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ROYAL CANOPY OVER THE CHURCH ENTRANCE: FORMS, SPATIAL CONTEXTS, ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAMS, AND MEANING OF THE DOME IN SERBIAN NARTHEXES OF THE 14TH CENTURY

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Abstract. The churches commissioned by King (later Emperor) Stephen Dušan, his important dignitaries, and later Serbian rulers—e.g., Holy Archangels near Prizren, Lesnovo, Hilandar, Markov Manastir, Ravanica, and Manasija—often have a narthex or an entrance porch covered by a dome. This architectural element is additionally emphasized by a specific program of painted decoration—as witnessed by several preserved ensembles—which, like the one in the nave’s dome, contains some representation of Christ surrounded by members of the heavenly ranks. Through the choice of iconographic elements of Christ or accompanying personages, these compositions are often imbued with a royal subtext. Such an architectural and iconographic solution has its precedents in some Byzantine monuments from the 10th to the 12th century, of which the most important for the Serbian

² An earlier, shorter version of this work, titled “The Dome over the Entrance to the Church as an Imperial Prerogative: Serbian and Byzantine Examples, Form, Program, and Meaning,” was presented at the Seventh National Conference of Byzantinists, held in Belgrade from June 22 to 25, 2021, in the thematic session “The Serbian-Greek Empire of the Nemanjić Dynasty: Idea and Reality.” I would like to extend my gratitude to my colleagues who participated in the discussion following my presentation, particularly Dragan Vojvodić and Smiljka Gabelić, whose insights were invaluable.

Subsequently, a revised version was included in the thematic collection of papers *Царство и Патријаршија: Идеја и стварности царства Немањића* [Empire and Patriarchate: The Idea and Reality of the Nemanjić Empire]. This volume is scheduled to be published jointly by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Serbian Committee for Byzantinistics, with Ljubomir Maksimović and Srđan Pirivatrić serving as editors. Due to space constraints and the thematic scope of the collection, some material had to be omitted, resulting in an article with a narrower geographical and chronological focus, under the title “Купола над улазом у цркву као царски прерогатив: српски примери из времена Царства” [“The Dome over the En-

examples, as their potential models, are probably the Athonite *katholika* and the main church of the Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople. The prevalence of this architectural element notably increased during the Late Byzantine period, particularly in political entities whose rulers sought independence and even aspired to imperial dignity, such as Epirus, which bordered the Serbian state, and later Mystra. In these Byzantine churches, the specific form of this micro-architectural feature and its strategic placement at the church entrance can be associated with imperial patronage and royal visits. Given the well-supported hypothesis that this paradigm was adopted into Serbian architecture with the same imperial connotation, this study examines its spatial, formal, and iconographic elements, along with its semantic and ideological context. The author's ongoing research of this phenomenon encompasses all preserved and relevant examples within the Serbian Empire, Byzantium, and the broader Byzantine world. However, for the purpose of this article, the discussion will be limited only to Serbian monuments, include an examination of their potential models, and underscore particular nuances in meaning exhibited by their spatial solutions and iconographic programs.

trance to the Church as an Imperial Prerogative: Serbian Examples from the Period of the Empire”].

Further research on this topic was undertaken as part of the research project “Assessing Neoplatonism in the Religious Traditions of the 14th- and 15th-Century Balkans (ANEB),” supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia under the Identities Program, grant no. 1554. This resulted in an expanded version, presented here in English, aimed to provide the wider audience with a more comprehensive exposition of the subject matter. I wish to express my sincere thanks to Vladimir Cvetković, principal researcher of the ANEB project, for including me as a researcher, and to the Editorial Board of *The Journal of the Faculty of Philosophy in Priština*, particularly Branislava Dilparić, for their acceptance of this work and their support during the final stages of its writing.

Introduction

The 14th century in Serbia was marked by a profound shift in architecture, resulting from a turning to the Byzantine paradigm, both in terms of design and building technique. Many new architectural features were introduced for the first time, bringing with them specific meanings but also acquiring some additional nuances. Monumental art, on the other hand, shows continuation, as it was invariably created by Byzantine artists even in the previous century. However, following the new trends in the artistic centers of Constantinople and Thessaloniki, new themes, complex narratives, and subtle renderings of biblical stories and theological notions gradually filled church walls and vaults.³ The present study aims to address one particular architectural element, novel to Serbia at the turn of the 14th century, which in combination with imagery painted on its surfaces provided the church with a distinct and symbolically charged feature. This is the dome or domical vault covering the church's entrance bay, commonly situated in the narthex, but also found in porches.

Certain Serbian churches commissioned by rulers and members of nobility alike, such as the Holy Archangels near Prizren, Lesnovo, Hilandar (Fig. 1), Markov Manastir, Ravanica, and Manasija, have a narthex or an entrance porch topped with a dome. This architectural element, distinguished by its mere form, is additionally emphasized by a specific program of painted decoration—as witnessed by a few preserved ensembles, most notably in Lesnovo and Markov Manastir—which, like the one in the nave's dome, contains some representation of Christ surrounded by members of the heavenly ranks. Through the choice of iconographic elements of Christ or accompanying personages, these compositions are often imbued with deep theological meanings relevant to the narthex's liturgical use, but they also bear a royal subtext. In this article, I will present and discuss all known Serbian monuments, both the surviving ones and those documented by archaeological evidence or historical sources. I will begin with an examination of potential models found in various Byzantine regions. Serbian examples will be exposed chronologically, divided into those created before, during, and after the period of the Serbian Empire (1346–1371). Addressing each case separately, I will explore particular nuances in meaning exhibited by their spatial solutions and iconographic programs, underscoring those pointing to the royal/imperial aspect.

³ For a general assessment of the Byzantine architectural and artistic influences in Serbia, particularly in the 14th century, see Vojvodić & Popović (Војводић & Поповић, 2016, pp. 13–55, 271–329; with older bibliography).



Fig. 1. Hilandar Monastery, katholikon viewed from southwest; from right to left: domed naos, twin-domed inner narthex, and single-domed exonarthex (photograph by author).

Byzantine Examples and Potential Predecessors

Before delving into the presentation and analysis of Serbian examples of dome structures over church entrances, it is pertinent to briefly address their prehistory within the context of Middle and Late Byzantine architecture. My present research was conceived precisely while studying the narthexes of the earliest monasteries of Mount Athos—Great Lavra, Ivērōn, and Vatopedi—constructed at the end of the 10th century.⁴ In these structures, I observed that the central of their three bays is emphasized in several ways. Firstly, it features a centrally designed, i.e., square plan with a corresponding vault, which typically differs from the adjacent two bays and has a domical shape, i.e., a sail vault. Secondly, the stone floor pavement in the central bay is more decorative, employing a pattern that is also centrally conceived and marks the position under the domical vault. Lastly, the painted representations on the vault, featuring an image of Christ in the center,

⁴ Stanković (2017).

are reminiscent of the iconographic program found in the church's main dome, that in the naos. Within this configuration, the domical or sail-shaped vault holds a particularly notable and distinctive position. This form can be associated with the form and meaning of the canopy, both in its liturgical and royal use.⁵ Similar examples can be observed in several other preserved churches from the same period: Myrelaion Church (before 920), Eski İmaret Camii (11th century), and Vefa Kilise Camii (11th or 12th century) in Constantinople,⁶ and Nea Monē (1049) on Chios.⁷ Of these, the first two buildings—if the identification of the latter with the katholikon of the Monastery of Christ Pantepoptēs is accepted⁸—as well as the last one, were royal foundations; the Byzantine identification of the Vefa Kilise Camii remains uncertain. This suggests that this architectural form most likely framed the ruler's visits to and presence in the church, either at the entrance or in the gallery.⁹ The same conclusion was reached by Jelena Bogdanović in her detailed and exhaustive study of the ciborium and related forms within the Byzantine church, taking into account the specific position of the architectural feature that is the subject of the present analysis.¹⁰ However, despite their status as imperial endowments, the Athonite monasteries, probably also Nea Monē on Chios, all located far from the capital and disassociated from the imperial ceremonial, were not visited by emperors as far as is known. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the status of these monasteries, which were either founded or protected by emperors, made it essential that an adequate ceremonial framework be provided to honor their potential visit or mark their symbolic presence, i.e., signal their protection. Thus, the domical feature at the church entrance—the place where the emperor would be welcomed and where visitors would first encounter the church—served to visibly announce that the monastery enjoyed imperial patronage.¹¹

Another monument from this period, the complex of three churches in the former Pantokrator Monastery (constructed between 1118 and 1136) in Constantinople, a foundation and mausoleum of the Komnenos dynasty, is also interesting and relevant. Of particular note is its southern church, which served

⁵ See *ibidem*, pp. 266–296.

⁶ About these churches, see Ćurčić (2010, pp. 275–277, 361, 360–361), Ousterhout (2019a, pp. 306–309, 354–356, 354), and Marinis (2014, pp. 172–175, 138–139, 204–205), respectively.

⁷ Ćurčić (2010, pp. 387–388); Ousterhout (2019a, pp. 313–314, 390–391). Both authors cite previous scholarship on this church.

⁸ On the proposed identifications of this church, see Marinis (2014, pp. 138–139, with bibliography).

⁹ Stanković (2017, pp. 283–293, 459–460).

¹⁰ Bogdanović (2017, pp. 235–241, 257). Jelena Bogdanović also connects the presence of the dome in the narthex with the funerary use of this space (2017, pp. 240–241).

¹¹ See footnote 9 above.

as the monastery's *katholikon*, and the dome rising in the center of the gallery formed above the narthex. This church was the first to be built in the complex, but the dome in question is the product of a subsequent transformation.¹² Unlike the previous examples, it is a dome proper that extends beyond the roofline of the gallery. Inside, structurally supported by arches within the gallery, it has additional pairs of slender pillars on three sides—north, east, and south—which support smaller arches and form three elegant *tribēla* that enhance the appearance of the room below the dome and give it the character of a canopied place of special distinction. This richly articulated architectural solution is the only such example surviving in Constantinople, raising the question of how common it was. But, like other, less articulated examples, it undoubtedly served as a ceremonial setting for the imperial presence during religious services in the church.¹³ This is confirmed by the fact that, after the conversion of the church into a mosque, the *hünkar mahfil*, i.e. the sultan's lodge, was established in this area, allowing him to participate in the common prayer and thus indicating the continuity of the function of this space. During the Byzantine era, though the exact timing is unclear, the vault between the ground floor of the narthex and the gallery was removed precisely in this zone. Presumably, this was done to improve natural lighting in the narthex, which had become quite dark after the addition of the exonarthex, which took place during the Komnenian period, by 1136.¹⁴ While the need for improved lighting is a plausible explanation for this modification, I am more inclined to see it as the consequence of some change in the imperial ceremonial (or in correlation with it) implemented within this and perhaps other Constantinopolitan churches, whether it happened already in the time of the Komnenoi, when the emperor also maintained his "cells" (i.e. chambers) in the monastery,¹⁵ in the period of Latin occupation, when Pantokrator belonged to the Venetians and, for a brief time, may have even

¹² Robert Ousterhout (2000, p. 249; 2019b, p. 238) concluded that the dome over the gallery was added after the construction of the exonarthex.

