“THINGS IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH, VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE”: TRIUMPHAL ARCH AT THE WEST FACADE OF THE MOTHER OF GOD LJевИШКА CHURCH IN PRIZREN. STRUCTURE AND MEANING

Over the course of years research about the Serbian King Stefan Uroš II Milutin and the Serbian Orthodox cathedral of Prizren, Bogorodica (Mother of God) Ljeviška has produced a body of articles about its intelligent iconographic contains (fig.1). What follows is perceptive reading of the west wall through historiography and possibilities of interpretation.

Articulation and conceptual elements of the façade screens are one of the crucial constructive concerns of late Byzantine architecture. Although severely damaged in March 2004th and November 2005th by Albanian extremists there


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is one layer related to the subliminal meaning conveyed by west façade of Ljeviška church in Prizren, transmogrified in the idea of triumphal arch. Also called a threshold arch, triumphal arch is tracing its origins to the roman triumphal arch. In Christian context this arch symbolized triumph and the entrance to the glory through resurrection.

Built in 1306/1307 on remains of the older basilica, Ljeviška is a significant Late Byzantine monument, especially if taken in consideration that in the architecture of medieval Serbia for the first time appeared the five-domed construction. Nevertheless, the structure and meaning of the west facade of Ljeviška church were not peculiarly analyzed in the historiography.

First detailed drawing entitled „West facade of the narthex of the Virgin Mary Ljeviška church“ (fig.2) was published by Alexander Deroko in his distinguished study Monumental and decorative architecture in Medieval Serbia. Decade after (1963) similar drawing was published by Slobodan Nenadović in his book (fig.3) Mother of God Ljeviška church – its origin and place in the architecture during the Age of King Milutin.

6 It seems that it was neglected the significance of the fact that King Milutin conquered Skopje in 1282th when he returned the area that belonged to his ancestors. By conquering this region, and thus restoring the monastery, King Milutin stressed his own legitimacy. It appears that as the ideological basis of the architectural concept of Ljeviška church should not exclude the geographically closest point, the church of Sv. Panteleimon in Gorno Nerezi. С. Ненадовић, Богородица Љевишка, 109. About the origin of lateral domes: Б. Тодић, Старо Нагоричино, Београд 1993, 87 – 120. About five-domed elevation in recent Serbian historiography: С. журич, Грачаници. Историја и архитектура, Београд 1999, 87 – 120.
7 А. Дероко, Монументална и декоративна архитектура у средњовековној Србији, Београд 1953, 173, слика 236.
8 С. Ненадовић, Богородица Љевишка, таб. XXI; Idem, Рестаурација цркве Богородица Љевишка у Призрену, Зборник заштите споменика културе III, св. 1 Београд
Nenadović concluded that if we take a look from the remote vantage the west facade, we are able to see only exonarthex and tower bell which are disturbing richness of the architecture. Furthermore he concluded that this solution is not unique and not original. On the other side, Draga Panić coauthor of the monographic study about Ljeviška church published 1975th mentioned that "this opened passage of the church, connected with three wide arches, doesn’t oblige beholder on the focusing or activating of mind’s eye." Vojislav Korać and Marica Šuput noticed that significant label of the architecture is tall belfry in the middle of the facade and that architect created unique solution in the architecture of Late Byzantine world.

West facade wide 17 meters (fig.4) was constructed by protomagister Nicholas who used alternation of stone and brickwork in order to reach polychromatic effects. Although not consistently executed, most probably for the first time appeared in brickwork in Ljeviška church. In visual focus of the facade it is possible to differentiate two zones, while third organic component of the facade represents tower in the middle. First zone possess dominant motif of triumphal arch (fig.5) while at the edges of the facade are two symmetrical pilasters which serve to stress visually contours of wide portal in the center. Tripartite division is employed with the central arch taller than the flanking ones. Structural clarity noticeable on this

9 Ibid, 99.
10 Ibid, 146.
façade is not merely decorative but the expression of highly symbolic values lies behind the articulation and precisely said economy of the façade.\textsuperscript{16} 

In creating of new architectural forms, Palaeologan builders largely relied on the method of compilation of components.\textsuperscript{17} That is raison d’être of west façade of Ljeviška as true expression of new understanding of the space in Byzantine architecture and why architect constructed west pair of domes closer to the central dome and thus moved visual focus which resembles on intentionally spoiled symmetry and moving of domes in Christ the Chora church in Constantinople (fig. 6).\textsuperscript{18} 

