

# A MAP OF FOOD IN THE BYZANTINE XV CENTURY (IN RADOSLAV PETKOVIĆ'S PERFECT REMEMBRANCE OF DEATH)

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## Abstract

*This paper analyzes the motif of food in Radoslav Petković's novel, The perfect remembrance of death (2008) which is set in the city of Byzantium and in the Peloponnese in the fifteenth century. The entire novel is filtered through a concept from St. John Climacus' Ladder of Paradise, which identifies the necessity of bread with the memory of death. Descriptions of Byzantine cuisine accompany the complex reasoning of the protagonists, members of Plethon's circle in Mistra.*

## Keywords

*Radoslav Petković, The perfect remembrance of death, food and the city.*

## Introduction

Can bread be identified with death? And does it make sense to talk about the memory of death? This is the filter through which the protagonists of the novel *Savršeno sećanje na smrt* (*The perfect remembrance of death*) by the Serbian writer Radoslav Petković [2008] faces important existential questions. In this novel with its Byzantine setting and atmosphere, where all the characters, except the main character a monk Philarion, are historical figures, food plays a fundamental role and is described on an alternate track, between the opulence of Plethon's philosophical circle and the frugality of the monks' table. In the complex plot, where reference is made to the diffusion of Platonic learning to the West, a map of food between Byzantium and the Peloponnese in the fifteenth century is identified.

## 1. Prismatic space-time dimension

Two maps open Petković's novel: the map of the Peloponnese and the map of Constantinople. These maps explicitly indicate the place(s) of action of the novel, in the triangle between Constantinople, Monemvasia (a medieval Byzantine fortress on the coast of Laconia) and Mistra near Sparta: this triangle, in turn, defines a number of environments, ranging from the city par excellence Constantinople, to the descriptions of the monastery of Monemvasia and the garden at Mistra.

Just as the spatial dimension of the novel is fragmented, so too is the temporal dimension; the author constantly leaps backwards and forwards from one decade or century to another. Although it could be said that the central time axis of the novel is the period 1420-1460, primarily around the Fall of Constantinople (1453), the narrative also includes a return to the pagan period that features figures like Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, and Plato, and then there are time “trips” into the XVII and beginning of the XX centuries. In *Perfect remembrance of death* Byzantium represents a mixture of themes and motifs that are taken as a known world of literary work and then problematized [Gligorijević 2009; Despić 2009; Gordić Petković 2011].

Within this prismatic space-time dimension, there are several narrative plots that are developed around the Fall of Constantinople, the events that took place in the Peloponnese in the middle of the XV century, the esoteric circle that surrounded the philosopher Gemistos, and the life of the sinful monk named Philarion – the only non-historic character in the novel – who flees from Constantinople in order not to be burned as a sorcerer, and who as punishment atones for his sin of having allegedly engaged in the practice of magic. An account is then given of his stay in a monastery and his friendship with Gemistos who was said to be a wizard and was later known as Plethon, The Judge, or the Teacher. Among other things, the novel treats the problem of religion or true faith and the author offers an inventive solution in which the abandoned Christian man is not transported to a new religion, but he invokes instead the aid of the ancient pantheon, Zeus, the pagan gods and demons.

## 2. Bread i.e. death

In line with the layered Byzantine culture it portrays, the novel opens and closes with a seemingly paradoxical reference to a remembrance of death. Most likely [Lazarević Di Giacomo 2015, 144-145] the author is referring to the tradition of Byzantine spirituality through points of view associated with Saint John Climacus, also known as John of the Ladder, a seventh-century monk, the author of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* or *Ladder of Paradise*, that would become very popular and would be translated into Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, Slavic. In his *Ladder*, John offers thirty steps leading from earth to heaven, climbing the ladder, that was placed and is supported by Christ, who had himself first climbed it. In book VI of the *Ladder* John speaks «On the Remembrance of Death» and in this context he mentions food: «Just as bread is the most necessary of all foods, so the thought of death is the most essential of all works. The remembrance of death brings labors and meditations, or rather, the sweetness of dishonor to those living in community, whereas for those living away from turbulence it produces freedom from daily worries and breeds constant prayer and guarding of the mind, virtues that are the cause and the effect of the thought of death» [Climacus 1982, 132]. In the chapter VI of the novel Petković accurately reproduces Saint John Climacus' description of a place called the Prison. Saint John recounts that at a distance of a mile from a great monastery in Egypt, where he stayed for a month, there «was a place called the

prison, deprived of every comfort. There neither smoke, nor wine, nor oil in the food, nor anything else could ever be seen but only bread and light vegetables» [105].