¹³ The southern church, intended for monks, was undoubtedly closed to the laity, except perhaps for the gallery, which possibly allowed the emperor, even the empress, to attend monastic services without disturbing the monastery's *abaton* (Τάβντος, 2008, pp. 328–329).

¹⁴ This is when the monastery's *typikon*, which mentions the existence of the exonarthex, was drafted (Thomas & Hero, 2000, p. 725). R. Ousterhout considered (and repeated on several occasions) that the dome over the gallery was added in combination with the removal of the vault between the ground and upper floors of the inner narthex, and that its sole purpose was to provide natural lighting to the ground floor after the addition of the exonarthex, and by no means any ceremonial or liturgical needs (Ousterhout, 2000, p. 249; 2019a, p. 372; 2019b, pp. 238–239).

¹⁵ As specified by the founder of the monastery, Emperor John II Komnēnos, in his *typikon* for the monastery (Thomas & Hero, 2000, pp. 772, 732). These premises may also have been used to house prominent political opponents who were imprisoned in the Pantokrator Monastery on several occasions (see *ibidem*, 2000, pp. 725–726, with references).

served as an imperial palace,¹⁶ or following the arrival of the Palaiologoi in the city in 1261. Despite these changes, the domed area, now connected to the ground floor, continued to bear imperial connotations, potentially serving as a symbolic setting for the entry and reception of the emperor, within a new ceremonial order that had him attending the church services on the ground level, no longer at the gallery. With this new spatial solution and the retained royal meaning, I would say precisely because of them, the narthex dome was introduced into Serbian church architecture in the 14th century.

This transformation, from a first-floor to a ground-floor dome space, may have occurred exactly around the time when the future king Stephen Uroš III Dečanski and his son, Dušan, still a child, were imprisoned there,¹⁷ or shortly before, possibly leaving an impression on the future emperor and influencing his later architectural choices in Serbia, where only ground-level solutions appear. Additionally, the use of the gallery as a space for the imperial retinue, common in Constantinopolitan churches such as Hagia Sophia, apparently did not gain traction in Serbia. Instead, only the ceremonial aspect of the dome, i.e., the canopy—specifically, its use during imperial processions into the church—was retained. Furthermore, of considerable importance was the example of Mount Athos, whose influence in Serbia was strong and long-lasting,¹⁸ and where the domical vault occurs only on the ground floor, at the entrance, not in the gallery, which—judging by the research—was reserved exclusively for the abbot or some other distinguished member of the monastic community.¹⁹

A comparable architectural approach is observed in Epirus, where—with the notable exception of the church of the Panagia Parēgorētissa in Arta (rebuilt in 1282–1289 and expanded in 1294–1296), where a dome in the form of an open octagonal canopy is located over the central part of the western gallery²⁰—a

¹⁶ Janin (1969, pp. 516–517).

¹⁷ The main source on the exile and detention of Dečanski and Dušan in Pantokrator is the former's biographer, Gregory Tsamblak (Григорије Цамблак, 1989, pp. 53–62; see also Mineva, 2013, pp. 87–92). One of Archbishop Danilo II's disciples reports that the royal detainees were assigned an imperial palace for their living (Мак Данијел, 1989, p. 28; cf. also Ђирковић, 1981, p. 464, n. 7). Both these pieces of information would be correct if the Serbian princes had been accommodated in the royal quarters inside the monastery (see note 15). For some reason, Ferjančić & Ćirković (Ферјанчић и Ђирковић, 2005, pp. 26–28), accommodate Dečanski's imprisoned family in the Constantinopolitan monastery of St. John the Forerunner, without specifying the source of this information.

¹⁸ Cf. Korać (Кораћ, 1979).

¹⁹ See Stanković (2017, pp. 374–385; 2021, pp. 536–537, 541–542) and Ćurčić (Ђурчић, 2000).

²⁰ Paladopolou (Παλαδοπούλου, 2002, pp. 131–143); Georgiadou (2015, pp. 69–83, 114–122); Fundić (2022, pp. 170–172, with older bibliography). It should be mentioned that there is a sail vault on the ground floor, above the central bay in front of the main entrance to the naos. This means that on both levels of the narthex, an architectural setting for some

dome (or, alternatively, domical vault) over the narthex, which does not have an upper floor, is found in a significant number of churches. Among these, the churches of St. Theodora in Arta (second half of the 13th century), Panagia Vlacherna (narthex added after 1284) and Panagia Vellas (Red Church, completed in 1295/96) near Arta, and St. Demetrius in Kypseli (probably after 1306) provide illustrative examples.²¹ The patrons of the first two were the rulers of Epirus and their wives, while the last two were founded by high court dignitaries.²² It is interesting that all these churches—except for the Panagia Vellas—had narthexes added later, but all at almost the same time, at the end of the 13th or the beginning of the 14th century. It is a period that coincides with the reign of Despot Thomas (1296–1318), who assumed certain prerogatives of Byzantine emperors.²³ Notably, the church of St. Theodora has a dome proper over the central bay of the narthex, whereas the others employ blind domes or domical vaults. The paintings within the dome of St. Theodora, which date to the late 13th century, feature a depiction of Christ as the Ancient of Days surrounded by eight medallions with angels' busts. The prophets, selected to be depicted on the drum of the dome, announce Christ's incarnation and salvific mission on earth; among them, King David occupies the place of honor on the eastern side, flanked on the left by King Solomon and an unidentified prophet on the right.²⁴ The presence of the former two figures and their appearance in some later ensembles²⁵ suggest a royal dimension to the iconography. This pool of examples can be expanded with the churches of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (1294/5),²⁶ St. George in Omorphoklisia (ca. 1295–1317) near Kastoria, and the

form of the ruler's presence in the church—both a ceremonial entrance and attendance at/in rituals/prayers—was secured. Unfortunately, no painted decoration has been preserved in either vault that would confirm or refute this interpretation of these architectural elements.

²¹ For these structures, see Παπαδοπούλου (Παπαδοπούλου, 2002, pp. 45–49, 69–74, 118–120), Georgiadou (2015, pp. 94–108, 85–93, 162–167, 167–174), and Fundić (2022, pp. 161, 179, 197, 222).

²² See the references cited in the previous footnote.

²³ See Maksimović (Максимовић, 2013, pp. 432–433) and Fundić (2022, pp. 144–148). It is possible that in this context the use of the dome in the narthex as a symbol of an independent ruler and an architectural setting for the imperial ceremonial was more pronounced in that period.

²⁴ Fundić (2022, pp. 134, 165–166).

²⁵ See below.

²⁶ In this church's narthex, the sail vault over the central bay is adorned with an image of Christ as the Angel of the Great Council (see Димитрова, Коруновски и Грандаковска, 2013, p. 159), carried within a circular mandorla supported by six angels, while figures of the prophets Habakkuk and Ezekiel holding scrolls occupy the eastern corner extensions of the vault (Марковић, 2011, p. 131). For an analysis and interpretation of this composition, which is an illustration of the *Second Easter Homily* by St. Gregory the Theologian, unique in Byzantine monumental painting, see Miljković (2004). In the lower zones of

Holy Trinity in Berat (late 13th to early 14th century),²⁷ all of which not only feature blind domes in their narthexes, but exhibit many other architectural features aligned with Epirote building traditions.²⁸

In addition to other, above-discussed models that were the likely inspiration for the domed narthex in Serbian architecture, its adoption may also be attributed to the influence of Epirote building workshops, which were known to have been employed in Serbia,²⁹ or more likely to a potential emulation of the Epirote customs, i.e., the close ties and possibly similar ceremonial practices between the courts of Serbia and Epirus during the 13th and 14th centuries.³⁰ In contrast, churches in Mystra, influenced directly by Constantinople, often included galleries that played a crucial role in the appearance of members of the local court at religious services.³¹ This is evidenced by the presence of domes

the two arches that support the vault, the Four Evangelists are painted, whose open books are inscribed with Gospel passages on Mary's conception of Christ and His incarnation (Марковић, 2011, p. 138), that is, the theme we have already seen in the dome of St. Theodora in Arta (see above). It should be noted that in both churches, on the western wall of the central bay, there are depictions of Moses in front of the Burning Bush and on Mount Horeb (cf. Марковић, 2011, pp. 131, 138; Fundić, 2022, pp. 134, 165–166), which further expand the theme of Christ's conception and incarnation (cf. Марковић, 2011, p. 138, n. 283). Although this ensemble, together with the other compositions in the narthex of the Peribleptos church, exhibits a very interesting, complex content, it seems that there are no elements that would connect it to some royal aspect. Perhaps this should not be surprising considering that the founder is an aristocrat, even though his wife hails from the imperial family (see footnote 28 below).

²⁷ Kissas (Κίσσας, 2008); Meksi (1983, pp. 158–162, Tab. XVII).

²⁸ About these connections, see Ćurčić (2010, pp. 570–572, 606), Dimitrova, Korunovski & Grandakovska (Димитрова, Коруновски и Грандаковска, 2013, pp. 111–112), Georgiadou (2015, pp. 164–165), and Ousterhout (2019a, p. 569). The first of these three churches was commissioned by Progonos Sgouros, the son-in-law of Emperor Andronikos II, and the second by the local noble family Netzadēs.

²⁹ The builders of the Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren (constructed by 1307) came from Epirus (Ćurčić, 2010, pp. 645–646), and it is possible that Epirotes were also involved in the construction of some other Serbian endowments (cf. Ćurčić, 2015).

