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STAGING IMPERIAL ASPIRATIONS: SPOLIA AT LJUBOTEN AND THE SYMBOLIC ROLE OF ANTIQUITY*

Abstract: This study examines the deliberate placement of spolia and the fresco of King Stefan Dušan within St. Nicholas Church at Ljuboten (present-day North Macedonia). It argues that this visual strategy aimed to showcase Dušan's authority and his ambition to claim the legacy of the Byzantine Empire as a successor to the Roman Empire. The deliberate juxtaposition of spolia with Dušan's monumental portrait suggests an intentional evocation of *Translatio Imperii*, legitimizing his rule and associating him with the prestige of the past. The analysis connects architectural elements, the ruler's portrait, and inscriptions of the west portal to illuminate the power dynamics within the Serbian nobility and Dušan's aspirations for imperial dominance.

Keywords: Spolia, King Stefan Dušan, St. Nicholas Church at Ljuboten, *Translatio Imperii*, visual strategy, imperial identity, staging the ruler

The strategic placement of spolia in Byzantine architecture offers a lens into the staging of imperial power and authority. Yet, the connection between spolia placement and the frescoes within a church, particularly the ruler's portrait, remains largely overlooked. This connection is evident in the case of St. Nicholas Church in Ljuboten (present-day North Macedonia; fig.1). Built during the reign of King Stefan Dušan (r. 1331-1346 as King, 1346-1355 as Emperor / in Slavic "Tzar"), the church's ktetorial inscription dates its completion between September 1, 1336, and August 31, 1337 (fig. 2).

Here, a fresco depicting King Stefan Dušan adorns the interior north wall (fig.3). Significantly, on the exterior of the north wall, in the exact location corresponding to the fresco, spolia is embedded in the stonework, although in a considerably weathered state (fig.4). Examining the deliberate interplay between the fresco of Stefan Dušan and the exterior spolia reveals a visual strategy designed to showcase his authority and imperial ambitions.¹ However, to fully

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¹ S. Marjanović-Dušanić, D. Vojvodić, "The Model of Empire – the Idea and Image



Fig.1. St. Nicholas church, Ljuboten, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.1. Црква Светог Николе у Љуботену, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

grasp the significance of this connection, let's begin by examining the church's foundation. As established by the ktetorial inscription above the west portal, the church was founded by Lady Danica and her sons.² On the inner side of the lintel, precisely aligned with the inscription's mention of the city of "Zvečan" is a cross-like monogram of Dmítar (fig.5).³

Standing in front of the west portal, viewers first encounter spolia just outside the entrance. Moving beyond the threshold, the monogram of Dmítar

of Authority in Serbia (1299– 1371)," *Byzantine Heritage and Serbian Art II: Sacral Art of the Serbian lands in the Middle Ages*, eds. D. Vojvodić, D. Popović, Belgrade 2016, 299–315.

² "This divine temple of Saint Nicholas, the great father, was built with the effort and toil of Lady Danica during the days of King Stefan Dušan. Elder son Bojko held Matka, while the other son held Zvečan and Sitnica. The year is 6845". Lady Danica, mother of the influential commander of Zvečan and Sitnica, is considered to have held authority over the Skopska Crna Gora district. Ж. Татић, „Архитектонски споменици у Скопској Црној Гори. II Љуботен", *Гласник Скопског научног друштва II* (1927), 93-108; В. Кораћ, *Споменици монументалне српске архитектуре XIV века у Повардарју*, Београд 2003, 109.

³ И. М. Ђорђевић, „Монограм Дмита у Љуботену", *Лесковачки зборник XXXV* (1995), 5–10.

aligns diagonally with a striking interior view. From this vantage point, the observer can simultaneously see the fresco of Stefan Dušan as a young king on the northern wall of the church, with spolia positioned directly across from it on the exterior wall. This deliberate visual connection, underscored by the strategic spolia placement, suggests both a strong relationship between Dmitar, and the word “Zvečan” which denotes the city he governed, and the royal figure within the church, as well as a powerful reminder of the continuity between the Roman past and the Serbian kingdom. This visual alignment deliberately constructs a narrative about Dušan’s legitimate rule and his connection to the legacy of antiquity.

The church was described the church as a cross-in-square plan with a central dome. The rectangular foundation aligns on a west-east axis, with the altar apse extending eastward. Four stone columns meticulously crafted from cut and polished limestone support the dome and its substructure. The primary entrance is located on the west side although there was also an entrance on the southern side. Windows placed in the dome’s drum, the apse, and the side walls illuminate the interior in a traditional rhythm. Frescoes originally covered the entirety of the walls. The facade features three decorative arches, visually reflecting the internal spatial division. On the north facade, the base consists of well-dressed sandstone blocks. This foundation is topped by alternating courses of brick and stone. The partially rebuilt southern facade echoes the overall form of the northern side. These grand central and side arches dominate the composition, creating a sense of monumentality.⁴

Of particular significance is already mentioned spolia placed in the central part of the northern wall, aligned with the interior fresco of King Dušan. A second spolia is notably situated in front of the entrance, further contributing to this visual connection with antiquity (fig.6). This deliberate placement suggests an intentional connection between the ruler’s portrait and the symbols of the former cult site. The spolia’s likely origin from an earlier church on the same site strengthens this connection.⁵ By incorporating these material fragments of the past, the builders may have sought to emphasize continuity with the Roman legacy, underscoring the Serbian Kingdom’s claim to dominion. This conscious presentation of history through architectural elements contrib-

⁴ B. Кораћ, *Споменици монументалне српске архитектуре XIV века у Повардарју*, Београд 2003, 109.

