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## Ancient, Byzantine and Macedonian Epic Poetry in the Book *The Shadow of King Marko*

Book review: Vitomir Mitevski (2017). *The Shadow of King Marko:  
Ancient, Byzantine and Macedonian Epic Poetry*. Skopje:  
Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Skopje

### Abstract

The book *The Shadow of King Marko* by prof. V. Mitevski can be perceived as some kind of a mental reflection on a very complex topic that treats Indo-European, Byzantine and Macedonian tradition. Such is this work, complex, extensively analytic, sometimes synthetic, particularly in the introductory parts that present the paths of the research process, but also in the conclusions that are expressed through numerous analytical passages. Main hypotheses are consequentially formed, derived and proven. Author's style, short sentence period, clearly formulated idea, enable the reader to easily follow the complex topics. This book is clearly scientific per se. It can be listed among numerous literal-critical and literal-historical studies that originated since the ancient times, in the era of sophists, peripatetics and Alexandrian philosophers, but also in the new-age philological, systematic and scientific, classical studies. This book, beyond any doubt, can be an inspiring reading not only for the classical philologists, but also for the large number of experts in

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the field of humanistic sciences, Slavacists, neohellenists, ethnologists, folklorists, historians, byzantologists etc. The Shadow of King Marko is casted way back in the space and time, and there is a good chance that the shadow of this book will be casted a long way in the future.

**Keywords:** The Shadow of King Marko, Vitomir Mitevski, Byzantine and Macedonian tradition, Slavacists, neohellenists.

The latest book by Prof. Vitomir Mitevski, *The Shadow of King Marko*, is an impressive comparative study of Macedonian, Byzantine and Indo-European (ancient) epic poetry. In line with the subtitle, *Ancient, Byzantine and Macedonian Epic Poetry*, the book comprises three larger thematic parts which explore Indo-European epic poetry, predominantly through the works of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, then Byzantine epic poetry through the *Song of Armouris* and the *Epic of Digenes*, and, finally, Macedonian epic poetry, which is presented here through the cycle of Macedonian epic songs about King Marko. Besides evidence of the extensiveness of the author's analytical and comparative effort, not only as regards space (the whole Indo-European space) but also time (several millennia), and the representation of a large number of resources (61 bibliographic entries; p. 329-332) as well as scientific works with critical interpretation of this topic (97 bibliographic entries; p. 333-338), this book also includes an important supporting part, "Indices" (p. 339-348), which covers several areas: Index rerum, nominum auctorum, nominum et verborum, Index Graecus and Index locorum, significantly facilitating the reader's navigation through the book and making it suitable for further scientific analysis and interpretation, which is clearly one of the goals of the work. Although there are three thematic parts, the most important one is the third part providing an in-depth analysis of Macedonian epic songs about King Marko. The author's primary goal is to highlight their quintessential relation, not only with the Indo-European (ancient) but also the Byzantine epic tradition. This central part of the research provides the main title of the work, *The Shadow of King Marko*. As Prof. Mitevski explains in the preface: "In our songs, Marko is a lone horseman warrior who performs his heroic deeds all alone, without companions. But there is a long shadow cast behind this character of a lone hero, which holds the secret that leads to his origin and genesis" (p. 7).

The term shadow here does not only have poetic meaning, accompanying sound, but also involves a certain scientific narrative. A shadow in itself means something "bidirectional" – both the one who casts the shadow

and the one over whom the shadow is cast. The shadow is a sort of link, a contact, and contacts and links are usually bidirectional. Thus, the author's main hypothesis is that the Macedonian epic tradition is authentic in every way despite the influences of the Greek-language Byzantine epic tradition, but also of the other neighbouring epic traditions. Undeniably, this is the main hypothesis of the book. The extended and more precise version of the main hypothesis is related to the *Epic of Digenes*, which originated from the Paulicians (a heretical religious-ethnic community in Asia Minor) and which is a "reflection of the initial epic amalgam in which Arabic, anti-Arabic and anti-Byzantine tendencies are interwoven" (p. 170). The *Epic of Digenes* arrived in the Balkans, primarily the territory of Macedonia (10th and 11th centuries), together with the Paulicians (known under the new name: Bogomils), where it was translated for the first time into a Slavic language by epic singers who were already present in that territory (as evidenced by the subsequent cycle of epic songs about King Marko), from where, in the 14th and 15th centuries, this "Slavonic Digenes" was probably transferred to Russia (known under the name of *Devgenievo dejanie*) during the mass migration of the South Slavs to the north, strongly suppressed by the conquests of the Turks in the Balkans (p. 168).

