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Serbian Studies: Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies, Volume 20, Number 1, 2006, pp. 95-120 (Article)

Published by Slavica Publishers

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ser.0.0004>



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Church of the Mother of God in Studenica: Analysis of the Architectural Decoration

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Introduction

The church of the Mother of God, a *katholikon* of Studenica monastery located in south-central Serbia, was built both as a church and a mausoleum for the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty. The *grand župan* Stefan Nemanja (r. 1167–96) began the construction of Studenica after uniting the coastal and continental territories, creating the first great Serbian state.¹ Like many influential medieval rulers, Stefan Nemanja recognized the political importance of funding religious edifices.² The endowments speak of the ruler's dedication to the Christian religion and reflect his power and prestige. A setting was created in Studenica in which the sculptural decoration and the fresco paintings worked together to commemorate the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty that ruled medieval Serbia for around two hundred years.

Studenica has been the subject of numerous scholarly studies since the turn of the twentieth century.³ The valuable contributions of the scholars such

¹ Stefan Nemanja conquered Byzantine territories in the east and south, including towns like Niš, Skoplje, Lesak, Prizren, Lipljan, etc. The towns that he conquered in the coastal region of Zeta (the territory of Montenegro was first known as Diocleia and later as Zeta) include Skadar, Ulcinj, Bar, Kotor, etc. As Jovanka Maksimović indicates, the list of the conquered territories is based on the biography of Stefan Nemanja, written by his second son and heir Stefan the "First-Crowned" in 1216. Jovanka Maksimović, *Srpska srednjovekovna skulptura* (Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1971), 63.

² In addition to building Studenica (1183–96), Stefan Nemanja previously erected two monastic churches near Kuršumlija; the church of St. Nikola and the church of the Holy Mother of God, both dating to around 1168–72. Subsequently, as a part of his endowment, he built Đurđe's Columns (after 1168); the Chilandar on Mt. Athos (1198) and the monastic churches of St. Nikola and St. Đorđe in the region of Dabar. See: Aleksandar Deroko, *Monumentalna i dekorativna arhitektura u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji* (Beograd: Naučna knjiga, 1962), 50.

³ In the first volume of *Spomenici Srpske arhitekture srednjeg veka* Milka Čanak-Medić and Đurđe Bošković provide a concise but informative summary of the scholarship conducted on Studenica from the turn of the twentieth century until the 1980's. Considering that the majority

as G. Millet, Đ. Bošković, Deroko, Mirjana Ćorović-Ljubinković, and others must be recognized. Their main concern was to discover the sources of influence for Studenica's architectural forms and the origin of the craftsman. The prevailing opinion among these scholars is that the supreme execution of Studenica's architecture and architectural decoration suggests that it was the work of craftsmen imported from more artistically developed areas. For example, some scholars established parallels between Studenica and churches in Apulia, while others noticed similarities to the monuments in Modena and Ancona. Đ. Bošković proposed that western artists came to Raška (the continental part of Stefan Nemanja's medieval Serbia) in 1189 with the Crusaders, led by Frederick Barbarossa.⁴ Mirjana Ćorović – Ljubinković, alternatively, suggested that Studenica's sculptors came from Hungary. As Čanak-Medić and Bošković note, scholarship concerning the study of Studenica took a different turn with Jovanka Maksimović.⁵ Instead of turning to the West for the source of the influence, Maksimović observed Byzantine stylistic features in Studenica's sculptural decoration. She speculated that Studenica is the work of a local workshop, where Byzantine and Western artistic influences were fused.⁶ Further scholarship has been directed towards establishing parallels between Studenica and churches of south Dalmatia and Zeta.

Description and classification of Studenica's architectural forms are essential and will be included in this paper. Formal analysis, however, is only a first step in reconstructing the meaning of this sacred monument. It is necessary to go beyond simply defining Studenica in terms of its style. Once the origin of Studenica's design has been established it is crucial to identify the reason for the selection of those specific models. It has long been established that the donors, Stefan Nemanja and his immediate family, played a central role in the overall appearance of Studenica but this topic needs further exploration. In order to determine fully the role of the Nemanjić dynasty in the

of this scholarship is not easily accessible, this summary provides a good overview of the research conducted on this subject. See: Milka Čanak-Medić and Đurđe Bošković, *Spomenici Srpske arhitekture srednjeg veka – arhitektura Nemanjinog doba I* (Beograd: Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture SR Srbije i Arheološki institut, 1986), 112–16.

⁴ Obolensky explains that in 1189 Stefan Nemanja received Barbarossa at his court in Niš, offering Barbarossa his military assistance against Byzantium. In return, Nemanja hoped that the emperor would grant him independence over the territories he had conquered from the Greeks. Obolensky suggests that the reason Nemanja's plans did not see fruition is because Barbarossa refused to be sidetracked from the Crusade. Dimitri Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 119.

⁵ M. Čanak-Medić and Đ. Bošković, 113.

⁶ Jovanka Maksimović, "Studije o Studeničkoj Plastici II, Stil," *Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta* (Beograd: Naučno delo, 1960), 97–107.

creation of Studenica and understand the propagandistic message they sought to convey, it is necessary to examine the sculptural decoration and the fresco program as an ensemble.

This paper will demonstrate how the Nemanjić dynasty used architecture and architectural decoration as a vehicle to promote the interests of their dynasty. Despite the fact that various elements of Studenica's architectural decoration date to different periods, they all work together in commemorating Stefan Nemanja, on whose reputation rested the legitimacy of the Nemanjić dynasty. The donors carefully selected iconography that validated the rule of the Nemanjić dynasty, and elevated their power and prestige in the larger medieval world. This paper will provide the historical, political and religious context essential for understanding the motivations of the donor for sponsoring Studenica. A description of the architecture, sculptural decoration and fresco program will follow. Finally, conclusions will be made concerning the importance of viewing the various components of Nemanja's mausoleum as a whole.⁷

Background

In order to identify the donor's motivation for sponsoring the church of the Mother of God in Studenica, it is necessary to present briefly, in a broad outline, the historical background of medieval Serbia (Figure B-1 in the insert that precedes this article between pages 94 and 95). As part of the South Slavic tribes, the Serbs first settled in the Balkans in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. During this time Serbs occupied Raška, a mountainous region positioned between the Danube in the north and the Adriatic Sea in the south. It was separated from the region of Zeta (previously called Diocleia and today Montenegro) by a stretch of mountains that extended along the Adriatic coast. Gradually, Serbian tribal leaders (*župans*) living in Raška extended their authority over the related Slavic tribes in the coastal regions of Zeta and south Dalmatia. The following five centuries can be characterized as a period of disorder and instability, as the more powerful *župans* (*grand župans*) asserted their dominance over the less powerful ones. In addition to experiencing internal disorders, these pagan communities (*županije*) were under constant threat from the leading powers of the time. Located in the central Balkans both Raška and Zeta marked a boundary where the political interests of the Byzantine Empire clashed with those of the Western powers;

⁷ The length of this project and the all-encompassing approach makes it unfeasible to discuss the entire sculptural and fresco program in detail. The focus will be on the iconography which relates to the royal agendas.

Byzantium fought Hungary and Venice over the territories in Croatia and Dalmatia, while Bulgaria was the main imperial opponent in the region of Raška and Zeta. This area was also a convergence point of two different religions and cultures: the Catholic Latin West and the Orthodox Greek East.⁸ The unique geographical location of medieval Serbia is significant in understanding the emergence of a local architectural style, promoted by the Nemanjić dynasty and exemplified by the Studenica *katholikon*.

Threatened by the Bulgarian invasion in the second half of the ninth century, the Serbs welcomed the alliance with the Byzantine Emperor Basil I (r. 867–86).⁹ Byzantine protection meant acceptance of Orthodox Christianity that, over time, became a defining element in Serbian national identity. Obolensky suggests that Serbs were initially evangelized by the Latin missionaries from the Dalmatian cities under Byzantine control, and later by the disciples of St. Methodius, who introduced to the Serbs Slavonic liturgy and scriptures.¹⁰ The conversion of Raška was followed by the Christianization of Zeta by missionaries sent from the Greek metropolitan see in Durazzo (a city on the Albanian coast). While Raška remained in the orbit of the Eastern church, rulers of Zeta oscillated between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. In the early thirteenth century Zeta was finally placed under the jurisdiction of the Latin archbishop of Bar (Antibari).¹¹ In addition to seeking protection, the Slavic regional rulers accepted the Christian faith because they realized that “paganism was an obstacle to political and cultural progress.”¹² Obolensky observes that the Serbian rulers recognized that in order to become part of the civilized world of Christendom they had to abandon their pagan religion. From the perspective of the Byzantine emperor and the papacy, on

⁸ H.C. Darby, et al., *A Short History of Yugoslavia* (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1966), 87–89;

Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 97–98.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

¹⁰ D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 119–20.