⁵ Generally for usage of antique spolia cf. B. Brenk, “Spolia from Constantine to Charlemagne: Aesthetics versus Ideology”, *DOP* 41 (1987), 103–109; H. G. Saradi Mandelovici, “Christian Attitudes toward Pagan Monuments on Late Antiquity and Their Legacy in Later Byzantine Churches”, *DOP* 44 (1990), 47–61; H. G. Saradi, “The Use of Ancient Spolia in Byzantine Monuments: The Archaeological and Literary Evidence”, *IJCT* 3 (1997), 395–423; J. Elsner, “From the Culture of Spolia to the Cult of Relics: The Arch of Constantine and the Genesis of Late Antique Forms”, *PBSR* 68 (2000), 149–184; M. Greenhalgh, *Marble Past, monumental present: Building with Antiquities in the Medieval Mediterranean*, Brill, Leiden 2009; P. Magdalino, “A Meditation on the Culture of Spolia”, *Spolia Reincarnated: Afterlife of Objects, Materials and Spaces in Anatolia from Antiquity to the Ottoman Era*, ed. I. Jevtić, S. Yalman, Koc University, Istanbul 2018, 141–147; I. Nilsson, “Imitation as Spoliation, Reception as Translation. The Art of Transforming Things in Byzantium”, *Convivium. Supplementum* 7, ed. I. Jevtić, I. Nilsson Brno 2021, 20–37.



Fig.2. Part of the ktetorial inscription on the architrave of the west portal, St. Nicholas church, Ljuboten, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.2. Део ктиторског натписа на архитраву западног портала, црква Св. Николе, Љуботен, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

utes to the church's overall visual strategy of solidifying Dušan's authority and imperial ambitions. Next to King Dušan, Queen Helen Nemanjić Asen and their son Uroš V are depicted (fig.7, 7a).⁶ Interestingly, this fresco marks one of the earliest depictions of King Dušan within a abbreviated Deesis composition, as Saint John the Baptist and Christ are painted next to the young Uroš V.⁷

⁶ В. Р. Петковић, „Живопис цркве у Љуботену”, *Гласник Скопског научног друштва II* (1927) сл.3, 113, 114; С. Радојчић, *Портрети српских владара у средњем веку*, Скопље 1934, 56; В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, Београд 1974, 613; Расолкоска–Николовска, „О владарским портретима у Љуботену и времену настанка зидне декорације”, *Зограф 17* (1986), 45–53 [eadem, *Средновековна уметност на Македонија*, Скопје 2004, 225–244]; С. Коруневски, Е. Димитрова, *Византиска Македонија*, Скопје 2006, 181–182.

⁷ The placement of King Dušan and Queen Helen flanking Christ can be interpreted as a visual representation of their earthly authority mirrored in the heavenly realm. Though the Virgin is absent, the presence of Christ and St. John the Baptist, along with the Deesis composition's inherent meaning, underscores the King and Queen's role as divinely sanctioned rulers. As V. J. Ćurić previously noted, the painter “in Deesis depicts members of the imperial family as Christ blesses them with his raised right hand. This illustration is actually of the everyday prayer of medieval man to Christ to be merciful at the Last Judgment - and Deesis is its abbreviated representation. At about that time, painters of the West and East introduced rulers and donors into the same relationship in paintings of the Last Judgment.” B.



Fig.3. Portrait of the King Stefan Dušan, north wall, zone of the standing figures, St. Nicholas church, Ljuboten, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл. 3 Портрет краља Стефана Душана, северни зид, зона стојећих фигура, црква Св. Николе, Љуботен, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

While the deciphered monogram of Dmítar on the church's exterior offers a crucial piece of the puzzle, a closer examination of its placement alongside the hidden ktetorial inscription reveals a fascinating interplay between public declaration and private devotion. Commissioned by Lady Danica for the salvation of her son, the inscription tucked away within the church's portal speaks to a more personal expression of loyalty. This act of private piety, though undoubtedly sincere, could not carry the same weight of public endorsement as Dmítar's prominently displayed monogram.

The complex power struggle between King Stefan Dečanski and his son Dušan played a significant role in the construction of the church. Dečanski ended his life in Zvečan in the autumn of 1331 after a series of conflicts with Dušan. The tensions culminated with Dušan's coronation as King in September 1331, shortly after Dečanski's capture and imprisonment, leading to his death in November of the same year. Interestingly, the Byzantine chronicler Nicephorus Gregoras attributes responsibility for Dečanski's death to the Serbian nobility.

J. Ћурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, Београд 1975, 61. The placement of Deesis reinforces Christ's role as the ultimate source of Salvation. By omitting the Virgin Mary in the Deesis composition, the focus might shift entirely to Christ's power to grant salvation upon the prayers of the depicted figures.



Fig.4. Spolia inserted at the lower register of the north wall, St. Nicholas Church, Ljuboten, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.4. Сполија уграђена у доњи регистар северног зида, црква Св. Николе, Љуботен, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.5. Cross-like monogram Dmitar, carved on the lower part of the architrave, St. Nicholas Church, Ljuboten, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.5. Крстолики монограм Дмитар, урезан на доњој страни архитрава, црква Св. Николе, Љуботен, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.6. Spolia in front of the west entrance, St. Nicholas Church, Ljuboten, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.6. Сполија уграђена испред западног портала, црква Св. Николе, Љуботен, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

Gregoras states that “His son was driven by fear and suspicion, likely sown by his peers into his troubled soul, so that he eventually rebelled and rose against his father”.⁸ This account suggests that the nobles, and perhaps Dmitar among them, played a role in instigating Dušan’s rebellion.⁹

Dmitar’s monogram, positioned directly across from the fresco of King Dušan, transcends mere decoration. It functions as a powerful visual statement, a public declaration of allegiance visible to all who enter the church. This strategic placement creates a visual axis that links Dmitar, the word “Zvečan” and the newly crowned King Dušan. In a period marked by political turmoil and the violent overthrow of a king by his son, such a public display of loyalty served a critical purpose. It bolstered Dušan’s legitimacy and authority, particularly in the wake of a controversial succession.¹⁰

The monogram Dmitar in Ljuboten embodies a powerful symbol of the power struggles within the Serbian nobility – those who sided with King Stefan Dečanski versus those supporting the young Dušan. The analysis of the

⁸ S. Marjanović-Dušanić, *The Holy King. The cult of St. Stefan of Dečani*, Belgrade, 2007; Eadem, “La mort et la sainteté du prince serbe,” *La mort du prince de l’Antiquité à nos jours*, eds. J. Foa [et al.], Presses universitaires de Provence Aix-en-Provence, 2016, 61–78.

⁹ Г. Томовић, *Морфологија ћирилских натписа на Балкану*, Београд 1974, 56, fig. 36.

¹⁰ И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, Београд 1995, 145–147; idem, „Монограм Дмитар у Љуботену”, *Лесковачки зборник XXXV* (1995), 5–10.



Fig.7, 7a, 7б. Queen Helen Nemanjić Asen and Uroš V (on the right side), north wall, zone of the standing figures, St. Nicholas church, Ljuboten, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.7, 7а, 7б. Краљица Јелена Немањић Асен и Урош V (десно) северни зид, зона стојећих фигура, црква Св. Николе, Љуботен, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



inscription and the monogram of Dmítar reveals the complex interplay of text, image, and devotion within the context of high Byzantine culture. The inscription's meticulous carving contrasts with the carved monogram (fig.8, 8a), hinting at different creation dates and the possibility of the architrave being actually inserted spolia. The complex monogram of nobleman Dmítar teases with the promise of a name, yet re-

mains visually captivating even to those who cannot decipher it.

The spolia, after being polished and prepared for insertion, were likely adapted to fit the purpose of the architrave beam. The cross-like monogram, resembling the Greek letters ΔΜΤΡ (Δημητρίου), carved in a courtly manner, was then adjusted to be directly below the founder's inscription. The fact that it cannot be said in this case that the carving occurred simultaneously is indicated



Fig.8, 8a. View of the carved monogram and the executed inscription on the frontal side of the architrave, St. Nicholas church, Ljuboten, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.8, 8a. Поглед на урезани монограм и изведени натпис на чеоној страни архитрава, црква Св. Николе, Љуботен, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

by the different techniques used for the monogram and the founder's inscription; the former was created by removing stone mass, making it relief, while the latter was incised. The letter forms differ drastically between the monogram and the founder's inscription. The technical execution and paleography are precise indicators that the inscription was not executed by the same person and that they were not executed simultaneously.¹¹ Similar monograms have been found in Thessaloniki, and for the purpose of comparison (fig.8b), we mention here the monograms of the patron saint of Thessaloniki impressed in low relief on the body of clay or scratched through the coating slip of the vessels. Such monograms must have been associated with this saint's cult in the territory.¹²

¹¹ For the placement of the patron's name on the work of art and adaptations of the monograms and inscriptions cf. B. Hostetler, "Towards a Typology for the Placement of Names on Works of Art", *Inscribing Texts in Byzantium: Continuities and Transformations*, ed. M. Lauxtermann, I. Toth, Routledge, London 2020, 267–290.