³⁰ Unfortunately, I am not aware of any study analyzing these connections and potential influences. The period that is relevant for this work would be the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century, when imperial ceremonial practices were imitated at the Epirote court and from which—probably not coincidentally—the Epirote examples of dome narthexes mentioned here date (see footnote 23 above). Interestingly, this period coincides with the reign of King Milutin, who is also known for adopting (or appropriating) certain elements of Byzantine culture and imperial practices (cf. Војводић и Поповић, 2016, pp. 20–21, 123, 299, 309–310, 317) and whose endowments were built by Epirote masters (see previous footnote).

³¹ See Tantsis (Τάντσης, 2008). The sponsorship and the possibility of a ruler's presence in these churches were further analyzed by Anastasios Tantsis (Τάντσης, 2015). It should be noted that there is an exception in Mystra, the church of Saint Sophia, which has a narthex with no gallery covered by a dome. This church's founder was a governor of

over the western galleries in the churches of Panagia Odēgitria (1309–1322) and Panagia Pantanassa (1428). However, this architectural and functional model did not significantly impact other regions of the Balkans.

Serbian Examples Prior to the Establishment of the Empire (1346)

Probably the earliest example of a dome over the narthex in Serbia is found at the church of St. Nicholas of Dabar, the katholikon of the Banja Monastery near Priboj and once the seat of the bishop of Dabar.³² It dates to 1329 and was erected under the sponsorship of King Stephen Uroš III Dečanski and his heir, Dušan. The dome in question, in its original form, was blind and externally decorated with a series of blind arches on a low drum.³³ The dome covers the central bay, which is square in plan, whereas the other two rectangular bays are barrel-vaulted. During the rebuilding of the church in 1899–1902,³⁴ this blind dome was transformed into a dome proper, with a circular drum pierced by eight windows, resulting in the loss of the original painted decoration, if it had not disappeared even before. Consequently, the iconographic program that once adorned the dome remains unknown. The overall architectural plan and spatial arrangement of the church, including the blind dome over the narthex, closely resembles two churches from the Epirote architectural corpus: the Panagia Vellas and the Virgin Peribleptos, which were mentioned earlier.

However, we should not omit the fact that a similar royal context for domes or domical vaults in the narthex is also evident in the architectural and artistic traditions of Mount Athos.³⁵ There, this practice persisted into the 14th century and later. The architectural design and iconographic treatment of the inner narthex of the katholikon of the Hilandar Monastery, which held the status of “imperial lavra,” provides a pertinent example. The church, constructed by King Stephen Uroš II Milutin between 1312 and 1315/16, with paintings completed in 1321,³⁶ features an innovative narthex, double the size of those found in older Athonite katholika and containing six bays separated by two

Mystra, who at the same time was a member of the imperial dynasty (Τάντσης, 2015, pp. 264–268, with older references).

³² A monographic presentation of the church and monastery is offered by Pejić (Пејић, 2009).

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 193–206.

³⁵ See above.

³⁶ For the dates, see Marković & Hosteter (Марковић и Хостетер, 1998) and Todić (Тодић, 2017, pp. 147–155). The architecture of the Hilandar katholikon is presented by Bošković & Kovačević (Бошковић и Ковачевић, 1992).

slender columns. In the central-eastern bay, directly in front of the entrance to the naos, the space is marked as in the older local examples by a small circular decoration within a square border in the floor pavement³⁷ and by a prominent domical vault. The vault is adorned with a painting depicting Christ Emmanuel within a medallion, as if in a special celestial sphere, which is supported by four angels. In the four corners of the adjacent north and south vaults, outside the composition but gesturing towards it, are the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel to the south, and Moses and Noah to the north. Isaiah and Moses occupy the honored eastern positions, symbolically representing spiritual and worldly authority directing toward God.³⁸ This composition bears thematic similarities to those in St. Theodora in Arta and the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid,³⁹ indicating a well-defined architectural and iconographic tradition in the treatment of the narthex's central bay at the turn of the 14th century across Byzantium. Although largely liturgical in nature, certain elements—such as the presence of prophets associated with the leadership of the God-chosen people and the mere canopy-like form covering the entrance space—suggest imperial connotations, a trend that further advanced under the reign of King, later Emperor, Dušan, as we will see in the next example.

The katholikon of the Treskavec Monastery offers a more interesting case. It is a building with a complex form and a complicated construction chronology, with some of its constituent parts built during Dušan's reign as king.⁴⁰ Here, I will focus on the northern dome of the outer narthex or, more precisely, the dome located in front of the entrance to the northern chapel, which is attributed to Dušan's patronage. Previous benefactors of Treskavec included the Byzantine emperors Andronikos II and Michael IX, or rather their general Michael Glabas Tarchaniotēs, as well as King Milutin.⁴¹ Tarchaniotēs likely sponsored the addition of an ambulatory room that envelopes the older single-naved and single-domed church with a narthex to the west and south, and doubles as an exonarthex.⁴² The construction or reconstruction of the inner narthex, possibly during this time or shortly before, involved its vaulting with a blind dome, potentially

³⁷ My field documentation. See also Stanković (2017, fig. 435 (5)).

³⁸ *Ibidem*, fig. 444. Overviews of the paintings in the Hilandar inner narthex are offered by Marković (1998, pp. 229–233, 238, 239–240) and Babić (Бабић, 1978, pp. 107–111). A more detailed examination is still a desideratum.

³⁹ See footnotes 24 and 26 above.

⁴⁰ About the architecture of this church, see primarily Kasapova (Касапова, 2009). The monograph by Smolčić-Makuljević (Смолчић-Макуљевић, 2019) provides a more comprehensive presentation by including an examination of the frescoes. For a brief overview of the architecture and art of Treskavec in English, see Vasileski (2016).

⁴¹ Marković (Марковић, 2014, pp. 82–88); Smolčić-Makuljević (2009, pp. 198–199).

⁴² Marković (Марковић, 2014, pp. 85–86).

reflecting the imperial status bestowed upon the monastery.⁴³ However, due to the uncertain dating of this part of the building, further exploration and inclusion in the study of domed narthexes should be left to rest until reliable data appear.

In Treskavec, Dušan joined his grandfather and his Byzantine imperial predecessors in patronage. Among his other contributions to the monastery,⁴⁴ Dušan's patronage entailed the construction of the northern, single-naved chapel, which has its own narthex. This narthex connects to the previously added ambulatory, with which it forms an exonarthex to the main church. The chapel's narthex is crowned with a fully-formed dome, including an eight-sided drum, mirroring a similar, supposedly older, dome on the exonarthex's southern end, constructed simultaneously with the ambulatory.⁴⁵ The latter dome, however, is an independent structure that lacks connection to the ground floor, from which it is separated by a vault, and was not even built to provide it with natural lighting, as it originally had openings only on its west and south sides.⁴⁶ This form suggests it was later added for symmetry with the northern dome,⁴⁷ creating the well-known motif of the two-domed narthex—in this case the outer narthex—which is commonly associated with Mount Athos.⁴⁸ The northern dome's inclusion to cover the entrance into Dušan's chapel, which notably does not have a dome over its nave, was thus deliberate, signifying the northern dome's architectural and symbolic importance.

This is further confirmed by the iconographic program of paintings within this dome, executed between 1334 and 1343, which also marks a significant departure from earlier examples, both in its content and in its articulation of

⁴³ The inner narthex was certainly built prior to 1334–1346, when the entire space of the exonarthex was painted (Бабиќ, 1961; cf. also Плигоријевић-Максимовић, 2005, pp. 81, 86). According to Elizabeta Kasapova, the blind dome is a product of the restoration of this part of the church that took place sometime between 1829 and 1847–1849 (Касапова, 2009, pp. 178, 181). However, it is possible that it was not a completely new architectural solution, but that the original dome was restored. On the dome covering the narthex as a possible symbol of the imperial status of a monastery, see Stanković (2017, pp. 266–296).

⁴⁴ For the texts and commentaries of the four charters he granted to Treskavec, see Babikj et al. (Бабиќ et al., 1981, pp. 55–185).

⁴⁵ Kasapova (Касапова, 2009, pp. 137–140, 188).

⁴⁶ See *ibidem*, pp. 21–22, 109–111, 123–124. The southern opening, in all likelihood, served as a door and the only entrance to the first-floor room formed inside the dome, while the western, narrower one was a window (*ibidem*).

⁴⁷ This should be confirmed by inspecting the southern dome, its masonry, and its connections with the lower part of the building, a procedure which is currently unavailable to me.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ćurčić (1971) and Stanković (2017, pp. 351–359). Elizabeta Kasapova also does not rule out the possibility that the southern dome was not part of the original design of the annexed ambulatory and that it was subsequently added, but she explains this by some change in the design during the construction of the ambulatory, that is, she ties the dome to the same construction phase (Касапова, 2009, p. 124).

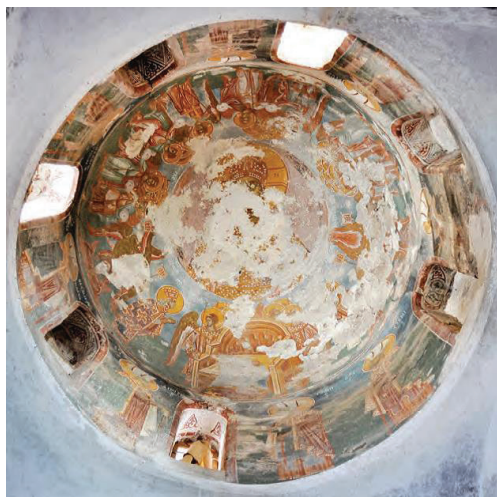


Fig. 2. Treskavec Monastery, interior of the northwest dome, with a painting of the Heavenly Court (photograph courtesy of Aleksandar Vasileski).

the dome's symbolic function. The imagery depicts the Royal Deësis and the Heavenly Court (Fig. 2), with Christ in imperial vestments and inscribed as Ἰησοῦς // Χριστὸς / ὁ Βασιλεὺς τῶν // βασιλευόντων (“Jesus Christ, the Emperor of emperors”) at the center of the dome's calotte.⁴⁹ Surrounding Christ is a broad band within which the Prepared Throne (Ετοιμασία), guarded by angels, is depicted on the east side. The Virgin Mary, also dressed in imperial attire, approaches with gestures of prayer the throne from one side, accompanied by another regal figure, likely King David, on the other. These figures are followed by representatives of the heavenly hosts, arranged in nine groups according to their hierarchy.⁵⁰

Below this, the spaces between the windows in the drum are occupied by eight holy warriors, dressed in courtly garments, among which the leading position on the east side is given to Saints George and Demetrius facing each other.⁵¹ They are all depicted gazing at and raising their right hands toward the throne in intercession for humankind.⁵²

⁴⁹ On this composition, see Smolčić-Makuljević (Смолчић-Макуљевић, 2002), Gligorijević-Maksimović (Глигоријевић-Максимовић, 2005, pp. 109–112), and Nemykina (Немыкина, 2016).