¹¹ Initially, Basil I placed the bishopric of Ras (capital of Raška) under the direct ecclesiastical rule of Constantinople. In the eleventh century Basil II (r. 979–1025) placed the bishopric of Ras, together with other bishoprics in the Serbian interior, under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Ohrid. See: *Ibid.*, 119–20; John Meyendorff, “St. Sava, Ohrid and the Serbian Church,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* (2006), 119–20. Ohrid, located in what is today Macedonia, became one of the leading centers of Slavonic Christianity in the Balkans. During the rule of Tsar Samuel (r. 986–1014), Ohrid became the capital of the Bulgarian empire and Bulgarian patriarchate. In 1019/20, Basil II took over Ohrid and made it into an independent Bulgarian archbishopric under the control of the Byzantine church. In 1334, together with the rest of Macedonia, Ohrid became part of Serbia.

¹² D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, 98.

the other hand, Christianity became a vehicle through which they asserted their influence among the unruly Serbs. Aside from incorporating Raška into its church structure, Byzantium also imposed on the Serbs “a real political vassalage,” insisting that the imperial government had to approve the elected *župans*.¹³ During the eleventh century, however, the native *župans* of Raška aspired to gain leadership in the region and became increasingly rebellious against their imperial overlord.¹⁴

Stefan Nemanja's aspirations to become *grand župan* led to his insurgency against Byzantium. In 1168 the Byzantine emperor Manuel I Komnenos (r.1143–80) appointed Tihomir, Stefan Nemanja's older brother, to rule over Raška. The territory was initially divided between four brothers: Tihomir, Stefan Nemanja, Miroslav and Stracimir. Tihomir, the eldest of the four, received the title of *grand župan*. As would be expected, the brothers did not get along as regional lords. Nemanja's desire to dominate the region led to the Battle of Pantino (between 1168 and 1171), which resulted in Nemanja's victory over the imperial army and his brother Tihomir, who died in combat. Stefan Nemanja's rebellion was viewed as treason against the empire and the following year Manuel I retaliated, decisively defeating Nemanja's forces. Nemanja was permitted to continue to rule Raška as *grand župan* and, until the death of Manuel I in 1180, he remained loyal to the emperor. During this period of Byzantine vassalage, Stefan Nemanja strengthened his rule in Raška.¹⁵

Following Manuel's death Nemanja reasserted himself again by declaring independence from Byzantine rule. As Fine suggests, the *grand župan* of Raška took advantage of the challenges that the Byzantine Empire was facing at the time: the disputed succession in Constantinople, the Hungarian and Norman invasion of the Byzantine territories in the Balkans, and the Third Crusade in 1189, led by Frederick Barbarossa.¹⁶ By 1189 Nemanja incorporated the maritime land of Zeta into Raška and conquered South Dalmatia, including the towns of Kotor, Ulcinj and Bar (Antibari). Nemanja's dominion was thus characterized by “ecclesiastical dualism,” the coexistence of the

¹³ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴ H.C. Darby., et al., 90.

¹⁵ D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 115–17; John V.A. Fine, *The Early Medieval Balkans* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 243–44; John V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 2–6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7. Stefan Nemanja, it will be recalled, offered military support to Barbarossa in hopes of gaining legitimacy for his conquered territories.

Greek church in Raška and the Latin church in the coastal territories.¹⁷ Stefan Nemanja's claim to both cultural (artistic) traditions is reflected in the architectural style he sponsored, and most clearly articulated in his mausoleum in Studenica. The issue of Nemanja's propaganda will be further elaborated, but first the remaining political life of Stefan Nemanja must be examined.

Nemanja's extensive campaigning in the Byzantine territories prompted Emperor Isaac II Angelus (r. 1185–95, 1203–04) to attack Nemanja's forces in 1190. The Battle on the river Morava resulted in an imperial victory, but Nemanja succeeded in retaining the conquered territories and winning the imperial recognition of Serbia as an autonomous state. The marriage between Nemanja's middle son Stefan and Eudoxia, the niece of the Emperor Isaac II, sealed the newly formed alliance between Byzantium and Serbia. Stefan was also granted the title of *sebastocrator*, one of the highest in the Byzantine hierarchy. The close relationship with the imperial court brought prestige to the Nemanjić dynasty and secured Byzantine involvement in Serbian affairs.¹⁸ The Nemanjić dynasty did not fail to emphasize this close relationship with the Byzantine court in Nemanja's most important foundation. The inscription, located around the interior of the drum of the dome in Studenica, identifies Stefan Nemanja as the founder of the church and emphasizes both his title of *grand župan* (local title) and his close relation with imperial house.¹⁹

In 1196 Stefan Nemanja abdicated the throne in favor of his second son Stefan.²⁰ He renounced the secular life and retired to Studenica, where he received the name Simeon. Shortly thereafter, Simeon moved to the monastery Vatopedi, on Mt. Athos, where he jointed his youngest son Sava. In 1199 Simeon died at Hilandar, a monastery on Mt. Athos that he built together with Sava.²¹

¹⁷ D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 117; D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, 222.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 222; Also see: D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 119; John V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 25–26.

¹⁹ See: Mirjana Šakota, *Manastir Studenica* (Beograd: Turistička štampa, 1987), 17, for the Serbian translation of the Greek inscription: "Ovaj presveti hram prečiste vladice naše Bogorodice sazdan bi veleslavnim velikim županom I svatom (prijateljem) cara grčkog Aleksija Stefanom Nemanjom (koji je) primio anđeoski obraz (kao) Simeon monah... velikog kneza Vukana godine 1208/9. indikta 12. I mene, koji je ovde radio pomenite Savu grešnog." Nemanja is identified as *grand župan* and in-law of Alexius III Angelus (1195–1203), father of Eudoxia and successor of Isaac II.

²⁰ Fine speculates that Isaac II agreed to give his niece to Nemanja's son Stefan only if Stefan, and not Vukan (Nemanja's oldest son), would inherit Nemanja's throne. John V.A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

Sava (1175–1235), often referred to as the “enlightener of the Serbs,” played a vital role in the establishment of the national church and state in medieval Serbia. Born as Rastko, Sava ran away from his home in Raška at an early age to become a monk on Mt. Athos. During his sixteen-year stay (1191–1207) on the Holy Mountain, Sava’s efforts were directed at establishing Hilandar as one of the most significant centers of Serbian Orthodox religion. He adopted the *typikon* (foundation charter) of the monastery of the Virgin Benefactress (Evergetis), in Constantinople, as a rule for Hilandar. He used the same constitution years later at his father’s monastic foundation of Studenica, and this model became the prototype for other medieval Serbian monasteries. Sava’s stay at Mt. Athos and his extensive journeys to Constantinople, Thessalonica and other leading religious centers in the East, exposed him to the traditions of Eastern Christianity. He became an important transmitter of Byzantine culture in early thirteenth-century Serbia.²²

During Sava’s stay on Mt. Athos, the rivalry between his brothers Stefan and Vukan intensified.²³ With the support of Hungary, Vukan deposed Stefan in 1202 and took over Raška where he ruled as *grand župan*. He recognized Hungarian suzerainty and accepted papal supremacy.²⁴ Like Vukan, Stefan was prepared to accept the absolute authority of the pope. Despite his marriage alliance with the imperial court, Stefan asked the pope to crown him king. Fine explains that Stefan recognized that the power of the Byzantine Empire was slowly declining in the early thirteenth century and he had no hopes that Byzantium would send him military support in the event of Vukan’s attack. Influenced by the Hungarian king Imre, however, the papacy failed to respond to Stefan’s appeal for support.²⁵ Eventually, Stefan returned to power in Raška late in 1204 or early 1205, with the help of Bulgarian allies.²⁶ With the weakening of the Byzantine Empire and its collapse in 1204

²² Mt. Athos was a meeting place for monks from different Orthodox centers where Byzantine manuscripts were copied and translated, and theological ideas exchanged. See: D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 121, 125, 132. For a map of Sava’s travels between 1191–1237 see: Fig.2. Also, for a more detailed account of St. Sava’s life, see the entire chapter, 115–72; John V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 38–39; J. Meyendorff, 211–12.

