

## COMMEMORATIVE BOOKS FROM THE MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SERBIA

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“He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”  
(Luke chapter 20:38)

**Abstract:** Commemorative books were kept in the National Library of Serbia, among the other manuscript books, ever since its foundation. Those can be divided into two basic groups – beadrolls and general sheets. In the German bombing of the National Library on 6 April 1941 were destroyed fourteen commemorative books created between the 16th and 19th centuries. In the current Collection of manuscript books of the National Library of Serbia, there are six commemorative books that will be the subject of this work.

**Keywords:** National Library of Serbia, manuscript, commemorative book, beadroll, general sheet.

The National Library in Belgrade is the central library in the Republic of Serbia. One of its organizational divisions is the Department of Archaeography, founded in 1961. That department is entrusted with the Collection of Cyrillic Manuscript Books, the most precious segment of the National Library of Serbia (NLS) fund (Ubiparip 2016, 9-15; Trijić 2016, 17-33). Since the very beginnings of the library fund, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this collection has always included various ecclesiastical books, for recording the names of benefactors and also the nature of their donations (Stojanović 1903, 385-387). These are handwritten books in which the names of donors and their relatives were inscribed, along with notes specifying the type and value of contributions, the purpose of their donation, and the time and place of collection or donation (Trifunović 1974, 241-242).

Due to tragic events, the original Manuscript Collection was destroyed, as was the entire fund of the National Library, in the German bombing of Belgrade on 6 April 1941. Work on restoring the NLS funds began soon thereafter, and the present-day Collection of Manuscript Books was formed (Štavljanin-Đorđević/Grozdanović-Pajić/Cernić 1986, V). Starting from these circumstances, this presentation will shed some light on the key questions about the emergence, purpose, and structure of these commemorative-type books in the Serbian lands, focusing on presenting beadrolls/catalogues and

general sheets (donorship books) from the old and new funds of the National Library of Serbia.

The practice of giving donations (alms) to churches to have the donors' living and deceased relatives mentioned in prayers has existed from early Christian times. It can be found in various forms throughout the Christian world. In the Serbian Orthodox Church, it is attested since the Middle Ages and gained particular importance in the period of the Ottoman rule. It was formalized in the *Monk's Rulebook* issued by Vićentije Jovanović, Metropolitan of Belgrade and Karlovci, in 1733. Donations of the faithful had to be recorded in a certain type of book, in the form in which they had been given, and the monks were obliged to dutifully mention the donors' names during worship services (SASA Archives in Sremski Karlovci, Metropolitanate archive collection, Fund "A", 1733/118; Ruvarac, 1870, 48; Martin-Petit 1907, col. 669).

More than a century after the fall of the medieval Serbian state, in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Serbian Orthodox Church suffered a heavy *economic blow*, known in Serbian sources as the "sale of churches and monasteries". During the reign of Sultan Selim II (1566-1574), the authorities confiscated and sold off church property, with the churches given right of first refusal to buy it back. This measure put immense financial pressure on the already impoverished Church. The Turkish treasury got hold of significant funds in this way, and the entire affair was justified by a need to harmonize regulations with Sharia law<sup>1</sup>. The earnings of the faithful gained in importance because they became the main source of income for Serbian monasteries, facilitating the survival of at least the holiest among them until the liberation from the Turks and the creation of Christian states.

Alms were collected not only in monasteries and other ecclesiastical centers but also in a distinctive way called *pisaniya* (alms-collecting), which involved monks touring settlements with a Christian population and asking the faithful for donations to help their monastery survive. Every contribution, along with the information on the donor, was dutifully recorded in a special book brought for that purpose, and once the monks returned to the monastery, the donors' names were mentioned during devotional services (Puzović 2012a, 309-310; Puzović 2012b, 145-146; Puzović 2017, 177-178).

Due to the diversity and wealth of the information recorded in them, these commemorative books are valuable historical sources for the history of the Serbian Church and people and, often, Christendom/Christianity in general. To piece together a comprehensive picture of their importance, we should assess them in the appropriate historical context, minutely analyze the structure and content of each manuscript, and draw some more general conclusions about

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<sup>1</sup> This measure accompanied the general agrarian reform of the Ottoman Empire and affected a large part of its territory in Europe. See in detail: Fotić 1996, 45-77; Fotić 2000, 49.

their significance. According to relevant criteria, all commemorative books can be classified either as classic beadrolls or non-classic beadrolls, i.e., general sheets. These terms comprehensively convey the distinctive features of these two types of commemorative books, regardless of how the scribe named them when they were formed (Puzović 2021, 31-32).

