
Vladimir Božinović
(Faculty of literature, Istanbul university)

**PALMETTE IN THE OUTLINE OF THE HEART IN
SCULPTURAL DECORATION OF LAZARICA AND
RAVANICA: HYPOTHESIS ABOUT ORIGIN AND
SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS MOTIF ¹**

In repertoire of Morava sculpture beside complex interlace and geometrical patterns, vegetative and zoomorphic presentations there are various depictions of palmettes. They are represented on portals, windows, arches, capitals and also on rose windows. However, I think that one motif of palmette here should be segregated from the others – the heart shaped palmette with leaf volutes on its peak or bottom. It has been one of the most frequently depicted vegetative ornaments on frescoes of medieval Serbian churches from late 12th to early 14th century.² This tradition continues in the second half of the 14th century through Morava sculpture.

Heart shaped palmette is presented on the arch of west and south portal of church of St. Nicholas or Veluče (fig. 1) from late 7th early 8th decade of 14th century and on one of the window frames on exonarthex of Hilandar katholikon.³ However, in the case of Lazarica and Ravanica this ornament appears in a greater extent as part of architectural sculpture. On the church of St. Stephan or Lazarica (ca. 1377/78-80) motif is depicted on the arch above west portal and

¹ I would like to thank Nicholas Melvani, Adrian Saunders and Ana Milojević for their help and advices on this topic.

² Motif has been popular in fresco painting not just in Serbia but also in general in the art of Byzantine cultural sphere. For various types of this motif on frescoes see D. Milovanović, *Osvežavanje memorije: Ornamenti srpskih srednjovekovnih fresaka*, Beograd 2013, 151, 260, 270, 278, 292, 300; Z. Janc, *Ornamenti fresaka iz Srbije i Makedonije od XII do sredine XV veka*, Beograd 1961, figs. 71, 142, 144, 182, 185, 199-202, 237, 240, 255, 258, 287, 292, 297, 298, 305, 302, 308, 310, 316-322, 326, 341-343, 480.

³ According to Slobodan Ćurčić exonarthex of Hilandar was built by emperor Stefan Dušan around the middle of the 14th century and not by prince Lazar as it was stated in previous researches. Ćurčić argues that all slabs and window frames which are enclosing originally open structure of exonarthex represent later addition and fabrication. In that case, these slabs and window frames were probably brought to Hilandar from some other church built by prince Lazar. S. Ćurčić, *The exonarthex of Hilandar. The Question of its Function and Patronage*, Huit siècles du monastère de Hilandar, ed, V. Korać, (Belgrade 2001), 477-487.



Fig. 1 Veluče, church of St. Nicholas, arch above west portal, photo S. Petrović

Сл. 1 Велуће, црква св. Николе, лук изнад западног портала, фото С. Петровић



Fig. 2 Lazarica, church of St. Stephan, cubical capitals on choir apse, photo S. Petrović

Сл. 2 Лазарица, црква св. Стефана, кубични капители на певницама, фото С. Петровић



Fig. 3 Ravanica, church of Ascension, trifora window on west façade, photo author

Сл. 3 Раваница, црква Вознесења, трифора на западној фасади, фото аутор

on cubical capitals on choir and altar apse (fig. 2). On the church of Ascension or Ravanica (ca. 1376-85) heart shaped palmette is beside consoles and cubical capitals on choir and altar apse also decorating lunettes of the windows (fig. 3). At first glance it may seem that it represents just a part of larger context of foliate decoration on church facades. Taking in consideration how often and in many different shapes heart shaped palmette has been depicted on Ravanica, a mausoleum of prince Lazar, one can wonder if there is a more straightforward symbolic of this ornament. In order to question potential meaning of motif, firstly we have to question its origins.