²³ Before Nemanja abdicated the throne, he divided his realm between his sons, as was customary among south Slavic tribes. The preeminence was given to Stefan, who ruled over Raška as *grand župan*, while Vukan was granted the title of great prince and ruled over Zeta, Trebinje and south Dalmatia. Vukan was expected to be Stefan’s vassal but instead declared himself an independent ruler. See: John V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 41–45.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45–48.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

in the hands of Latin crusaders, both Vukan and Stefan viewed affiliation with the papacy as a shrewd political move.²⁷

Sava returned to Serbia in 1207 with his father's body to reconcile Vukan and Stefan, who were still at war. Stefan Nemanja's relics were believed to have miraculous powers, which could bring peace and protection to his country, now ravaged by civil and international war. Meyendorff explains that after returning to Serbia, Sava "directed his efforts primarily at securing the unity of the country under the Nemanjić dynasty, of which the relics of St. Simeon were now a holy symbol."²⁸ Shortly after the translation of Simeon's relics to his mausoleum at Studenica, the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty was sanctified. One of the signs of his sanctity was the holy oil, which was flowing out of his body, hence his name, St. Simeon the Myrrh-Gushing.²⁹ Sava became abbot at his father's foundation. The administrative experience Sava gained during his stay on Mt. Athos helped him to organize the life of the Studenica monastery. He also completed the construction and oversaw the decoration of the *katholikon* that, as already suggested, commemorated his holy father and promoted the legitimacy of the Nemanjić dynasty.³⁰

During the following decade Sava worked together with his brother Stefan to obtain both political and ecclesiastical legitimacy for Serbia. They approached Pope Honorius III to request a royal crown for Stefan.³¹ Meyendorff speculates that while Stefan aspired to gain independence for his realm, the papacy hoped to increase the Catholic influence in Raška.³² Finally,

²⁷ Stefan even renounced his Greek wife Eudoxia and married the granddaughter of Enrico Dandolo, the Doge of Venice, who was one of the leading figures in the Fourth Crusade. See: J. Meyendorff, 212.

²⁸ Ibid., 212; D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 135–36.

²⁹ J. Meyendorff, 212; D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 136.

³⁰ Ibid., 136; Sima Ćirković, Vojislav Korać, and Gordana Babić, *Studenica Monastery* (Belgrade: Jugoslovenska Revija, 1987), 15.

³¹ It will be recalled that Stefan had previously asked the papacy for a royal crown but was ignored. Sava's attitude towards Stefan's coronation has been debated among scholars. Fine argues that Sava, a strong promoter of Orthodoxy, was against Stefan's pro-Roman policy. The argument is supported by the fact that Sava's departure from Serbia to Mt. Athos coincided with Stefan's coronation. See: John V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 107–08. Obolensky and Mayendorff make a more reasonable case suggesting that Sava did not protest his brother's coronation. These two scholars point out that during the thirteenth century in the Balkans, unlike in the East and West, the concept of a united Christendom still persisted. Thus Sava's recognition of papal spiritual authority would not have been seen as a "betrayal of ecclesiastical identity," but rather as manifestation of "political shrewdness." See: J. Meyendorff, 212–13; D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 146–50, 153; D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, 240–42.

³² J. Meyendorff, 213.

in 1217 the pope sent his legate to Serbia where Stefan was crowned the first king of Serbia. He came to be known as Stefan the “First-Crowned” (Prvovenčani).³³ While Rome recognized Serbian political independence, the Ecumenical Patriarch Manuel, exiled in Nicea, approved Serbia’s religious sovereignty. In 1219 Sava was ordained archbishop by Patriarch Manuel and, with the emperor’s approval, the Serbian church was granted an autocephalous (autonomous) status. The new canonical status of the Serbian church secured its full administrative and judicial independence. Additionally, the consent of the patriarch was no longer necessary in the election and consecration of the archbishop and other bishops in Serbia. However, one condition imposed on the Serbian church was that the Byzantine (Nicean) patriarch was to be given primacy over other bishops in the Eucharistic prayer.³⁴

Once Sava secured Serbia’s religious autonomy, he focused his efforts on organizing the administrative structure of the Serbian church. He divided his brother’s kingdom, including Raška, Zeta and Hum (Herzegovina, the southern part of Bosnia and Herzegovina) into ten bishoprics. The new archbishop Sava, with his see in Žica, replaced the Greek bishops with his own disciples, some of whom he had brought back with him from Hilandar. Furthermore, the Serbian (Slavonic) language gradually replaced Greek in liturgy which further intensified the national character of the church in Serbia. Catholicism continued to coexist with the Serbian church in the coastal territories, but its influence was slowly weakening. Fine explains, “As the Catholic influence declined, the alliance between church and dynasty was reasserted, and both ruler and church worked to make the church a strong national institution closely tied to the holy dynasty.”³⁵ The early Nemanjići, especially Sava, recognized that shrewd diplomatic relations with both the East and the West was the only

³³ John V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 107; D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 142.

³⁴ The Byzantine Empire’s motivation for recognizing Serbian ecclesiastical independence has to be viewed in the light of the contemporary Nicean-Epirote dispute. The empire of Nicea and the despotate of Epirus refers to the two Greek successor states that were founded after Constantinople was conquered by the Crusaders in 1204. The authorities of Nicea and Epirus competed for recognition as the legitimate successors of the Byzantine Empire. In approving Serbian ecclesiastical independence, Nicea did not have anything to lose because the Serbian bishopric in Raška was not under Nicean jurisdiction, but under the jurisdiction of Ohrid, one of the main bishoprics of Epirus. In short, by recognizing Serbian religious autonomy, Nicean authorities simply confirmed their own legitimacy. See: Ibid., 151–53;

J. Meyendorff, 213–16; John V. A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 116–19.

³⁵ Ibid., 117–18; See: D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 153–68, for a more detailed account of Sava’s administrative activities after the establishment of the Serbian autonomous church.

way to secure Serbia's prominence in the Christian medieval world. Advancement of the Serbian church inevitably elevated the power and prestige of the holy dynasty. Additionally, Orthodox Christianity promoted by the Nemanjić dynasty, became a unifying factor among the Serbian populace living both in Raška and Zeta. As it will be demonstrated below, the sculptural decoration and fresco paintings of Stefan Nemanja's mausoleum reflect the efforts of the "holy dynasty" to present themselves as protectors and promoters of the Christian faith.

Patronage

Scholars have often noted that there is a direct relationship between medieval Serbian (Slavonic) texts and the iconography of the Studenica *katholikon*. Writings that are essential to understanding Studenica's program of decoration, and the propaganda of the Nemanjić dynasty, are two accounts of Stefan Nemanja's life. The first of the two biographies was composed by Nemanja's youngest son, Sava, in 1208. The text was written as an introduction to the *typicon* of the Studenica monastery, where Sava became an abbot after his father's death.³⁶ Between 1208 and 1216 Stefan Nemanjić (Prvovenčani or the "First-Crowned") wrote his version of Nemanja's *Vita*. These types of texts in the Middle Ages were not intended to be objective in their representation of the lives of those they portrayed. The authors' motivations varied, but the common goal was to present an idealized image of the central figure that somehow supported the needs of the dynasty at the time the piece was written. A brief analysis of the portrayal of Nemanja in his two biographies is necessary for understanding the propaganda crafted by the Nemanjić family.

Upon Sava's return to Serbia from Mt. Athos with his father's relics, Sava wrote the biography of Simeon. In the introduction to his *Vita*, Sava praises his father's military achievements. He explains that God appointed Stefan Nemanja to rule over Serbian lands, which he "inherited" from his ancestors. After "restoring" and "enlarging" his territory, Sava claims, Stefan Nemanja established peace in his realm.³⁷ Nemanja is depicted as an ideal ruler who

³⁶ D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 138.