All the supposed trajectories of movement of the epic songs through space and time that the author has presented are based on the studies of several prominent researchers of epic poetry as well as renowned historians: H. Grégoire, P. de Odorico, J. Mavrogordato, A. Lord, D. S. Likhachov, A. Toynbee etc. Prof. Mitevski closely examines these hypotheses, interprets them, partially incorporates them into his own main hypothesis, but never accepts them unconditionally, and even less so without scrutiny. On the contrary, as the author says: if a manuscript with the *Epic of Digenes* is discovered somewhere in Macedonia, regardless of whether it is in Greek or in a Slavic language, "that does not mean that the Slavonic Digenes was created in Macedonia, because there is always room for claims that books can be relocated, can be bought, sold, and transferred in one direction or another, from one cultural area into another" (p. 176). The same claim is expressed further on in the book: "We can, but we are not obliged to, accept the hypothesis that the Paulicians as an ethnic-religious community brought the *Epic of Digenes* to Macedonia. The possibility remains that the epic arrived on Macedonian territory earlier, with the help of epic singers" (ibid).

This brings us to the third hypothesis, according to which one of the key roles in this process of mutual influence, expansion and amalgaming of different epic traditions was played by numerous bilingual epic singers, both in the wider Indo-European area and in the narrower Asia Minor, and, above all, in the Balkans. It is no coincidence that Prof. Mitevski

highlights the importance of these bilingual epic singers on many occasions in the book, particularly in its third, central part where he mentions these singers twice: 1) when reiterating the hypothesis on the creation of the *Epic of Digenes Akritas* in the East, or, more precisely, in Cappadocia under the influence of the epic and folklore tradition of the neighbouring peoples (Arabs, Persians, Turks, Armenians...), underlining that “the exchange was performed due to the bilingual and even trilingual epic singers who easily transferred the songs from one language area into another” (p. 176); 2), when he deliberately draws a geographic and cultural parallel between Macedonia and Cappadocia, stating that they are some kind of a bridge between the East and the West, the former in the Balkans and the latter in Asia Minor, stating that “Macedonia has always been a country that served as a melting pot for different cultural influences. Thus, Macedonian epic singers were often bilingual or trilingual. They sang in Macedonian (Slavic), Turkish, Greek and in other languages that were close to them, depending on the dominant language of the territory they lived in” (p. 177).

Regarding the basic theoretical hypotheses in this book, one can say that they are derived in an explicit, scientifically sustainable and evidence-based manner. Nevertheless, the main point in presenting and proving these hypotheses here lies neither in historical nor in cultural facts. On the contrary, the accent in this book is given above all to the internal analysis of literary works which are the subject of this research; more precisely, these are the epic songs about King Marko, the *Song of Armouris* and *Digenes Akritas*, *Deeds of Devgeni* (*Devgenievo dejanie*), the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* etc. Moreover, the literary analysis refers to the style, script, language, motifs etc. not only in a most general but also in a specific sense. Taking into consideration the author’s main hypothesis that the champions of the “transplantation” process of the epic songs from one language to another were bilingual and trilingual poets, Prof. Mitevski does not focus on their language (which is only a medium of the transfer), but, above all, on the “baggage” they carried with them, which implies common use of typical motifs and themes, followed by conventional stylistic features such as standard, previously adopted formulaic expressions, epithets, comparisons etc. (p. 177). Considering the fact that defining the relations between epic songs belonging to different cultures itself presents a problem, the author partially accepts M. West’s perspective contrasting the vertical or independent legacy in European poetry with the horizontal influence, i.e. the direct influence of the epic experience between one neighbouring culture and another (p. 23). This is a fact that completely justifies the methodology adopted for the study, analysis and interpretation of the literary material in the three bigger thematic parts.