¹² D. Papanikola Bakirtzis, "The Palaeologan Glazed Pottery of Thessaloniki", *L'art de Thessalonique et des pays balkaniques et les courants spirituels au XIVe siècle: recueil des rapports du IVe Colloque serbo-grec*, red. D. Davidov, Belgrade 1985 194–204. Also, it should be reminded that the facade of the church was originally covered with frescoes. On the northern half of the western façade, below the lintel, there was probably the image of St. Demetrios. There should be no doubt that the holy warrior from the northern niche found himself in such a prominent place because of the significance he had for the founder. Cf. M.

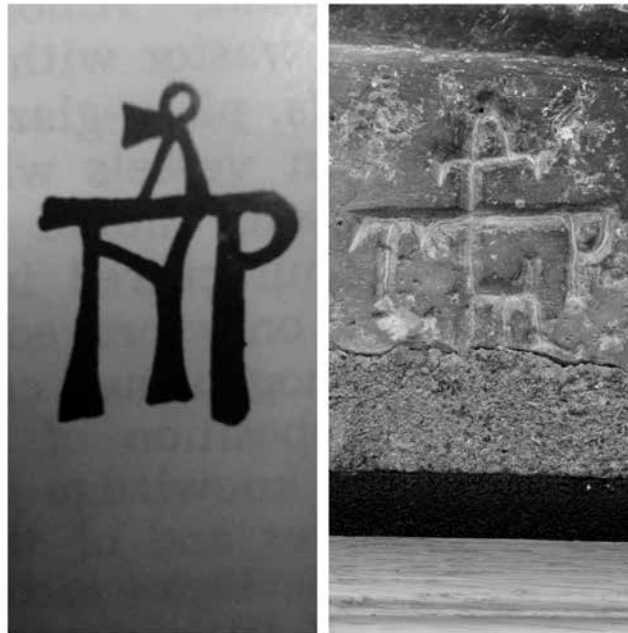


Fig.8b. ΔMTP monogram, left: Drawing of St. Demetrios monogram found on the vessel in the crypt in the St. Demetrios basilica in Thessaloniki (after Demetra Papanikola Bakirtzis). Right: Monogram at the architrave of west portal from Ljuboten, photo Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.86. ΔMTP монограм, лево: Цртеж монограма на посуди из крипте базилике Св. Димитрија у Солуну Солуна (по Деметра Папаникола Бакиртзис). Десно: монограм на архитраву западног портала из Љуботена, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

This reflects the Byzantine understanding of both the power of images and the symbolism of partially concealed text. The deliberate placement of inscription and monogram suggests a sophisticated design sensibility. By partially obscuring Lady Danica's son's name, the portal becomes a visual puzzle, inviting contemplation and underscoring the devotional act's connection to courtly culture. The incorporation of spolia further emphasizes this link, positioning the site within a broader Byzantine artistic tradition and referencing its legacy. Thus, Ljuboten's inscription, monogram, and spolia reflect not only the piety of Lady Danica and her son but also the intellectual and aesthetic sophistication of Constantinople. Through a clever interplay of word, image, and repurposed materials, the site becomes a testament to both devotion and the cultural richness of the Byzantine world.¹³

Радужко, "Живопис прочеља и линете јужног улаза Св. Николе у Љуботену", *Зограф* 32 (2008), 101–116, esp. 105.

¹³ For similar cases of intriguing monogram placements cf. A. Eastmond, "Monograms and the Art of Unhelpful Writing in Late Antiquity", *Sign and Design: Script as Image in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, eds. B. Miriam Bedos-Rezak, J.M. Hamburger, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington 2016, 219–235. The author expresses

The oversized portrayal of King Dušan on the northern wall, aligned directly with the exterior spolia, indicates the noble family's support for the young king's rise to power. Dušan's time in Constantinople during his formative years would have exposed him to the rich visual culture and the tradition of emperors utilizing monumental scale and visual symbols to project authority.¹⁴ This deliberate visual strategy in Ljuboten, coupled with Dušan's clear aspirations to become the Emperor of the Byzantine world, suggests that the spolia and the ruler's portrait intentionally link him to the legacy and legitimacy of the Roman Empire. This visual spectacle not only signals DMITAR's loyalty but also serves as a symbolic *rite of passage* for Dušan, marking his ascent to power and his ambition to reclaim a broader imperial legacy. As one passes through the doorway, they symbolically leave behind the past and enter a new phase of faith. The inscription above the portal reinforces this idea.¹⁵

King Stefan Dušan can be seen as another ruler who, emboldened by military successes against both the Byzantine Empire and other territories once under Roman dominion, adopted the title of autocrat of the medieval Romans (Romaioi).¹⁶ From Constantine the Great to the issuance of Dušan's Code, all rulers of the Byzantine Empire held the title of "previous Orthodox emperors," presenting themselves as successors to the Roman legacy and rivals to the emperor in Constantinople. These events suggest a possibility that, like the first Bulgarian Tsar four centuries earlier, Stefan Dušan may have envisioned himself as the rightful Tsar of the Romans. His conquests of former Roman territories and aspirations to revive the empire, perhaps in a renewed form, fu-

gratitude to Dr. Branislav Cvetković, museum advisor and senior research associate, for the inspirational discussion and reflections on the Ljuboten portal as a bearer of the aforementioned concepts.