⁵⁰ Gligorijević-Maksimović (Глигоријевић-Максимовић, 2005, pp. 110–111). The heavenly powers are grouped according to the hierarchy described by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in his work *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, Chapters 6–9—starting with the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones as the highest, followed by dominions, powers, and authorities, and finally by principalities, archangels, and angels. For an English translation of this work, see Luibhéid & Rorem (1987, pp. 143–191).

⁵¹ The figures shown next to these two and completing the circle are Artemius and Eustratius, who follow George, and Theodore *Stratēlatēs* (the General), Theodore *Tērōn* (the Recruit), Procopius, and Mercurius, who follow Demetrius (Мијовић, 1967, p. 111; Глигоријевић-Максимовић, 2005, pp. 111–112).

⁵² Cf. Miјović (Мијовић, 1967, pp. 107–113), where this ensemble is considered as the central part of the illustration of Psalm 44 (45), i.e., the wedding ceremony of the King (i.e., Christ) and the Queen (the Mother of God, but also the Church), which extends across the entire outer narthex; the presence of David the Psalmist, as a sort of witness at the wedding, can be explained by his authorship of this psalm, as well as by his royal stature. For additional considerations, see Smolčić-Makuljević (Смолчић-Макуљевић, 2002) and Gjorgjievski (Ѓорѓиевски, 2014).

While the eschatological meaning of this entire ensemble is undeniable, it is crucial to underscore the distinctly royal elements embedded within it. Notably, this composition represents the earliest known depiction of the Heavenly Court,⁵³ and the choice of the dome as its location is particularly noteworthy. Nonetheless, Dušan decided to have his portrait painted not beneath this dome, but in the exonarthex's central area, on the eastern wall, flanking the entrance into the main church to the right.⁵⁴ Thus, the opportunity to have a dome serving as a symbolic canopy over the ruler, with its iconography establishing an imperial-heavenly framework, was apparently missed⁵⁵ or deliberately avoided. This raises the question of why such a program was implemented while Dušan was still a king.⁵⁶ Does it reflect his imperial aspirations and signals his future ambitions? Or could it suggest that some imperial prerogatives had already been acquired or appropriated? Alternatively, might the program simply emphasize the imperial status of the monastery, akin to those on Mount Athos, a status conferred earlier by Andronikos and Michael? Perhaps it was already marked by a blind dome over the inner narthex and Dušan may have wanted to provide a similar distinction for the chapel he commissioned, but as he was not yet emperor, he avoided being depicted under the canopy. Regardless of these possibilities, the imperial significance of this space appears indisputable, especially when considered in comparison to later examples from the imperial era in Serbia.

Examples from the Imperial Period (1346–1371)

The principal imperial foundations, specifically the katholikon of the Monastery of the Holy Archangels (ca. 1348–1352) near Prizren and the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Matejča (constructed before 1348), are surprisingly not the best examples of the architectural and symbolic element under consideration here. This is primarily due to the poor preservation of these monuments. Even though they are in such a state, their sheer size, valuable materials, decoration, and wall paintings witness to their magnificence and stature in the newly proclaimed empire.⁵⁷ The first structure (Fig. 3), which

⁵³ Vasileski (2016, p. 19).

⁵⁴ Gligorijević-Maksimović (Глигоријевић-Максимовић, 2005, p. 113); Cvetkovski (Цветковски, 2006–2007, pp. 158–162).

⁵⁵ Unlike the later example in the Lesnovo Monastery (see below).

⁵⁶ Another older church, rebuilt during Dušan's reign as king, the Church of the Virgin in Drenovo (Northern Macedonia), had a dome (proper or blind) covering the western entrance bay of an ambulatory aisle (Ćurčić, 2010, pp. 400–401). However, it is not completely clear whether this solution was created during the renovation or belonged to the church's older, late 11th-century phase.

⁵⁷ See Djurić (1996, pp. 32–35, 44).

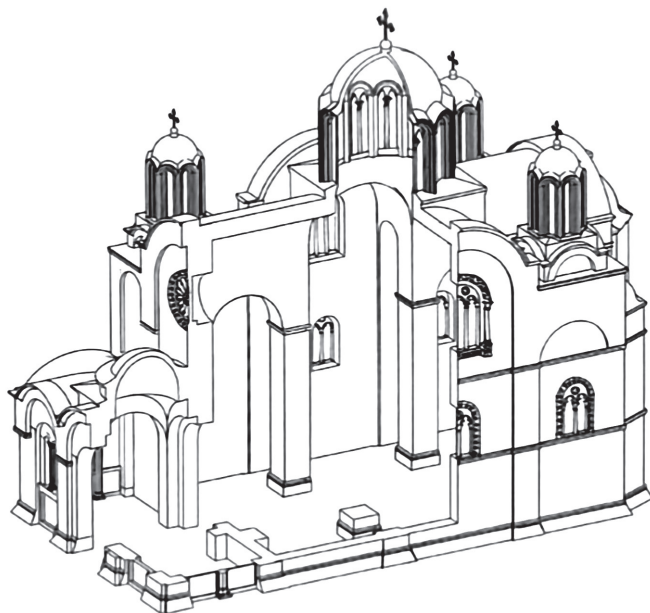


Fig. 3. Monastery of Holy Archangels near Prizren, katholikon, reconstruction, isometric cut-off (drawing courtesy of Igor Bjelić).

served as Dušan's endowment and burial church, has unfortunately survived only in its foundational remains and a number of fragments, now scattered at various places.⁵⁸ However, these remnants do confirm that the central of the three bays in the narthex, which took the form of a porch, was covered by a dome, most likely a blind one.⁵⁹ Additionally, other factors lend credence to the assumption that there was such a dome over the entrance to the Church of the Holy Archangels and, at the same time, suggest its complex origins. Chief among these are several well-supported theories regarding Dušan's emulation of certain architectural solutions employed at the Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople, a mausoleum for the Komnenoi and Palaiologoi, with which Dušan was familiar.⁶⁰ Furthermore, a recent reassessment of the Church of St.

⁵⁸ The monograph by Slobodan Nenadović (Ненадовић, 1967) still represents the seminal and most comprehensive work on this monastery. The book's largest section is devoted to the katholikon and the reconstruction of its original appearance (pp. 24–77). Ristić (Ристић, 1995) and Bjelić (Бјелић, 2020) partially revised and supplemented Nenadović's insights.

⁵⁹ Nenadović (Ненадовић, 1967, p. 35); Bjelić (Бјелић, 2020, p. 171).

⁶⁰ See footnote 17 above. For discussions on the architectural connections between the two churches (the Church of the Holy Archangels and the southern church of Pantokrator), see Korać (Кораћ, 1998, 2004) and Bjelić (Бјелић, 2020, p. 174). Igor Bjelić finds many

Nicholas of Dabar, which was co-founded by Dušan and originally featured a blind dome over its narthex, suggests it may have served as a local model.⁶¹ On the other hand, the Church of St. Nicholas—despite likely being constructed by local builders⁶²—shares its overall design with churches from the Epirote architectural tradition, as noted earlier. This suggests that the inclusion of a dome above the entrance to the katholikon of the Holy Archangels could also be attributed to Epirote origins, alongside the aforementioned Constantinopolitan model and Athonite influences. Unfortunately, the lack of preserved architectural details and painted decoration makes it challenging to confirm these hypotheses definitively.

The Church of the Matejča Monastery, built under the auspices of Dušan's wife, Empress Jelena, and their son, King Uroš, presents a slightly different issue.⁶³ The vaulting of the central part of the narthex, which was functionally distinct but spatially unseparated from the nave, has suffered severe damage. According to Aleksandar Deroko and his drawings, this rectangular space at the church's entrance was covered by two connected cross-vaults,⁶⁴ indicating the absence of a dome. Although the solution of employing an even number of bays instead of an odd number is quite unusual, there is no reason to doubt Deroko and other early researchers who had the opportunity to examine the church prior to its restoration in 1930. However, it is plausible that a domed porch once existed in front of the entrance, whose collapse or deliberate demolition might have caused the characteristic damage to the central portion of the church's western wall.⁶⁵ This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that the western arm of the inscribed cross over the naos, which was unusually but apparently consciously shortened, left a somewhat peculiar gap on the church's western façade.

points of contact between the two churches, as well as some divergences. However, he fails to address the presence of a domed structure above the entrance in both churches. In his second referenced work (Korać, 2004, p. 207), Vojislav Korać notes a "possible difference" in the upper construction of the two narthexes but does not elaborate on it. Nenadović includes Pantokrator among the possible models for the Church of the Holy Archangels only regarding the ornamental floor pavement of the two churches (Ненадовић, 1967, p. 100).

⁶¹ Vjelić (Бјелић, 2020, pp. 173–176).

⁶² Ćurčić (2010, p. 659).

⁶³ About the architecture of this church, see Dimitrova (Димитрова, 2002, pp. 39–74); Korać (Korać, 2003, pp. 212–242).

⁶⁴ Deroko (Дероко, 1933–1934, p. 86). The same information is also provided by Dimitrova (Димитрова, 2002, p. 50).

⁶⁵ See Millet (1919, fig. 127). Aleksandar Deroko noted in 1930 that a "narthex" had been attached to the western façade but was no longer there (Дероко, 1933–1934, p. 86; there have been no archaeological investigations around and inside the church to confirm or refute this—see Dimitrova (Димитрова, 2002, p. 40)). He also mentions that the exact appearance of the western portal cannot be established, probably due to the damage to that part of the façade (Дероко, 1933–1934, p. 89).