As mentioned by Carl Sheppard Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya müzesi) is a treasure house of ornaments and while art historians often look back to its decoration, they are usually confronted with problems of dating certain elements. In Hagia Sophia heart shaped palmettes are depicted on casings of wooden tie-beams on gallery above narthex (fig. 4). Radiocarbon analysis was performed on tie beams which were dated in 5- 6th century and probably they are part of original justinianic structure.⁴ However, wooden casings were dated in the 9th cen-

⁴ C. D. Sheppard, *A Radiocarbon Date for the Wooden Tie Beams in the West Gallery of St. Sophia, Istanbul*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 19, (Washington 1965), 238.

ture.⁵ Even though this wooden beams are of later date, in Hagia Sophia we may notice some elements of original decoration which are not so dissimilar. There are two examples of heart shaped motif connected into frieze made in opus sectile technique. One of them is in the upper zone, above arcades of north and south gallery. The other is in the lower zone in north and south nave beneath the marble cornice (fig. 5). Analogous motif appears between arcades of the north and south gallery. Influence of Sassanian and Early Islamic art on decoration of



Fig. 4 Hagia Sophia, wooden casings of tie-beams on gallery above narthex, photo author

Сл. 4 Св. Софија, дрвени покривачи затезних греда на галерији изнад нартекса, фото аутор

Hagia Sophia was mentioned by previous researches. They have noticed similarities with motifs depicted on bronze coverings of tie beams in Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem from the end of the 7th century.⁶ Keeping in mind analogues in iconography between 6th and 9th century decorative elements in Ayasofya, it seems that 9th century ornaments didn't represent new or imported (Sassanian or Umayyad) phenomenon but a repetition of already existed 6th century motifs in Byzantine art. Evidence for this theory is decoration of fragments of architectural sculpture which belonged to church of Hagios Polyeuktos. If Sassanian motifs were firstly adopted in Byzantine art in decoration of church of Hagios Polyeuktos, this church may have been a role model not just for architectural concept of Justinian's Hagia Sophia, but perhaps also for its interior decoration.

Similar was stated by Carl Sheppard in his work about decoration of Byzantine marble slabs. A slab which was brought to Archaeological museum in Istanbul from Arap camii (church of St. Paul) in Galata was dated by Sheppard in late 10th - early 11th century.⁷ A heart shaped palmette in the center field of the slab was described as part of foliate style in Mid-Byzantine art (fig. 6). After discovery of sculpture which belonged to the church of Hagios Polyeuktos and by comparison with sculptural decoration in Fenari Isa camii (Constantine Lips monastery) from 10th century, researchers have stated that application of Sassanian ornaments in Mid-Byzantine art represents revival of 6th century art and not direct influences from Islamic art.⁸

In Constantinople during Mid-Byzantine period motif of heart shaped palmette represents a part of decoration in imperial foundations. Until today fragment of frieze depicting this motif remained incorporated in the wall of the

⁵ ibidem.

⁶ M. S. Dimand, *Studies in Islamic Ornament: I. Some Aspects of Omayyad and Early Abbasid Ornament*, *Ars Islamica*, Vol. 4, (Washington 1937), 294; Sheppard, *A Radio-carbon Date*, 238-240.

⁷ C. D. Sheppard, *Byzantine Carved Marble Slabs*, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (New York 1969), 71.

⁸ A. Grabar, *Sculptures Byzantines de Constantinople IVe-Xe siècle*, Paris 1963, 121-122; Sheppard, *Byzantine Carved Marble Slabs*, 69-70.



Fig. 5 Hagia Sophia, opus sectile frieze in side naves of the church, photo author

Сл. 5 Св. Софија, опус сектиле фриз у бочним бродовима цркве, фото аутор



Fig. 6 Marble slab from Arap camii in Archaeological museum in Istanbul, photo author

Сл. 6 Мермерна плоча из Арап цамије у Археолошком музеју у Истанбулу, фото аутор

platform of Gül camii (church of St. Theodosia or Christ Euergetis) (fig. 7). In Kalenderhane camii (church of Virgin Kyriotissa) similar motif was represented on monumental marble icon frames flanking the apse.

