iron-teeth] will take live coals from
the pot and burn the fingers of those who do not spin well" (Karadžić 1852, s.v. "Gvozdenzuba"). [18]

Furthermore, in accordance with the colour symbolism of traditional culture, red and white are isosemic with black, which is confirmed particularly in the context of St Petka—alone (in Russia: Mifi narodov mira 1982, 2, s.v. “Pyatnitsa”) or together with St Nedelja (“St Sunday”) (in Bosnia and Romania: see Sveshnikova and Civyan 1973), she walks in the Other World “all red and bloody in [the] face, because whatever sins people commit and whenever they curse God, she takes it all on herself, and suffers [in their place]” (Śajnović 1928, 378–9). Alternatively she goes through the Other World pricked by the spindles of lazy spinners (Yudin 1997, 88). [19] Another variant of the taboo on handiwork on St Petka's day especially, and on every Friday during the year, is a belief in a dangerous possibility that, by doing so, the eyes of the dead ancestors will be cut with the sharp blades of the scissors and similar objects. Accordingly, St Paraskeve appears both in Russia (Pyatnitsa) and in the Balkans (Petka) also as a protector of the eyes (that is, as the healer of eyesight maladies), although this part of her cult may be connected with a detail from another saint’s hagiography, namely, that of St Paraskeve the Roman, mostly venerated in Russia. She was tortured and executed by the Roman emperor Antoninus and is usually invoked to protect or heal the eyes and other body parts. Thus the two traditions appear to have been amalgamated, something that often happens in similar occasions, especially in such a multicultural and a multiethnic environment as the Balkans. [20]

Since the weaving and sowing are not connected with either her official or apocryphal hagiography, St Petka—once she entered the folklore of the Balkan peoples—must have overlapped with some ancient, even by that time, forgotten pagan deity, like, for example, Mokosh (see Popov 2001, 137–49). [21]

In the shape of a white apparition or of a woman in a white dress, St Petka is depicted in Greece as a warrior against cholera (which is represented as a woman in black), and against a dragon (Ikonomidis 1858, 75 sq.). In the Slavic traditions, on the other hand, white clothes are characteristic of impure power in general, in contrast to the devil who appears only in black (Slavyanske drevnosti 1995, s.v. “Belyj cvet”). In Serbia, for example, the demon of the plague is imagined as appearing in the shape of a woman with a white scarf” (Karadžić 1852, s.v. “Kuga”); [22] while in Slovenia, a death demon is represented as a white apparition, that is, as a “white girl” (Radenković 1996, 285). Of course, it does not mean that, in the traditional culture of the Balkan peoples, St Petka is identified with front teeth, plague, cholera, and impure forces in general. On the contrary, all characteristics that are mutual to this saint and these demons are “impure,” specifically within the context of Christianity and, together with the opposite group of “pure” characteristics and beings, may have become alienated from older, and the general naming of numina [divine or mythic beings] as the “higher” force [vis maior]. In the very core of beliefs and fabulats, the nature and attribution of a numen can still be defined by the term sacer, which is transcendental to the Christian sanctus. Taking over its functions from this older and stronger domain, a new agent—as a weaker one—had to be re-encoded in congruence with the environment to which it had to adjust.

In popular religion, however, the veneration of St Petka is very closely connected with the day of the same name. Among Slavs, the adoration of Friday
was so serious and strong, that—with Russians, for example—it had to be made official, once they were converted to Christianity. By the beginning of the eleventh century, the Orthodox Church proclaimed Friday, “the crucifixion day of our Lord Jesus Christ,” to be a weekly fasting holy day, thereby legally recognizing its widespread special standing: a day that among many people had long been known as “scaring” day, “hard day,” and “women’s holiday.” [23] According to a belief in Serbia, nothing should start or end on Friday and nothing should be taken out of the home on that day. In pastoral communities, in order to protect sheep and lambs against wolves, men should not shave or have their hair cut on Friday, and women should not wash their hair or comb it. For the same purpose, nobody should weave, spin, or sow, and women should not soak or dye wool on Friday (Nedeljković 1990, s.v. “Petak”).