In that sense, the first part of the book, dedicated to Indo-European epic poetry, has the role of uncovering the historical and cultural background of epic poetry itself in three areas: in space, time and content (timeless-poetic). In the first part of the book the author presents the most important epic poems which were created in ancient and medieval times: *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Gilgamesh*, *Enûma Eliš*, *The Song of Kumarbi*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Hesiodus' *Theogony*, the Persian epic poem *Shahnameh* by Ferdousi, the Turkish epic poem *Sait Batal*, the Russian epic poem *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* and the so-called *bylina*, as well as Serbo-Croatian traditional epics from the King Marko cycle. This part of the book might be the most important in terms of content, since it plays a role in determining and specifying typical elements which are constituent parts of Indo-European (Euro-Asian) epic poetry, and thus Byzantine and, finally, Macedonian epic poetry.

If the first part of the book introduces the ancient foundations of the Indo-European literary tradition, not only in the widest but also in a narrower sense, in the second part the reader seriously steps into the world of medieval Byzantine epic poetry. This section, like the previous one, has an introduction which provides periodization of the Byzantine epics and distinguishes three forms: folklore epic songs (13th to 16th centuries), para-folklore songs (11th to 13th centuries) and literary epic songs (14th to 15th centuries). Since the literary epic songs have an author, while in para-folklore songs intervention by educated individuals can be noticed, the research topic in this part is, above all, folklore epics as an expression of spontaneous folk creation portraying war themes, depicted in short epics in which the leading characters are the so-called *Apelatai* (herdsmen, thieves, bullies) and *Akritai* (warriors who protected the borders). Although the short *Song of Armouris* is placed on the vague border between folklore and para-folklore songs, while the one about *Digenes Akritas* is the most prominent representative of the second phase, both epic songs are products of the old oral epic tradition which can be easily recognised in the language, style and other means of presentation. At the same time, certain differences are noted between the ancient, Homeric epic tradition and the Byzantine epic tradition regarding the character of the hero, who appears as a lone horseman for the first time. The analysis of the oldest song in Byzantium (9th to 11th centuries), the short *Song of Armouris* (200 verses), which thematically belongs to the time of Byzantine-Arab clashes in the Middle East, is followed by the most important Byzantine *Epic of Digenes Akritas*, which was forgotten for a very long time, up until the last two centuries, which clearly illustrates the neglecting of Eastern European culture (p. 76).

Further in the book there is an overview of the significant legacy of this epic's manuscripts, in several versions, known in the science as *Grottaferata*,

Escorial, Pogodin's and Titov's version, followed by an overview of the content of the epic, its oral character, stylistic features, hyperboles, comparisons, gnomes, compositions, typical themes and motifs etc. Here we can also note the same pattern of already-established literary topics and issues as in the first part, which confirms the established methodological principle that is followed when performing thorough comparative analysis in each part of the book. Moreover, the author's conclusions in this part completely match his main hypothesis. Namely, the *Epic of Digenes* shows that a strong cultural symbiosis developed on this Byzantine territory, where epic poetry was just a part of the cultural energy in which cosmopolitanism and interreligious tolerance prevailed. Actually, "It is presented by the 'symptomatic nickname' of the main hero Digenes (i.e. man of two origins), and 'the dominant topics of the epic are striving towards tolerance and reconciliation between peoples and religions'" (p. 160).