During this period a heart shaped palmette was also depicted in other media than sculpture. On 12th century mosaic on gallery of Hagia Sophia empress Irene of Hungary, wife of emperor John II Komnenos, is wearing lavishly decorated loros with heart shaped ornaments enclosing split palmette (fig. 8). In the monastery complex of Pantocrator or Zeyrek camii, which was founded by the same royal couple, heart shaped palmette was represented as part of rich decoration of stained glass window on the apse of the south church.⁹

Very interesting example of application of this motif as part of Byzantine visual propaganda and imperial iconography is visible on manuscript portrait of Michael VII Doukas with his court officials from the end of 11th century (fig. 9).¹⁰ Emperor is wearing chlamys on which heart shaped palmettes are inscribed inside of the larger inverted heart fields. He is sitting on a throne which armrests

and suppedion are decorated with this motif. Here we are dealing with complex semiotics of decoration of imperial insignia as well as garments of the officials. Monica White stated that inverted heart motif, depicted on chlamys of the emperor and one of his courtiers, has been overlooked iconographic element by previous researches. According to White, this motif played important role in visual construction of imperial power and establishment of relationship between earthly court and his heavenly counterpart.¹¹ Branislav Cvetković also

⁹ These fragments are today in Archaeological museum in Istanbul. Reconstruction was presented by Arthur Megaw. A. H. S. Megaw, *Notes on Recent Work of the Byzantine Institute in Istanbul*, Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Vol. 17, (Washington 1963), 333-371, figs. F, G, H, I, J, K, L.

¹⁰ Originally this portrait was made for Michael VII Doukas. Later it was changed in presentation of his successor Nikephoros III Botaneiates. H. Maguire, *The Heavenly Court*, Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204, ed. H. Maguire, (Washington 1997), 249.

¹¹ M. White, *Byzantine Visual Propaganda and the Inverted Heart Motif*, Byzantion 76, (2006), 330-363.

argued that depiction of chlamys on royal portraits becomes an important attribute in cases when patron has a desire to present relation among two courts.¹² This important concept of Byzantine visual propaganda was maybe related with depiction of specific iconographic elements. Like inverted heart motif, in some cases, a motif of heart shaped palmette may have had a similar meaning. Application of these ornaments may have been connected with representation of imperial majesty and authority of high aristocracy. In the church of the Holy Saviour in Chora or Kariye camii on arches of the vaults of exonarthex there are figures of martyrs wearing court garments. One of the figures is wearing a mantle decorated with lattice square motif which according to Robert Ousterhout presents a symbol of imperial iconography.¹³ However, another also unidentified figure is wearing a mantle with heart shaped palmettes. Similar, heart shaped palmettes are depicted on garments of two rulers from Nemanjić dynasty in Gračanica.¹⁴

In the case of Virgin Pammakaristos of Fethiye camii in the chapel of Michael Glabas, from the beginning of the 14th century, we have champlévé frieze of heart shaped split palmettes interrupted with medallions of rampant lions. Presented lions were interpreted as potential family emblems by Cyril Mango and Nicholas Melvani.¹⁵ These medallions are also emphasized by central position and inlaid with red substance. Among depictions of birds in heart shaped frames, reserved in general for palmettes, there is also representation of lion passant (fig. 10). This interesting synthesis of decorative elements in parekklesion may give us as Mango states some idea of aggressively aristocratic tone that this monastery has conveyed during Palaeologan period.¹⁶



Fig. 7 Fragment of frieze incorporated in the wall of the platform of Gül camii, photo author

Сл. 7 Фрагмент фриза уграђен у зид платформе Гул џамије, фото аутор



Fig. 8 Hagia Sophia, empress Irene of Hungary, mosaic detail, photo author

Сл. 8 Св. Софија, царица Ирина Угарска, детаљ мозаика, фото аутор

¹² B. Cvetković, *Plašt srpskih despota u 15. veku. Prilog proučavanju*, Vizantijski svet na Balkanu 2, (Beograd 2012), 551-562.

¹³ R. Ousterhout, *Emblems of Power in Palaiologan Constantinople*, *The Byzantine Court: Source of Power and Culture*, Proceedings of Second Sevgi Gönül symposium, (Istanbul 2010), 93-97.

¹⁴ Milovanović, op.cit., 278, figs. 23, 24.