### 3. Opulence vs. lack of food

In stark contrast with John's description of the seventh century Egyptian monastery-prison where there is no wine nor fruit nor cooked food are the three centers that form the axes of the narrative triangle of the novel and which are the three locations where the characters constantly come into contact with food or sometimes just contemplate food. The first is the city par excellence, marked by a capital letter in the novel: Constantinople, as the narrator says, «the only City in Oecumene», «Empress of all the Cities, set by the Holy Emperor Constantine» [Petković 2008, 43-44]. The description of the City's opulence has its antagonistic counterpart in the first encounter of the monk Philarion with food. That is anything but positive: the monk unconsciously enters into the dining room of the monastery in Monemvasia where he was sent to expiate his sin of having allegedly been involved in secret rituals. The monk Joasaph will pour him some wine that was «bad, from last year, and now a little old sour» [57] and so Philarion bitterly thinks at that moment: «The Devil himself has put me in this dining room». Philarion became a monk against his will, and therefore it is no wonder that his first encounter with monastery food, specifically with malmsey wine that actually had a good reputation, would be negative. Before he became a monk Philarion, was one of four men who took the names of Evangelists and who allegedly practiced secret rituals in Constantinople and as a consequence he was arrested. Loukas Notaras, the last Mega Dux of the Byzantine Empire, tried as much as possible to help him, and instead of imprisoning him, he put him in the ground floor of the palace, in a small room with a cage, «in which the smell of cooking strongly penetrated» [140].

Perhaps this is the only time that Philarion really suffered from the lack of food: his father raised him to be a successful and devout soldier, which meant that he taught him discipline and self-denial. It is true that he dined in the dining room with the others, but at the monastery in Monemvasia there were strict rules of silence during the meal, and he also did not have the opportunity to talk with others outside of the meals. He had to adapt to the fasting, which in fact was easy for him: «After the first few months of strict fasting to which he was subjected, Philarion ate like the other monks and found that the monastery food was not so bad, and that fastings are less strict than at the home of a devout soldier, his father» [157].

That lack of food in the monastery corresponds to the depiction of scarcity in Monemvasia that was «just as one quarter of Constantinople, to be honest, one of those densely populated, towards the Golden Horn» [169]. In Monemvasia Philarion had the feeling that he was «trapped in a small box with fragrances. And now and then, let's say from the top floor of the monastery building, the sea could be seen from the city; high buildings in the narrow streets closed every view».

But unlike the first, negative impression of malmsey, Philarion and the storyteller will have many opportunities to convince the reader that the wine of Monemvasia is

excellent [174, 411, 449, 486], a reputation, in fact, that has come down to us in our day. Francesco Balducci Pegolotti wrote in his *Libro di divisamenti di paesi e di misuri di mercatanzie e d'altre cose bisognevoli di sapere a mercatanti* (written between 1335 and 1343): «Vino di Malvagia, vino di Triglia, e vini di Candia vi si vendono a metri» [Balducci Pegolotti 1936, 24]. Shakespeare wrote about Malmsey, a rich and sweet wine brought to England from Greece in the XVI century, in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Henry IV*, but the most famous reference to Malmsey in all of literature can be found in *Richard III* [IV, 1, 4] when Richard orders the execution of his brother, the Duke of Clarence: «I'll drown you in the malmsey-butt within».