In Serbian, petak [“Friday” in the masculine form], often becomes petka (feminine) in vernacular speech, with attributes like “difficult,” “white,” “Annunciation” (the Friday before Annunciation Day), or “new” (as in “new moon”). On Annunciation petka there is a custom called “cattle church” (for the protection of livestock against epidemics) in central Serbia (Levač and Temnić); and in eastern Serbia (Pirot), on new petka, everybody goes to the wells for the prevention of headaches (Nedeljković 1990, s.v. “Petak”). They also obey fifty-two Fridays per year as fasting days—that is, each Friday in each week—as a protection against hail and flood (Nedeljković 1990, s.v. “Petak”). [24]

Finally, a parallel cult of twelve Fridays lives on both in popular religion and in apocryphal church tradition (Nedeljković 1990, 180; Poljnj pravoslavnyj... 1898, s.v. “Pyatnitsa”; Miličević 1984, 116–18). [25] In popular religion, twelve Fridays are venerated whenever they occur before some major religious holy day, such as St George’s day, Trinity, St Peter’s day, St Elijah’s day, the Beheading of St John the Baptist, Christmas, Holy Innocents’ day, Annunciation, and others. Good Friday and Eastern Friday (first Friday after Easter) also belong in this connection (Nedeljković 1990, s.v. “Petak”). A more developed variant of “twelve difficult Fridays” was imported into popular religion from the medieval apocryphal story “On Twelve Fridays,” which was very popular among the common people. It existed in a huge number of variants, in verse and prose, and all were attributed to the Roman Pope, St Clement I (in Slavic: Sveti Kliment). In a Slavonic-Russian redaction, there were two main classes of texts—Eleutherian and Klimentian—depending on the source of the holy days connected to the twelve Fridays: the Old (Eleutherian) or the New Testament (Klimentian). The “On Twelve Fridays” story was widespread in European countries, including France, Italy, Germany, and Spain (Veselovskij 1876). In the Balkans, the most popular variant was as follows: the first Friday is in March—when Adam sinned; then the Friday before Annunciation—when Cain killed Abel; Good Friday—when Christ was crucified; Friday before Ascension Day—when Sodom and Gomorra were destroyed; Friday before Trinity—the day of “the horrid Hagarians” [26]; Friday before St Peter’s day—when ten disasters attacked Egypt; Friday before the Transfiguration—when Jerusalem was devastated by the Chaldeans, and stayed empty for seventy-six years; Friday before Assumption—when Ishmaeli Turks came in galleys to rob many countries; Friday before the Beheading of St John the Baptist—when Herod decapitated St John the Precursor; Friday before the Holy Cross Day—when Moses cut the sea in half and led the people of Israel through it; Friday before
St Andrew's day—when Jeremiah the Prophet announced the second coming of our Lord; and Friday after Christmas—when the Innocents were slaughtered by Herod the King (Milčević 1984, 116–18). This is not the only variant of “On Twelve Fridays” in circulation. The belief is still alive and taken very seriously, especially by farmers. [27]

All these—taboos of weaving, spinning, and soaking wool, sowing, shaving, and the cutting, washing and combing of hair, as well as dealing with cattle, dairy, and fire—are not connected to any one deity, numen, or Christian saint, but to the very day of Friday. [28] When she emerged on the stage of popular religion, St Petka was simply adjusted to the cult of her day and the accent was put (if not pre-existing) on the female form of the word and feminine functions. The ambivalence of male–female features in this cult is still unresolved—among Bulgarians, for example, who use both gender forms (St Petko, masculine; and St Petka, feminine) with shared functions and qualities (Popov 1994, 93–6).