This gap would have created a physical separation between the western arm and the dome above the porch, leaving it unobstructed from all sides. On the other hand, if it is certain that no dome existed above the narthex or as part of a porch, then the *tribēlon* between the narthex and the naos inside the church could have provided the entrance area with a reduced canopy form,⁶⁶ and the iconographic program on the narthex's vault—now lost—might have conveyed a similar symbolic meaning. Such a program would have been consistent with the painted compositions found elsewhere in the narthex, where the most significant themes are the Ecumenical Councils, especially the depictions of the three councils presided over by emperors, prominently displayed on the eastern wall of the narthex just above the *tribēlon*, as well as the Council of Emperor Stephen Dušan, the Tree of Jesse, and the Tree of the Nemanjić dynasty, which has the connections with the Byzantine Komnenoi and the Bulgarian Asenids highlighted, in other parts of the narthex.⁶⁷ These themes collectively underscore the authority and legitimacy of imperial power, imbuing this part of the church with a distinctly imperial character.

The presence of a dome over the narthex of the next monument, a structure added to the slightly older church and painted in 1349, is perhaps the most striking example discussed thus far. It provides a spatial and visual framework that parallels previous instances, but also adds some new undercurrents. This monument is the Church of Archangel Michael of the Lesnovo Monastery (Fig. 4), commissioned by Despot John Oliver.⁶⁸ Although it is not an imperial foundation but an aristocratic one, the dome is not only present but also fully articulated architecturally—having a tall, eight-sided, rotated drum—and almost as large as the dome crowning the naos, thus indicating that its inclusion was conscious and meaningful. This raises the question of its specific significance within this context. One crucial consideration is that the narthex was likely added to the church, originally constructed in 1340/41, in response to the establishment of the Bishopric of Zletovo in 1347 and the placement of its seat in Lesnovo.⁶⁹ However, earlier narthexes of Serbian episcopal cathedrals are generally more spacious and lack domes, with the exceptions of St. Nicholas of Dabar, renovated two decades earlier, and perhaps the original exonarthex in Gračanica.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the dome at Lesnovo should be understood within

⁶⁶ Cf. Bogdanović (2017, pp. 219, 225–226).

⁶⁷ Dimitrova (Димитрова, 2002, pp. 199–226, 260–262).

⁶⁸ Basic information about the history and architecture of the Lesnovo church can be found in Gabelić (Габелић, 1998, pp. 27–38, 225–234) and Korać (Кораћ, 2003, pp. 153–188).

⁶⁹ Đorđević (Ђорђевић, 1994, p. 159); Gabelić (Габелић, 1998, p. 34 (with previous scholarship cited)). By reading the title of *sebastokrator* next to the name Oliver on the cross of the narthex dome, Vošković (Вошковић, 1932, pp. 90–91) concluded that the narthex was built before 1346, the date until which John Oliver bore this title.

⁷⁰ The former is discussed above, the latter below.

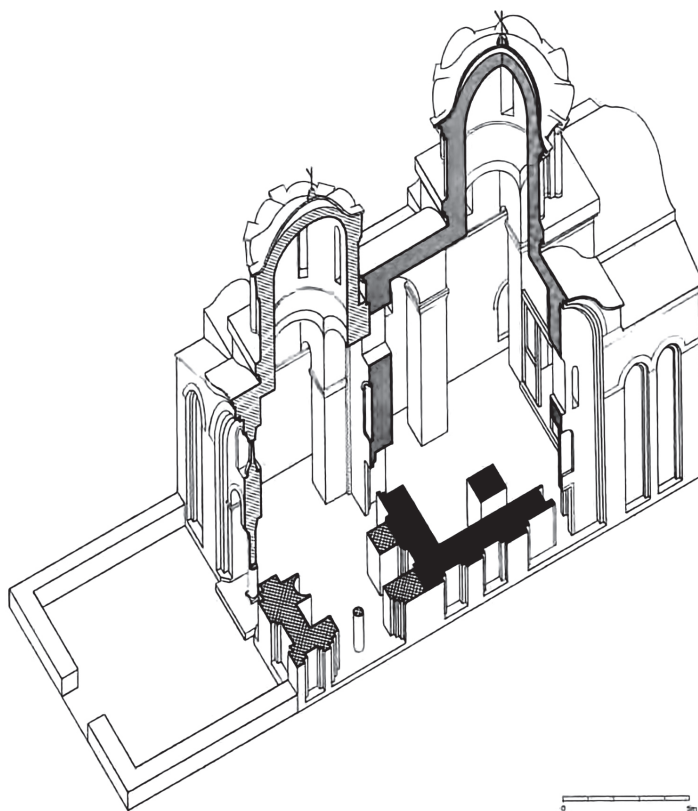


Fig. 4. Lesnovo Monastery, Church of Archangel Michael, axonometric cut-off (drawing courtesy of Slobodan Ćurčić)

the broader context of the newly proclaimed empire and the newly established bishopric, as suggested by nuances in the iconographic program.⁷¹

The dome's topmost inner surface features a depiction of Christ Pantokrator, blessing with His right hand and holding a closed Gospel in the left, encircled by a procession of angels. Below, on the drum between the eight windows, are representations of prophets and righteous figures. Except for two of these, David and Solomon, who as kings are placed on the eastern, honored side, others are characterized by their priestly and spiritual roles (Melchizedek, Aaron, and Samuel) or by their leadership in national and military contexts (Noah, Moses, and Joshua). Several of these figures can be interpreted in dual roles: David and Solomon are traditionally shown as kings but are also identified in their labels as prophets; Melchizedek is inscribed as righteous but is also

⁷¹ On the paintings in the narthex dome, see Gabelić (Габелић, 1998, pp. 155–167).

biblically known as both a priest and king of Salem; Joshua, though labeled as righteous, is unusually depicted in royal attire, while Noah's clothing bears priestly insignia.⁷² Smiljka Gabelić has thoroughly analyzed these depictions and provided an interpretation of the entire ensemble.⁷³ However, I should propose an additional level of reading: could this specific selection of Old Testament figures and their iconography symbolize the relationship between the Bishop of Zletovo and the Serbian emperor (along with Despot John Oliver)? Could it represent a harmonious convergence of spiritual and secular authority, akin to those of the Old Testament—here illustrated by the prophets and righteous—and divinely ordained and blessed in the same way? There are no compelling arguments against this interpretation,⁷⁴ and as observed in a similar case at Hilandar, the motif is not unique to Lesnovo; here, it is merely elaborated and more strongly emphasized. Indeed, the imperial element, with David, Solomon, and Joshua occupying the eastern, honored positions on the drum, seems even more pronounced.⁷⁵

This interpretation aligns with the proposition that the dome in the narthex can be seen as a kind of canopy over Emperor Dušan, whose monumental portrait depicted on the northern wall of the narthex is flanked by images of his wife and heir. The emperor is clearly presented as the sovereign ruler and protector of the church, whose true *ktētor*, John Oliver, is shown with his family in the lower register of the same wall.⁷⁶ These portraits were likely the first images seen by visitors entering the narthex through the southern biforium, which, identical to the western one, likely served as one of two equally important entrances to the narthex and the church.⁷⁷ In this context, and complementing the imperial dimension of the dome's program, the thematic choices in the paintings along the north-south axis appear deliberate. In the northern vault, directly above the imperial family portrait, is the Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel, or Christ in Glory.⁷⁸

⁷² Cf. *ibidem*, p. 160.

⁷³ See footnote 71 above.

⁷⁴ Admittedly, some attributes of the painted prophets also refer to the Virgin and the Incarnation (Габелић, 1998, pp. 160–161), i.e., a theme also present in some earlier narthexes (e.g., St. Teodora in Arta and the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid; see footnotes 24 and 26 above), so this subtext should not be neglected either.

⁷⁵ Their special position is also noted by Gabelić (Габелић, 1998, pp. 161–162). As a reminder and comparison, David and Solomon have similar positions in the dome program in St. Teodora in Arta (see footnote 24 above).

⁷⁶ About these portraits, see Gabelić (Габелић, 1998, pp. 167–172 (with older bibliography)).

⁷⁷ The approach to the narthex from the south seems to be slightly more emphasized by the fresco icon of the Virgin Eleousa, painted in a shallow, flat niche in the façade left of the biforium (see *ibidem*, p. 218, fig. 123; Копан, 2003, p. 160, drawing 6, fig. 14).

⁷⁸ For a description and analysis of this composition, see Gabelić (Габелић, 1998, pp. 190–192). Its spatial and thematic connection with the portraits of the emperor and founder

Opposite, in the southern vault and on the southern wall of the narthex, are illustrations of Psalm 148:1–12 (“Praise the Lord!”).⁷⁹ The dominant image of Christ in the southern vault depicts Him enthroned on cherubim within a circular white mandorla, surrounded by thirty-three frontally-shown angels. Around the mandorla, still in the vault, elements of the cosmos are depicted glorifying the Lord, while representatives of the earth participate in the glorification painted further below, on the wall. Among the latter, on the eastern half of the wall, are the “kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all judges of the earth” (Psalm 148:11), in whose ranks—according to Gabelić—Dušan and John Oliver can be identified.⁸⁰ Their merits before God and the divine favor they enjoy are likely metaphorically represented in the illustration of Psalm 149:8—“To bind their kings [i.e. enemy’s kings] with chains”—positioned just below.⁸¹ Thus, north of the dome, we observe divine grace being bestowed upon the emperor and, through him, upon the despot, while to the south, their participation in glorifying the Lord is depicted, as parts of the emphasized north-south axis. This sequence is, however, partially interrupted by the compositions found on the four pendentives at the base of the dome. They represent the Teachings of Church Fathers: John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and Athanasius the Great. They can be interpreted as the dissemination of the Divine Wisdom of Christ, here placed in the dome, to the faithful, including the emperor, entering the church.⁸² In this way, the four pictures thematically participate in a vertical axis going from the dome down. Additionally, they were likely chosen to also serve as a reminder for the congregation of the church’s status as an episcopal seat.⁸³

In this final context, the potential presence of a dome in the outer narthex of another episcopal cathedral, the Church of the Virgin Mary of the Gračanica Monastery, is particularly relevant and should be examined. This exonarthex, added in the mid-14th century,⁸⁴ was likely commissioned by Emperor Dušan, considering its association with a church that both served as the seat of the Bishophric of Lipljan and was an endowment of his significant royal ancestor,

has already been noted by Gavrilović (1980, p. 51; 1989, pp. 303–304).

⁷⁹ Gabelić (Габелић, 1998, p. 183–186).

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ See *ibidem*, p. 187. Pavle Mijović also saw in the selection of these psalms and their illustrations a symbolic depiction of imperial triumph (Мијовић, 1967, pp. 115–117).

⁸² Gavrilović (1980, p. 52).