³⁷ Sveti Sava. "Žitje Svetog Simeona Nemanje," *Sabrani Spisi* (15 Oct. 2006), 1, http://www.rastko.org.yu/knjizevnost/liturgicka/svsava-sabrana/svsava-sabrana_06.html. Obolensky explains the basis on which Serbian medieval rulers claimed royal independence: "The medieval Serbian idea of royal sovereignty rested on a triple foundation: the concept of national "inheritance" which the dynasty's leading representatives, beginning with Nemanja himself, were held to have "restored," "gathered," or "enlarged"; Old Testament models, which Sava used to liken his father both to Isaac, who blessed his son Jacob, and to Jacob himself, whose body was

promoted and strengthened Christian teachings among his people.³⁸ Additionally, Sava expresses his admiration for Nemanja's compassion and kindness towards the less fortunate (the poor, orphans, blind, crippled, etc).³⁹ The predominant theme of Sava's writings is the concept that the glorious Serbian ruler gave up his "earthly kingdom" for the "heavenly kingdom."⁴⁰ Realizing that earthly power and glory are impermanent prompted Stefan Nemanja to renounce his throne in favor of his middle son, Stefan, and become a monk.⁴¹

According to Sava, Stefan Nemanja withdrew from the society and took religious vows at the Studenica monastery, receiving the name Simeon. Two years later, Simeon left for Mt. Athos where he spent the last year of his life in the company of his youngest son, Sava.⁴² Their shared devotion to the monastic way of life brought the father and son closer together. Sava's description of his father's death and their last moments spent together is, as Obolensky observes, one of the most moving accounts in Sava's biography of Simeon:

He said: "My child, bring me (the icon) of the most holy Mother of God, for I have made a vow to yield up the ghost (Matt. 27:50) in front of her." And when his command had been carried out, towards the evening, he said: "My child, do me a service of love, clothe me in the *raŝon* appointed for my funeral and place me in the same sacred position in which I shall lie in my coffin. Spread a matting on the ground and lay me on it and place a stone under my head, that I may lie here until the Lord comes to visit me and take me hence." And I

brought out of Egypt and carried to the promised land by his son Joseph; and, finally, the Byzantine connection: marriage-links with the imperial house and the high-sounding titles bestowed by Constantinople gave special prestige to the Serbian ruler and placed him among the emperor's friends and subject-allies." D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 139. Serbia's connection with the Byzantine court is also emphasized, as mentioned earlier, in the inscription located around the interior of the drum in Studenica's *katholikon*. In his writing Sava also points to the close relations of the Nemanjić dynasty with the imperial court. See: Sava, 2.

³⁸ Stefan makes a reference to Nemanja's condemnation of heresy in his realm. See: Stefan Prvovenčani, "Život Svetog Simeona," *Sabrani Spisi* (15 Oct. 2006), 8–9, http://www.rastko.org.yu/književnost/liturgicka/stefan-sabrana/stefan-sabrana_03.html. As Obolensky suggests the heretical sect which Sava and Prvovenčani refer to is most likely Bogomilism.

See: D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 156–57.

³⁹ Sava, 1.

⁴⁰ In particular see: *Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁴¹ For the reference to Nemanja's abdication see: *Ibid.*, 3–5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6–9.

did all this and carried out his commands. And all of us who looked on wept bitterly ... For in truth, my beloved brothers and fathers, it was a wondrous sight: he whom all men in his country feared, and before whom all trembled, was now seen as a stranger and beggar, clothed in a *rason*, lying on the ground on a mat with a stone under his head, receiving the salutations of all the brethren and asking everyone's forgiveness and blessing with love in his heart. When night had fallen they all took their leave of him, and, after receiving his blessing, returned to their cells to do what they had to do and rest a little. I and a priest whom I had kept with me remained by his side all that night. At midnight the blessed father fell silent and spoke to me no longer. But when morning came and the singing of matins began in the church, the blessed father's face was suddenly illuminated, and looked up to heaven and said: "Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in his firmament of his power." I said to him: "Father, whom do you see as you speak these words?" He looked at me and said to me: "Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness." And when he had said this he straightaway yielded up his godly spirit and died in the Lord.⁴³

Sava's admiration for his father's monastic deeds is clearly evidenced by his writings. Sava represented his father as an ideal monk, whose life is to be used as model for others to follow. More importantly, as Fine suggests, Sava created this *Vita* with the intention of securing Simeon a place in the pantheon of Christian saints.⁴⁴

In addition to characterizing Nemanja as an idealized ruler and a monk, Stefan Prvovenčani also celebrated his father as a canonized saint, to the benefit of the dynasty. Stefan's primary goal was to present Simeon as a protector saint of the Serbian state and its new ruler, the author himself. Stefan recounts his conflict with his brother Vukan, who decided to rebel against him thereby neglecting their father's order.⁴⁵ Stefan called attention to the fact that, with the intercession of St. Simeon, he eventually prevailed over Vukan. Nemanja's effectiveness in protecting Stefan, and not Vukan, demon-

⁴³ Ibid., 11–12. For translation of this passage in English see: D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 138–39.

⁴⁴ John V.A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 40.

⁴⁵ Both Sava and Stefan emphasized that Nemanja chose Stefan over Vukan as his heir. As it will be recalled, Stefan received the title of *grand župan*, while Vukan ruled as *grand knez*. Nemanja, however, warned his sons that only if they love and respect each other peace would prevail over their realm. See: Sava, 5; Prvovenčani, 14, 23–24.

strated God's favor for Stefan and justified his right to rule. Similarly, Stefan depicted St. Simeon as a national intercessor whose miraculous powers helped Stefan protect their country from foreign enemies. For example, in Chapter XVI Stefan attributes his victory over the Bulgarian Tsar Boril (1207–18) to the miraculous intervention of his saintly father.⁴⁶ In short, the objective of both Sava's and Stefan's biographies of their father was to develop and promote the cult of Stefan Nemanja/Simeon. Claiming descendency from a holy king legitimized not only Stefan's right to rule, but it also proved to be beneficial to all rulers of the Nemanjić dynasty up to late fourteenth century.⁴⁷ In addition to literary means,⁴⁸ Nemanja's immediate successors also used architectural decoration to foster the cult of St. Simeon.

Before turning attention to an analysis of Studenica's architectural decoration, it is necessary to examine more closely Stefan's text, which provides valuable information concerning Nemanja's patronage. While Sava only names the churches Nemanja founded, Stefan dedicated a significant portion of his writing to the description of Nemanja's role as a patron of religious edifices. He provided the names and locations of the monasteries his father founded, and explained Nemanja's motivations for building. Modeling himself after prominent medieval rulers, Stefan Nemanja expressed his devotion to the Christian religion by sponsoring churches and monasteries.

The two earliest churches founded by Stefan Nemanja were the church of the Holy Mother of God and the church of St. Nikola, both located in the Toplica region, part of the territory which Nemanja inherited from his father.⁴⁹ Stefan suggests that Nemanja's deep commitment to the Christian religion inspired him to provide the funds for the erection of these two sacred monuments.⁵⁰ His church building during the period between 1168–72,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 25–26.

⁴⁷ John V.A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 40.

⁴⁸ In addition to writing Nemanja's biography, Sava also composed a liturgical office dedicated to his father. See: Sveti Sava, "Služba Svetom Simeonu," *Sabrani spisi*, http://www.rastko.org.yu/književnost/liturgicka/svsava-sabrana/svsava-sabrana_07.html. Obolensky affirms that this is the first known example of Serbian Church Slavonic hymnography. D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits*, 137–39.

⁴⁹ At the time his brother Tihomir held the title of *grand župan*, while Nemanja, and the rest of his brothers, were considered Tihomir's vassals. For information concerning the church of the Holy Mother of God in Toplica see: Prvovenčani, 4. For information concerning the church of St. Nikola in Toplica see: Ibid., 5.

