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CHURCH OF THE BLACK MOUNT VIRGIN (MATEIČ): SOURCES OF ARCHITECTURE**

Abstract: This article examines the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount (Mateič) as a paradigmatic monument of Tsar Stefan Dušan's programmatic Byzantinism in the mid-14th century. Perched on a commanding hilltop in the Skopska Crna Gora massif, Mateič is analyzed as an imperial project that consciously appropriates and transforms established Byzantine and Serbian architectural models. Through detailed comparison with foundations such as Saint George church at Staro Nagoričino and Saint Nicetas near Čučer, the study demonstrates how Mateič reinterprets the cross-in-square plan, bipartite construction techniques, and ornamental strategies to articulate Dušan's imperial ambitions. The paper further explores the church's complex iconographic program, revealing its role as a commemorative and triumphal monument that celebrates Dušan's victories and dynastic legitimacy. By situating Mateič within the broader context of the Nemanjić dynasty's cultural politics, the study underscores its significance as a testament to the dynamic negotiation of tradition and innovation in late medieval Serbian architecture.

Keywords: Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount, Mateič monastery, Tsar Dušan, Staro Nagoričino, Nemanjić dynasty, Serbian medieval architecture, Byzantine architecture

Introduction

Majestically perched on one of the eastern ridges of the Skopska Crna Gora massif, the Monastery of the Virgin of the Black Mount—commonly referred to in modern historiography as Mateič (Matejče)—occupies a site of both strategic and symbolic significance (fig. 1). Its elevated position not only dominates the surrounding landscape but also affirms its role as a spiritual and ceremonial focal point. Initially founded during the reign of Isaac Komnenos (r. 1057–1059),¹ the monastery experienced substantial restoration and artis-

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Fig. 1. The Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount (Mateič), southeast view of the church (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 1. Црква Богородице црногорске (Матеич), југоисточни изглед цркве (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)

tic revitalization in the 14th century under the patronage of the Serbian Tzar Stefan Dušan (born 1308—died Dec. 20, 1355), King of Serbia (1331–46) and emperor of the Serbs and Greeks (1346–55) fig.2). These historical layers render the site a rare testament to the entangled cultural and political dynamics of Byzantine and medieval Serbian traditions.²

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¹ K. Jireček, *Staat und Gesellschaft im mittelalterlichen Serbien: Studien zur Kulturgeschichte des 13.–15. T. III*, Wien 1914, 4; V. Marković, *Pravoslavno monaštvo i manastiri u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji*, Sremski Karlovci 1920, 18–19.

² N. L. Okunev, “Građa za istoriju srpske umetnosti. 2. Crkva Svete Bogorodice – Mateič”, *Glasnik Skopskog naučnog društva VII-VIII* (1930), no. 7–8, 89–113; K. Balabanov, A. Nikolovski D. Čornakov, *Spomenici na kulturata na Makedonija*, Skopje 1980, 82–83; E. Dimitrova, *Manastir Matejče*, Skopje 2002, 39–43; Eadem, “On the New Dating of the Fresco Ensemble of the Church of the Holy Virgin in Matejče”, *Balkanoslavica* 30/31 (2002), 95–100.

Its elaborate fresco program and architectural context evoke not only the local monastic tradition but also a broader worldview that transcends territorial boundaries. The existence of an earlier architectural structure dedicated to the Virgin on this site is confirmed by King Milutin's charter from 1300, issued for the Monastery of St. George the Gorgos.³ The modern name Mateič, now commonly used in scholarship, originally referred to the village at the Mount's base, with proposed etymologies ranging from *mati* ("Mother") to the diminutive Matthew.⁴ Nevertheless, historical sources consistently identify the site as the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount—from Gerasim's inscription in 1409 to the colophons penned by the scribe Vladislav in 1473, 1479, and 1480/81, and finally in Archbishop Gabriel's visitation account around 1650. These records attest to the monastery's sustained vitality and scribal production well into the Ottoman period.⁵

Despite its commanding hilltop location and prominent architectural massing—features traditionally associated with commemorative and triumphal functions in the Orthodox medieval world—the site has rarely received sustained scholarly attention for its symbolic or ideological dimensions.⁶ Much of the existing scholarship has focused



Fig. 2. Tsar Stefan Dušan, fresco on the south wall of Mateič, east of the southern entrance (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 2. Цар Стефан Душан, фреска на јужном зиду Матеича, источно од јужног улаза (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)

³ *Zbornik srednjovekovnih ćirilskih povelja i pisama Srbije, Bosne i Dubrovnika. Knjiga I, 1186-1321* [Collection of Medieval Cyrillic Charters and Letters of Serbia, Bosnia, and Dubrovnik. Volume I, 1186-1321.], ed. Vladimir Mošin, Sima Ćirković, and Dušan Sindik, Beograd 2011), 321 (64), no. 92.

⁴ N. L. Okunev, „Građa”, 89, n.1; V. Petković, *Pregled crkvenih spomenika kroz povescnicu srpskog naroda*, Beograd 1950, 428, n. 2470; M. Jakimovska Tošić, “Pogled vrz istoriskoto minato na manastirot ‘Sv. Bogorodica’ – Matejče [A View of the Historical Past of the Monastery of ‘Holy Virgin’ – Matejče],” *Roots* 5 (2003), 649–669.

⁵ *SSZN* 1, 68, no. 216; *SSZN* 1, 107, no. 335; *SSZN* 3, 146, no. 5572; *SSZN* 3, 147, no. 5575; *SSZN* 1, 378, no. 1515.

⁶ A. Serafimova, *Macedonian Cultural Heritage*, Skopje 2009, 60–63.



Fig. 3. Comparative view of King Milutin's endowment (Church of St. George, Staro Nagoričino) and the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount (Mateič) (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 3. Компаративни изглед задужбине краља Милутина (црква Св. Ђорђа у Старом Нагоричину) и цркве Богородице црногорске (Матеич) (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)

on typological analysis or on debates regarding the extent of Empress Helena's patronage, often overlooking the church's deliberate articulation of imperial ideology.⁷

This article seeks to address that gap by reinterpreting Mateič as a programmatic monument of Tsar Dušan's "Byzantinism." By examining its architectural composition, construction techniques, ornamental program, and comparative models—especially Staro Nagoričino and Saint Nicetas near Čučer—it argues that Mateič represents not merely dynastic homage but the act of ideological appropriation and innovation (fig.3). The analysis further explores the monument's iconographic program, situating it within the broader context of Dušan's claims to Byzantine imperial legitimacy and the Orthodox Triumph of Orthodoxy. Through this approach, the article seeks to illuminate Mateič's role as a testament to the dynamic negotiation of tradition and originality that characterized mid-14th-century Serbian ecclesiastical architecture.

What is particularly striking—and rarely addressed in scholarship—is the deliberate and elevated placement of the church on a commanding hilltop (fig. 4), a location that conveys both spiritual authority and political statement. In the context of Byzantine and medieval Serbian architecture, such topographi-

⁷ A. Deroko, "Matejča", *Starinar* 8–9, 1933–1934 (1934), 84–89; E. Hadžitrifonos, "Pristup tipologiji petokupolnih crkava u vizantijskoj arhitekturi [Approches de la typologie des églises à cinq coupôles dans l'architecture byzantine]". *Saopštenja* 22–23, 1990–1991 (1991), 49, 57, 59, 67, 68, 74; V. Korać, M. Šuput, *Arhitektura vizantijskog sveta [The Architecture of the Byzantine World]*, Beograd 1998, 342–344, figs. 486–487; V. Korać, *Spomenici monumentalne srpske arhitekture XIV veka u Povardarju*, Beograd 2003, 212–242.