So, on entering this context as a probable successor of some grim but great numen, vaguely remembered in the form of a goddess or sacerdotal being, St Petka gradually gained her main features. She is depicted as a protectress of weaving, weavers, and spinning in the tradition of all peoples who recognise her (Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians, Greeks, Russians), but also with fearful characteristics like those of demons. On the other hand, St Petka in Russian tradition (where she is known as Pyatnitsa = St Paraskeve the Roman) is venerated as a protectress of water, especially of holy wells and springs. Her day is the most popular Russian holy day, observed ten weeks after Easter when the soaking of flax commences. Thus she is addressed as “water and earth mother,” she herself is “flaxen,” and the name of her day is mokrīda [“wet”], with its root *mok-trs shared with the name of the goddess Mokosh, who was associated with female activities such as shearing, spinning and weaving (Zelenin 1995, 341–2). [29] The consequences of such an overlapping of different religious traditions point to the common source of the cult and the transformations it had to go through when migrating from one place and nation to another. In Romanian folklore, for example, mokoși are called the evil, female demons of a special kind. Within the same tradition, evil demons are thought to have power over large, uncontrolled waters such as floods, melting snow, and so on, while the wells are ruled by good demons (Sveshnikova and Civyan 1973). In Romania, Sfânta Vineri is connected with boiling water, which is the water that kills. In congruence with it, Romanians—like Greeks—picture this saint as an old and ugly woman, black in the face, and evil, with big, evil eyes and long, ugly teeth. According to the Bulgarians, St Petka is connected with the moisture in the earth that enables fertility to be achieved, but at the same time, because of its position, belongs to the dead. She is also depicted in an animal hypostasis (wolf and snake), although the standard image of an old woman in black is more common. For all of these reasons, St Petka is honoured in Bulgaria as a mediator, a being equally belonging to this and the Other World.

In Russia too, although she is very deeply honoured, St Petka/Pyatnitsa also has demonic features. In Mala Russ, for example, she is identified with rusalke [water demons] imagined as drowned women with long hair. On the basis of her connection with water, St Petka/Pyatnitsa is related to St Nicholas who has the same function, and is even depicted together with him. These two, in fact, are the only Orthodox saints who may be represented in sculpture, usually in wood.
According to some sources, their sculptured images are even more valued than standard icons. This, obviously, was not always the case, for in 1540 the procession of the wooden sculptures (“carved icons”) of Pyatnitsa and St Nicholas through the city of Pskov provoked disorder, because people thought that they were images of Veles (god of livestock) and of Mokosh. An official church proclamation was needed to calm people down:

In the year 7048 ..., on the Ascension Day, the old monks, pilgrims from foreign parts, brought carved icons of St Nicholas and St Petka into the church. The people of Pskov found it very strange because they had never seen those kinds of carvings, and thus many of them, simple people, understood it as an adoration of the log, and were much annoyed. So the simple people went to the monks and complained, and the monks went to the governor and to the vicar of Pskov, and then they sent the old monks together with the holy carved icons to the archbishop in Great Novgorod. The archbishop Makarie saw those holy icons, and prayed a congregational liturgy for them, and honoured them, and sent a message to the Pskov people through those old monks that the icons were to be brought in procession. And on the day that it should be done for the first time, so on that same day it was to be done for ever (Polnac Soobranie 1848, 303-4; translation by author).

Those “carved icons” are still preserved in Pskov Museum (Uspenskij 1982a, 113).

The curious thing is that people did not mind taboos of weaving, spinning, hair-cutting, and so on connected with St Petka, but they were revolted and scared by her image in wood. The taboo layer was obviously old enough to erase everything but what it recognised as the practice of the holy day Friday, older even perhaps than the pre-Christian pantheon itself. This strongly suggests that, when the official and relatively new church story about St Paraskeve was completed (some time in the fourteenth century), everything that had had any significance for her cult in folk religion was already in place in popular consciousness.

Notes

[1] The Serbian Orthodox Church still uses the Julian calendar, so it is necessary to add 13 days to each date mentioned here. Thus, 26 July is, in fact, 8 August in the Gregorian counting system; and likewise 28 October is 11 November, and 14 October is 27 October, in the Gregorian system.

[2] As such, Friday was connected with Sunday, the Resurrection day and Most Holy Day of all, celebrated at Easter. Sunday (Dies Dominii, whence Dominica/Kirynki from Gr. κυριακή = Sunday) was also a very popular personal name at the beginning of the Christian era. Thus, the Orthodox church recognises two saints with that name (7 July and 8 January). In Serbian popular tradition, St Petka (Friday) is often thought of as the mother of St Nedelja (Sunday) (see Fler 1984; Mirkovic 1922). Those two, St Petka and St Nedelja, have also their own iconographic imagery (see Walter 1995, illustrations 2 and 8).