⁸³ For a much more extensive and detailed interpretation of these four images, which point that—as in the program painted in the drum—there are some other levels of meaning, primarily liturgical and theological, embodied in the iconography of the narthex, see Gabelić (Габелић, 1998, pp. 162–167).

⁸⁴ Ćurčić (Ђурчић, 1988, p. 23).

King Milutin.⁸⁵ The emperor may have been moved to this decision following the elevation of the Bishopric to Metropolitane in 1346,⁸⁶ in a similar scenario the Lesnovo church acquired its narthex following the establishment of the seat of a diocese among its walls.⁸⁷ The current form of the exonarthex is likely the result of a rebuilding in 1383, which gave it the design of an open porch with a blind dome at the center, and an intervention in 1570, when the openings were walled up.⁸⁸ Archaeological investigations have shown that the original narthex had the same dimensions and likely a similar open design, but its interior structure was different, with the foundations of two columns suggesting that the space was divided into six bays.⁸⁹ The central western bay, where the entrance was situated, was square in plan, and it is plausible that it was covered by either a blind dome, which was also chosen for the 1383 rebuilding, or a dome with a drum and windows.⁹⁰

If the latter was true, the narthex would have closely resembled the exonarthex of the Hilandar katholikon (Fig. 1), which is likewise six-bayed in plan, originally conceived as an open porch, and features a dome proper with an eight-sided drum over the central western bay. This structure is traditionally associated with Prince Stephen Lazar (reigned ca. 1371–1389),⁹¹ but Slobodan Ćurčić suggested that it could actually be attributed to Dušan.⁹² In the context

⁸⁵ Dimitrijević (Димитријевић, 2022) considers the possibility that Stephen Dečanski and Dušan may have jointly been the ktētors, but without reaching a definitive solution to this problem.

⁸⁶ Janković (Јанковић, 1985, p. 63).

⁸⁷ See above.

⁸⁸ Ćurčić (Ћурчић, 1988, pp. 23–24, 54–55). The exonarthex was painted sometime during the 16th century and in 1570 (Тодић, 1988, p. 264). The painting in the dome has not been preserved, but a rendering of the Teaching of Athanasius of Alexandria remained on the southwestern pendantive (*ibidem*), which indicates possible similarities with the program in Lesnovo. Gračanica's present exonarthex and its paintings are the subject of Aleksandra Dimitrijević's doctoral dissertation, which is being finalized and in which additional elaborations on this part of the Gračanica church can be expected.

⁸⁹ Ćurčić (Ћурчић, 1988, p. 23); Mijović (Мијовић, 1978, pp. 154–157), who assumed that the exonarthex was built immediately after the completion of the church, i.e., after 1321; Vulović (Вуловић, 1978, p. 168).

⁹⁰ Mijović has proposed the possibility that either the central western bay was covered by one dome or that two domes topped the western corner bays (Мијовић, 1978, pp. 156–157). However, the geometry of the remains of the foundations indicates that only the central western bay was square in plan and allowed the placement of a dome in the standard way. On the other hand, Vulović takes into account the stronger substructure in this bay and suggests a belfry may have been built over it, drawing as an analogy the solution in the western part of the Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren (Вуловић, 1978, pp. 168–169).

⁹¹ See Korać (Кораћ, 1978, 1998).

⁹² Ćurčić (2000, 2010, p. 655); Ćurčić (Ћурчић, 2005, pp. 30–31). Branislav Todić has proposed an even earlier date, opining that the exonarthex was built under the auspices

of the imperial connotations of the dome at the church entrance, I concur with this earlier dating of the Hilandar exonarthex. Unfortunately, there are no extant fresco decorations inside from the time of construction to further support this hypothesis. Nevertheless, this edifice could have served as a means for Dušan to enhance the Hilandar katholikon—another commission of his grandfather Milutin—making it more grandiose and marking it more clearly as an imperial lavra enjoying the patronage and protection of both Byzantine and, from then on, Serbian-Greek emperors. The emperor's untimely death may explain why his vision was not fully realized, with the exonarthex remaining unpainted and being glazed only a few decades later.⁹³

Returning to the Lesnovo narthex, in light of the preceding discussion, the imperial aspect of the domed element used in its design should not be overlooked, despite the fact that the Lesnovo church and narthex were commissioned by a lord of high rank in Dušan's hierarchy but not by the emperor. This situation raises some questions. Did John Oliver, as a despot, have the right to include a dome in his foundation? Or was the imposing 2.95-meter-tall portrait of the emperor on the narthex's north wall meant to indicate his suzerainship but also potential patronage expressed in granting Lesnovo the status of an "Imperial Lavra," thus necessitating and justifying the presence of a dome to signify this status? The latter seems more plausible, as it parallels the situation at Treskavec, where a high-ranking dignitary of an empire had likely added, a few decades earlier, a blind-domed narthex to the existing church due to the monastery's imperial protection. Later on, in the very same church, Dušan, still a king, had his portrait painted not under the northwestern dome, which precedes the chapel he added, but further away, near the entrance into the main church. It was located there for strategic reasons, to be viewed by those entering the church, but perhaps also in order to leave space for the portraits of its earlier protectors, Emperors Andronikos II and Michael IX, to be painted beneath the northwestern dome, unless their portraits already existed in the main church's narthex, under the blind dome. Whatever was the case, in the same manner, the narthex dome in Lesnovo secures a "canopy" over the portrait of Dušan, now an emperor, which was deliberately exhibited on the wall where it could be best viewed.

of King Stephen Dečanski (Тодић, 2017, pp. 155–166). If this turns out to be correct, the building and its form could be viewed as a predecessor of and the potential model for the original exonarthex of Gračanica (see above). The sculptural decoration of the Hilandar exonarthex, with a consideration of its artistic origins and time of creation, is the subject of Božinović (2021).

⁹³ Under the sponsorship of either Prince Lazar (Тодић, 2017, pp. 166–170) or his son Despot Stephen (Božinović, 2021).

The presence of a dome above the entrance bay of the Church of St. Nicholas in Psača, constructed before 1355 and painted between 1365 and 1371,⁹⁴ may be explained in a similar manner as that of the Lesnovo Monastery. And, like Lesnovo, this church was an aristocratic foundation rather than a royal one. The central-west dome-covered bay, along with the adjacent northwest and southwest ones, serves as a narthex, uncommonly separated from the main body of the church merely by two columns.⁹⁵ The dome is of the proper type, eight-sided in the exterior and pierced by as many windows. The iconographic program in the narthex, particularly in the dome and on the north wall, mirrors Lesnovo by featuring Christ Pantokrator surrounded by a band with angels and seraphims in the calotte, prophets Ezekiel (with an abbreviated Vision), Jeremiah, Zechariah the Younger, Jonah, Joel, Aaron, and Moses in the drum, the Teachings of Saints John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and another church father on the pendentives,⁹⁶ and royal portraits on the north wall in the following sequence: Saints Helen and Constantine, the then reigning Emperor Uroš, and his co-ruler, King Vukašin.⁹⁷ Although the royal figures here are not located directly under the dome, like those in Lesnovo, they seem to similarly take advantage of its symbolic protection. One more common thread between the two churches should be noted: the domes in these aristocratic donations are fully realized architectural elements, with a drum and windows, contrasting with the blind dome found at the Church of the Holy Archangels in Prizren, built under direct imperial patronage. Viewed chronologically, this evolution in architectural articulation suggests a broader trend in ecclesiastical design during this period, though it also harkens back to earlier Byzantine examples, such as those seen in the churches of St. Panteleimon in Thessaloniki, St. John the Forerunner of the Lips Monastery in Constantinople, and St. Theodora in Arta. However, one wonders whether the difference in form was meant to suggest the distinction in hierarchy as well. Due to the lack of written sources addressing this issue and a very limited number of monuments with this feature, this question will have to remain unanswered. Regardless of the potential answer and despite the apparent design trend, the use of blind domes and domical vaults persisted in both Byzantine and Serbian contexts, exemplified by the Church of St. Demetrius at Markov Manastir.

⁹⁴ About this church, see Korać (Кораћ, 2003, pp. 189–211) and Đorđević (Ђорђевић, 1994, pp. 172–175).

⁹⁵ A similar solution can be observed in the Matejča church, as presented earlier.

⁹⁶ Đorđević (Ђорђевић, 1994, pp. 174–175).

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 174; Rasolkoska-Nikolovska (Расолкоска-Николовска, 1995).

Post-Imperial Examples

The main church of Markov Manastir is one of the best-preserved and most complex examples of the domed element over the church entrance, likely representing the peak in the development of this architectural feature. The construction of the church was initiated by King Vukašin sometime between 1365/6 and 1371 and completed by his son, King Marko, in 1376/7, when the church was painted.⁹⁸ As in Psača, there is no dividing wall between the naos and the narthex, which occupies the three westernmost bays. However, unlike Psača, the central bay is covered by a blind dome. It is composed of two shallow calottes, with the smaller one centrally nested within the larger one, thereby increasing both its depth and height.⁹⁹ From the exterior, the dome is subtly accentuated by a unique structure that conceals it. This structure features a square base topped by a cruciform roof, formed by two intersecting gabled roofs extending along the east-west and north-south axes. The interior surfaces of the blind dome are adorned with a rare depiction of the Feast of the Wisdom of God (Fig. 5). Within a medallion representing a celestial sphere covered with stars, but with an unusually white background, which matches the smaller calotte, there is an image of a youthful, beardless Christ, the Wisdom of God and God the Word,¹⁰⁰ seated on a red-colored rainbow, with his feet resting on two similarly colored celestial thrones, and blessing with both widely stretched hands. Surrounding this composition, painted on the surface of the larger calotte, there are the

⁹⁸ Tomić Đurić (Томић Ђурић, 2019, pp. 29–35), where the issue of dating is discussed in detail (with older bibliography). The architecture of this church is presented in Korać (Кораћ, 2003, pp. 275–314), and more extensively in Mirković & Tatić (Мирковић и Татић, 1925, pp. 7–26) and Kasapova (Касапова, 2012).

⁹⁹ This unusual solution, which is a little more demanding to execute, was obviously deliberate. As such, it prompted V. Korać to attribute it to the choice of the founder himself (Кораћ, 2003, pp. 278–279). On the other hand, without commenting on the fact that this form of the blind dome over the narthex was already recorded by Žarko Tatić (see previous footnote), Elizabeta Kasapova incorrectly presents the form of the blind dome to be that of a regular calotte (Касапова, 2012, pp. 73, 232, 235, 246, 306). Moreover, she mentions a profiled molding at the base of the calotte (pp. 73, 235), which actually does not exist.