Fig. 4. General view of the mountainous terrain surrounding the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount (Mateič) (Đurđe Bošković, Legacy of Đurđe Bošković, Archaeological Institute, Belgrade)

Сл. 4. Општи изглед планинског терена који окружује цркву Богородице црногорске (Матеич) (Ђурђе Бошковић, Легат Ђурђа Бошковића, Археолошки институт, Београд)



cal prominence often signals commemorative or triumphal intent, evoking the visual strategies used in imperial Constantinopolitan foundations. Despite its visual dominance in the landscape, Mateič's position has received limited critical attention in art-historical literature, a gap this study seeks to address.⁸

Political and Ideological Context

The Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount must be understood within the broader ideological and dynastic ambitions of Tsar Stefan Dušan's reign. Far from being a private devotional foundation or a mere expression of local piety, Mateič functioned as a deliberate monument of imperial self-fashioning. Dušan's elevation from king to emperor in 1346 marked a decisive claim to Byzantine political and spiritual authority—a claim that demanded architectural expression commensurate with his new status. In this context, church became not only a religious act but a crucial medium for projecting dynastic legitimacy.⁹

⁸ Although now administratively located in the Lipkovo Municipality near Kumanovo, the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mountain occupies a historically charged hilltop, echoing the Christian tradition of situating sacred foundations on elevated ground. From Mount Sinai to Mount Tabor, such topographies have consistently been sites of divine manifestation, spiritual vision, and theological revelation. The Old Testament is replete with references to mountains as loci of God's presence—Mount Horeb (Exodus 3:1; 4:27), Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:14), and the eschatological 'mountain of the Lord's house' (Isaiah 2:2–3; Micah 4:1–2). These elevated settings not only signify access to the divine but often serve as idealized templates for Christian sacred geography. The location of Mateič, dominating its surroundings from a commanding height, therefore participates in this wider symbolic framework of sanctified elevation. A. Lidov, "New Jerusalem: Transferring of the Holy Land as Generative Matrix of Christian Culture." In *New Jerusalem: Hierotopy and Iconography of Sacred Spaces*, ed. Alexei Lidov. Moscow 2009, 8–10; J. S. Ćirić, "Medieval Architecture in Ohrid and Paradigms of Creation of the Sacred Spaces: A Few Observations." In *Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart Üniversitesi Balkan ve Ege Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi Uluslararası Balkan Tarihi ve Kültürü Sempozyumu 6–8 Ekim 2016, Çanakkale Bildiriler Cilt I*, ed. Aşkın Koyuncu. Çanakkale 2017, 319–329.

⁹ V. Korać, "Mateič. Crkva Uspenja Bogorodice", *Spomenici monumentalne srpske*



Fig. 5. Fresco of Empress Helena and her son Uroš holding a model of the church, eastern section of the south wall (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 5. Царица Јелена и млади краљ Урош држе модел цркве, источни део јужног зида (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)

Much of the earlier scholarship on Mateič has tended to emphasize the figure of Empress Helena (fig. 5), interpreting the church as a personal foundation or even a mausoleum.¹⁰ Although widely circulated, the theory that the church at Mateič served as Empress Helena's mausoleum lacks solid evidentiary arguments.¹¹

The earliest mention of a tombstone near the donor portraits—allegedly dating to 1873—derives from a questionable source, while an 1892 report misidentifies a later-added and subsequently demolished chapel within the altar space as a burial chamber.¹² These tenuous claims have nonetheless influenced later interpretations, including a monograph which asserts Helena's mausoleum function—a view that has been met with critical resistance in scholarly reviews.¹³

Much of the confusion stems from divergent readings of the donor portraits: the depiction of Empress Helena and her son Uroš holding a model of the church seems to have inspired

Patriarch Paisius, writing in 1641, to conclude in his *Vita of Tsar Uroš* that they completed a foundation originally initiated by Tsar Dušan.¹⁴ In con-

arhitekture XIV veka u Povardarju, Beograd 2003, 212; E. Dimitrova, *Manastir Matejče*, Skopje 2002, 1–74, about the architecture of the church esp. 39–74; V. Korać, “Smisao građenja po uzoru. Primeri u srpskoj arhitekturi XIV veka”, *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta XLI* (2004), 208–209.

¹⁰ E. Dimitrova, “On the New Dating”, 95–100.

¹¹ L. Vinulović, “The Painted Program of the Mateič Monastery and the Ktetorship of Empress Jelena Nemanjić Asen as the Path to the Salvation of the Soul.” *Bulgaria Mediaevalis* 12 (2021), 141–164; T. Leber, *Stifterinnen und ihre Stiftungen auf dem Balkan des Spätmittelalters*. Wiesbaden 2023, 250–267; S. Smolčić-Makuljević, “Female Donation and Representation in Serbian Medieval Visual Culture: Queen and Empress Jelena (c. 1330–1376).” *Etudes balkaniques* 3 (2023), 599–628.

¹² P. Srečković, “Grob carice Jelene” [The Tomb of Empress Helena]. *Brastvo* 2 (1888), 130, 132; J. Hadži-Vasiljević J. *Južna Stara Srbija [Southern Old Serbia]*, Beograd 1909, 452.

¹³ E. Dimitrova, *Manastir Matejče*, 267–271; M. Radujko, “Elizabeta Dimitrova, *Manastir Matejče* [Matejče Monastery], Skopje 2006” (review), *Zograf* 29 –2002/3 (2003), 234–235.

¹⁴ Patrijarh Pajsije, “Žitije svetog cara Uroša” [*The Life of Saint Tsar Uroš*], *Sabrani spisi*, ed. Tomislav Jovanović, Beograd 1993, 92.

Fig. 6. General view of the church exterior, seen from the southwest (© Mihajlo Džamtovski)

Сл. 6. Општи изглед екстеријера цркве са југозападне стране (© Михајло Џамтовски)



trast, earlier sources such as the 16th-century Karlovac genealogy¹⁵ and the *Branković Chronicle* (ca. 1620) attribute the church's construction solely to Helena.¹⁶

Such readings typically highlight selected iconographic details or speculative genealogical schemes, often underestimating Dušan's role as the primary patron and ideological author of the monument.¹⁷ By contrast, a close examination of the church's architectural scale, commanding siting, and triumphal decorative program suggests a far more public, political function.¹⁸

The monumental scale and elevated position of the Mateič church resonate with the triumphal tone of Stefan Dušan's reign. As a young co-ruler, Stefan Dušan gained prestige by leading troops in the pivotal Battle of Velbužd (1330), a victory that reshaped regional power dynamics. Following his proclamation as Emperor in 1346, Dušan launched a series of military campaigns extending Serbian rule deep into Byzantine territory, including Skopje, Serres, and parts of Thessaly and Epirus. These conquests, culminating in his imperial coronation, suggest a deliberate strategy of territorial and ideological expan-

¹⁵ Lj. Stojanović, ed. *Stari srpski rodoslovi i letopisi [Old Serbian Genealogies and Chronicles]*, Sremski Karlovci 1927, 36, no. 23.

¹⁶ R. Novaković, *Brankovićev letopis [The Chronicle of Branković]*, Beograd 1960, 46.

¹⁷ S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*. Milano 2006, 130–134, 185–190.

¹⁸ S. Ćurčić, "Articulation of Church Facades during the First Half of the Fourteenth Century: A Study in the Relationship of Byzantine and Serbian Architecture", in *Vizantijska umetnost početkom XIV veka*, S. Petković, Beograd 1978, 23; J. S. Ćirić, "Mateič Monastery: a Place of Cultural Memory in Urgent Need of Conservation", in *Niš i Vizantija XXI: Dani Sv. cara Konstantina i carice Jelene. Dvadeset prvi međunarodni naučni skup, Niš, 3–5. jun 2022*, ed. Miša Rakocija (Niš: NKC Niš, 2023), 305–322.



Fig. 7. Triumphal arch, Mateič (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 7. Тријумфални лук, Матеич (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)

sion aimed at Constantinople itself. Within this framework, the architectural and iconographic program of Mateič—with its five domes, elevated site (fig. 6), and imagery of holy warriors—can be read as both a celebration of victory and a visual assertion of divine sanction for imperial ambition.¹⁹

¹⁹ The principal challenges stem from misinterpretations of the building fabric and site, as well as from a persistent absence of comprehensive documentation. In light of recent scholarship emphasizing the monumental character and symbolic associations of this church—particularly its imperial and triumphal undertones—it is difficult to disregard the role of the Tsar as one of its principal ktetors. Furthermore, the importance of visual records should not be underestimated, especially since early photographs from 1914, as well as those from 1925 and 1938 from National Museum in Belgrade, have remained largely overlooked in academic literature. G. Ostrogorski, *Istorija Vizantije*, Beograd 2000, 471; Danilo Drugi, *Životi kraljeva i arhiepiskopa srpskih*, ed. Gordon Mak Danijel, Damnjan Petrović, Beograd 1989, 44; B. Ferjančić, S. Ćirković, *Stefan Dušan kralj i car (1336–1355)*, Beograd 2005, 40–41; D. Preradović, *U ime nauke i domovine. Istraživanja srednjovekovnih spomenika pod okriljem Narodnog muzeja Srbije i njihovi rezultati (1906–1940) [In the Name of Science and the Homeland. Research of Medieval Monuments under the Auspices of the National Museum of Serbia and Their Results (1906–1940)]*, Beograd 2023, 86, 229, 231, 245. Fort triumphal context of Mateič see J. S. Ćirić, B. Cvetković, “Empress Helena in Athos, Mateič, and Serres: from Shared Power to Personal Reign,” in *Women and Power in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Southeast and Central Europe (1300–1600)*, ed. Melina Rokai, Budapest 2025), 75–114.