#### 4. Gemistos' circle

Wine and the food far richer than the monastery's modest fare will be part of life in Mistra, a third location in the novel, primarily in Gemistos' garden, in the esoteric circle of his disciples. Georgius Gemistos, who called himself Plethon, was «one of the greatest and most controversial political theorists produced by the Byzantine Empire» [Peritore 1977, 168]. He is an important figure in the diffusion of Platonic learning to the West and he lectured on Plato at the palace of Cosimo de' Medici (it is known that his political works influenced Thomas More's *Utopia*). It would seem that Gemistos founded a school of esoteric religious philosophy in Mistra and his circle of disciples included the future Cardinal Bessarion and Manuel Chrysoloras. In *Perfect remembrance of death*, Gemistos' esoteric circle at Mistra is described in many places although there are «external indications pointing strongly against the existence of a paganizing circle in Mistra or any Gemistos' pagan activity there» [Hladký 2014, 232].

The author, however, has no doubts about the existence of Gemistos' circle and at one point Philarion is even identified as a disciple of Gemistos. Mistra, or more precisely Gemistos' garden at Mistra, therefore, represents the third location on the map of *Perfect remembrance of death* and the fact is that unlike the monastic Monemvasia, this garden of scholars discussing pagan philosophy and pagan gods has all the features of the Garden of Eden or *locus amoenus*: the first description of the garden provided by the narrator is the moment when Philarion learns some things about his own past in «the spring lush of Gemistos' garden, with Malmsey wine, with the plate full of Persian apples, grapes, pears, figs, quinces and Bessarion's jokes» [Petković 2008, 128]. However, descriptions of Mistra are not missing, and one of the characters, the Muslim Qutbuddin whom Philarion will meet three times during his life, gives an exact description of Mistra while he is traveling in the Peloponnese: «I was approaching Mistra in the morning and in the light of a mild sun I saw a flattened hill, sprinkled with houses, with a castle on top, and I wondered what I could expect there» [234].

In contrast, the inhabitants of Monemvasia, a city that was a centre for trade, did not consider Mistra a city [319]. The fact is, however, that in the novel Mistra is identified primarily with Gemistos' garden, but also with Gemistos' estate that seems to be a sort of appendix of his garden. When Gemistos decides to move to his estate near the sea, he will take with him some of his disciples from the circle, i.e. two women disciples, as well

as the Greek philosopher and humanist John Argyropoulos and Philarion. Gemistos' property contained a house where the «kitchen and a large room designed for dining» [327] were at the center, and around the house were vineyards and olive groves. Here, the Teacher-Judge-Wizard and his disciples discussed many questions of mythology, philosophy and alchemy, while drinking wine, and with occasional interruptions for lunch.

## 5. Food deprivation

Food is in fact one of the fundamental motifs in the novel as it relates to asceticism which is inextricably linked with Philarion's being a monk. This is completely in line with Byzantine philosophy since ancient Greek philosophers stressed the importance of asceticism, sometimes reaching the point of starvation in order to increase wisdom. A very poor and limited diet led to a higher status at the philosophical level and was a way to ideal perfection. It is known that the frugality of the ancient philosophers when it came to food often took the form of vegetarianism: abstaining from both eating meat and drinking wine was the ultimate symbol of asceticism, since it implied purity of the soul, according to Pythagoras, who would go down in history as one of the founding fathers of vegetarianism. Moreover, even among the Hesychasts, the practice of food deprivation was used [see Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder*, Step 27].

## 6. Byzantine cuisine

Generally, the descriptions of food in *Perfect remembrance of death* correspond to the typical Byzantine cuisine or at least what we now know about it. Byzantine cuisine involved a mix of Greek practices and Roman traditions: cheese, figs, eggs, olive oil, walnuts, almonds, apples, and pears, were all staples of the Byzantine diet. The food of medieval Constantinople was truly a fusion. It combined ancient Roman culinary traditions, local Greek and Anatolian practices, the dictates of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the influence of cross-cultural exchange. No recipe books have survived from Byzantium, but in the corpus of the Byzantine poem known as the *Ptochoprodromica* of Theodore Prodromos, we find types of dishes eaten by various groups of society. The poem is written from the viewpoint of a hungry monk, and he describes the meals of the abbots and list all of the delicacies they ate, fish in sauce, sweet-sour egg soup with rooster, all accompanied with wine; ordinary monks, on the other hand, ate raw, broad beans, holy broth [Weiss Adamson 2002, 11-12].