¹⁰⁰ Christ is identified as *Ἡ ἐνυπόστατος τοῦ Θε[ο]ῦ* above His right hand, which once continued with words *Λόγου Σοφία* above His left hand, which translates as “the hypostatic Wisdom of God the Word”, i.e., “the (Divine) Wisdom which is also God the Word”. Therefore, P. Mijović is right to connect this representation of Christ with both the Wisdom of God from Solomon’s Proverbs 9:1–6, and God the Logos from the Gospel according to John 1:1–5 (Мијовић, 1971, p. 80). John Meyendorff attributes this connection to the Jewish tendency to personalize Wisdom, which directly led to the development of the doctrine of God the Logos in the prologue of John’s Gospel (Meyendorff, 1987, p. 392). Ivan M. Đorđević (Ђорђевић, 2006, p. 197) refers to the interpretation of Proverbs by St. John Chrysostom and argues that the identification of Wisdom with God’s Word and God the Son was generally accepted knowledge among both theologians and painters in the Middle Ages.



Fig. 5. Markov Manastir, Church of St. Demetrius, interior of the blind dome over the narthex's central bay with the painting of the Feast of the Wisdom and Word of God (photograph by author).

personifications of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, depicted as angels carrying the medallion (i.e., the firmament) encircling Christ. The personifications are arranged along the cardinal and diagonal axes, except towards the north, where there is a portrait of King Solomon, to whose prophecies this vision is attributed, pointing to the vision with a gesture of his right hand. These eight standing figures alternate with eight red-winged seraphims. Below these, in the transition zone from the circular base of the dome to the square of the central bay, choirs of saints, arranged in nine groups, face the Table of Wisdom, which is located on the eastern side and to which two angels invite. In the next and last zone of this ensemble, set lower on the eastern and western walls, standing figures of the holy martyrs—eight on each side—are depicted in prayer.¹⁰¹

This rich and intricate iconographic program, rooted in biblical, theological, and liturgical traditions, conveys a range of equally complex meanings.

¹⁰¹ For a more detailed description and examination of this painted ensemble and its thematic content, see Tomić Đurić (Томић Ђурић, 2019, pp. 363–377 (with older bibliography)).

While it aligns with the dome's celestial symbolism within the narthex, it also carries deeper connotations, which have been explored in detail by Marka Tomić Đurić.¹⁰² One of them, pertinent to the present analysis, relates to the image of the ideal Christian ruler.¹⁰³ This significance would have been especially relevant to King Marko, who sought to assert his authority and possibly expand his influence as the rightful heir to the Nemanjić dynasty. The church's location near Skopje, the imperial capital, further underscores his intentions. The strategic placement of this message in the dome as a symbolic architectural feature in the narthex was done in reference to older rituals and ceremonial practices from the period of the Serbian Empire, but also earlier, in Byzantium,¹⁰⁴ and also with some innovative yet complementing iconographic additions and spatial solutions. The omission of the wall between the narthex and the naos can be taken as one of these advancements, allowing the king's entrance to be visible from almost every part of the church. Additionally, comparable to the arrangements in Lesnovo and Psača, the dome in the narthex served as a ceremonial setting for the portraits of King Vukašin and King Marko, located on the north wall, which was common for the narthex area.¹⁰⁵ What is rather unusual is that they are represented within a linear composition of the Heavenly Court,¹⁰⁶ which—painted in the lowest register of the walls—extends over the entire circumference of the church and culminates in the figure of Christ as the Heavenly King. Enthroned Christ, flanked by the Virgin Mary, also regally attired, and St. John the Forerunner in what is known as the Royal Deësis, is placed in the naos, also on the north wall and exactly in the direction of the church's main dome and opposite a door piercing the south wall. In this position and within this spatial arrangement, the image of Christ is viewed by those entering the naos through the south door as framed by the dome, which serves as the canopy over the Heavenly King, in a similar manner to how the portrait of Emperor Dušan is framed in the Lesnovo narthex. But was this door important at all and who was meant to enter through it? Inferring from the painted program that frames it on the exterior side, it reliably had a royal dimension.¹⁰⁷ Were King Marko and

¹⁰² See previous footnote.

¹⁰³ Tomić Đurić (Томић Ђурић, 2019, pp. 375–377).

¹⁰⁴ On the narthex as the traditional place of the emperor's ceremonial entry into the church, see Stanković (2017, pp. 285–292) and Bogdanović (2017, pp. 51, 237, 249).

¹⁰⁵ About these portraits, which were largely destroyed in the period of the Bulgarian Exarchate (Томић Ђурић, 2019, pp. 17–18), see *ibidem*, pp. 387–392 (with older literature).

¹⁰⁶ In interpreting this composition and a similar representation in the northwestern dome at Treskavec (see above, as well as footnotes 49 and 52), P. Mijović refers to the verses of Psalm 44 (45) (Мијовић, 1967, pp. 113–115).

¹⁰⁷ See Tomić Đurić (Томић Ђурић, 2019, pp. 457–465) for references to previous studies of this issue. Among these, Sinkević (2012) gives special consideration to the possibility of royals entering the church through the southern portal. About southern entrances

his potential successors those who were expected to use this door to enter the church and, moving from there to the area under the dome, pay respects to the Heavenly King? This spatial and iconographic configuration seems to further support the thesis about the royal meaning of the dome structure over the entrance, whether it is located in the narthex or the naos. In Markov Manastir, each of the two royal groups was simultaneously in view underneath a dome, one in the naos, the other in the narthex.

Prince Stephen Lazar had similar political ambitions as King Marko, calling upon the traditions of the Serbian Empire, as evidenced by the architectural choices in his own foundation and mausoleum, the *katholikon* of the Ravanica Monastery (constructed between 1376 and 1381). One of these architectural elements relying on the Serbian imperial traditions is the church's narthex (added prior to 1385/6), which may have actually served as an *exonarthex*.¹⁰⁸ It had nine bays, separated by four pillars, and—according to the evidence provided by the *ktetorial* composition in the church—it was of an open type and there was a blind dome over the central bay. The Ravanica narthex draws conceptual parallels to the *exonarthexes* at Hilandar and Gračanica, being closer to the latter as rebuilt in 1383, which is understandable considering both the close chronology and potentially shared sponsorship with Ravanica. Both structures perhaps reflect the evolving architectural preferences of the late 14th century, characterized by the enlargement of narthexes in monastic churches¹⁰⁹ and the continued use of blind domes.¹¹⁰ The latter was possibly inspired by earlier models like the Church of the Holy Archangels, which also served as a model for Ravanica and its five-domed naos design. Furthermore, they may demonstrate certain changes in the position of the domed bay—specifically, its movement from the very entrance to the center of the narthex—possibly reflecting a shift in emphasis from the ceremonial to the liturgical significance of the dome. Nonetheless, the conceptual and symbolic dimension of the dome element in the narthexes of royal foundations persisted and was further reiterated in the foundation of Lazar's son, Despot Stephen Lazarević, the Manasija Monastery. Its *katholikon* (1407–1418) closely followed the design implemented at Ravanica, including a nine-bayed, centrally domed narthex (or *exonarthex*). The only variation in Manasija is that the narthex dome—if the present one, rebuilt with the narthex in 1735,¹¹¹ replicates the original—features a dome proper with a

to the church and the possibility that they were reserved for the royal entries, see also some Georgian examples (Stanković, 2017, pp. 280–282, with bibliography).

¹⁰⁸ On the Ravanica narthex, its original appearance, and the origins of its design, see Vulović (Вуловић, 1966, pp. 67–89, 157–167).

¹⁰⁹ Stanković (2011).

¹¹⁰ The latter also employed in Markov Manastir.

¹¹¹ Todić (Тодић, 1995, pp. 22–23), with references.

ten-sided drum. These two royal endowments, as well as several other smaller ones commissioned by their nobility,¹¹² show that the domed element in the narthex continued to appear in Serbia's Moravan period as well, signifying its ongoing relevance. However, due to the lack of surviving fresco programs in all these later examples, it is challenging to ascertain the extent to which the dome's symbolic association with royal patronage was preserved or transformed.

Concluding Remarks

As has already been noted for several cases presented in this paper, a dome above the narthex—or any entrance space in a church, such as a porch—embodied and manifested a royal dimension. Already monuments of the Middle Byzantine period, primarily those in the capital but also the Athonite ones, with their ktetorial backgrounds associated directly or through an intermediary with an imperial sponsorship, suggest that this architectural form, doubling as a canopy, most likely framed the emperor's actual and expected visits to and presence in the church, either at the entrance or in the gallery. The expected visits apply to the monastic churches away from the capital and the regular imperial ceremonial scheme, and may have meant only symbolic presence, i.e., the protection of an emperor, which has been maintained in the title of "imperial lavra" in Mount Athos and some other places. These aspects were present in Byzantium as early as the 11th century. Still, they may have gotten a new and deeper currency toward the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century, as witnessed by examples in Constantinople and Epirus. The dome and its meaning were introduced into Serbian ecclesiastic architecture around the 1330s and were increasingly used towards and after the proclamation of the empire under Stephen Dušan, especially when it comes to the painted decoration in the dome and adjacent spaces, giving the feature some additional dimensions. For example, the domes in certain narthexes, most notably in that of Lesnovo, but in a way also at Psača and Markov Manastir, functioned as "canopies" over the royal portraits painted on the walls below, thus integrating the ruler into a cosmic framework and visually affirming the connection between earthly and heavenly rule. The placement of the sovereign's image somewhere beneath the dome, especially in the foundations commissioned by nobility, meant to express the noble founder's subjugating to the emperor's suzerainship and admitting his

¹¹² Notably, the churches of the Naupara, Rudenica, Kalenić, and Jošanica monasteries likely had some kind of dome or domical vault covering their entire narthexes. However, in these and several other churches, the domes have not been completely preserved in their original forms, so it is difficult to speak with certainty about their designs, and even less so about the painted decorations and the meaning they may have conveyed.

ultimate sponsorship and protection of the monastery. This practice further reinforced the role of emperor as both a spiritual protector and political sovereign.