Fig. 8. General view from the east side: the apse and upper structure of the church (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 8. Општи изглед цркве са источне стране: апсида и горња структура цркве (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)



Fig. 9. Church of St. George, Staro Nagoričino (© Mihaјlo Džamtoovski)

Сл. 9. Црква Св. Ђорђа, Старо Нагоричино (© Михајло Џамтовски)

Although the dedication of the Mateič church to the Virgin places it within a familiar theological and iconographic framework, the triumphal aspects of its architecture and decoration remain surprisingly underexamined in the scholarly literature. In particular, the historical context in which the church was most likely initiated—shortly after 1345—coincides with the renewed Byzantine celebration of the *Triumph of Orthodoxy*, marking the 500th anniversary of the restoration of icon veneration in 843. This major liturgical and ideological feast, commemorated each year on the first Sunday of Lent, celebrated the Orthodox Church's victory over heresy and reaffirmed its unity under legitimate imperial authority. Within this context, the visual program of the Mateič monastery acquires new ideological significance. The repeated use of triumphal arches, both on the façades and in the interior articulation—especially the monumental *trivelon* (fig. 7) separating the western and central bays—suggests more than architectural ambition.²⁰ When considered together with the extensive cycle of the *Akathistos Hymn* in the narthex, these features point toward a deliberate conceptual framework aligned with triumphal theology. The pairing of devotion to the Virgin Mary and triumphal rhetoric was especially potent in Byzantine ceremonial and theological discourse, and it is striking that this dimension has largely been overlooked in previous interpretations of Mateič.

Architectural Analysis

1. Materials and Construction Techniques

The Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount at Mateič exemplifies a bipartite construction technique characteristic of late Byzantine and Serbian ecclesiastical architecture (fig. 8). The lower portions of the structure are composed of well-dressed stone masonry, conveying a sense of permanence, solidity, and continuity with older local building traditions. By contrast, the upper sections employ elaborately patterned brickwork, creating a striking visual differentiation that emphasizes lightness and decorative complexity.²¹

This combination of stone and brickwork is directly comparable to the construction of King Milutin's endowments, especially Staro Nagoričino (fig.

²⁰ V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 219, 239, 247; J. S. Ćirić, "Četiri srpske srednjovekovne crkve u okolini Skoplja: arhitektura i problemi očuvanja kulturnog nasleđa", *Glasnik: Službeni list Srpske Pravoslavne Crkve C*, br. 6, (2020), 309–316. Moreover, the inclusion of historical figures such as Theoktistus—an ardent iconophile and patron of Constantine-Cyril—in the genealogical fresco cycle further reinforces the ideological program of the church. The presence of such a figure is not merely genealogical ornamentation but a theological-political statement, aligning Tsar Dušan's imperial vision with the defense and propagation of Orthodoxy. In this light, the architectural and iconographic choices made at Mateič appear not only as emulation of Constantinopolitan models, but as a localized enactment of a broader Orthodox triumphalism. This interpretative gap—namely, the failure to connect the triumphal character of the architecture and program with the broader commemoration of the *Triumph of Orthodoxy*—is addressed more fully in recent research by Ćirić and Cvetković, who argue that Mateič should be understood as a visual manifesto of Orthodoxy's victorious identity during Dušan's reign. Cf. J. S. Ćirić, B. Cvetković, "Empress Helena", 100–102.

²¹ V. Korać, M. Šuput, *Arhitektura*, 342–344, fig. 486–487; V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 212–242.

9).²² Yet while both churches share this bipartite division, the execution at Mateič demonstrates a heightened ornamental ambition. The upper brick zones at Mateič are more densely articulated, featuring intricate patterns and decorative frames around windows and cornices. This elaboration suggests an intentional shift toward a more visually commanding and ideologically charged architectural language—one that proclaims Tsar Dušan’s desire to surpass the aesthetic restraint of Milutin’s reign and signal his own imperial creativity.²³

Moreover, the use of stone in the lower portions at Mateič is not merely structural but symbolic: it evokes continuity with earlier architectural phases, appropriating an older tradition to stress monumentality on Dušan’s new architectural program. It is noteworthy that this monumentality was mentioned by Aleksandar Deroko; however, it appears to have been largely overlooked in scholarly literature in the decades that followed. In the conclusion of his text, Deroko noted: “*The church building of the Mateič Monastery ranks, in terms of its dimensions, among the largest of our old monuments, but this alone does not constitute its full value. What places ‘Mateič’ among the most significant monuments is its monumentality. This monumentality stems from the fact that the exterior appears imposing, with large, calm, and heavy masses lacking slenderness, ornamentation, and vividness — while the interior volume of the church space is spacious, clear, and well lit. These qualities are not shared by many of our old monuments*”.²⁴

2. Plan and Dome Structure

The architectural plan of Mateič adheres to the five domed cross-in-square model (fig. 10), one of the most canonical forms in Byzantine ecclesiastical design.²⁵ This plan features a central domed bay supported by four robust piers, creating a spatial arrangement that not only satisfies liturgical requirements but also embodies cosmological symbolism: the dome as the vault of heaven, the cross-arms marking the four cardinal directions. In adopting this plan, Mateič aligns itself with a centuries-old Byzantine tradition while simultaneously asserting dynastic continuity with the monumental church-building program of King Milutin.²⁶

²² G. Bošković, “Deux églises de Milutin: Staro Nagoričino et Gračanica”, in *L’art byzantin chez les Slaves. Les Balkans, Premier recueil dédié à la mémoire de Théodore Uspenskij*, Paris 1930, 197–206; B. Todić, *Staro Nagoričino*, Beograd 1993, 127–138.

²³ S. Čurčić, “The Role of Late Byzantine Thessaloniki in Church Architecture in the Balkans”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 57 (2003), 65–84; G. Velenis, “Building Techniques and External Decoration During the 14th Century in Macedonia”, in *L’art de Thessalonique et des pays balkaniques et les courants spirituels au XIVe siècle*, ed. R. Samardžić, Belgrade 1987, 95–105.

²⁴ A. Deroko, “Matejča”, 89.

²⁵ V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 214 – 217.

²⁶ Vojislav Korać offers limited commentary on Tsar Dušan’s architectural accents borrowed from the architecture of King Milutin, mentioning it primarily in his conclusion on Mateič, where he observes some parallels between the Mateič narthex and those of the churches in Ljeviška and Gračanica. While comparisons with the Church of the Holy Archangels near Prizren are frequent, Mateič is more convincingly interpreted as engaging in a visual dialogue with the architectural idiom of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin rather than replicating

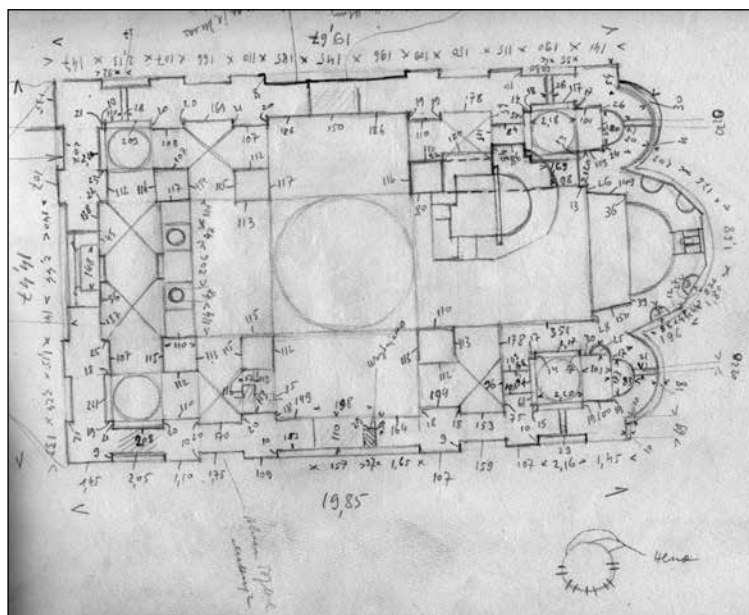


Fig. 10. Plan of the church, architectural sketch by architect Đurđe Bošković, 1930 (Legacy of Đurđe Bošković, Archaeological Institute, Belgrade)

Сл. 10. План цркве, архитектонска скица архитекте Ђурђа Бошковића, 1930 (Легат Ђурђа Бошковића, Археолошки институт, Београд)

Yet Mateič is far from a static copy of earlier models. Compared to Staro Nagoričino, Mateič's dome demonstrates a subtle but significant shift in proportional emphasis: it is slightly more elongated, producing a pronounced vertical thrust (fig. 11). This verticality is not simply an aesthetic refinement but carries clear ideological weight, suggesting an upward movement that reflects Tsar Dušan's imperial aspirations. By accentuating height and light, the dome structure amplifies the monumentality of the space and metaphorically elevates the imperial patron's spiritual status. Above these, dome windows admit carefully modulated light into the interior (fig. 12), contributing to a luminous atmosphere that enhances the spiritual resonance of the space and visually supports the theological symbolism of elevation.²⁷

the Prizren model, which in fact postdates it. When viewed from the east, Mateič clearly echoes the architectural vocabulary of Staro Nagoričino, particularly in the tiered composition of the apse, the pronounced vertical articulation, and the carefully ordered rhythm of fenestration. These elements suggest a deliberate invocation of Milutin's monumental aesthetic. Simultaneously, the church asserts its distinctiveness through refined brickwork and sophisticated ornamental details that reflect Tsar Dušan's dual ambition: to pay homage to his royal predecessor and to project his own imperial aspirations. V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 231; J. S. Ćirić, B. Cvetković, B. "Empress Helena", 91 – 96.