⁵⁰ Stefan Prvovenčani notes that after endowing the monastery of the Holy Mother of God with all the necessities essential for the functioning of the monastic community, Nemanja placed the monastery under the control of his wife Ana, who was to provide for the nuns living there. Ibid., 4.

however, was a source of conflict between Nemanja and his brothers, especially his oldest brother, the *grand župan* Tihomir. The author suggests that Nemanja's brothers protested because Nemanja funded churches without the *grand župan's* consent. Nemanja, on the other hand, believed that he had the right to independently erect churches at his own will. Consequently, Nemanja was captured, placed in chains and thrown into a cave.⁵¹ He prayed to St. George, who helped him escape and defeat Tihomir at the Battle of Pantino (between 1168 and 1171). Nemanja's success over his brother, the author implies, was a manifestation of God's will. As a symbol of gratitude to St. George, Stefan reveals, Nemanja sponsored another monastery called Đurđevi Stupovi (Đurđe's Columns), located on a hilltop near Ras.⁵² With reason, scholars often speculate that Stefan Nemanja intentionally chose the prominent location for this church symbolically to represent his triumph over his older brother.

Shortly after Stefan Nemanja expanded his territories and consolidated his power in the region,⁵³ he proceeded with the construction of his fourth and greatest endowment - Studenica monastery. Stefan's text suggests that at the peak of his career, Nemanja became concerned for the salvation of his soul. The *grand župan's* fear of the Last Judgment is also evident in the charter of the monastery of Hilandar, issued personally by Stefan Nemanja.⁵⁴ The Serbian ruler realized the impermanence of his power and fame, and prayed to God to find him worthy of eternal life. Nemanja hoped that the Theotokos would be his intercessor and protectress on Judgment Day. He promised to build a monastery dedicated to the Mother of God (Studenica), where he would take a religious vow.⁵⁵

In addition to building these four churches in his homeland, *grand župan* Nemanja displayed his generosity by bestowing gifts upon the leading

⁵¹ Ibid., 5

⁵² Ibid., 6–7.

⁵³ It will be recalled that Stefan Nemanja expanded his realm into the Byzantine controlled territories. Stefan Prvovenčani claims that his father restored Diocleia (Zeta) and Dalmatia, which belonged to Nemanja's ancestors. Stefan Nemanja was born in Zeta but fled with his family to Raška as a result of his father's power struggle with his own brothers. *Grand župan* Nemanja is thus presented as a liberator who saved his people in the coastal region from Greek dominance and restored the territory which belonged to his family. See: Ibid., 10; John V.A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans*, 3.

⁵⁴ Sveti Sava, "Hilandarska povelja Simeona Nemanje," *Sabrani Spisi* (15 Oct. 2006), http://www.rastko.org.yu/književnost/liturgicka/svsava-sabrana/svsava-sabrana_02.html.

⁵⁵ Prvovenčani, 10–12.

Catholic and Orthodox edifices in the West and the East.⁵⁶ Another one of Nemanja's main foundations, as previously mentioned, was the monastery of Hilandar, which Nemanja established with his younger son, Sava, on Mt. Athos. Stefan Prvovenčani does not fail to highlight his own role in the creation of this major Serbian monastic foundation.⁵⁷ These churches were testaments to Stefan Nemanja's aspirations to establish himself as an independent ruler, whose dedication to the Christian faith would assure him salvation. They are symbols of his piety, power and prestige.

Analysis

Thus far the main focus of this paper has been to provide the historical, political and religious context necessary for interpreting the meaning of Stefan Nemanja's endowment. The rest of the thesis is devoted to the description and analysis of Studenica's architecture and architectural decoration in order to reconstruct the manner in which the text and image were used to convey sophisticated messages.

The church of the Mother of God is centrally located within the circular enclosure of the Studenica monastery. Modeled on Byzantine church architecture, the main church of Studenica was built for the Orthodox rite (Figure B-3). The *katholikon* has a nave without aisles, a sanctuary at the east and a narthex (entrance vestibule), with two side chapels at the west end.⁵⁸ North and south of the domed central area are two rectangular vestibules,⁵⁹ both oriented on a south-north axis. The semi-circular niches along the east wall of the vestibules suggest that these spaces were probably used for ceremonial purposes.⁶⁰ The sanctuary is divided in three sections, with an emphasis on the larger central section, which is reserved for the communion table. All three sections end in semi-circular apses. North of the main apse is a *prothesis* chapel,⁶¹ while a *diakonikon*⁶² occupies the area south of the

⁵⁶ These churches and monasteries were located in Jerusalem, Rome, Bethlehem, Bari, Constantinople, Thessalonica, etc. See: Ibid., 11.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 16–17.

⁵⁸ The inner narthex dates to the time of Stefan Nemanja and the outer narthex (exonarthex), recognizable by the groin vault, is a thirteenth-century addition, dating to the rule of Nemanja's grandson Radoslav.

⁵⁹ Vestibules are halls between the side doors and the main part of the building.

⁶⁰ Ćirković explains that these types of ceremonial vestibules can be found in large Byzantine churches of the preceding period. For example in Hosios Lukas, in Phokis. See: S. Ćirković, V. Korać, and G. Babić, 24.

⁶¹ A prothesis is mainly used for the preparation of the liturgy.

⁶² A diakonikon is used for the storage of sacred objects.

sanctuary. The central dome, resting on pendentives, has a drum, circular in the interior and twelve-sided on the exterior. Four massive arches, supported by the piers, located on the side walls of the nave, provide support for the dome. These arches are reflected on the north and south side of the exterior façade. In a distinctly Byzantine manner, the exterior blind arches frame the three windows (Figures 4–5).⁶³ The original structure of the building, except obviously the domed area, is covered with barrel vaulting. The interior walls and the upper structure (including the dome) were constructed of limestone and brick. Local Radocelo marble was used for the exterior walls, portals and windows, and permanent furnishings.⁶⁴

Most scholars agree that Nemanja's earlier foundations, the church of St. Nikola at Kuršumljia and Đurđevi Stupovi at Ras, were used as prototypes for the spatial arrangement of the church of the Mother of God. The church of St. Nikola is a single dome church without aisles, a variation of a cross-in-square plan. Ćirković suggests that this church is modeled on Middle Byzantine church architecture that emerged in the ninth century, and is most prevalent in the provincial territories of the Byzantine Empire, where it assumed local features in architectural forms and decoration. For example, variants of the cross-in-square churches can be found in Zeta, where they incorporated pre-Romanesque and Romanesque features. Studenica is similar to the church of St. Nikola in terms of its ground plan (especially in the way the area under the dome is emphasized), but its architectural form (the construction of the walls, shape of windows, materials, sculptural decoration) differs significantly. Moreover, despite the similarities - emphasizing the height of the dome area - the elevation of the nave at the church of the Mother of God is higher than the one in the church of St. Nikola.⁶⁵ Đurđevi Stupovi is generally recognized as

⁶³ Hosios Lukas, in Phocis (Fig.6), and church of Panagia Kosmosoteira, in Pherrai are examples of churches, dating to the Middle Byzantine period, which have similar exterior blind arches that frame the windows. In general, there are three types of windows found on the church of the Mother of God in Studenica: the three-light apse window, which will be discussed in greater detail, the two-light and single-light arched windows.

⁶⁴ For the description of the interior see: Ibid., 27–32.