It is not accidentally that King Milutin restored the old bishopric church in Prizren due to the fact that it represents with its solid tower as the symbol of the pillar of Christianity and all his military achievements until 1299th. In the same time, it is possible to discuss about visual appropriation between Ljeviška and the Constantinopolitan church of the Chora (Kariye Camii), the most celebrated monument of the second decade of the fourteenth century, if not the entire Palaeologan period.\textsuperscript{19} Hagia Sophia may have also included the belfry that once stood on axis between the second and third buttresses of the west façade (fig. 7), and in any case the constructions at Hagia Sophia would have been more significant visually and politically than the renovation of the Chora which happened after renovation of Ljeviška.\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{19} R.G. Ousterhout, The Architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul, 102, 107, 108.

It is worth of mentioning that triumphal arch on the façade (fig. 8) and solid, massive tower in the middle emblematize another one King Milutin’s ideological statement.\(^{21}\) Such architectural reading and concept with three axis: horizontal triumphal arch, vertical dominant belfry tower, Symeon Nemanja “below” (fig.9) as legitimate link in between epitomize “adventus regnans” of King Milutin, his legitimate rule.\(^{22}\) Ljeviška church contemporary with the Chora preserved potent symbols of the power, and it is for this reason, it may be concluded, that it was given greater emphasis in the political history of King Milutin.\(^{23}\) King Milutin followed Nemanjić’s tradition although the model of the church in his hands is left out from the ktenorial composition (fig.10).\(^{24}\) Visually and politically for King Milutin the closest parallel was depiction which today is not preserved, but it is mentioned in a poem of Maximos Planoudes. Planoudes describes a now lost representation of Christ, Mary, Andronikos II, his son Michael IX and two saints over the entrance to a monastery.\(^{25}\) Those imperial pretensions further manifest themselves in the associations between the imperial mosaics which today do

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\(^{21}\) С. Марјановић Душанић, Владарска идеологија Немањића, Београд 1997, 109, 130, 249.


\(^{23}\) В. Станковић, Краљ Милутин (1282 – 1321), 140 – 142.

\(^{24}\) Д. Панић – Г. Бабић, Богородица Љевишица, 58 – 64.

\(^{25}\) C. Wendel, Planudea, BZ 40 (1940), 427.
not exist, Ljeviška church and the royal imagery of Constantinople. Lineage of the Holy Nemanjić dynasty, their God blessed continuity is shown in Ljeviška church in by complex network of interactions between architecture and fresco programme. Symeon Nemanja, depicted as the monk in the gesture quite similar to Symeon Stylites, is depicted with raised hands. Having in mind that stylites and their iconography is connected with pillars, it is easy to establish link between Symeon Nemanja as the pillar of Nemanjić dynasty, pillar of true faith and pillar of the church additionally mentioned in two inscriptions in the church.

King Milutin is mentioned in the inscription executed in brick on the east façade as great-grandson of Nemanja, as follows:

“I Stefan Uroš King in Christ God Faithful King of Serbia and Pomorje, great grandson of Saint Simeon Nemanja, and son in law of the Greek Emperor, Lord Andronikos Palaiologos, have renewed the church of the Holy Mother of God Ljeviška from the very foundations”. Intention of his portrait and juxtaposition with other portraits fits also with the iconography of the tower bell and intention of representing of Milutin as the one and only King of Serbia, son in law of Andronicus II Palaiologus.

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Third important part of the interpretation of the façade is the floor of exonarthex, precisely said dedication of the parecclesions to St. George and St. Demetrios. That is architectural transposition of prominent exponents of the ecclesia militans.30

King Milutin as ruler of Serbia is defender of faith also militarily. St. George and St. Demetrius are intermediaries between God and the King, by their help Milutin’s conquests were achieved. Triumphal character of the façade, old and new themes in the poetic way is stressed with the impressive entrance in the church.

Triumphal gateway retained royal aura translated into the tower façade, acquiring the symbolism of the gate of Heaven.31 Façade is threshold leading from the terrestrial life to the eternity beyond, to enter this higher realm one passed through the west portal where is depicted Christ true Door (fig.11).32


Such an understanding of the wall filled with triumphal arch and iconography of the structural units of the church presupposes seeing the church from an eschatological perspective. From the perspective of faith, the church is understood as a sign and an anticipation of that fellowship between God and humans which will be brought about by the forthcoming Kingdom of God.