¹⁴ King Dušan's official imagery evolved in tandem with his growing authority. As his status transitioned from kingdom to tsardom, portrayals of him became larger and more solemn. This deliberate visual evolution reflects the inherent link between power and representation. B. Cvetković, "The Royal Imagery of Medieval Serbia", *Meanings and Functions of the Ruler's Image in the Mediterranean World (11th–15th Centuries)*, eds. M. Bacci [et al.], Brill, Leiden 2022, 172–218, esp. 184.

¹⁵ E. Velkovska, "Funeral Rites according to the Byzantine Liturgical Sources", *DOP* 55 (2001), 21–51; J. Baun, "Coming to Age in Byzantium: Agency and Authority in Rites of Passage from Infancy to Authority in Byzantium", *Authority in Byzantium*, ed. P. Armstrong, Ashgate, Farnham 2013, 114; E.E. D. Vasilescu, *Heavenly Sutenance in Patristic Texts and Byzantine Iconography: Nourished by the Word*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2018, 31. About rites of passages see also: *Rites of Passage: Cultures of Transition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. N. F. McDonald, W. M. Ormrod, York Medieval Press, New York 2004. For the sources about passages in Byzantium and the Balkans in 14th century cf. J. S. Čirić, "“Open up, ancient doors, and let the King of Glory enter”. Meaning of the entrances in the Byzantine architectural setting: Preliminary thoughts", *Byzantium and the Heritage of Europe: Connecting the Cultures. Proceedings of the 3rd International Symposium “Days of Justinian I”*, Skopje, 30–31 October 2015, ed. M. B. Panov, Euro Balkan University, Skopje 2016, 146–151 (with bibliography).

¹⁶ I. Sinkević, "Serbian Royal Mausolea: A Quest for Cultural Identity", *Eclecticism in Late Medieval Visual Culture at the Crossroads of the Latin, Greek, and Slavic Traditions*, ed. M. Alessia Rossi, A. I. Sullivan, De Gruyter, Berlin–Boston 2022, 71.

eled his ambition.¹⁷ Notably, the strategic placement of spolia within the central arch of the Ljuboten church's northern façade, itself reminiscent of a Roman triumphal arch, further underscored this claim to legacy. This deliberate visual spectacle – including the adoption of the title, the grand coronation, and the architectural reference to Roman triumph – aimed to legitimize Dušan's claim to the Byzantine imperial mantle.¹⁸ This interpretation is supported by both Gregory's proclamation of Dušan as "Tsar of the Romans" (βασιλέα Ῥωμαίων ἑαυτὸν ἀνηγόρευσε) and Kantakouzenous's similar description (βασιλέα ἑαυτὸν ἀνηγόρευε Ῥωμαίων καὶ Τριβαλῶν).¹⁹

Dušan's request for the cession of the Venetian fleet certainly revealed the Serbian Tsar's bold ambitions regarding the Byzantine capital. The Vasileus of Serbs and Greeks proudly wrote to Venice that he was "the master of almost the entire Roman Empire". This assertive claim, coupled with his strategic use of visual symbolism in the Ljuboten church, reinforces the idea that Dušan sought not only to conquer Byzantine territories but to inherit and revitalize the Roman imperial legacy.²⁰

The strategic spoliation in the St. Nicholas Church at Ljuboten (fig.9), offers a fascinating insight into the church's ideological program. These fragments of a bygone era, function not merely as construction material but as potent symbols of the past Roman imperial legacy.²¹ By juxtaposing the spolia with the monumental depiction of Dušan, the builders and ktetors implicitly connected the Serbian ruler to this prestigious lineage. Dušan's oversized portrayal further reinforces this visual narrative. In Byzantine art, the scale of figures often reflects their importance and authority. Dušan's monumental presence within the church visually elevates him to a level commensurate with Roman emperors of the past.²² This deliberate spatial and stylistic alignment between the spolia

¹⁷ D. M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium 1261–1453*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, 205; D. Mishkova, *Rival Byzantiums: Empire and Identity in Southeastern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2022, 66.

¹⁸ J. W. Sedlar, *East Central Europe in the Middle Ages 1000–1500*, University of Washington Press, Washington 1994, 31, 45–46, 330; J. Shepard, "Manners maketh Romans? Young barbarians at the emperor's court", *Byzantine Style, Religion and Civilization. In Honour of Sir Steven Runciman*, ed. Elizabeth Jeffreys, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, 145–147.

¹⁹ Љ. Максимовић, „Значење речи Грк и Јелин у српским средњовековним изворима”, *Зборник радова Византолошког института* 38 - 1999/2000 (2000), 219; В. Д. Пејушковић, „Цариград у царској идеологији Стефана Душана”, *Зборник радова Филозофског факултета* LII (2) (2022), 169; S. Šarkić, *A History of Mediaeval Law*, Brill, Leiden 2023, 130.