¹⁵ H. Belting, C. Mango, D. Mouriki, *The mosaics and frescoes of St. Mary Pammakaristos (Fethiye camii) at Istanbul*, Washington 1978, 21-22; Nicholas Melvani, *Late Byzantine sculpture*, Turnhout 2013, 23.

¹⁶ Belting, Mango, Mouriki, op.cit.



Fig. 9 Michael VII Doukas, Coislin 79. folio 2r, detail, National library of France, source Gallica

Сл. 9 Михаило VII Дука, Coislin 79. folio 2r, детаљ, Национална библиотека Француске, извор Gallica

As mentioned, in medieval Serbia motif of heart shaped palmette was depicted in Serbian art from 12th century and was especially popular as part of fresco decoration. In the so called Raška sculpture this ornament appears on many monuments from Studenica, Banjska, Dečani to Holly Archangels near Prizren. Amongre maining parts of sculpture from church of St. Stephan or Banjska, mausoleum of king Milutin, there is a fragment with split palmette which resembles a console in Ravanica. In a search for analogies of Ravanica sculpture special contribution was given by Branislav Vulović who recognized the same ornament on marble slab from early Christian basilica in Ancient Corinth, capital of exonarthex in church of St. Sophia in Ohrid and on the door of mausoleum of Bohemond I of Antioch in Canosa di Puglia in Italy.¹⁷ On the other hand, Vulović has overlooked decoration of capitals and iconostasis in the church of the Virgin in Hosios Loukas in Fokida.¹⁸ These examples testify about popularity of the motif outside of the capital and borders of Byzantine empire. Therefore, we can't state that heart shaped palmette was adopted in Serbian art by direct influence from Constantinople. Still, extent application of this ornament in sculpture on church facades is certainly an innovation in connection to Byzantine concept of depiction of earthly church as Heavenly Jerusalem, as pointed out by Jelena Trkulja and Ivan Stevović.¹⁹

Relation between earthly and heavenly realm in the context of roman imperial iconography and concept of divine kingship during early Christian period was well studied by Thomas Mathews. Mathews uses term Emperor Mystique to describe a metaphors of ceremonial drama where, for example, presence of ruler on liturgy in the church was interpreted as presence of heavenly king in

¹⁷ B. Vulović, *Ravanica: njeno mesto i njena uloga u sakralnoj arhitekturi Pomoravlja*, Saopštenja VII, (Beograd 1966), 90-121.

¹⁸ A. Grabar, *Sculpture byzantines du Moyen Age II (XIe-XIVe siecle)*, Paris 1976, pl. XX.

¹⁹ J. Trkulja, *Aesthetics and Symbolism of Late Byzantine Church Facades 1204-1453*, (unpublished PHD thesis at Princeton University), Princeton 2004.; I. Stevović, *Late Byzantine Church Decoration as an Iconic Vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem: The Case of Kalenić*, New Jerusalem. Hierotopy and Iconography of Sacred Space, ed. A. Lidov, (Moscow 2009), 585-606.



Fig. 10 Virgin Pammakaristos, chapel of Michael Glabas, champlévé frieze, photo author
Сл. 10 Богородица Памакаристос, параклис Михаила Главаса, champlévé фриз, фото аутор

heavenly court.²⁰ Also, church building was modeled as an image of the imperial court in connection to the term of basilica which means a royal hall.²¹ Concept of Emperor Mystique remains part of church decoration during mid and late byzantine period in the form of presentation of Christ Pantocrator in the dome. Image of Pantocrator was a symbol of universal domination, formerly by the emperor and then by Christ.²² Idea of heavenly court, its presentation in Byzantine art and manifestations on imperial iconography was further discussed by Henry Maguire.²³ Maguire makes relations between visual culture and literally sources and explains how, for Byzantines, concepts of earthly and heavenly court were not mirroring each other as separate phenomena.²⁴ On the contrary, they were constantly overlapping and interacting.