²⁷ This interplay of light and architecture was designed to evoke profound spiritual and sensory experience. B. V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium*, University Park, Pa. 2010, 141, 154, 184; A. Stejskal, "Substitution by Image:

Fig. 11. Central dome of Matejč (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 11. Централна купола Матеича (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)

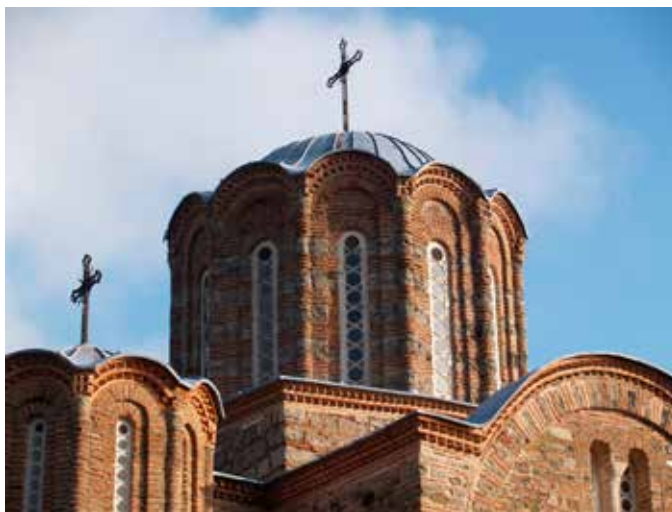


Fig. 12. View toward the south wall of the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 12. Изглед према јужном зиду цркве Богородице црногорске (Матеич) (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)



Fig. 13, 13a. East part of the south wall; west part of the north wall, Church of St. George, Staro Nagoričino (© Mihajlo Džamtoovski)

Сл. 13, 13а. Источни део јужног зида; западни део северног зида, црква Светог Ђорђа, Старо Нагоричино (© Михајло Џамтовски)



3. Façade Articulation and Ornamentation

The façades of Mateič present one of the most compelling aspects of its architectural program, revealing a conscious engagement with, and reinterpretation of, the established formal language of King Milutin's foundations—especially Staro Nagoričino (fig. 3). Both churches share a construction system that combines a massive stone base with elaborately patterned brickwork in the upper zones, creating a clear visual division between weight and ornament. This dual-material strategy conveys solidity and tradition in the lower portions while showcasing sophisticated surface articulation above.²⁸

The Very Idea.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77 (1) (2019), 55–66; I. Potamianos, “The Handling of Light: Its Effect on Form and Space in the Greek Temple and the Byzantine Church”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Light in Archaeology*, ed. Costas Papadopoulos and Holley Moyes, Oxford Handbooks, London 2021, 284–302.

²⁸ V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 218–219.

Fig. 14. South wall of the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount (Mateič) (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 14. Јужни зид цркве Богородице црногорске (Матеич) (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)



In Staro Nagoričino, the lateral façades are organized in a rhythmic sequence of narrow blind niches and small, uniformly placed windows that together articulate the inscribed-cross plan on the exterior (figs.13, 13a).²⁹ This cruciform articulation is emphasized by vertical pilasters and horizontal cornices, which create clear bands dividing the façade into ordered registers. The apsidal zone is particularly developed, marked by tiered blind arcades and richly decorated brickwork that nonetheless maintains a restrained, systematic elegance. Decorative motifs such as the triumphal arch form around windows and niches are carefully proportioned, underscoring the commemorative and hieratic character of Milutin's aesthetic program.³⁰

Mateič on the other side adopts this compositional matrix but transforms it in scale, proportion, and ornament. The façades of Mateič are markedly taller and more vertically dynamic, with windows that are longer, narrower, and placed higher on the wall surfaces, drawing the viewer's eye upward in a pronounced act of visual ascent (fig. 14). The articulation of the inscribed-cross plan remains evident in the exterior volumes and pilaster lines, but these are treated with a heightened complexity. Particularly striking is the eastern apsidal ensemble, which clearly emulates the layered articulation of Staro Nagoričino but expands it with larger blind niches, more projecting Constantinopolitan architectural vocabulary visible at the apse of the south church of Pantocrator monastery and the apse of the Christ the Saviour in Chora (figs.15, 15a).³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 53–57.

³⁰ Ibid., 220; J. S. Ćirić, "Brick by Brick: The role of Thessaloniki in façade exterior decoration in the age of King Milutin's Patronage", *Kyrrillos kai Methodios: To Byzantio kai o kosmos ton Slabon: Diethnes Epistemoniko Synedrio 20 - 30 Noembriu 2013 [Cyril and Methodius: Byzantium and the World of the Slavs]*, ed. E. Tachiaos, Thessaloniki 2015, 229–238.

³¹ V. Korać, V. – M. Šuput, *Arhitektura*, 139, 292; E. Dimitrova, *Manastir Matejče*, 62; V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 218–221.



Fig. 15, 15a. The apse of the south church of the Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople; the apse of the Church of Christ in Chora (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 15, 15a. Апсида јужне цркве манастира Пантократор у Цариграду; апсида цркве Христа Хоре у Цариграду (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)

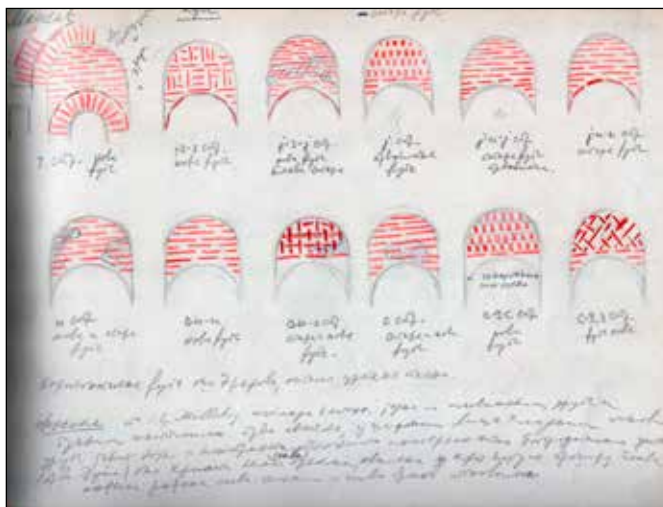
The brickwork at Mateič represents an even more elaborate development. Intricate patterns of sawtooth friezes, chevron bands, and interlacing motifs frame windows and cornices with a level of decorative ambition not seen in Staro Nagoričino (fig. 16). One of the most distinctive features visible in the drum zones is the use of checkerboard (chequerboard) motifs in brickwork, introducing textural variety and a high-relief play of light and shadow that accentuates the monument's verticality and visual complexity. These ornamental details do not merely embellish the surfaces but function as ideological statements of imperial sophistication and cultural appropriation of Byzantine models (cf. drawing of the dome sides by the architect Đurđe Bošković).