All books for inscribing donors and donations originate from beadrolls, special books in which the names of ktetors (church founders) and benefactors were recorded so that they could be mentioned during the liturgy. Medieval scribes inscribed in beadrolls only the names of rulers, bishops, ktetors, and benefactors, whereas the scribes of general sheets from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century included other types of information, too. The beadroll and the general sheet differ, first of all, in their structure and content; secondly, the place and way they were compiled; and, ultimately, their purpose. We will list some of their general features<sup>2</sup>.

In most cases, the structure of beadrolls was predetermined, whereas the structure of general sheets was mostly arbitrary. The beadroll begins with an introduction or preface containing rules for inscribing information in the book, but they usually do not appear in general sheets. The introductory parts of beadrolls became increasingly shorter and simpler over time. After the preface came the ruler's beadroll, the most representative part of every beadroll, containing the names of the rulers and often regional lords. It was followed by the bishops' beadroll and that of other church and secular personages. In later beadrolls, it was customary to class the donors' names into two categories – living or deceased, whereas there was no such practice in earlier ones (Puzović 2021, 32-33). The names of the settlements where the contributors lived were usually written on the margins; for practical reasons, this information gradually acquired an increasingly important and prominent place in the book. The listed settlements served as a guide for monks in later *pisaniya* missions (Puzović 20126, 145-146).

Beadrolls were written at monasteries, in formal lettering, and unhurriedly; in contrast, general sheets were written on the road, often in a rush, usually in barely legible handwriting. Beadrolls were commonly used during the liturgy, whereas general sheets served as a notebook of sorts for writing down all relevant information during *pisaniya* (Puzović 2021, 32-33).

The general sheet, a type of book that can be considered a beadroll of a monastery's donors, later evolved compared to the traditional beadroll. It emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was typical of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Besides the mentioned differences, the general sheet differs from the beadroll in its volume and content. More information was inscribed in it than in the beadroll, in a descriptive form, with an introductory formula that begin with:

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<sup>2</sup> See details about this topic in Puzović 2021, 31-32.

*Pisa...* (Written...), followed by the donor's name, the type and value of the donation, and its purpose. It is this information that is the key difference between the beadroll and the general sheet: the beadroll did not include the donation (its type and value), or the purpose for which it was given. Besides information on donors and donations, general sheets can contain other types of texts, such as chronicle notes, prayers, and others (Puzović 2021, 33-34).

The old collection of manuscripts of the National Library in Belgrade, destroyed in the German bombing of Belgrade on 6 April 1941, had fourteen of these commemorative-type books out of 1400 manuscripts. Some data about them has survived in earlier papers containing shorter or longer descriptions. An important source is the Catalog of the National Library in Belgrade – IV Manuscripts and Early Printed Books from 1903, by the academician Ljubomir Stojanović, a distinguished Serbian historian (Stojanović 1903, 385-387).

The first, under the catalog number 530, is the Pčinja beadroll – the beadroll of the monastery of St. Prohor of Pčinja (Prohor Pčinjski) from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which continued to be written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was a classic beadroll that had an introduction followed by the names of the ruler and bishops. Some of its parts have been published (Stojanović 1903, 385).

Then there is the Kruševo beadroll, i.e., the beadroll of the Dobrun monastery, also begun in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and covering up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The names and inscriptions from this book were published by Stojan Novaković, an eminent Serbian historian and politician who laid the ground of beadroll research (Novaković, 1875, 1-152). The book was copied in 1864, and the copy was kept in the manuscript collection as MS 228 (Stojanović 1903, 386).

The 16<sup>th</sup> century Lesново beadroll, believed to be the oldest surviving beadroll, was filed under catalog number 533. Its Preface, the longest in the preserved Serbian manuscript heritage, became the template for all other donorship books (Stojanović 1903, 387).

