



The Church of the Christ Pantocrator,  
southwest view, Visoki Dečani Monastery

# VISOKI DEČANI

## UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE

Gojko Subotić

**A**T THE VERY end of his life, King Milutin allowed his elder son Stefan—who, after rising up against his father and being blinded, lived in exile with his family in Pantocrator Monastery in Constantinople—to return home to his country. Even though before this he had borne the title of young king (heir to the throne), Stefan had not received a place in the scene of the Family Tree in Gračanica Monastery, painted, judging by available facts' shortly before this. In the unrest resulting from the death of Milutin, however, Stefan, aided by some of the landowners and rumors of a miraculous return of his sight, succeeded in seizing the throne. These events have also left a direct trace on the shrines that he built. In Banja near Priboj where due to ill health he resided from time to time for its medicinal waters, a church was dedicated to Saint Nicholas, to whose aid his cure was attributed; and in Metohija, south of Peć, he undertook the building of Dečani which he dedicated in remembrance of the years of banishment, to Christ the Pantocrator. In gratitude the King also richly endowed the famous Holy Site in the capital city of Byzantium.

The excellent location of Dečani Monastery near a river with wooded hillsides on one side, a gorge cut into the mountain behind and fertile land before it, was already described with rapture by Grigorije Camblak, a gifted writer and head of a brotherhood, at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in his *Life of Stefan Dečanski*.

Most of the information, however, on the construction of this great endowment is found in the founding charter itself. Its first, original version—officially written on a roll of parchment over five meters in length with the ruler's signature in red ink and a seal of gold—in cultured language, presents the motives which moved the benefactor to undertake this work, emphasizes his royal birth and in a special, moving way describes the unfortunate misunderstanding between father and son.

The document furthermore calls to mind the King's great donation to the monastery in expensive items, and the lists the numerous lands and the people on them by name, which, alongside the estates of Hilandar Monastery, made up the greatest landholding of this type in medieval Serbia. All of this, one learns from this Act, was ratified at an assembly which met most likely at the palace in Nerodimlja where the Charter was written. Some time before this, it is also noted, while the Document was being put together, the country was attacked by Bulgarian Emperor

In 2004, UNESCO listed the monastery of Visoki Dečani on the World Heritage List, citing its frescos as “one of the most valued examples of the so-called Palaeologan renaissance in Byzantine painting” and “a valuable record of the life in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.” This Monastery, the first cultural monument on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija Province to be inscribed in the list of UNESCO World Heritage, has long been known as one of the architecturally most interesting and best preserved Serbian medieval churches in which traditions of Romanesque architecture meet artistic patterns of the Byzantine world. The most recent photographing of the entire fresco-painting of Dečani Monastery has revealed a beauty of fresco painting which has so far largely remained unnoticed in academic and iconographic circles.

Mihailo; at the battle on Velbužd on July 28, 1330, he was defeated and also lost his life. The result of this great battle in which young King Stefan Dušan proved himself, permanently affected a change in relations with the neighbor to the East.

The detailed Charter of Dečani—also preserved in other versions allowing the life of the monastery and its large land holdings and changes to be subsequently followed—includes excellent topographical and onomastical material of 14,000 names; and also offers, rare for an act of this kind, information on the state of building project and the experts who took part in them. Thus the overview of estates verifies the village of Manastirica, granted already by King Milutin to Protomaster Djordje with his brothers Dobroslav and Nikola “for their work in the adornment of many churches throughout all the Serbian lands.” It adds furthermore that in the “home of the Pantocrator”—as the entire monastery is called here—they built a refectory and a great tower over the entrance gate, and in the “city” (the monastery complex is surely meant) and “around the church” (on buildings no longer extant today) they also carried out many other jobs. The refectory, thus, was finished before the great church, whose construction—the charter mentions—was underway when the conflict with the Bulgarian Emperor broke out; and at the same time certainly, the ramparts were built which provided solid protection for the complex in the valley.

The refectory, whose primary appearance is, fortunately, known to us, and the tower with an open area facing the interior through which even today one enters the monastery, bear witness that the builders—as their name also suggest—were born there and raised on the local tradition. The refectory, as is often the custom, was situated west on the church, its placement adapted to following the outside walls. In later centuries, however, its appearance changed numerous times. A primary room with tables for monastic meals and a wide semi-circular apse with the abbot's table occupy the larger, northeastern part of the building; in front of this, in the center, was a so-called *mutvak*, a kitchen with heart—similar even today to the preserved examples on Mount Athos—with a vaulted structure and raised chimney which became narrower by degrees. The onetime character of the other, western wing of the refectory, as well as its appearance in its entirety could reasonably be reconstructed, so a few years ago it was rebuilt. On the exterior, shallow pilasters along the walls separated the even areas of the façade into fields, but it appears they were without relief decorations. Masterbuilder Djordje and his brothers, judging what is by known, were given jobs which did not require special stone cutting experience.