²⁰ D. M. Nicol, *The Reluctant Emperor: A Biography of John Cantacuzene, Byzantine emperor and Monk, c. 1295–1383*, Cambridge University Press Cambridge 1996, 164.

²¹ I. Jevtić, "The Antiquarianism and Revivalism in Late Byzantine Court Culture and Visual arts", *The Byzantine Court: Source of Power and Culture. Papers from the Second International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium*, eds. A. Odekan, N. Necipoglu, E. Akyurek, Istanbul 2013, 209–217; E. N. Boeck, *Imagining the Byzantine Past: The Perception of History in the Illustrated Manuscripts of Skylitzes and Manasses*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2015.

²² V. Roudometof, *Globalization and Orthodox Christianity: The Transformations of*

and the fresco suggests an intention to evoke the concept of *Translatio Imperii*, or the transfer of imperial authority. By associating himself with the Roman past through these visual cues, Dušan legitimizes his own claim to dominion and perhaps even aspires to revive a unified Roman Empire, as evidenced by his later actions and pronouncements.²³ Furthermore, the very act of incorporating spolia into the church can be interpreted as a reflection of the prevalent belief that a ruler's power and legitimacy were enhanced by association with the grandeur of the past. The expectation that the man-as-ruler would appear superhuman was central to his experience.²⁴ Modern theories of performativity argue that all insight into reality is mediated through appearance. In this sense, the elaborate visual presentation of Dušan's authority was not merely theatrical performance, but a way of shaping his reality and his claim to rule. This understanding of performativity underscores the significance of the deliberate visual strategies employed in the Ljuboten church. These strategies aimed not just to depict Dušan's power but were instrumental in constructing it.

The interplay between imperial power and religious devotion, analyzed in the context of Byzantine stagings, finds a compelling parallel in the strategic placement of spolia and the monumental depiction of King Stefan Dušan in St. Nicholas church at Ljuboten. Like Byzantine emperors, Dušan sought to present himself as both a secular ruler and a figure imbued with Constantinian authority.²⁵ The deliberate use of visual elements within sacred spaces aimed to elevate his position, legitimize his rule, and solidify his claim to dominion. This art historical analysis of the Ljuboten church reveals a sophisticated visual strategy employed to communicate the political ambitions of King Stefan Dušan. While the use of spolia might be considered less common in Dušan's era compared to earlier Byzantine periods, its strategic placement speaks to a desire to align with the enduring legacy of the Roman Empire.²⁶

a Religious Tradition, Routledge, New York–London 2014, 52–53.

²³ S. Ćirković, "Between Kingdom and Empire: Dušan's State 1346–1355 Reconsidered", *Byzantium and Serbia in XIV Century*, Athens 1996, 110–121; N. Oikonomides, "Emperor of the Romans – Emperor of Romania", *Byzantium and Serbia in XIV Century*, Athens 1996, 121–128. An interesting observation is made by I. Grumeza: "Stefan Dušan learned one thing from his seven years of living in Constantinople: it was better to rule an Empire than a Kingdom". I. Grumeza, *The Roots of Balkanization: Eastern Europe C.E. 500–1500*, Landham 2010, 92.

²⁴ For the claim that he compared himself with Constantine the Great and Justinian I and that "Dušan came closer to being the Roman basileus" cf. A. Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, Oxford University Press, New York 2024, 852.

²⁵ V. J. Đurić, "Le nouveau Constantin dans l'art serbe médiéval," *Αιθοστροτόν. Studien zur byzantinischen Kunst und Geschichte. Festschrift für Marcel Restle*, eds. T. Steppan, B. Borkopp, Stuttgart 2000, 55–65.

²⁶ While ancient Rome originated the practice of spolia, the Byzantine Empire significantly expanded and elevated its significance. The Byzantines, through Constantinople's revival of Roman ideals, saw the use of spolia as more than just repurposing building materials. With a reverence for the past, they likened this practice to natural cycles. Spolia thus became a powerful symbol within Byzantine culture, representing an enduring ideology rather than simply an artistic technique. Cf. I. Polemis, "Theodore Metochites 'Byzantios' as a Testimony to the Cosmological Discussions of the Early Modern Period", *Byzantion* 66

The very presence of spolia, bearing tangible links to the Roman Empire, serves as a theatrical backdrop against which Dušan's aspirations play out. The spolia become metaphorical fragments of an empire he sought to revive or reconquer.²⁷ By choosing to position his oversized, monumental portrait directly across from a piece of Roman history, he visually connects himself to a lineage of power and prestige. This deliberate spatial and stylistic alignment between the spolia and the fresco suggests an intentional evocation of the concept of *Translatio Imperii*.²⁸

The line-up of elements in Ljuboten – spolia as symbol of antiquity, the oversized royal portrait signifying authority, and their deliberate placement within the sacred space of a church – adheres to expectations of imperial power and piety. It was crucial to present a convincing image to the spectator.²⁹

King Stefan Dušan's carefully orchestrated "mise-en-scène" at Ljuboten is meant to be encountered both by his immediate subjects and, through his artistic legacy. Like Byzantine imperial processions, his portrait is designed to perpetually engage its audience, bolstering support, inspiring loyalty, and potentially even instilling fear in those who might oppose his ambitions. Did it create the desired sense of awe, respect, and subservience in those who beheld it? The staging of King Dušan's portrait in the Ljuboten church transcends mere

(2008), 241–246.