While Staro Nagoričino's façades project a sober harmony aligned with Milutin's programmatic piety, Mateič's more dynamic façades reflect Tsar Dušan's ambition to proclaim his imperial identity in explicitly triumphalist terms. By adopting and transforming the established decorative vocabulary of so-called Serbian-Byzantine architecture, Mateič positions itself as both a respectful homage to Milutin's legacy and a clear declaration of Dušan's own ideological and artistic originality.³²

³² Architect Đurđe Bošković's unpublished 1930 drawing provides a rare and precise visual analysis of the ornamental brickwork decorating the interior drum of the Mateič dome. Each segment is individually recorded, revealing a deliberate and varied repertoire of brick patterns that serve both structural and decorative functions. Bošković's documentation demonstrates an early recognition of Mateič's architectural significance—not as a provincial

Fig. 16. Drawing of the central dome sides by architect Đurđe Bošković, 1930 (Legacy of Đurđe Bošković, Archaeological Institute, Belgrade)

Сл. 16. Цртеж страна централне куполе, архитекта Ђурђе Бошковић, 1930 (Легат Ђурђа Бошковића, Археолошки институт, Београд)



4. Interior Features and Spatial Program

The interior spatial composition of the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount at Mateič demonstrates an advanced and ideologically charged reinterpretation of the cross-in-square plan, with a central dome supported by four massive piers, establishing a hieratic vertical axis that directs the worshipper's gaze upward and reinforces the symbolism of imperial authority under divine sanction (figs. 17, 17a).³³

However, Mateič innovates beyond standard interpretations through its treatment of the western part of the church. Instead of a conventional narthex or simple western bay like those seen in Staro Nagoričino, Mateič features a trivellon—a monumental triple-arched screen (figs. 7 and 17a) that divides the western compartment from the naos.³⁴ Architectural sections and plans reveal

derivative, but as a monument consciously aligned with the dominant artistic tendencies of the mid-14th century. The careful articulation of brick ornamentation reflects a sophisticated architectural vocabulary in which brick becomes a principal expressive medium. Rather than evolving in isolation, Mateič *evokes* and *citationally references* key visual strategies developed under King Stefan Uroš II Milutin. This deliberate appropriation of earlier forms—particularly in the use of ornamental brickwork and polychromatic façade organization—constitutes a form of architectural *eclecticism* that simultaneously honors the past and asserts Tsar Dušan's imperial identity. Bošković's analytical approach captures this complexity, underscoring the need to interpret Mateič not as an isolated structure but as a programmatic and ideologically charged edifice within the broader currents of Late Byzantine and Serbian court architecture. It is notable that Slobodan Ćurčić made a relatively similar observation stating that Mateič as “five-domed church, obviously relies on the tradition of five-domed churches initiated in Serbia by Dušan's grandfather, King Milutin”. S. Ćurčić, “Articulation of Church Facades”, 23.

³³ V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 214, fig. 1, 215, 216; E. Dimitrova, *Manastir Matejče*, 62; V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 46–49.

³⁴ Whether this space should be termed a “narthex” remains a matter of scholarly debate; it might be more accurately described as a western architectural unit intended for ritualized entrance, a typological feature absent in earlier examples. Notably, a comparable entry

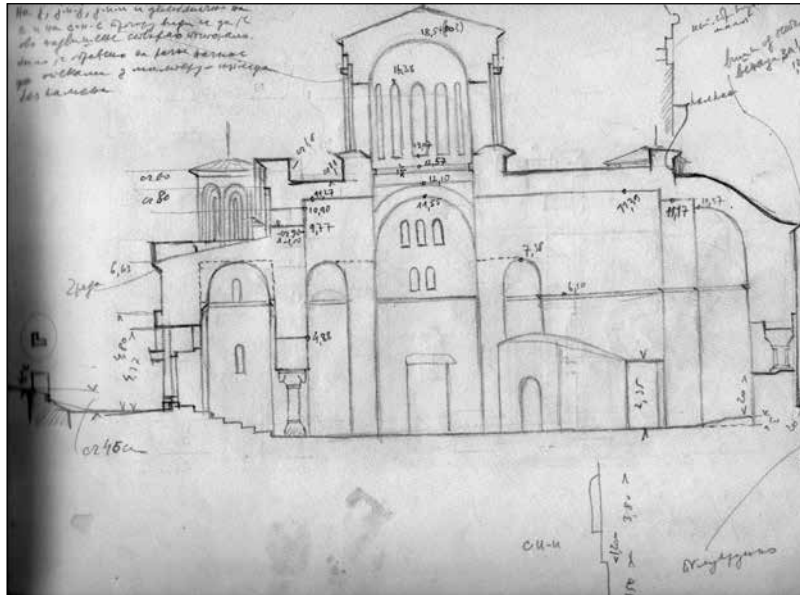
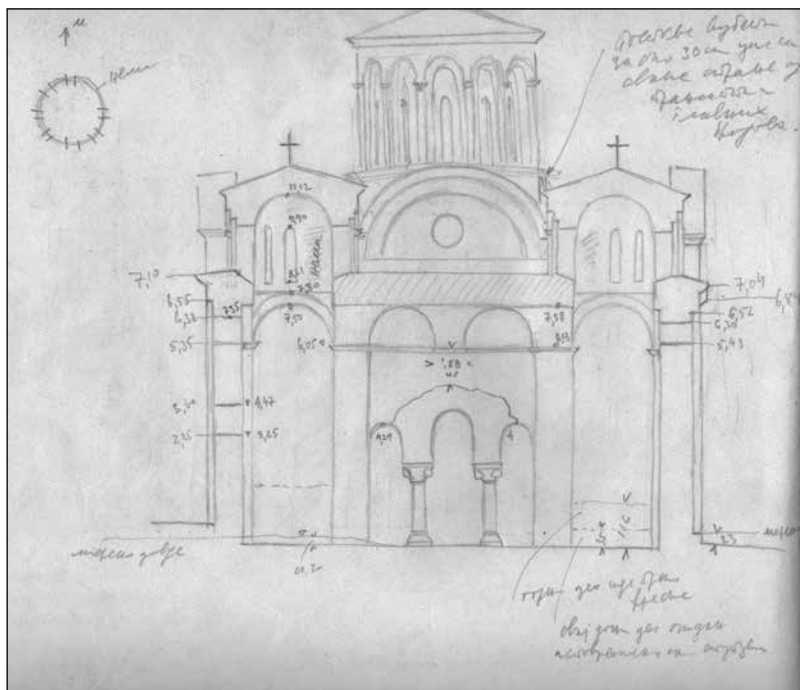


Fig. 17, 17a. Longitudinal section of the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount and drawing of the west wall with trivelon, condition in 1930 (Legacy of Đurđe Bošković, Archaeological Institute, Belgrade)

Сл. 17, 17а. Подужни пресек цркве Богородице црногорске и цртеж западног зида са тривилоном, стање 1930. године (Легат Ђурђа Бошковића, Археолошки институт, Београд)



this elaborate articulation, in which the western space functions not as a typical vestibule but as a distinct, ceremonial zone mediating the passage from the secular exterior to the sanctified imperial core.³⁵

The entrances merit particular attention. At the western portal, a broad architectural frame was later constructed using two flanking columns that rise just above the lintel. These columns were originally painted. Such a design must have had a ceremonial function.³⁶ It is plausible that significant buildings or rooms—such as a trisectional annex, the hegumen's residence, or a court—once stood on that side. The dimensions of the northern entrance were adapted accordingly. It is not surprising that, only a short time after the construction of the Archangels' church in Prizren, master stonemasons from the western regions of the empire were still actively employed. Two robust, round columns support cubic capitals adorned at the corners with stylized human and animal heads, along with curling foliage motifs (figs 18, 18a). On the southwestern figure of the northern capital, remnants of color survive on the abacus. The capitals were skillfully carved in local sandstone.³⁷ One of the capitals, on the southern column, displays sculpted motifs of particular iconographic and theological depth: an eagle and a ram. Positioned on the side facing the southern entrance—near the imperial donor portrait—the **eagle** may be understood as a heraldic or imperial reference, amplifying the visual narrative of Tsar Dušan's authority. Diagonally across from this capital is the figure of Saint Nicetas, possibly alluding to the earlier dedication of a Milutin-era foundation, thus establishing a visual and dynastic reference within the spatial setting.³⁸

design—flanked by a pair of columns—can be observed in the church of Staro Nagoričino. V. Korać characterizes this type of space as a “ceremonial approach to the central zone of the church”. V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 229; N. Stanković, “Royal Canopy over the Church Entrance: Forms, Spatial Contexts, Iconographic Programs, and Meaning of the Dome in Serbian Narthexes of the 14th Century,” *Collection of Papers of the Faculty of Philosophy of Priština in Kosovska Mitrovica* LIV/3 (2024), 325–326. On the possible existence of a now-lost vestibule originally preceding the western façade cf. 325–326.

³⁵ Vojislav Korać noted that entrances of Matej; contained ceremonial character. V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 217, fn. 14.

³⁶ J. S. Ćirić, M. Džamtovski, “A Roman-Period Stele from the Matejče Monastery in North Macedonia and its Reuse in the 14th Century”, *CLOTHO* 2026 (forthcoming).

³⁷ V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 217, 218.