⁶⁵ As seen from the image, the church of St. Nikola consists of two basic sections: a Byzantine eastern section and a western section comprised of an exonarthex with a twin tower. These two sections date to two distinct periods and scholars debate over which was constructed first. Some scholars believe that Nemanja built the domed part of the building, and that the western end was a subsequent addition. Slobodan Ćurčić, however, challenged this assumption, arguing that the central part of the church was a Comnenian building, and that Nemanja sponsored the addition. Slobodan Ćurčić, "Origins of Thirteenth-Century Church Architecture in Serbia," *Abstracts of papers – Byzantine Studies Conference* (1976), 21–22. It is outside the scope of this paper to investigate these debates. More important to this essay is that the overall plan of the church of St. Nikola was used as a model for Studenica. For comparisons of Studenica with

an additional source for Studenica's architectural plan. Features which were adopted from this earlier foundation are two rectangular vestibules, positioned north and south of the central domed area.⁶⁶

Ćirković notes that, aside from the Byzantine type of dome, the exterior appearance of Nemanja's foundation resembles Romanesque churches without aisles and with a pitched roof.⁶⁷ The façade is articulated by pilasters, which indicate the internal division of the church. Along the top part of the building, just below the roof, is a Romanesque type of frieze with blind arches. Similarly, the concept of incorporating elaborate relief ornamentation and sculpture on the portals and windows is clearly Romanesque.⁶⁸ Scholars have searched for the models for Studenica's sculptural decoration among the monuments of various Italian maritime cities on the Adriatic coast. For example, there is a clear resemblance between Studenica's main portal (Figure B-7) and those of the cathedral in Trani (Figure B-8) and the cathedral in Bitonto (Figure B-9). Like Studenica, both of these Apulian portals have the canopy type of archivolts, which rest on free-standing colonnettes with consoles in animal forms. In addition, the piers are embellished with carved vines, of which the tendrils are intertwined with floral and figural motifs. Parallels have also been established with the Romanesque church of Santa Maria Maggiore at Monte San Angelo, Apulia. Like Studenica, the tympanum of the west portal of Santa Maria Maggiore, has a similar arrangement of Theotokos with Christ in her lap, flanked by two angels. Similarities have also been established between Studenica's apse window (Figure B-10) and the apse window of the cathedral in Bari (Figure B-11). One has to agree with Ćirković who argues that attempting to find a single source of influence for the church of the Mother of God would be fruitless.⁶⁹ It is clear, however, that the overall exterior appearance of Studenica reflects the architectural trends prevalent in maritime towns on the Adriatic, including southern Italy and the coast of south Dalmatia and Zeta.⁷⁰

the church of St. Nikola see: S. Ćirković, V. Korać, and G. Babić, 24, 33, 36; M. Čanak-Medić and Đ. Bošković, 114–15.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 114–15.

⁶⁷ S. Ćirković, V. Korać, and G. Babić, 28.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 28–30.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁰ The study of sculptural decoration on this side of the Adriatic coast is somewhat more problematic due to the lack of sculptural remains in Dalmatia and Zeta from the twelfth century. The sparse sculptural remains and their reference in literary sources are sufficient enough, Maksimović argues, to claim that Dalmatia and Zeta had a rich sculptural tradition. See: J. Maksimović, *Srpska Srednjovekovna Skulptura*, 73–75.

Despite the decline of Byzantine political power in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in these Mediterranean territories, its influence persisted in the sphere of art and architecture. The continuation of Byzantine tradition is not only evident in the superstructures of sacred architecture in the Adriatic region, but also in the execution of the sculptural decoration. Interest in the classical ideals of geometric order and balance, and realistic rendering of floral motifs are some of the characteristics of Studenica's sculptural decoration, which suggest Byzantine influence.⁷¹ This fusion of Romanesque and Byzantine elements acquired a unique character in the *katholikon* of Studenica. It became a defining feature of the indigenous style known as "Raška school," which was essentially created and promoted by Stefan Nemanja and his successors for the purpose of dynastic propaganda. Incorporating architectural trends from the Adriatic region confirmed Nemanja's claim to the newly conquered territories of Zeta and S. Dalmatia.⁷² Additionally, the "classicizing" tendency, to use Kitzinger's well-known phrase, is evident in some of the sculptural elements of Studenica, and is meant to validate Nemanja's rule by associating it with early Christian rulers.⁷³ The donor did not have a specific model in mind when selecting the sculptural design for his mausoleum, but one can argue that through "classicizing" Nemanja wished to make a reference to early Christian rulers, such as Constantine ("the first Christian Emperor").⁷⁴ Krautheimer's theory that many medieval copies did not exactly "look" like their models is applicable to Nemanja's foundation of Studenica.⁷⁵ To the medieval viewer a monument was considered a copy even if it contained only a small number of selected features of the given prototype. During the Middle Ages the art and architecture of the early Christian period,

⁷¹ Maksimović emphasizes the importance of Byzantine ivory carving, metalwork, woodwork and manuscript illumination in the execution of Studenica's sculptural decoration. The author explains that similarities between the sculptural decoration of Studenica and the decoration of Apulian monuments can be explained by the fact that both were created within the Byzantine sphere of influence. Jovanka Maksimović, "Studije o Studeničkoj plastici II, Stil," 100–07.

⁷² It will be recalled that Nemanja began building the church of Theotokos around the time he conquered Zeta and S. Dalmatia, the land which he claimed belonged to his ancestors.

⁷³ Ernst Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁷⁴ Interestingly, Stefan the "First-Crowned" draws a parallel between his father and Constantine in his biography of Nemanja. Stefan recounts that Nemanja gave him a cross made from pieces of the relic of the Holy Cross, whose miraculous powers protected Nemanja against his enemies and helped him in battles. Similar to Constantine's victory over Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Stefan attributes Nemanja's military victories to divine intervention. Prvovenčani, 18–19.

⁷⁵ Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an Iconography of Medieval Architecture," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* V (1942).

especially those monuments sponsored by prominent Christian rulers, were perceived as the purest expression of Christian forms. General references to these monuments, and early Christian rulers who sponsored them, might seem obscure to the contemporary viewer but to the medieval audience the connection was very explicit. Before further examining the motives of the Nemanjić dynasty, a more detailed examination of the sculptural decoration of Studenica is necessary.

Two of the most prominent features of Studenica's façade are the elaborately decorated main west portal and the apse window at the east end.⁷⁶ The rectangular marble frame of the main portal is richly embellished with relief carvings. The front sides of the piers are ornamented with vines combined with floral motifs (Figure B-7), while the lintel below the tympanum contains same vines inhabited by figural images. At the apex of the portal's outer archivolt is a relief carving of a lion's head, from whose mouth emerge vines on both sides. Intertwined in the tendrils of these vines are animals and fantastic beasts which appear to be chasing each other.⁷⁷ Maksimović suggests that the imagery symbolizes the Christian dualistic belief of the perpetual struggle between the forces of good and evil.⁷⁸ The abundance of flora, a symbol of paradise, offers a hopeful message to those who enter the church.⁷⁹ On either side of the main entrance are two sculpted lions, on whose backs once rested free-standing colonnettes which supported the consoles with griffins. Maksimović explains that these sculptures in round, together with the rest of the animal imagery on the main portal, have an apotropaic function.⁸⁰ They are meant to ward off evil and safeguard the body of the deceased donor, together with all believers who enter the church.

⁷⁶ As Ćirković notes, the church, including the portal and the east window, was most likely completed during the rule of Nemanja (1183–96). The latest date for the completion of the church is 1208/9, when the frescoes in the original part of the *katholikon* were executed. S. Ćirković, V. Korać, and G. Babić, 24.

⁷⁷ The imagery, which largely originates from classical antiquity, was adopted during the Early Christian period and continued to be used throughout the Middle Ages. For example, the centaur, which appears four times in the archivolt, each time with a different attribute, originated in classical mythology and was a common motif in both Byzantine and Romanesque art. See: J. Maksimović, *Srpska Srednjovekovna skulptura*, 66.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

⁷⁹ Interestingly, in Romanesque architecture the predominant theme of the main portals is typically the Last Judgment, which carries a more frightening message.

⁸⁰ Maksimović notes that these types of apotropaic motifs were often incorporated on the doors of early Byzantine monuments in the Mediterranean region. Jovanka Maksimović, "Studije o Studeničkoj Plastici I, Ikonografija," *Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta* (Beograd: Naučno delo, 1958), 143–44.