Finally, the third, central and most important part of the book introduces the topics from the Macedonian epic songs about King Marko and the epic tradition of this territory in general. The goal of the third part is to identify the typical features of epic song in Macedonia (p. 178). The subject of the analysis is a representative sample of Macedonian epic songs published by the prominent Macedonian folklorist K. Penushliski in the anthology *Marko Krале, Legend and Reality* (*Марко Крале, легенда и стварност*), which is a critical selection of songs that were compiled and published by prominent collectors of Macedonian artefacts from the 19th century, such as the Miladinovci brothers, Marko Cepenkov and Kuzman Šapkarev. These songs are considered relevant for two reasons: 1) they were collected in the 19th century and are not contaminated by the influence of literary intervention; 2) most of them appear raw, naïve, unfinished and, above all, archaic. For the comparative analysis, the author considers their character as an advantage, not a disadvantage (p. 179). If the author's primary goal was to explore the oral character, which is the oldest layer of this poetry, then the motive behind his choice is clear. Prof. Mitevski reviews the literary features of these Macedonian songs through the established elements of traditional Indo-European poetry in ancient times and in the Byzantine period. Thus, the comparative analysis in this book generally contains the following literary elements: stylistic features of Macedonian, Byzantine and Homeric poetry – sublime style, voluminousness of the hexametric verse (Homer), fifteen-syllable verse (Byzantine epics), decasyllable (Macedonian epics); frequent use of pleonasms and inversions; archaic and dialect language forms which strive to create an echo from the distant past and to suggest the status of an "old song" which is especially valued in the Indo-European world; use of so-called formulaic epithets, comparisons,

hyperboles; descriptions of characters, objects, buildings, surroundings, typical numbers 3, 6, 7, 9, 12, 27; typical number combinations (3x9; 6x2 etc.); typical themes and motifs: initiation, the abduction of a woman, fight (duel), catalogue, dragon-slaying, death of the hero, mourning of the dead hero, letter exchange, dreams and interpretation of dreams, travel in the underworld etc., as well as special features of the epic hero, such as his unusual origin and heroic nature, appealing appearance, superhuman strength and courage, invulnerability, unusually fast development as a child, his weapons, military equipment and his horse, taming a wild horse, up to the presence of his companion, who usually occurs as his younger friend or assistant, protégé, nephew from his sister (avunculus), servant etc.

The analysis and overview of the epic songs about King Marko show certain deviations, differences and distinctiveness. For example, the epithets in the songs about King Marko, which are numerous, frequent, simple and short but expressive, are closer to the Homeric than to the Byzantine epics. And vice versa, when it comes to comparisons, “they are no match for the Homeric epics, neither by occurrence nor by diversity. In this manner, they are closer to the Byzantine epics” (p. 184). On the other hand, the descriptions in the cycle of Marko, in comparison to the Byzantine epics, give “an impression of modesty, archaism, and even poverty” (p. 187). In addition, the motif of the hero’s fight with a dragon/snake, although it is present in the widest Indo-European space and closely related to water or a spring of water, in Slavic versions is usually part of the young hero’s initiation, while in Greek-language versions Digenes simply protects the girl from the monster. On the other hand, the image of a horseman who slays the dragon has a completely different context and meaning in Christian hagiography and iconography. When it comes to the contact points between the characters of Marko and Digenes Akritas, these epic heroes share numerous common features: noble origin, defending a smaller territory, common Christian ideology, well-adjusted to the Indo-European image of an epic hero who is inseparable from his horse etc. At the same time, they diverge from that image with their characteristic loneliness, i.e. alienation from the community. In the fight with their opponent, they are alone and fight as individuals. Unlike Homeric heroes, they are real lone heroes, each in his own way. This does not exhaust the topics and issues presented in this part as well as in the book as a whole.

The book *The Shadow of King Marko* by Prof. Mitevski can be perceived as a form of mental reflection on a very complex topic related to the Indo-European, Byzantine and Macedonian tradition. Such is this work: complex, extensively analytic, sometimes synthetic, particularly in the introductory parts that present the paths of the research process, but also in the

conclusions that are expressed through numerous analytical passages. The main hypotheses are consistently formed, derived and proven. The author's style, with short sentences and clearly formulated ideas, enables the reader to easily follow the complex topics. This book is clearly scientific per se. It can be listed among numerous literal-critical and literal-historical studies that have appeared since ancient times, in the era of the sophists, Peripatetics and Alexandrian philosophers, but also in the new-age philological, systematic and scientific, classical studies. This book, beyond any doubt, can be inspiring reading not only for classical philologists, but also for a large number of experts from the humanities: Slavic studies scholars, neo-Hellenists, ethnologists, folklorists, historians, Byzantologists etc. *The Shadow of King Marko* is cast way back in space and time, and there is a good chance that the shadow of this book will be cast a long way into the future.