³⁸ According to my knowledge, no previous art historian or scholar has drawn attention to a particularly significant detail: the figure of Saint Nicetas is painted within the very space of the *trivellon*. This placement is far from incidental—it reinforces the triumphal character of the church and evokes the concept of *ecclesia triumphans*, the victorious Church. The depiction of a military saint in this liminal zone—the ceremonial three-arched passage between the narthex and the naos—should not be read merely as part of a conventional iconographic cycle. Rather, it reveals a deliberate strategy to sacralize this architectural threshold and to underscore the protective and victorious dimensions of the Christian faith. *Trivellons* in monumental churches such as Matejč were specifically designed to stage solemn entrances and liturgical processions, thereby aligning spatial function with theological and ideological symbolism. In this context, the strategic positioning of Saint Nicetas—a warrior-saint and celestial intercessor—at the very threshold of the western approach acquires powerful connotations. It projects an image of the church as a fortified spiritual citadel, its sacred entrance safeguarded by both theological authority and heroic virtue. His proximity to the liturgical



Fig. 18, 18a. Capitals of the triumphal arch entrance in the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 18, 18а. Капители тријумфалног улаза у цркви Богородице црногорске (Матеич) (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)



Fig. 19. Capital of the northeast column, Church of St. Nicholas in Ljuboten (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 19. Капител североисточног ступца, црква Светог Николе у Љуботену (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)

Of equal theological richness is the **ram's head**, carved into the northeast face of the southern capital. This motif evokes the Old Testament episode of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:13), wherein a ram, caught by its horns in a thicket, is divinely provided as a substitute offering. The theme of **substitutionary sacrifice and redemption** resonates profoundly in Christian typology and may here acquire a political undertone. The sculpted ram could metaphorically reflect the complex dynastic transition between King Stefan Dečanski and his son, Dušan. In this reading, Dušan's rise to power parallels the sacrificial narrative, where the son is spared and the ram intervenes—symbolizing both **Divine providence** and the legitimacy of the new ruler's

axis enhances the dramatic procession toward the divine, reinforcing the church's identity not merely as a place of worship but also as a spatial embodiment of imperial and eschatological affirmation. Thus, the inclusion of this saint within the architectural and symbolic core of the *trivellon* supports an interpretation of Mateič not simply as a devotional site, but as a **monument of sacred victory**—a space in which the triumph of Orthodoxy and imperial ideology is both visually asserted and ritually enacted.

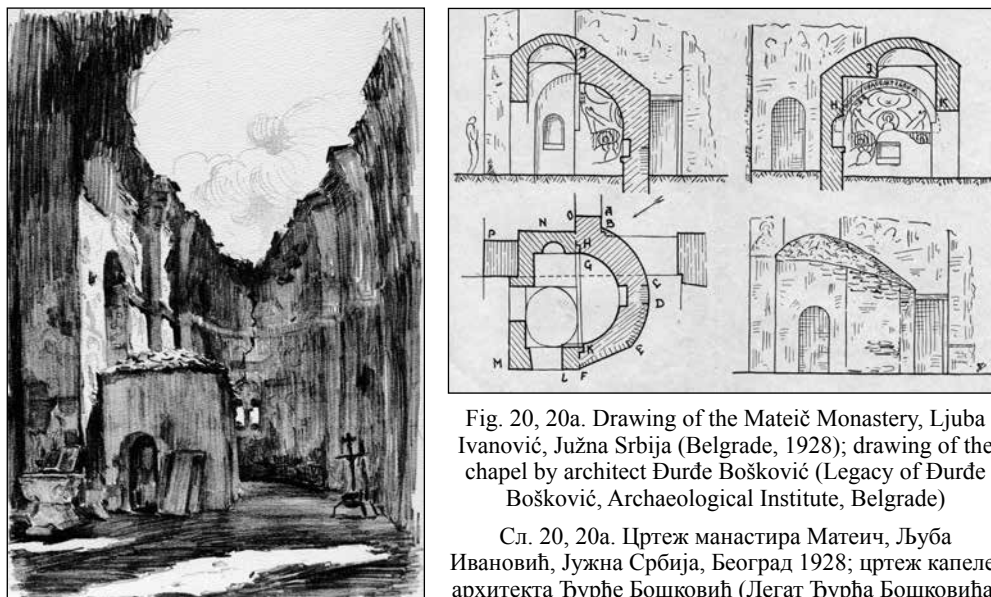


Fig. 20, 20a. Drawing of the Mateič Monastery, Ljuba Ivanović, Južna Srbija (Belgrade, 1928); drawing of the chapel by architect Đurđe Bošković (Legacy of Đurđe Bošković, Archaeological Institute, Belgrade)

Сл. 20, 20а. Цртеж манастира Матеич, Љуба Ивановић, Јужна Србија, Београд 1928; цртеж капеле, архитекта Ђурђе Бошковић (Легат Ђурђа Бошковића, Археолошки институт, Београд)

claim. As noted by Marjanović-Dušanić, this Biblical typology serves as an ideological framework that merges religious symbolism with political transformation.³⁹

On the **southwest face of the northern capital**, another symbolic form emerges: a scallop shell (fig. 18a). Though modest in scale, this motif opens profound theological vistas. The shell has long been associated with themes of **Divine conception, spiritual rebirth, and the Incarnation**, especially in Marian symbolism. From early Christian interpretations of Gideon's fleece (Judges 6:36–40), to its role in the *Physiologus* and patristic texts—such as Clement of Alexandria's *Paidagogus*⁴⁰—the shell became a symbol of the **virginal conception of Christ**, and by extension, of Mary as Theotokos. Its presence in proximity to the church's western entrance, the liturgical “portal of salvation,” reinforces its resonance with hymnic invocations such as the **Akathistos hymn**: “Rejoice, O Door through whom the Salvation came into the world”.⁴¹

The deliberate juxtaposition of the **ram's head and shell** in the sculptural program of the trivellon suggests a sophisticated iconographic strategy that interweaves **biblical, Theotokological, and dynastic themes**. Positioned at the threshold of the church, these motifs perform a dual function: **theological proc-**

³⁹ S. Marjanović-Dušanić, *S. Vladarska ideologija Nemanjića*, Beograd 1997, 209.

⁴⁰ J. P. Migne, N. Le Nourry, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Patrologiae Graecae Tomus IX. Clemens Alexandrinus – Tomus Secundus*. Paris 1857, col 393.

⁴¹ J. S. Ćirić, “Sensory Encounters: Decoding the Symbolism of St Nicholas Church in Ljuboten/Senzorična srečanja: dekodiranje simbolike cerkve svetega Nikolaja v Ljubotenu”, *Studia Universitatis Hereditati* 12 / 2 (2024), 34–35.



Fig. 21. Roman-period stele with inscription, reused as spolia and inserted as the threshold of the southern portal of the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 21. Римска стела са натписом, секундарно употребљена као сполија и постављена у праг јужног портала цркве Богородице црногорске (Матеич) (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)

lamation and symbolic mediation.⁴² They reinforce the sacredness of the entryway as a liminal space—both physically and spiritually—linking the interior of the church with the narrative of salvation history. The sculptural decoration, though modest in scale, thus engages in a profound visual theology, serving as a vehicle for expressing both imperial ideology and Orthodox soteriology.

Moreover, the eagle, ram, and shell motifs—recurrent also in the church of Saint Nicholas in Ljuboten (fig. 19)—indicate a **sculptural idiom** that blends local tradition with metropolitan (Constantinopolitan) currents, reflecting Dušan's exposure to Byzantine visual culture during his youth. In this regard, the trivellon of Mateič should not be seen as a mere architectural connector, but rather as a **sculpted theological statement**—a visual prologue to the mysteries of faith celebrated within.⁴³

One of the most striking and original aspects of Mateič's interior program is the deliberate incorporation of an earlier chapel, or *parekklesion*, into the new church's eastern zone. Historical and archaeological evidence suggests that this small, barrel-vaulted chamber corresponds to the prothesis of the original church founded under Isaac I Komnenos in the mid-11th century, which was demolished in 1938 (fig. 20, 20a). Rather than effacing this earlier sacred structure, Dušan's builders preserved it as an integral part of the new edifice, enclosing it within the larger spatial framework of the imperial monument. This act of architectural spoliation served not only to maintain the site's long-established cultic continuity but also to sanctify the new foundation through direct physical and spiritual linkage to its revered Byzantine past.⁴⁴

The iconographic program of the interior complements the Constantinopolitan architectural rhetoric shaped by reuse of antiquity. Above the southern doorway — a clearly ceremonial portal, whose threshold is formed by a reused Roman-period stele (fig. 21) bearing an intriguing inscription, and over which the emperor would have symbolically stepped to enter the sacred core of the church — an oversized lunette depicting Christ Pantocrator (figs 22, 22a) reinforces the sense of imperial presence. This configuration evokes not only the monumental decoration of imperial churches in Constantinople that Dušan may have encountered during his childhood and later visits to the capital

⁴² J. S. Ćirić, "Sensory Encounters", 35–36.