According to Svetozar Radojčić crucial turning point for visual presentation of heaven in Serbian medieval art starts around the middle of the 14th century during reign of emperor Dušan.²⁵ In Treskavac monastery Jesus was presented as an emperor, Virgin Mary as empress and angels as court officials.²⁶ Radojčić argues that nobles and aristocrats who belonged to the court of emperor Dušan started to project their own appearance to heaven and vice versa.²⁷ Coming from this surroundings, prince Lazar insisted that organization of the

²⁰ T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Princeton 1999, 15.

²¹ *ibidem*.

²² *ibidem*, 16.

²³ Maguire, *op. cit.*, 247-258.

²⁴ *ibidem*.

²⁵ S. Radojčić, *Ideja o savršenom gradu u državi kneza Lazara i despota Stefana Lazarevića*, Zograf 32, (Beograd 2008), 5-12.

²⁶ Same iconographic solution was noticed by Henry Maguire in the church of Hagios Athanasios tou Mouzaki at Kastoria from 1384/5. Maguire states that this kind of depiction of heavenly court developed outside of the capital and borders of the Byzantine empire in the period when emperors in Constantinople became weak and powerless. During 14th century when a Byzantine ruler had no important role in the heavenly court it was possible to clothe Christ himself in imperial costume. Maguire, *op. cit.*, 257-258.

²⁷ Radojčić, *op. cit.*, 9.

court should resemble hierarchy on heaven and that court officials should build endowments as an image of Heavenly Jerusalem.²⁸ This leads toward hypothesis that prince Lazar has built and decorated his two endowments Lazarica and Ravanica as an image of heavenly court, a concept of Byzantine imperial propaganda. Keeping in mind great political ambitions of prince Lazar, we can assume that usage of ornament such as heart shaped palmette on his endowments didn't represent a motif of random selection. Moreover, Late Byzantine patrons and especially aristocrats viewed sculpture as powerful media which helped them to express their wealth and dynastic ideology.²⁹ As in the case of inverted heart motif, this may have been another overlooked iconographic element in Byzantine art which marked the one who were chosen and established the connection between earthly and heavenly court.

Владимир Божиновић

(Факултет за књижевност, Истанбулски универзитет)

ПАЛМЕТА У КОНТУРИ СРЦА У СКУЛПТОРАЛНОЈ ДЕКОРАЦИЈИ ЛАЗАРИЦЕ
И РАВАНИЦЕ: ХИПОТЕЗА О ПОРЕКЛУ МОТИВА И ЊЕГОВОЈ СИМБОЛИЦИ

Мотив палмете у контури срца често је представљан у византијској уметности. Као индивидуални мотив или у саставу фриза био је саставни део деографије цркава у Цариграду. Ране представе овог мотива могу се наћи у програму орнаментике св. Софије, тачније на затезним гредима галерије нартекса. Током средњевизантијског периода мотив је представљан у скулптури, мозаику, фреско-техници и витражу. Крајем 12. века мотив палмете у разлисталој контури срца заступљен је и у уметности средњовековне Србије. У другој половини 14. века чини саставни део програма скулпторалне декорације цркава Поморавља што се посебно уочава на примеру Лазарице и Раванице. Овај облик палмете приказан је на кубичним капителима који подржавају слепе аркаде на певницама и олтарској апсиди Лазарице. Исти мотив краси лук западног портала Лазарице и Велућа. У скулпторалној декорацији Раванице палмета у разлисталој контури срца представљена је у различитим варијацијама на кубичним капителима и конзолама које подржавају слепе аркаде на певницама и апсиди, али исто тако чини и доминантни орнамент у лунетама прозора.

У овом раду се, поред расправе о пореклу мотива, предлаже хипотеза да се о његовој симболици може расправљати како у теолошкомком тексту, тако и у контексту владарске пропаганде.

У претходним истраживањима указано је да је вегетативна декорација у илуминираним рукописима и на фасадама позно византијских цркава могла да персонификује идеју Рајског врта.

На основу сачуваних примера из Цариграда стиче се утисак да је мотив палмете у контури срца уживао посебну популарност у саставу програма декорације задужбина владара и високе аристократије и да је временом могао бити усвојен као један од симбола високог друштва.

²⁸ *ibidem*.

²⁹ Melvani, *op. cit.*, 25.