[3] Because of the fact that her relics rested in Belgrade from 1398 to 1521 (see Mirkovic 1922, 143).

[4] In Russia, the most respected — both officially and traditionally — is St Paraskeve the Roman.

[5] Together with some other languages of both Roman and German groups (English, German, French, Italian, and so on), Romanian and Albanian also name the fifth day of the week after the goddess Venus (Veneri). Furthermore, the first of the three saints is also known as St Venera (see Raciti-Romeo and Santoro 1903-4, 133-56; Elis 2000, 43). The connection between the day Friday as Veneris dies and the saints of this name in the context of folkloristics, was postulated
as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century by the Russian mythological school, and reasserted quite a few times since (see Mif st narodov mira 1982, vol. 2, s.v.). The connection Giovedì—Venerdì, Donnerstag—Freitag corroborates the mythologem about the Supreme God and his unfaithful wife, as it was reconstructed from the folklore stories about the German pantheon (see Gurevič 1987, 140; Leach 1972, s.v. “Frigg”). In the Slavic languages, days of the week are named numerically, under the influence of Hebrew and Greek practice, but not with Saturday as the seventh day in the row as it figures in Greek and Hebrew. Actually, Slavs amalgamated both traditions and kept Friday as the fifth day, but did not call it after any divinity. It remained *Pyatnitsa* / Petek / Petak [literally “the fifth day”].

[6] In his article on Albanian saints, Robert Elis defines St Veneranda (Paraškeve, Albanian version *Prenne* or *Petka*) as an illusive saint: “strictly speaking, she does not really exist” (Elis 2000, 43), because she “was originally a pre-Christian deity and came to be identified by the Catholic Church with Saint Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary” (Elis 2000, 43). In referring to a saint as non-existent, Elis means a saint “for whom there are no historical sources” (2000, 43), although she “was particularly popular in Albania and Greece, as elsewhere in the Balkans, and many villages and churches in Albania were named after her. Indeed, of the some 275 Catholic churches […] over one in eight, were dedicated to this obscure figure, more than to any other saint except the Virgin Mary and Saint Nicholas.” As historical data about the saints are usually found in their hagiographies, the historical aspect of St Petka (and I strongly believe that it is the same St Petka venerated generally in the West Balkans as is postulated in my paper) is very well covered by the abundance of different, official as well as apocryphal, hagiographies. However, the link between this saint, the goddess Venus, the Holy Mother of God, and St Anne, is well indicated by Elis as a matter of continuation of a belief through the ages, in different religions and different confessions.

[7] This hagiography was written by the Bulgarian patriarch Ephthimie in 1385, and reprinted in Venice in 1538 (compare Mirković 1922, 144).


[9] See tale no 28 (“Deča andjeli” [“Children angels”]). Here St Petka also acts as the “mother of all humans” (Čajkanović 1927, 99–101).


[12] Both in Greece and in Serbia, St Petka alternates with “ala,” a kind of demonic creature similar to a dragon; in Greece she also alternates with a dragon and “aždaja,” and in Russia she alternates with Baba-Yaga (compare Radenović 1996, 15). “Aždaja” is a distorted form of “Azī Dähaka,” an old Iranian three-headed snake named Dahaka.


[14] In a paper about curses and obscene speech, Uspenskij is of the opinion that, in Slavic paganism, the cult of the Mother the Black Earth is directly connected with the cult of the Thunder God in the first instance, and with the cult of the goddess Mokosh as a female hypostasis in contraposition to the Thunder God. With the arrival of Christianity, veneration of Mokosh was transferred both to St Petka Paraskeve ("water and earth mother"), and to the Mother of God. That is also the reason why God’s Mother is connected with the Mother the Black Earth. In Russian spiritual verses, the cursing of St Petka is forbidden in the same way as the cursing of God’s Mother is likewise forbidden. But, in the Serbian language, the cursing of the mother can be connected directly to St Petka, and such a curse is considered very strong.


[16] See story no. 35 in Čajkanović 1927, 124–31. This folktale type could also be defined in terms of the groom's inhuman metamorphosis, as folktales of a boar, a hedgehog, a falcon, a snake, a lizard, an ox/bull, a lamb as bridegroom (see also comments in Čajkanović 1927, 512).