The next is the Beadroll of the Cetinje monastery from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Only the notes from this book were published. The Rulers' beadroll was MS 535, and the Bishops' beadroll was MS 536. Both were copied by Stefan Verković in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who left no indication of where he copied them. MS 537 was the Defter – the General Sheet of the Voljavča monastery from 1762, of which some parts were published. To sum up, Ljubomir Stojanović described eight beadrolls in total, four created from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and four 19<sup>th</sup> century copies (Stojanović 1903, 387).

The second important catalog describing the manuscripts in the National Library of Serbia destroyed in the bombing of 1941 was compiled shortly before the war by Svetozar Matić, a librarian in charge of manuscripts. The war broke out, and the description was published as late as 1952. His description included six beadrolls bearing catalog numbers from 220 to 225. All were from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with some having been continuously written for two or even

three centuries. The first is the Dečani beadroll from 1672, with important notations from a later time, followed by two beadrolls from churches and hermitages in the vicinity of the Dečani monastery: the Beadroll of the Three Saints' Church (Three Holy Hierarchs) and the beadroll of the Belaja hermitage near Dečani. Then there are the beadrolls of the monasteries of the Patriarchate of Peć, Treskavac, and Šudikova. Of course, the destruction of 16<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts that had yet to be studied was an irreplaceable loss for historical research of the Serbian Church and people and, more broadly, for the Orthodox heritage (Matić 1952, 178-179).

Efforts to restore the fund of the National Library in Belgrade, destroyed in a fire that burned for several days after the 1941 bombing, began already in the early wartime years. The determination of many state institutions and individuals to contribute to reviving the country's leading cultural institution by restoring its collections was reflected in the purchase and gifts of printed books and manuscripts. Owing to these efforts, among other books, several manuscripts that will be discussed later made their way to the National Library in 1943 (Štavljanin-Đorđević/Grozdanović-Pajić/Cernić 1986, V-VIII).

The first among them (MS 111), filed in the Library's catalog as the Deftor of the Paprača Monastery<sup>3</sup>, was donated in May of 1943. The book block of this codex, now damaged in several places by cutting several sheets lengthwise, has a small format and 55 sheets of paper. There is no filigree on the leaves of the manuscript that have remained intact. The codex was written in the common Serbian language with elements of the Russian recension of Old Slavonic Church, especially in terms of phonetics. Two types of scripts are dominant – cursive and half-uncial with cursive elements<sup>4</sup>. This book has several topical segments: the opening pages contain notes on large contributions given to the monastery, followed by a list of monastery revenue in kind (grain and livestock), a detailed list of books and other monastery property (mostly objects necessary for performing devotional services), new lists of donations and donors, and, in several places, a beadroll – a list of names of deceased and living donors to be mentioned during the liturgy. Three hands seem to have shaped the book's contents by occasionally adding notes from 1859 to 1880. The first priest called Hadži Zaharije Popović started writing the book during the restoration of the monastery in the early 1850s. His role in the restoration of Paprača is attested by a note with his name and the cost of having the roof repaired. Most notes were made by priest David, whose parish was near the monastery (MS 111, fol. 14a).

The same priest was responsible for another commemorative book from the manuscript collection of NLS, now known as MS 110. Notes were occasionally

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<sup>3</sup> More about the history of the monastery: Zirojević 1984, 159; Boškov 2005, 67-90; Puzovič 2019, 525-526.

<sup>4</sup> Details about this manuscript in the paper: Gošić 1998, 427-442.

inscribed in this book starting from the early 1860s. It includes a list of names of living and deceased believers for their 40-day<sup>5</sup>, semi-annual (“half of the parousia”) and annual commemoration at the liturgy, a note on three-year revenue in grain, and separate pages with the names of living and deceased priests and their wives. Another separate segment is the list of donors to the monastery (probably the Papraća monastery)<sup>6</sup>, specifying the type and value of the contribution. Priest David also wrote the second part of the book. In this section, he recorded the place where the donation was collected, the donors, and the type and value of the donation. The manuscript was essentially written in the Serbian vernacular. The influence of the literary language, the Russian recension of Old Church Slavonic, can be seen in the orthography and, to a much smaller extent, morphology.