It seems that there was a pattern of Byzantine eating that meant that «one looked for little food during the day, expecting a single big meal in the evening» [Dalby 2010, 97]. «Travellers, for their part, would carry a midday snack with them or rely on chance», because it certainly was not easy to find food during the trip. And Philarion at one point in his life decides to go on a journey: he wishes to go to a place where he had last been with Gemistos, a temple or a mausoleum in which he saw his own grave; on

one late-morning in July 1460, the monk resolves to set out on a journey, just as many years before two young monks, he and Diogenes had agreed, to seek knowledge. This time too Philarion appears to be a traveling monk, but as soon as he moves away from Monemvasia, he takes off his monastic clothes and changes into a secular garb. At one point he meets four robbers towards whom he points an arrow, but they simply declare that they are «unhappy people, hungry, scared» [Petković 2008, 466]. The monk felt pity for them «and thought they must be hungry. But he had very little food with him, and he knew he would not find more soon» [467]. Philarion will then regret he did not share what little food he had with the robbers, since he was capable of asceticism [469].

## 7. A story from the East...

In the shade of Gesmistos' garden, however, on an equally warm summer day, Philarion listens to a story from the East, about Sheikh Hajdar who discovered hashish and narrated to his disciples how he began to eat the plant: «As I walked across the field my spirit wandered next to my body. And we passed through a field where some plants have sprung up, and my spirit spotted that over the field, in this day when every living thing was suffering the heat, a peculiar peace reigned. Then I began to pick leaves of the plant and eat them, and that peace was transferred to me» [475].

The story is told by Muslim Qutbuddin who explains to Philarion that he tried that plant too, but he had no use for it. Philarion, however, heard from a merchant that at the bazaar in Brusa it is possible to get «something like cookies, of strong odor and brown colour. When you eat them, it is said, you get drunker than with wine; they grab you slower but hold longer, apparently no headache in the morning» [480]. Philarion therefore gets «brown cookies» from the merchant, which he takes with him on his journey to the mausoleum, and on the second night, «after a brief hesitation, he took a packet wrapped in leaves, pulled out a brown cookie that had strong odor and swallowed it. He knew that a lot of time would pass before he felt anything». Philarion will wait for the «brown cookies» to take effect and will then have a vision of the Turkish fleet sailing and when he comes out of the vision he will find the robber pierced with an arrow. And yet, the lack of written evidence to the contrary suggests that cannabis, in contrast to alcohol, was never introduced into the cultural life of Byzantium. There is no evidence that Byzantine Greeks, conquered by Arabs and then by Turks, acquired the use of opium or hashish [Stefanis, Ballas and Madianou 1975, 307].

## Instead of conclusion: the door to another world

It is not known whether another of Gemistos' disciples also ate hashish, but the fact is that Philarion «knew well that the door of another world inexorably opened and that he would soon go through that door» [Petković 2008, 492]. As the author says, «the sinful monk who escaped from Constantinople in order not to be burned as a witch doctor was the ideal character of this story» [10]. Perhaps only such a figure could pass secret

documents to the West: when Philarion boards ship for Italy he is aware, from conversations with Sigismondo Malatesta, that there is an interest in the teachings of Gemistos but also for those of Plato, Iamblichus, Hermes Trismegistus, and Pythagoras. «He [i.e., Sigismondo Malatesta] did not know much about them, as most people in the West know little about them, but he read a large part of what has been translated into Latin; it is, notwithstanding the great efforts of Marsilio Ficino and his translation workshop in Florence, still a little bit that is known» [505]. And yet Marsilio Ficino knew well that «What happens to us is what happens to those who fall sleep on an empty stomach and who feast in their dreams but are not filled, because their stomach is hungry, not for the image of food, but for the real food» [Snyder 2008, 20]. Therefore, it will be Philarion who, after his vision, boards ship and carries with him the remains of Plethon's bodily mantle and the writings of Hermes Trismegistus. Philarion will pass through the door of another world, to his new country, the country of Sigismondo Malatesta with whom Philarion was sitting and «drinking the wine and it was nice; it could be very nice to drink wine with Lord Sigismondo Malatesta» [Petković 2008, 507] in a plurality of meanings of an uncertain future.

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