## References

Mitevski, V. (2017). *The Shadow of King Marko: Ancient, Byzantine and Macedonian Epic Poetry*. Skopje: Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

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### Античката, византиската и македонската епска поезија во делото „Сенката на Марко Крале”

Резиме: Vitomir Mitevski (2017). *The Shadow of King Marko: Ancient, Byzantine and Macedonian Epic Poetry*. Skopje: Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Skopje

Книгата на проф. В. Митевски, *Сенката на Марко Крале*, може да се доживее како своевиден ментален одблесок на една мошне сложена тема која се занимава со индоевропската, византиската и македонската епска традиција. Такво е и ова дело, комплексно, аналитичко во најголем степен, напати синтетичко, најчесто во воведните делови кога се навестуваат линиите на истражувањето, но и во заклучоците кои проблеснуваат низ бројните аналитички пасажи. Главните тези се консекветно формулирани, изведени и докажани. Стилот на авторот, кусата реченична периода, јасно формулираната мисла, овозможува лесно да се следат комплексните теми. Ова дело е бездруго научно – per se. Тоа се придружува на бројните книжевно-критички и книжевно-



историски студии кои настанале уште во антиката, во времето на софистите, перипатетичарите и александриските филолози, но и на нововековните филолошки, систематски и научни, класични студии. Бездруго, оваа книга може да биде инспиративно четиво не само за класичните филолози, туку и за голем број на стручњаци од областа на хуманистичките науки, слависти, неохеленисти, етнологи, фолклористи, историчари, византолози и т.н. „Сенката на Марко Крале,“ се протега далеку наназад во времето и просторот, но и сенката на оваа книга има изгледи да се протега далеку нанапред.

**Кључни зборови:** „Сенката на Марко Крале,“ Витомир Митевски, византиската и македонската епска традиција, слависти, неохеленисти.

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### Antyczna, bizantyjska, i macedońska poezja epicka w monografii Cień Marka Królewicza

Recenzja książki: Vitomir Mitevski (2017). *The Shadow of King Marko: Ancient, Byzantine and Macedonian Epic Poetry*.  
Skopje: Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts,  
Skopje

Monografię Vitomira Mitevskiego, *Cień Marka Królewicza*, można traktować jako swego rodzaju odbłask mentalny pewnego bardzo złożonego tematu, który jest powiązany z indoeuropejską, bizantyjską i macedońską tradycją. To samo można powiedzieć o samej monografii, kompleksowej, w najwyższym stopniu analitycznej, a zarazem mającej ambicje syntetyczne, widoczne zwłaszcza we wprowadzeniu do każdego rozdziału i w podsumowaniach wieńczących liczne passusy analityczne. Formułowane konsekwentnie główne tezy książki zostały przedstawione i poparte dowodami. Także styl wywodu autora, charakteryzujący się krótkimi zdaniami jasno formułującymi myśl, pozwala [czytelnikowi] na łatwe śledzenie tematu głównego. Jest to książka naukowa per se. Te [cechy] charakteryzują liczne studia krytyczno-literackie i historyczno-literackie od starożytności, w czasach Sofistów, perypatetyków i Aleksandryjskiej szkoły filologicznej aż po czasy studiów klasycznych, filologicznych i naukowych. Prezentowana książka, bez wątpienia może być inspirującą lekturą nie tylko dla filologów klasycznych, ale także dla wielu specjalistów z dziedziny nauk humanistycznych, sławistów, neogrecystów, etnologów, folklorystów, historyków, bizantologów itd. *Cień Marka Królewicza* sięga

daleko w przeszłość czasów i przestrzeni, ale cień tej książki ma szansę sięgnąć także daleko w przyszłość.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Cień Marka Królewicza*, Vitomir Mitevski, bizantyjska i macedońska tradycją, slawiści, neogrecyści.

Przekład z języka macedońskiego  
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### Note

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