Another distinctive characteristic of Serbian monuments is that the dome appears only on the ground floor because the use of galleries in court ceremonies did not take root in Serbia—at least not in its monasteries—unlike some other areas, such as Mystra. The dome always rises above the narthex's central bay, the first one behind the entrance door, with the only exception being Hilandar's inner narthex. This one, six-bayed in the plan, has a sail-vaulted bay dislocated to the east and preceding the entrance to the naos, perhaps to move away from the two domes erected above the western corner bays. Such an arrangement and the lack of a proper dome along the central axis may have been the reasons for the exonarthex attached to its west façade a few decades later to acquire a single dome over the central west bay, thus rectifying the situation, i.e., bringing it closer to what may previously have been set as the standard. Such reasoning indicates that the dome was used for or stemmed from the ceremonial entry and reception of the emperor at the entrance of the church.

Initially influenced by the Constantinopolitan, Athonite, and Epirote traditions, the builders of Serbian single-domed narthexes similarly employed either the dome proper, with a drum pierced by windows, or the blind dome. When used, the latter is more architecturally articulated and pronounced than its Byzantine counterparts, with a full calotte being used, with almost no sail vaults found—except in Hilandar's inner narthex. However, it is not quite clear whether there was some difference in the message meant by using the dome proper or the blind dome. Was there any meaning hidden behind the choice at all, or was it driven merely by natural lighting conditions inside the space covered by the dome? It seems that the narthexes that were designed as porches with large openings feature blind domes (e.g., the Holy Archangels and Ravanica), while those that are more enclosed tend to have domes proper (e.g., Treskavec and Psača). However, this is not always the case. Examples like the Lesnovo narthex and the Hilandar exonarthex, which have large openings but domes proper over their entrance bays, and the rather enclosed narthex in Markov Manastir, which features a blind dome, suggest that daylight was not a concern. Inferring from the pool of surviving churches—which admittedly is not that large—one can note that the dome proper appears in aristocratic foundations, such as Lesnovo and Psača, or in structures added to already existing churches, as in Treskavec and Hilandar (exonarthex), whereas the blind dome was chosen for royal foundations (e.g., the Holy Archangels, Markov Manastir, and Ravanica). This seems somewhat paradoxical, as we tend to consider the dome proper as more advanced and, thus, hierarchically superior to the blind dome. But this may not have been the case for medieval people. Whatever their understanding was, however, one must conclude that the true reason behind the choice of the dome proper over the blind dome or vice versa cannot be presently established.

When it comes to the painted decoration of domes, only a handful of them—those at Treskavec, Lesnovo, Psača, and Markov Manastir—have been preserved. This makes it difficult to establish any general rule on the iconography in the narthex dome, especially because each of these four programs differs from the others to a lesser or greater extent. Nonetheless, they show some common traits. They all feature an image of Christ in the center, surrounded by heavenly beings: the Emperor of emperors within a ring of angels in nine hierarchical groups in Treskavec, the Pantokrator encircled by an angelic procession in Lesnovo, the Pantokrator surrounded by a band with angels and seraphims in Psača, and the Wisdom of God and God the Word inside a medallion (i.e., the firmament) carried by the personifications of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, depicted as angels, in Markov Manastir. The rest of the dome and the adjacent surfaces were covered with depictions of prophets known for their visions of Christ and saints who act as members of the Heavenly Court (Treskavec) or take part in the Feast of the Wisdom (Markov Manastir). Thus shaped and decorated, the domes represented the celestial sphere of the narthex, just as the main dome did for the naos. Unlike the latter, however, the iconographic types of Christ chosen for the narthex dome, as well as the selection of saints that join Him—particularly the Virgin Mary dressed in royal attire, King David, and King Solomon (in Treskavec, Lesnovo, and Markov Manastir)—give the ensembles an imperial dimension. In more complex programs, such as in Lesnovo and Markov Manastir, this meaning is enhanced by figures representing national leadership and spiritual authority, or the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Both these two sets can be connected to the image of the ideal ruler, with the former interpreted as his Biblical models or prefigurations, and the latter pointing to his virtues, acquired directly from God. The teachings of the Church Fathers in the pendentives at Lesnovo and Psača can be seen as the descent of Divine Wisdom from Christ in the dome onto those entering the church, conveyed through their theological contributions and blessings.

The rich and intricate iconographic programs found in the narthex domes not only represent liturgical and eschatological themes but also underscore the imperial and divinely inspired authority of the Serbian rulers. Based on programs of preserved Byzantine painted decorations—with a reservation that none of them has survived in Constantinople—it can be inferred that the Serbian courtly and ecclesiastic environment gave birth to some new, more complex iconographic solutions. They testify not only to political and ideological aims but also to the high intellectual level and education of both their creators and viewers.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the incorporation of single-domed narthexes in key monuments, such as Treskavec, the Holy Archangels near Prizren, the Hilandar exonarthex, and Lesnovo, was a means of visually communicating the empire's legitimacy and continuity with Byzantine traditions, as well as its distinct identity and power. These domes were not merely

functional and decorative elements; they held profound symbolic significance associated with the idea of Christ's presence and divine authority in the world. They also served as representations of harmony between spiritual and secular authority, which was of particular importance in the context of the newly formed Serbian Empire, indicating continuity with the Byzantine imperial tradition while simultaneously establishing a new identity for the Serbian state as an independent and sovereign empire. The persistence of this architectural and iconographic phenomenon even after Dušan's death, in foundations like Markov Manastir, Ravanica, and Manasija, underscores the enduring legacy of its imperial symbolism in Serbian church architecture. As seen in examples from the pre-imperial, imperial, and post-imperial periods, these architectural and iconographic choices were deeply intertwined with both the broader and local political and religious narratives of the Serbian state, with the dome serving as a distinctive and potent symbol of both worldly and divine authority.

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Царски балдахин над улазом у цркву: облици,
просторни контексти, иконографски програми и
смисао куполе у српским припрамама XIV века

Резиме

Присуство купола над припрамама у одређеним српским црквама XIV века, нарочито током владавине краља (касније цара) Стефана Душана и након тога, одражава значајан феномен у архитектури, иконографији и симболичком представљању. У чланку се анализирају архитектонска форма, просторни односи, сликана декорација и значење купола, посебно у контексту царског покровитељства и симболике царске власти. На почетку је истражена могућа предисторија куполног склопа постављеног над улазном зоном византијских цркава, најчешће у припрамама. Обухваћени су примери из средњовизантијског и позновизантијског

градитељства. Аутор узима у обзир архитектонске карактеристике централног травеја у припратама католиконе светогорских манастира, чији је значај наглашен кроз употребу куполастог свода, подне декорације и особене иконографије, а што упућује на везу са царским церемонијалом и симболиком. Поред ових, слично и веома карактеристично решење у јужној цркви цариградског манастира Пантократора, аутор сматра од највећег утицаја на потоње облике и решења у српским споменицима. Посебно се истиче да су у Србији усвојено присуство купола у приземно решеним припратама, што је можда резултат ових утицаја или одраз потенцијално сличних церемонијалних пракси на двору Србији суседног Епира. У Епиру се, на прелазу из XIII у XIV век, као и нешто касније у Србији, налази готово искључиво на куполне склопове над приземним припратама, док у Мистри куполе над западним галеријама одражавају цариградски утицај. И једно и друго решење било је одраз царског церемонијала—прво свечаног уласка цара у цркву, друго његовог присуства на црквеним богослужењима. Закључује се да је купола имала улогу у формирању церемонијалног простора, али и у симболизацији царског присуства и заштите у црквеном контексту.

Аутор потом прелази на детаљно представљање сачуваних или документованих примера куполног склопа над улазима у српске цркве. Као главни период узето је време Српског царства (1346–1371). Међутим, пошто се куполна решења јављају и пре тога, прво су анализирана она и закључено је да су царски елементи већ тада били присутни. Главни представници овог периода су Црква Св. Николе у Дабру, задужбина Стефана Дечанског и Душана, и северни параклис католиконе Трескавца, чији је ктитор Душан. У Трескавцу, у куполи пред улазом у параклис, насликан је Небески двор, са Христом као царем у средишту калоте, што се може довести у везу са царским статусом манастира. Потом излагање прелази на сам период Царства, током ког настају најзначајнији примери куполног склопа на улазу у цркву: царска задужбина Свети Архангели код Призрена, властелинске задужбине Лесново и Псача, као и спољна припрата у Хиландару. Купола над лесновском припратом је од посебног значаја, са потпуно очуваним сликаним програмом, који својом комплексном иконографијом и вишеструким значењским елементима проширује владарски симболизам куполе над улазним простором, а који овде садржи и монументални портрет цара Душана. Континуитет овог архитектонског и иконографског феномена, чак и након Душанове смрти, рефлектује се у веома сложенем иконографском решењу куполе у Марковом манастиру, са представом Гозбе Премудрости и Речи Божије, и у употреби куполе у припратама Раванице, Манасије и бројним другим црквама Моравске Србије.

Богати и сложени иконографски програми у куполама Трескавца, Леснова и Марковог манастира не само да представљају литургијске и есхатолошке теме већ такође истичу политички и духовни ауторитет владара. Један аспект, наслеђен из Византије, посебно се издваја: употреба куполе као архитектонске реплике церемонијалног балдахина, намењеног за царски улазак, али и као обележја суверенове заштите над манастиром. Поред тога, куполе у одређеним црквама функционишу као симболични оквир над царским портретима, интегришући владара у космички систем и визуелно потврђујући везу између земаљске и небеске

власти. Ова пракса додатно учвршћује улогу цара као духовног заштитника и политичког суверена.

У закључку се истиче да је увођење купола над припратама у српску црквену архитектуру представљало специфичан искорак у уметничком и идеолошком изразу у контексту успостављања царства, али и потоњег покушаја његовог продужења. Ове куполе нису биле само функционални и декоративни елементи, већ су имале дубоко симболичко значење, које је било повезано са идејом присуства Христа и божанске власти у свету. Такође, оне су служиле као репрезентација хармоније између духовне и световне власти, што је било од посебног значаја у контексту новоформираног српског царства, указујући на континуитет са византијском царском традицијом и истовремено успостављањем новог идентитета српске државе као самосталне и суверене царевине. Еволуција овог архитектонског склопа, од раних примера до софистициранијих, показује свесну апликацију и адаптацију византијских модела, постепено водећи ка комплексној синтези византијских узора и локалних потреба, што је резултирало стварањем јединственог архитектонског и уметничког изрази који је обележио епоху.

Кључне речи: купола; балдахин; припрата; средњовековна Србија; цар Стефан Душан; царски аспекти.



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