⁴³ J. S. Ćirić, "Sensory Encounters", 36–37.

⁴⁴ A. Deroko, "Matejča", 84–89; Đ. Bošković, "Srušena je i stara kapela u Matejiću", *Starinar*, treća serija, XIV (1939), 153–157.



Fig. 22, 22a. Lunette with the depiction of Christ Pantokrator above the southern portal of the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount (© Mihajlo Džamtovski)

Сл. 22, 22а. Лунета са представом Христа Пантократора изнад јужног портала цркве Богородице црногорске (Матеич) (© Михајло Џамтовски)

— a formative experience that likely shaped and sustained throughout his life what modern scholars call *the dream of Constantinople*,⁴⁵ but also the ideological resonance of the Chalke Gate of the Great Palace. There, the renowned icon of Christ Chalkites stood above the entrance through which the emperor would ceremonially pass, receiving proskynesis from court officials and the public.⁴⁶ The Chalke icon presided over triumphal returns and liturgical processions; its periodic removal and reinstatement during episodes of Iconoclasm transformed it into a lasting symbol of the Triumph of the Orthodoxy.⁴⁷

By analogy, the southern portal at Mateič — crowned with Christ Pantocrator — may be interpreted as a ideologically charged echo of this Constantinopolitan archetype, linking Tzar Dušan's ceremonial passage into the sacred space with a visual proclamation of divine sanction and imperial legitimacy. Through the integration of the cross-in-square plan with the innovative trivelon, the spoliation of the nowadays demolished parakklesion as a relic of sacred continuity, and the adoption of monumental iconography, the church emerges as a richly layered architectural statement of Tsar Dušan's political theology and his ambition to assert a Serbian claim to the legacy of Byzantium.⁴⁸

5. Comparative Perspectives

The Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount at Mateič occupies a pivotal position within the architectural production of the mid-14th-century Serbian state, embodying both a profound respect for dynastic tradition and a deliberate program of innovation in service of Tsar Dušan's aspirations.⁴⁹ Comparative

⁴⁵ About spoliation and the afterlife of the antiquity I. Jevtić, I. Nilsson, "Imitation as Spoliation, Reception as Translation. The Art of Transforming Things in Byzantium", *CON-VIVIUM Supplementum: Spoliation as Translation: Medieval Worlds in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Brno 2021, 20–38; B. Ferjančić, S. Ćirković, *Stefan Dušan kralj i car (1336–1355)*, Beograd 2005, 27; V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 230–231.

⁴⁶ In the legacy of Đurđe Bošković, there are also photographs mentioned in his text (showing the state of the chapel before its demolition), as well as ground plan sketches. The appearance of the chapel is visible exclusively in the photographs taken by Vladimir R. Petković, which are preserved in the National Museum in Belgrade. D. Preradović, *U ime nauke i domovine*, 86.

⁴⁷ C. Mango, *The Brazen House; a study of the vestibule of the imperial palace of Constantinople*, Copenhagen 1959, 21; *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De cerimoniis*, ed. J. J. Reiske, CSHB, Bonn 1829–40, p. 276, 458; *Theophanes Continuatus, Chronographia*, ed. I. Bekker, CSHB, Bonn 1838, p. 467; B. Miljković, "Christ Chalkites in the Chora Monastery", *Zbornik radova vizantološkog instituta 61* (2024), 125–139.

⁴⁸ It should be noted, as Vojsilav J. Đurić rightly observed, that "Matejić, tant avec son édifice qu'avec ses fresques, illustraient parfaitement les idées en vigueur à cette époque et l'idéologie politique des souverains et de l'État qui les ont fait ériger". V. J. Djurić, "L'art impérial serbe: marques du statut impérial et traits de prestige." *Βυζάντιο και Σερβία κατά τον ΙΔ' αιώνα / Byzantium and Serbia in the 14th Century*, ur. Ev. Παπαδοπούλου i Δ. Διαλέτη, Αθήνα: [s.n.], 29; S. Ćirković, "Between Kingdom and Empire: Dušan's State 1346–1355 Reconsidered", *Βυζάντιο και Σερβία κατά τον ΙΔ' αιώνα / Byzantium and Serbia in the 14th Century*, edd. Ev. Παπαδοπούλου i Δ. Διαλέτη, Αθήνα: [s.n.], 120.

⁴⁹ N. Okunjev, "Građa za istoriju srpske umetnosti", 89–118; A. Deroko, "Matejča", 84–89; S. Ćurčić, "Architecture in the Byzantine Sphere of Influence around the Middle of the Fourteenth Century", *Dečani i vizantijska umetnost sredinom XIV veka: međunarodni naučni skup povodom 650 godina manastira Dečana, septembar 1985 / Dečani et l'art*

Fig. 23. Church of St. Nicetas in Čučer near Skopje, endowment of King Milutin (© Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Сл. 23.
Црква Светог Никите у Чучеру код Скопља, задужбина краља Милутина (© Јасмина С. Ћирић)



analysis reveals that Mateič's design is neither a simple imitation nor an isolated experiment but a sophisticated reworking of models perfected under King Milutin, most of all church of St. George at Staro Nagoričino,⁵⁰ as well as smaller church such as Saint Nicetas near Čučer (fig. 23). Both churches share the stone masonry in the lower zones combined with elaborately patterned brickwork in the upper sections—that visually and symbolically marks continuity with Byzantine imperial practice both of Constantinople and Thessaloniki.⁵¹ Staro Nagoričino's façades are defined by their restrained, systematic articulation, with evenly spaced blind niches and small windows marking the exterior expression of the inscribed-cross plan. Its apsidal ensemble is particularly instructive: tiered blind arcades and modest brick decoration establish a hieratic yet sober monumentalism appropriate to Milutin's pious image.⁵²

Mateič adopts this compositional grammar but magnifies and transforms it. Its apsidal design clearly references Staro Nagoričino in its tiered articulation and the rhythmic use of blind niches, yet introduces greater verticality, more pronounced projection of pilasters, and denser ornamental brickwork. The architectural language of Mateič represents a deliberate reinterpretation of the building practices developed during the reign of King Milutin, a gesture that invites comparison with the architectural plan of the prestigious Constantinopolitan monuments, most notably the southern church of the Monastery of Christ Pantokrator in Constantinople foundation of the Empress Eirene (1118–1124).⁵³

byzantin au milieu du XIVe siècle, ed. V. J. Đurić, Beograd 1989, 60–66.

⁵⁰ N. L. Okunjev, "Građa za istoriju srpske umetnosti", 91.

⁵¹ V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 229.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 56–58; J. S. Ćirić, "Brick by brick", 206 – 214.

⁵³ The Pantokrator Monastery held significance not only in cultic but also in dynastic

Mateič's façades, with their elaborate brick ornamentation, complex patterning including chequerboard motifs on the drum zones, and the systematic use of blind niches and pilasters, demonstrate a clear familiarity with this Constantinopolitan model.⁵⁴ Such parallels suggest that Tsar Dušan's builders did not merely reproduce local Serbian models but consciously appropriated and transformed the architectural language of the imperial capital itself, seeking to legitimize Dušan's imperial claims through direct visual and material quotations from the most authoritative Byzantine sources.

This dynamic of imitation and transformation is further evident when comparing Mateič to Saint Nicetas near Čučer. The church of Saint Nicetas exemplifies a more conservative approach: while it demonstrates refined masonry and careful articulation, it maintains modest proportions and limited ornamental complexity.⁵⁵ Mateič, by contrast, pushes these elements to their limits, introducing an ambitious ornamental system that includes complex sawtooth friezes, chevron bands, and the striking use of checkerboard patterns on the drum zones—visual signatures of both technical virtuosity and ideological ambition. Taken as a whole, the church at Mateič should be viewed as a monument decisively influenced by a local architectural workshop associated with the building projects of King Milutin.⁵⁶

Importantly, Mateič does not simply emulate Byzantine forms in a superficial manner but adapts them to local needs and dynastic memory. The preservation and integration of the earlier parekklesion within the new church—a structure dating back to the time of Isaac I Komnenos—demonstrates an acute awareness of the site's layered sacred history.⁵⁷ Namely, visualizing political power in Mateič is achieved not only through architectural form but also through a highly complex fresco program. In this context, the dynastic trees depicted on the west wall of the church play a crucial role. It is well established in historiography that King Milutin's reign produced some of the most elaborate examples of dynastic imagery to suit Serbian ideological needs.⁵⁸

terms. It was notably the place of imprisonment for Stefan Dečanski and his son Dušan. Tsar Dušan's decision to adopt this Constantinopolitan foundation as a model is further emphasized by the placement of the fresco of Christ Pantokrator in the lunette above the church's southern portal. Notably, depictions of archangels also appear inside the building—next to the southern entrance and in the central apse, where one is painted directly onto the window. This arrangement suggests a carefully developed iconographic program in which the archangels are presented as celestial guardians of the sacred space, in keeping with their role in both dynastic and liturgical contexts. C. Mango, *Architettura bizantina*, Venezia 1974, 235–243; V. Korać, "Sveti Arhandeli. Dušanov carski mauzolej", *Glas SANU CCCLXXXIV, Odeljenje istorijskih nauka, knj. 10*, Beograd 1998, 191–201; Idem, 231.