²⁷ H. Hunger, "On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature", *DOP* 23/24 (1969), 15–38; A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium. The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*, 2007, 189–190; A. Leone, "Spolia in Churches: Recycling in Late Antique Building Activity", *The End of the Pagan City: Religion, Economy, and Urbanism in Late Antique North Africa*, Oxford, 2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, 26 Sept. 2013, 189–234.

²⁸ Professor S. Ćirković, examining sources that reveal Dušan's perspective on becoming emperor, suggests his coronation wasn't a dramatic shift but a formal recognition of his existing role within the Empire. The title „честник Грком” / “co-ruler of the Greeks”, or its Latin equivalent *particeps Romaniae* foreshadowed this elevation. С. Ћирковић, “Србија уочи Царства”, Дечани и византијска уметност средином XIV века, Београд 1989, 3–13. Byzantine political views allowed for a „joint rule” where foreign rulers could hold authority within the Empire, but only while recognizing the Byzantine Emperor's supremacy. This concept played a role in Stefan Dušan's initial entry into the Empire, which began with a legitimate agreement with the Palaiologos dynasty. However, his later actions – proclaiming himself Emperor, creating a Patriarchate, and his coronation – were contested, especially after Kantakouzenos came to power. For in-depth analysis, see С. Пириватрић, “Улазак Стефана Душана у Царство”, *Зборник радова Византолошког института XLIV* (2007), 381–409.

²⁹ K. Altug, “Reconsidering the Use of Spolia in Byzantine Constantinople”, *Di Bisanzio dirai ciò che è passato, che passa e che sarà. Scritti in onore di Alessandra Guiglia*, Vol 1., ed. S. Pedone, A. Paribeni, Bardi Edizioni, Roma 2018, 3–16.