The prominent position on the west portal is reserved for the patron saint of the church, the Theotokos, located in the tympanum above the lintel (Figure B-12). The enthroned Mother of God is depicted with Christ on her lap and flanked by two angels. A Serbian Cyrillic inscription identifies the two angels as Michael and Gabriel. The two archangels are turned toward the Theotokos, while she is depicted frontally in high relief looking over the faithful who enter the church. The image is an iconographical symbol of Incarnation, one of the main Christian doctrines that maintains that God entered the human realm in person of Jesus, for the purpose of the salvation of humanity.⁸¹ The theme of Incarnation is paired with another major Christian theme: the establishment of the Christian church for the purpose of spreading the teachings of Christ, and is symbolically represented by the enthroned Christ and Apostles (Figures 13–14).⁸² Christ is depicted on the underside of the lintel, holding a Gospel book in his left hand, while his right hand is raised in a sign of blessing. The sides of the piers each contain reliefs of six Apostles who hold half rolled out scrolls, signs of their apostolic mission. Both themes, enthroned Theotokos with Child and archangels, and Christ with Apostles, are commonly found in both the East⁸³ and the West⁸⁴, but the juxtaposition of the two themes was less common in the twelfth century. The origin of this imagery dates to early Byzantine apse decoration. For example, Maksimović points to the sixth-century apse mosaic of the Basilica Eufasianiana in Poreč, Croatia (Figure B-15).⁸⁵ In the apse Theotokos is depicted holding Christ, surrounded by angels. In the frieze, on the triumphal arch above the apse, Christ is depicted seated on a globe. Similar to Studenica, Christ in Basilica Eufasianiana is shown holding an open Gospel book in his left hand, while his right hand is raised in a sign of blessing. Flanking him on both sides are the twelve Apostles. Todić convincingly argues that the selection of the two themes, particularly the representation of Christ with Apostles, must be viewed as Nemanja's effort to establish and strengthen Orthodoxy in his realm.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Branislav Todić, "Predstava Hrista sa Apostolima na Zapadnom Portalu Studenice," *Saopštenja* (Beograd: Zavod, 1994), 22.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 20–22.

⁸³ Ninth-century mosaic showing the enthroned Theothokos and Child in the apse of the St. Sophia, Istanbul. The Theothokos and Child are flanked in the presbytery vault by two archangels (only southern one is preserved).

⁸⁴ On the north wall of the nave in S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, there is also an image of the Virgin with Child, flanked by angels.

⁸⁵ J. Maksimović, *Srpska Srednjovekovna Skulptura*, 64–65.

⁸⁶ Nemanja's deep dedication to the Christian religion, as already noted, was also promoted by his two sons, Sava and Stefan the "First-Crowned," in their biographies of their father. Sava emphasized Nemanja's concern for the purity of the Christian faith. Similarly, Stefan referred

The apse window at the east end is also commonly recognized for its fine marble relief carving (Figure B-10). The three-light window is framed by a broad decorative band and an ornamental frieze below it. Like the main portal, the frame is filled with vines, which emerge from the mouth of a snake on the north side, and a dragon on the south side. Furthermore, the vines on the archivolt and the north side are intertwined with floral motifs, while the on the south side various figural motifs are depicted in the roundels created by the tendrils of these vines. Maksimović identifies these figures as a bird, man riding pips⁸⁷, an animal, a goat, a bird with spread wings, a lamb with a cross (Figure B-16) and a mermaid (Figure B-17).⁸⁸ In the midst of the vines and the foliage in the tympanum, placed above the window openings, are depictions of a dragon devouring a human figure and a basilisk with a long snake-like tail. Similar to the imagery of fantastic beasts on the main portal, Maksimović attributes the same apotropaic meaning to the imagery found on the apse window.⁸⁹ The carved relief figures are part of the larger sculptural program that is meant to protect the mausoleum of Stefan Nemanja. Furthermore, at the lower corners of the apse window are two damaged consoles in the form of kneeling figures, which probably supported free-standing colonnettes that carried the outer archivolt. The northern figure shows remains of a halo around his head and is depicted holding a book. The heads of these figures are missing which makes them difficult to identify. Scholars have developed various theories relating to the identity of these figures. Some scholars argue that they represent a righteous man and a sinner. Others suggest that they are representations of the Virgin Mary and an angel, while some scholars imagine that these figures are symbols of two Evangelists.⁹⁰ The most interesting speculation is that the northern figure, dressed in simple monk attire and shown holding an open book, represents St. Simeon. As Maksimović explains, similar sculptural representations of donors are also found on the facades of other medieval churches in Italy, Russia and Georgia.⁹¹ If this

to his father as a “shepherd,” a “teacher,” and an “apostle” who saved his people from false religion. The ultimate proof of Nemanja’s commitment to Orthodox Christian doctrine is his intolerance towards heretics. As Stefan claims, his father burnt heretics at the stake, exiled them, and had their tongues cut off. See: Sava, “Žitije Svetog Simeona Nemanje,” 6; Prvovenčani, 8,30; B. Todić, 22.

⁸⁷ pip – rootstock or flower of certain plants

⁸⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁹ J. Maksimović, “Studije o Studeničkoj Plastici I, Ikonografija,” 146.

⁹⁰ These scholars assume that two additional symbols of the Evangelists were originally found on the upper consoles, which are now presumably destroyed.

⁹¹ S. Ćirković, V. Korać, and G. Babić, 31, 44, 45; J. Maksimović, *Srpska Srednjovekovna Skulptura*, 68–9.

argument is accepted, one can hypothesize that the other figure represents either Stefan Nemanja's wife, Ana, or his youngest son, Sava, who, as previously established, played an important role in creating the architectural program for his father's foundation.

In addition to assisting his father in the selection of the sculptural program for Studenica's *katholikon*, Sava was also personally involved in decorating the interior of the Church of the Mother of God.⁹² The fresco paintings further demonstrate how the members of the Nemanjić line used architectural decoration to promote their dynasty. The first image relevant to the present discussion is the donor's portrait, located in a niche on the south wall of the nave, above Stefan Nemanja's sarcophagus. Scenes from the south chapel of Radoslav's exonarthex, dedicated to St. Simeon, will also be examined.⁹³ In the donation scene, Stefan Nemanja, dressed in simple attire with a domical crown, holds a large model of Studenica in his left hand, while in his right he holds the hand of the Theotokos (Figures 18–19). The Mother of God leads Nemanja to the enthroned Christ.⁹⁴ Christ blesses Nemanja with his right hand, while in his left he holds an open Scripture with the following Serbian inscription: "Come, you that are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom" (Mt. 25:34).⁹⁵ Stefan Nemanja offers his endowment to Christ with the hope that his dedication to the Christian faith will ensure him salvation. The

⁹² The fresco decoration, as indicated in the inscription around the drum of the dome, dates to 1208/9, the period after Nemanja's death but before his sanctification. During this time Sava managed Studenica as an abbot. Some of the imagery, including the donor's portrait, was repainted in 1568. Branislav Todić, "Ktitorska Kompozicija u Naosu Bogorodičine Crkve u Studenici," *Saopštenja* (Beograd: Zavod, 1994), 35.

⁹³ Stefan Radoslav (r. 1227–34), the son and heir of Stefan the "First-Crowned," sponsored the building of Studenica's exonarthex. While some scholars, like Ćirković, believe that the fresco program from the south chapel was painted after Radoslav's deposition, other scholars, like Branislav Cvetković, argue that it was executed during his rule, between 1230–33. Cvetković makes a compelling case, arguing that Radoslav was depicted as the current ruler, with the appropriate regalia. By 1235 Radoslav took a monastic vow and if the south chapel was decorated after he was deposed he would have been depicted in monk's attire rather than royal dress. Moreover, as Cvetković points out, there are no other examples of deposed rulers in Serbian medieval fresco painting. See: S. Ćirković, V. Korać, and G. Babić, 82; Branislav Cvetković, "Studenički Eksonarteks i Kralj Radoslav," *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* (Beograd: Naučno delo, 1998), 79.

⁹⁴ Similar to Sava's Life of Simeon, the role of Theotokos as Nemanja's intercessor and personal protectress is also emphasized in the donor's fresco painting.