Both manuscripts, created in the Serbian ethnic space still under Ottoman control, are important sources for the history of the Serbian Orthodox Church and people in northeastern Bosnia, of which the Papraća monastery was the spiritual and cultural center.

The third book in this group, the Beadroll of the Holy Prophet Elijah (MS 339), was created in the 1820s, in the territory of present-day North Macedonia. In terms of content structure and text formatting, the codex follows the template of medieval beadrolls. A short introductory note on the first page announces the list of names to be mentioned at the liturgy (parousia) in a church dedicated to Elijah the Prophet. The names of Bishop Ananije (the head of the Metropolitanate of Skopje in 1820–1828) (Vuković 1996, 14), first on the list, are *protosynkellos* Josif, and the deacons with the names of their parents, followed by names of members of the clergy and laypeople. The design of the pages of the book is quite crude. Two colonnades facing each other were drawn in red and black ink – the left was for the names of living donors and the right for the names of the dead to be mentioned during liturgy, with the name of their hometown in the middle of the page, near the top. The list of toponyms in this book confirms that donors came not only from the immediate vicinity of the church (or monastery) but from the broader area of eastern Macedonia, which shows the strong spiritual influence of this sanctuary.

The fourth book, the Beadroll of the Monastery of the Most Pure Mother of God near Kičevo, is MS 300, and has been in our collection since 1952. Its large-format book block comprises 146 sheets of paper with several types of watermarks from the 1840s. Many notations the scribes used to indicate the year of writing of some parts can be traced throughout the book, specifying the timeframe when the book was in use – roughly twenty years, from 1840 to 1861. In terms of content, it includes lists of the monastery’s donors and their

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<sup>5</sup> About the female names written in this book, see: Novakov 2022, 125-141.

<sup>6</sup> About other manuscripts of monastery Papraća in detail: Subotin-Golubović 1999, 160-162.

deceased relatives. The lists were occasionally updated during alms-collecting missions, which covered the broader area of Macedonia and not only the monastery's immediate vicinity.

The content of the book has an unusual structure – the name lists are grouped into seven sets whose names reflect the geographic division into administrative units (tur. *kaza*) in western Macedonia – Kičevo, Poreč, Ohrid, Skopje, Bitola, Tetovo, and Gostivar. In each group, the names are organized according to the donor's place of residence. The names of settlements were written at the top or center of the page, like a title, in large letters and separated from the name columns by horizontal lines. On some pages, the names were inscribed in several columns, in irregular handwriting, most of them in the Serbian vernacular with elements of Russian Slavonic orthography. The first notes in the book were made before the devastation of the monastery in the mid-1840s, when the Turks plundered and burned the sanctuary. Before and especially after the fire, the monastery survived by collecting alms not only in the western Macedonian areas but also from guilds in Prizren, Vidin, and Constantinople, whose members had ancestral ties to the monastery and its area. Other sources attest that donations for restoring the monastery were also collected in the Metropolitanate of Belgrade, and the Serbian prince Alexander Karađorđević donated a bell to the church (Građa 1979, 138-139). Hieromonk Simeon added donors' names in several places in the book and also copied them "anew" into a new beadroll unknown to us today<sup>7</sup>.

The last book we will present today, MS 108, the most recent, was written in 1856 and 1857. The bulk of the text was inscribed by Ace Smičković (MS 108, fol. 2a), a teacher in Prilep, in a small-format notebook comprising eight sheets. It includes a beadroll of the fraternity of priest Anđelković of Prilep on five sheets, with the names on the last two added by a different scribe, probably later. Besides the names of the deceased members of this brotherhood, the book contains a note on the fire in Prilep that destroyed almost the whole town in 1856 (MS 108, fol. 2b).

In Serbian manuscript heritage, there are around 200 known beadrolls, with 25 of those created before the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>. Numerous notes in those books testify to the social and economic circumstances of Orthodox monasteries and churches under Ottoman rule. Extensive name lists in books of this type are an obligatory body of evidence in the research of onomastics and ethnography, and the recorded geographical names are valuable in the study of historical geography.

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<sup>7</sup> There is a record of that on MS 300, fol. 133a.

<sup>8</sup> In Bogdanović (1982, 82–83), the existence of 21 beadrolls is recorded, but several beadrolls older than the 18th century are in collections abroad.

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