⁵⁴ V. Korać, M. Šuput, *Arhitektura*, 160–161.

⁵⁵ G. Velenis, "Building Techniques and External decoration during the 14th Century in Macedonia, *L'art de Thessalonique et des pays balkaniques et les courants spirituels au XIVe siècle: recueil des rapports du IVe colloque serbo-grec*, ed. Dinko Davidov, Belgrade 1985, 96–100; V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 22, 23, 26.

⁵⁶ V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 231.

⁵⁷ A. Deroko, "Matejča", 84–89; Đ. Bošković, *Srušena je i stara kapela u Matejiću*, 153–157.

⁵⁸ B. Cvetković, "Royal Imagery of King Milutin in Historical Context Revisited," in



Fig. 24, 24a. Genealogical trees, north and south sides of the west wall of the ceremonial compartment in the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount (© Mihajlo Džamovski)

Сл. 24, 24а. Генеалoшка стабла, северна и јужна страна западног зида церемонијалног простора цркве Богородице црногорске (Матеич) (© Михајло Џамтовски)

These compositions, typically beginning with a saintly ancestor, emphasized the sacred lineage of the ruling house and set Serbian royal ideology apart from its Byzantine counterpart.⁵⁹ Each foundation adapted the genealogical scheme to its patron's political agenda. For instance, the large fresco on the tower of Studenica, though now damaged, once displayed both Jesse's and the Nemanjić trees side by side, incorporating scenes such as the Baptism and Crucifixion of Christ in an unconventional sequence. At Mateič, two genealogical trees occupy opposite sides of the west wall of the ceremonial compartment (fig. 24, 24a). The surviving inscriptions—written in Greek—identify some of the figures as Byzantine emperors. Earlier scholarship interpreted the imagery as a composite genealogy of Serbian, Bulgarian, and Byzantine rulers linked to Empress Helena Asen. However, recent reexaminations of early photographs and a closer reading of the iconography suggest a very different concept: no Bulgarian rulers are represented; the founding figure is more likely Constantine the Great than St. Simeon Nemanja.⁶⁰

The construction of this church atop a hill commanding a broad surrounding landscape is consistent with the typology of monuments bearing a memorial or triumphal character. This interpretation is further supported by iconographic and spatial elements such as the procession of holy warriors extending from the western entrance toward the altar,⁶¹ and the imposing tripartite triumphal arch linking the narthex and the naos.⁶² Within this context, the genealogical fresco—commonly referred to as the Mateič tree—has often been interpreted by scholars as part of Dušan's broader vision for his imperial coronation.⁶³ A close visual analysis of the composition not only supports this interpretation but also reveals the presence of additional historical figures—such as the logothete Theoktistos—who are praised for their role in suppressing iconoclasm and reinstating the veneration of icons. Rather than a mere dynastic chart, the tree emerges as a deliberate construct, assembling select protagonists from Christian history, with Dušan enthroned at its apex as the newly crowned Tsar of the Serbs and Greeks.⁶⁴

Holy King Milutin and his Age: History, Literature, Art, ed. Jasmina S. Ćirić and Srboj Ubiparić, Kragujevac 2023, 667–691; D. Vojvodić, “Kraljevi portreti,” in *Sveti kralj Milutin. Vladar na raskršćima svetova*, ed. Srđan Pirivatrić, Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić, and Danica Popović, Beograd 2022, 377–425.

⁵⁹ D. Vojvodić, “Od horizontalne ka vertikalnoj genealoškoj slici Nemanjića,” *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 44/1 (2007), 295–311.

⁶⁰ D. Vojvodić, “Rodoslovne predstave i ideja praroditeljstva u manastiru Studenici,” in *Manastir Studenica – 700 godina Kraljeve crkve*, ed. Ljubomir Maksimović and Vladimir Vukašinović, Beograd 2016, 253–266.

⁶¹ V. J. Đurić, “Le nouveau Constantin dans l'art serbe médiéval,” in *Αιθιοπικών. Studien zur byzantinischen Kunst und Geschichte. Festschrift für Marcel Restle*, ed. Thomas Steppan and Birgitt Borkopp, Stuttgart 2000, 55–65.

⁶² D. Gorgievski, “Identifikacija na svetite vojni vo manastir Mateiče,” *Patrimonium* 7–8 (2010), 197–216.

⁶³ V. Korać, *Spomenici*, 212–242; J. S. Ćirić, J. S. “Mateič Monastery: a Place of Cultural Memory,” 305–322.

⁶⁴ S. Marjanović-Dušanić, *Vladarska ideologija Nemanjića*, 89, 92, 197, 218; Lj.

Conclusion

Architectural articulation of Mateič likewise transcends mere copying. While the cross-in-square plan aligns it with a pan-Byzantine tradition, its innovative trivelon in the west—framing the monumental triumphal arch—demonstrates knowledge of advanced Constantinopolitan spatial concepts and ceremonial planning. This feature transforms the movement of worshippers through the space into a choreographed passage from the secular to the imperial-sacred realm, mirroring the ceremonial progression of imperial processions in the Byzantine capital.

In this sense, Mateič stands as both a culmination and an evolution of the Nemanjić dynasty's architectural legacy. It pays deliberate homage to Milutin's mature Byzantine style while advancing it to new ideological heights. Through its complex ornamentation, reimagined spatial planning, conscious references to Constantinopolitan imperial models, and careful preservation of earlier sacred forms, Mateič proclaims Tsar Dušan's aspiration not merely to imitate Byzantium but to inherit and redefine its imperial legacy on Serbian soil.

Maksimović, "L'empire de Stefan Dušan: Genèse et caractère," *Mélanges Gilbert Dagron. Travaux et Mémoires* 14 (2002), 415–428; S. Pivatrić, "Ulazak Stefana Dušana u Carstvo," *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 44/2 (2007), 381–406. This observation was first brought to my attention by my colleague and friend Dr Branislav Cvetković, senior curator, who presented related insights at the international conference *Niš and Byzantium* on June 4, 2025, in a paper titled "Imagery of Theoktistos, Regent and *logothetēs tou dromou*." His interpretation is further supported by newly examined photographs of the fresco's inscriptions, which reveal the presence of additional figures associated with the triumph of the iconophile cause, such as St. Sergius the Confessor and St. Theodosia of Constantinople. It is also important to highlight Eva Hausteiner's significant contribution: in the preserved lower portion of the fresco, she identifies the partial remains of a halo, whose placement and integration into the genealogical scheme suggest the original presence of two ancestral figures—likely Constantine the Great and Helena, or more precisely Constantine bearing the Cross.

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ЦРКВА БОГОРОДИЦЕ ЦРНОГОРСКЕ (МАТЕИЧ): ИЗВОРИ АРХИТЕКТУРЕ

Рад разматра Цркву Богородице Црногорске (Матеич) у контексту архитектонских извора који су обликовали њену концепцију средином XIV века. Полазећи од анализе просторне организације, конструктивних техника и фасадне артикулације, истраживање указује на сложен процес преузимања, адаптације и преобликовања византијских и српских градитељских модела у време владавине цара Стефана Душана.

Посебна пажња посвећена је односу Матеича према задужбинама краља Милутина, нарочито цркви Св. Ђорђа у Старом Нагоричину и Св. Никити код Чучера, као и могућим цариградским узорима, укључујући архитектонски проседе манастира Пантократора. Анализа показује да се у Матеичу не ради о механичком понављању постојећих типолошких решења, већ о свесном и програмском преобликовању архитектонског наслеђа у складу са царским амбицијама српског двора.

Кроз испитивање петокуполне основе, бипартидне технике зидања, система ређања опеке, артикулације апсидалног склопа и увођења монументалног тривилона, рад показује да Матеич представља простор у коме се архитектонски извори трансформишу у носиоце идеолошког значења. Очување и интеграција старије сакралне структуре додатно указују на свесно успостављање континуитета са цариградском градитељском традицијом.

Матеич се, стога, може разумети као храм у коме се архитектонски извори не само рефлектују, већ и активно преосмишљавају, у функцији артикулације царске власти, династичке легитимације и културне апропријације византијског наслеђа у доба српског Царства.