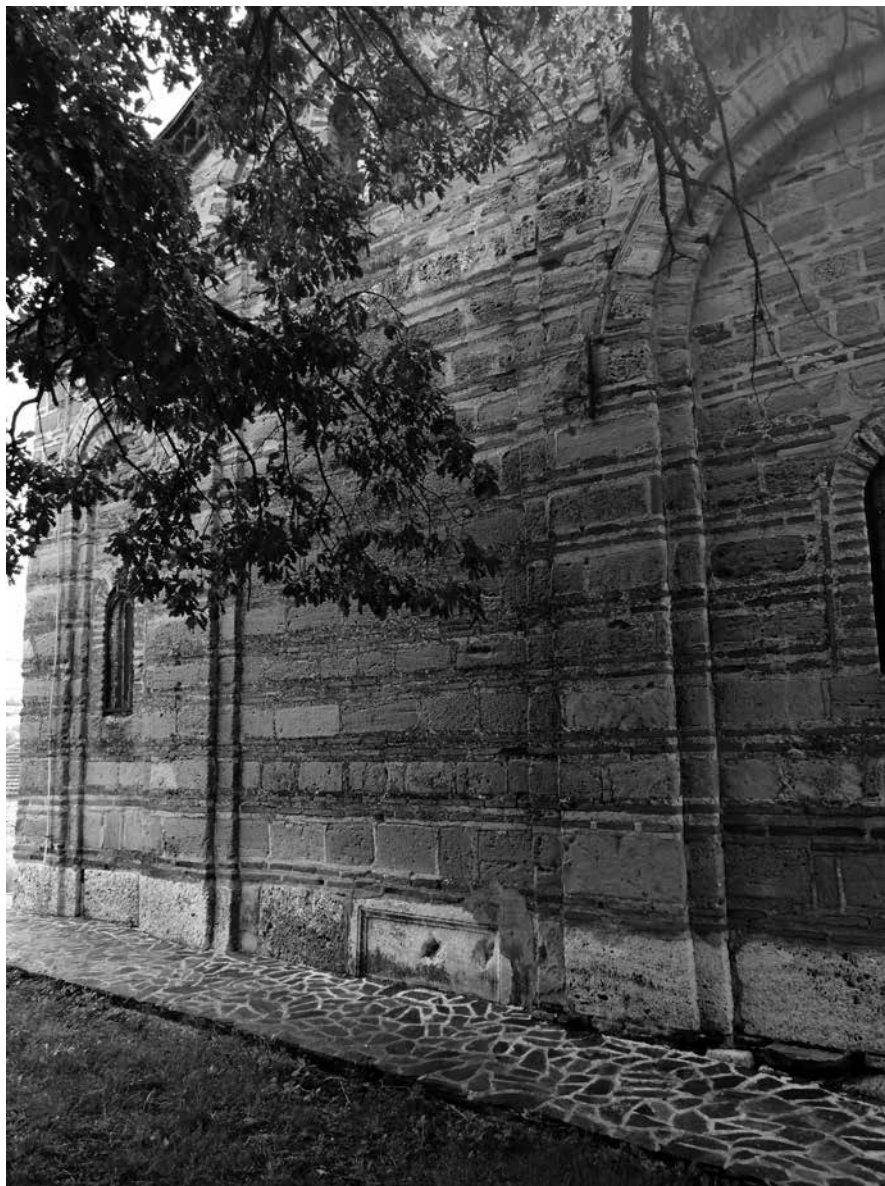


Fig.9. View of the north wall with inserted spolia in the middle of the triumphal arch, St. Nicholas church, Ljuboten, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.9. Поглед на северни зид са уграђеном сполујом у средини тријумфалног лука, црква Св. Николе, Љуботен, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.10. Spolia incorporated into the threshold of the southern portal of the Church of the Mother of God, Mateič monastery, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.10. Сполија уграђена у праг јужног портала Богородичине цркве, манастир Матеич, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

representation.³⁰ Through these strategic visual choices, Dušan sought to position himself not merely a powerful ruler but as a successor to the emperors of Rome, a rightful heir to their legacy of dominion and prestige.³¹

St. Nicholas church in Ljuboten provides us with a glimpse into the mindset of a ruler. The repetition of these visual strategies in other artworks, such as the portrayal of Emperor Stefan Dušan in the church of the Mother of God in Mateič near Kumanovo just right from the spolia incorporated into the threshold of the southern portal (fig.10),³² reinforces the notion that the use of spolia

³⁰ Staging deliberately elevates the ruler, transforming their ordinary presence into an extraordinary one. This calculated display influences the audience's perception, forcing them to reimagine the ruler's status and importance. While scholars largely view the artificiality of staging positively, emphasizing the ruler's position, this manufactured image inherently separates the ruler from their natural persona. Their institutional, political body assumes heightened significance over their personal being. For in-depth analysis, see B. Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1982, 3-10; E. Kantorowitz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study of Medieval Ideology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016.

³¹ A. Eastmond, "Staging as Metaphor: The King's Body and the Theatricality of Power", *Staging the Ruler's Body in Medieval Cultures: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. M. Bacci [et al], Brepols, Turnhout 2023, 136–155. Cf. in the same volume: M. Parani, "Clothes makes the Emperor? Embodying and Performing Imperial Ideology in Byzantium through Dress", *Staging the Ruler's Body in Medieval Cultures: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. M. Bacci [et al], Brepols, Turnhout 2023, 156–172.

³² An article regarding the spolia incorporated into the threshold of the southern portal of the Church of the Mother of God at Mateič Monastery is being prepared for publication

and monumental portraits was a calculated and intentional strategy. This underscores the importance of visual narratives in the assertion of authority, the shaping of historical memory, and the enduring power of art to influence our understanding of the past.

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ПРИКАЗИВАЊЕ ЦАРСКИХ АСПИРАЦИЈА: СПОЛИЈЕ У ЉУБОТЕНУ И
СИМВОЛИЧКА УПОТРЕБА АНТИКЕ

Постављање античких сполија у специфичан контекст са монументалним портретима насликаним унутар средњовековних српских цркава представља промишљену визуелну стратегију осмишљену да евоцира историјско наслеђе, пројектује ауторитет и владарски легитимитет. У тексту је изложен детаљ из цркве Светог Николе у Љуботену (данашња Северна Македонија) као занимљив пример овог визуелног модела. Фокус је на тенденциозном положају сполије на спољној страни северног зида, док је на унутрашњој страни на истом месту монументални портрет краља Стефана Душана. Заједно са архитектонским концептом храма и ктиторским натписом на надвратнику портала, формира се сложен визуелни наратив. Положај сполије која је на истом месту где и Душанов предимензионирани портрет осмишљен је да евоцира концепт *Translatio Imperii*. Ово сугерише не само потенцирање поштовања претходног култног места (што је додатно подвучено и архитравном гредом која је по свим приликама такође сполија која је прилагођена за потребе ктитора у XIV веку, што се закључује на основу различите технике извођења монограма, у односу на ктиторски натпис) већ и да је владар приказан као легитимни наследник идеје Римског царства. Ослањајући се на теорије перформативности и визуелних приказа моћи Царства, указано је да је краљ Душан, попут византијских царева, представљен и као световни али пре свега као Богом одабрани владар. Премда његов крајњи циљ освајања Цариграда није био остварен, уметнички и архитектонски акценти видљиви у Љуботену сведоче о његовој амбицији. Анализа визуелне повезаности сполије на северном зиду, натписа на архитравној греди, као и сполије испред западног портала показује како се међусобно деловање визуелних елемената и натписа у верском контексту могло искористити за преношење политичких порука, легитимизацију власти и обликовање историјског сећања.