[17] In Serbian tradition, the spinning spinner is cooked—together with the yarn—by Wednesday (Čajkanović 1927, 444).

[18] Karadžić 1852, s.v. "Gvozdrenzuba." In Boka Kotorška (Montenegro), there is "baba korizma" ["old woman Lent"] with the same functions, and in Slavonia (Republic of Croatia), where the population is mostly Catholic, a similar belief is connected with St Lucia (Čolić 1916, 147). There are opinions that connections with weaving and spinning leads not only to a female deity like Mokosh, but also—and rather—to a kernel of beliefs in three goddesses of fortune (Farke, Moire, Urissnice, Rožanice) who weave, spin, and cut the thread of life (see Loma 2002).

[19] Yudin 1997, 88. In that sense, St Petka, in Russia, alternates with St Barbara and the Holy Mother of God (see Slavjanske drevenosti... 1995, s.v. "Vereteno").

[20] Elis in his article already cited mentioned this detail about St Paraskeve, but seems to be unaware of the existence of two, and even more saints with the same name (Elis 2000, 43).


[22] Karadžić 1852, s.v. "Kuga." The most recent fieldwork carried out in Serbia by the ethnologists of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA), Institute of Balkan Studies, confirms belief in a female demon called "mlada" ["the bride"], a woman in white robes similar to a wedding dress.

[23] As "women's holiday," and as a day of St Paraskeve/Friday, this holy day was a part of a fairly long procession of saints who were considered protectors of women's skills and crafts (St Evdokia/Javdoha, Varvara/Barbara, Gana, Marina, Nedelja/Sunday, and so on), and whose purpose was to punish the disobeying of strictly-forbidden domestic activities (compare also Ajdačić 2004). Yet another link to the "women's holiday" is suggested by Elis, based on sexual behaviour and a fertility ritual complex. "On her feast day, July 26, also the feast of Saint Anne, the women would dress up in their finest clothes and put out a maid and pestle, evident erotic symbolism. The rainbow, sacred to Veneranda, is known popularly as 'Lady Prende's belt,' i.e., Venus's girdle. According to legend, anyone who succeeded in jumping over the rainbow would change his sex" (Elis 2000, 44).

[24] For the same in Bulgarian and Romanian tradition, see Popov (2001, 139–42) and Sveshnikova and Cviyan (1973).


[26] The Hagarians are the descendents of Abraham's concubine Hagar; that is, the Ishmaelite people who included the Arabs (Genesis 16:15). During the age of the Jewish kings, Arabian tribes attacked the neighbouring Jewish tribes. In the Balkans, "Hagarian" became the name for all Muslim peoples coming to Christian lands as invaders (Turks, Arabs, Tatars, and so on).

[27] For the Albanian tradition, Elis gives a very interesting explanation for the veneration of Friday: "It has been postulated that the cult of Saint Veneranda was encouraged by the church
in Albania as a strategy for stemming the spread of Islam. Her association with Friday meant that the faithful would be busy attending Friday mass in her honor instead of participating in Friday prayers in a mosque” (Elis 2000, 45).

[28] Compare also Polnij pravoslavni… 1898, s.v. “Pyatnica,” where it is said that St Petka’s holy day was “often connected with different pagan festivities and dances, as can be read in Stoglav [Council of a Hundred Chapters, Moscow 1551] and Duchovnij Reglament [Spiritual Regulation, Petersburg 1721].” Since all these characteristics of Friday are found not only among Serbs but also among all surrounding peoples (Romanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians), the cult of the day Friday is obviously common to all Balkan peoples. The influence of St Petka’s cult is, of course, much wider than the cult of the day Friday, but it does not always show the same combination of elements.

[29] For Mokosh, see, for example, Vasmer (1962).

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Biographical Note

Mirjana Detelić's main interests are in folklore, oral literary genres, and poetics. She has published four books—on the poetics of space in oral epic poetry, on epic formulae, on the formula of white city in epic poetry, and a lexicon on epic cities. The author has also published many articles in various scientific journals and she has received three literary awards— one for the book Mythical Space and Epic Poetry, in 1993, and two for the book The Epic Cities. A Lexicon, in 2008.