⁹⁵ The text refers to Jesus' sermon concerning the Judgment Day, and the division of people into the righteous, who are welcomed by God, and the sinners, who are punished. As Todić explains, this quote from Scripture was more commonly used in Early Christian art. Sava also used this quote in his introduction to the *typicon* of Hilandar monastery. See: B. Todić, "Ktitorska Kompozicija u Naosu Bogorodičine Crkve u Studenici," 37.

dependence on Byzantine imagery is apparent. This type of subject matter is commonly found in Byzantine church decoration of previous centuries.⁹⁶ Todić notes that this peculiar combination of the ruler-monk regalia reflects Sava's main objective to celebrate his father as a devoted monk. The crown on the donor's head is not used to emphasize Nemanja as a ruler, but is rather a symbol of his willingness to give up his "earthly kingdom" for the "heavenly kingdom."⁹⁷ Todić's interpretation is especially compelling considering the similarity between Sava's biography of his father and the donor's portrait. In both, Sava focused on commemorating the monastic deeds of Stefan Nemanja, with the intent to promulgate Nemanja's/Simeon's canonization.⁹⁸

Flanking the donation scene, on the side walls of the niche, were originally portraits of Vukan and Stefan the "First-Crowned," who are presented as the heirs of their father's foundation and followers of Nemanja's religious commitment. Images of Vukan and Stefan were replaced with portraits of Stefan Dečanski (r. 1321–31) and St. Sava in the sixteenth century. It will be recalled that Vukan and Stefan were at war when Sava returned to Serbia with their father's relics with the goal of mediating peace between them. Similar to Sava's biography of Simeon, Sava depicted his two rival brothers together in the nave fresco paintings. Sava's determination to present Vukan and Stefan as brothers at peace is also evident in the paintings at the west entrance to the monastery, where they are depicted together, and in the inscription around the drum of the dome, where both of their names are most likely mentioned.⁹⁹

The second group of paintings that celebrates the Nemanjić dynasty, particularly its "holy" founder St. Simeon, are frescos found in the south chapel of King Radoslav's exonarthex.¹⁰⁰ In the upper zone are scenes from

⁹⁶ For example, the tenth-century image of Justinian and Constantine presenting their models to Theotokos and Christ, found in the vestibule of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Fig.20). Sava would have encountered this type of imagery during his pilgrimages to Constantinople prior to his return to Raška in 1208.

⁹⁷ B. Todić, "Ktitorska Kompozicija u Naosu Bogorodičine Crkve u Studenici," 40.

⁹⁸ The chronology of the events that led to Simeon's sanctification are as follows; between 1207 and 1213/14 Sava, then an abbot of the Studenica monastery, completes the Studenica's typicon, including the "Life of Simeon Nemanja." Next, Sava designs the fresco decoration above his father's sarcophagus, and witnesses the gushing of the myron from Simeon's relics and from the wall with the donor's portrait. Finally, Sava composes the liturgical office dedicated to his father where Simeon is celebrated as a saint. See: *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹⁹ B. Todić, 35–38.

¹⁰⁰ By the time Radoslav's exonarthex was built and decorated Simeon had already been canonized. Moreover, medieval Serbia had received its political independence and a Serbian autocephalous church had been established.

the life of St. Simeon,¹⁰¹ based on Sava's biography of his father. The events from the religious life of St. Simeon are presented using a pre-existing Byzantine model. The formula was only slightly modified, by adding certain details to fit Studenica's (Serbian) environment. In the lower zone of the chapel is a "horizontal" Nemanjić family tree juxtaposed with a row of three ecclesiastical dignitaries on the opposite wall. Stefan Nemanja's grandson King Radoslav is rendered holding a model of his endowment (Figure B-21). Radoslav's Byzantine wife Ana stands next to him. Stefan the "First-Crowned," dressed in monastic garb, is shown leading his heir, king Radoslav, to the newly proclaimed Serbian saint, St. Simeon. As Ćirković notes, there is a clear parallel between the donation scene from the nave and the image of the Nemanjić family tree in the south chapel of the exonarthex. Similar to the Virgin who holds Stefan Nemanja by the arm leading him to Christ, Stefan the "First-Crowned" leads his son king Radoslav to St. Simeon, who will intercede for the new king before Christ.¹⁰² The donor of the exonarthex clearly aimed to highlight his descendants from the "holy" king, with the purpose of legitimizing his rule.

The row of church leaders depicted opposite the members of the Nemanjić dynasty includes the first three archbishops of the independent Serbian church: St. Sava, Arsenije I and Sava II.¹⁰³ A similar arrangement of ecclesiastical leaders can be found in monuments in the Byzantine capital. For example, Ćirković points out that a row of Byzantine patriarchs are depicted in a similar fashion along the bases of tympana in the nave of St. Sophia, in Constantinople, and in the narthex of the church of St. George, in the city's suburb of Mangana. As Ćirković suggest, Sava was very familiar with these Byzantine models, which he would have encountered during his pilgrimages to Constantinople.¹⁰⁴ It is apparent that by pairing the two compositions in the south chapel, the donor wished to promote the newly established independent Serbian church and state, both in the hands of the Nemanjić dynasty.

¹⁰¹ The Departure of St. Simeon for the Holy Mountain, the Arrival of St. Simeon on the Holy Mountain, the Death of St. Simeon, and the Translation of St. Simeon's relics to Studenica. See: S. Ćirković, V. Korać, and G. Babić, 82. In keeping with Sava's wish to depict Vukan and Stefan together, the two brothers both appear in the fresco illustrating the translation of Simeon's relics.

¹⁰² Ibid., 85.

¹⁰³ S. Ćirković, V. Korać, and G. Babić, 82- 86; B. Cvetković, 77-78.

¹⁰⁴ S. Ćirković, V. Korać, and G. Babić, 86.

Conclusion

The late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries marked an important political change in the Balkans. The weakening of Byzantium, and its conquest by Crusaders in 1204, created an opportunity for the regional Balkan rulers, such as *grand župan* Stefan Nemanja, to assert their authority in the provincial territories of the empire. On one hand, Nemanja strove to gain independence from the imperial overlord, but, on the other hand, he wished to be associated with the prestigious Byzantine court. The church of the Theotokos testifies to Nemanja's ambition to establish himself as an independent ruler, whose dedication to Eastern Orthodoxy would assure him salvation. The impressive appearance of the Studenica *katholikon* was achieved by the use of expensive materials, such as marble, and by the employment of skillful craftsmen, capable of creating a monument that would affirm the power and glory of the donor. The idea of an autonomous Serbian church was not clearly defined during the construction of Studenica monastery, but the first steps were taken to give the monument a distinctly national character. For example, it was in the tympanum of Studenica's main portal that a Serbian Cyrillic inscription was used for the first time. Also, the donor deliberately chose imagery that would emphasize his apostolic mission among the Serbian people.

Reliance on Early Christian and Byzantine themes in Studenica's sculptural decoration reflected the desire of the nascent Christian community to resolve fundamental doctrinal issues. The complex iconographical language of Studenica's sculptural decoration suggests that it was created by someone very knowledgeable in matters of Christian doctrine, as well as someone familiar with Byzantine cultural traditions. The person who worked with Nemanja in creating the design for Studenica's sculptural decoration could be no one else but Nemanja's youngest son, Sava. Sava was on Mt. Athos during the time of Studenica's construction, but he must have corresponded with his father concerning the design of Nemanja's most important foundation.

Sava's efforts to pave the way for the spiritual independence of medieval Serbia are more explicitly suggested in the donor panel in the nave of Studenica's *katholikon*. Nemanja is portrayed as an exemplary monk with the aim of advancing his candidacy as a saint. Sava realized that Serbia's spiritual independence rested on the sanctity of the holy founder of the Nemanjić dynasty. Furthermore, he recognized that unity of the Nemanjić dynasty was crucial for its advancement in the larger Christian world. Sava's attempt to promote peace between his disputing brothers, Vukan and Stefan the "First-Crowned," is evident in their portraits flanking the donor's panel. Shortly after the execution of these frescoes, Simeon was proclaimed a national patron saint.

Finally, the frescoes from the south chapel of Radoslav's exonarthex capture the next phase in Serbia's history, subsequent to establishing Serbia's political and ecclesiastical independence. Simeon is, for the first time in the architectural decoration, celebrated as a national saint who protects the newly established Serbian church and state, both dominated by members of the ruling dynasty. Once again, Sava was not personally present during the execution of these frescoes, but the iconographical solution was most certainly his idea.

Most scholars are inclined to examine Studenica's frescos independently from the sculptural decoration in an attempt to explain how members of the Nemanjić dynasty used visual imagery as a form of propaganda. However, the architectural decoration must be viewed as an ensemble because, as demonstrated above, they both work together in commemorating Stefan Nemanja, on whose reputation rested the legitimacy of the Nemanjić dynasty. In more general terms, the architectural decoration of Studenica's *katholikon* reflects the formative years of the establishment of the Serbian Orthodox tradition, which was essentially based on the Byzantine model.

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