The construction of the great church was entrusted to builders from the coast, led by master builder Vita of the Franciscan Order, who after the work was completed left an inscription over the southern entrance: *Fr. Vita, Friars Minor, from Cattaro (Kotor), city of kings, built this church of the Holy Pantocrator, for Lord King Stefan Uroš the Third and his son, the eminent and all-great and all glorious Lord King Stefan. Built in eight years. And the church is finally completed in the year 6843.*

According to the Byzantine manner of reckoning time, this would be between 1 September 1334 and 31 August 1335. As the construction season ended in autumn and not in the summer, it is natural to assume that the inscription was engraved in 1334. The work on building the church which lasted for eight years began most likely in 1327 and was continued and completed during the time of King Stefan Dušan (1331–1355).

In his inscription Fr. Vita mentions both benefactors of the great church, but alongside Dušan's name lists appellations which unpretentiously but clearly express changes

at the head of the country—as a faithful subject the Master builder from Cattaro paid special respect to the King who had in the interim taken reign. Behind all of this lies hidden the deeper tragedy of the first ruler who, because of his great endowment remained the most in memory and even received the name: Stefan Dečanski, whose eyesight was taken in his youth, who was imprisoned in Zvečan, and afterwards put to death in circumstances yet unclear. This most unfortunate member of the Nemanjić, however, received a special place as a martyr in the cult, particularly in his own monastery, and for centuries would be glorified in literature and rendition.

The decision of its founder to be buried in the monastery decisively influenced the character of this greatest memorial of Serbian medieval architecture, as it did in Banjska. That understood taking into account the Church of the Theotokos in Studenica Monastery to where the bodily remains of the founder of the dynasty, Stefan Nemanja, were transferred and interred; and expressed itself in its own way in the iconography scheme distinctive for shrines of the Raška school and, especially, in the exterior adaptations in the spirit of western architecture.

The church in Dečani, of enormous dimensions—36 meters long, 29 meters wide and high—is a basilica with 5 naves, a dome of a rectangular bed and a narthex with 3 naves. In the interior, the central part with a wide and spacious area was divided by massive columns of intricate profiles, with tall arches supporting the dome. On the eastern side, spanning the width of the appropriate naves, is a monumental altar area with semi-circular apses—a large one behind the altar table and lesser ones on the sides. Opposite the prothesis, open by means of an arch of great dimension toward the center and altar table, the diaconicon is totally separated by a full wall with a low entrance in order to house the monastery treasury in safety.

The end naves of the naos make up chapels dedicated to Saint Demetrius on the north, and Saint Nicholas on the south side, with separate altar areas, apses and iconostases. By their placement and function they have repeated the role of side chapels which at one time, in the Raška school, were built separately. Here they are separated from the central part of the unique basilican area only by colonnades and marble columns connected by arches.



Signature of Stefan Dečanski on the Founding Charter of Dečani Monastery, 1330



**Holy King  
Stefan Dečanski,**  
fresco in the naos,  
adjacent to the  
iconostasis. The King's  
reliquary coffin was  
originally placed below  
this fresco, ca. 1343



From the exterior the three central naves are brought under a common, tow-sloped roofing, while the ones at the end have their own sloped roofs. In that way, the main part of the church, with hidden differences in height, gives an impression of a wide building with three naves. The central naves are also visible from the outside, over the eastern part and the narthex, raised in relation to those on the sides so that each of them has a special roof structure.

The spacious interior of the narthex is separated by four slender columns into sections. From the exterior it repeats the appearance of the eastern, somewhat lower, part of the church by means of which a definite balance is achieved in the interrelation of the architectural masses. On the other hand, the central part of the church—the highest and, at the same time, widest retreats by degree in elevation to its focal point and over the cubic bed ends with a dome with circular drum. Even though of massive dimensions, the entirety is thus to a certain extent divided and lightened.

In the well-lit interior, the lucidity of the area whose size is strongly experienced especially in the area under the dome, is kept in the heights. At the height of the faithful, however, the single space of the basilican area, characteristic for western architecture, is partitioned by parapetic blocks which have adapted it not only to the Orthodox ritual but also to the tradition of Raška architecture. That is to say, railings have partitioned the central nave of the church with its field under the dome and the sections of the neighboring naves on the north and south side, which agrees with the layout of Raška structures (with one nave, a dome and transepts for singers). This type of appearance in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was also repeated in Banjska as we have seen, due to its purpose as a mausoleum.

The building language of the masters of Dečani, led by Fr. Vita, reveals a high aptitude for stone cutting, fostered in Cattaro, which from the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century was not only a center of special importance for the economic life of the Serbian state, but also a valuable connection with the cultures of other regions, especially Italy. Special regal privileges which Cattaro enjoyed within its borders prompted the builder of “the church of the Pantocrator” to call it in his inscription the “city of kings.”

By its entire appearance and relationship, the great church of Dečani above all reminds one of the monumental cathedrals built in the spirit of mature Romanesque in the cities of the Adriatic region, but a number of its forms and structural solutions are distinctive of the Gothic style: excepting the prothesis and diaconicon which have been semi-formed, the entire complex has ribbed vaultings and end side naves, in keeping with the lower and lesser and their double in number sections.

As with other shrines of this region, the church of Dečani is roofed with lead plating which most securely protected the interior from moisture and precipitation in the long winter months. They are not, however, in the tradition of Byzantine construction—arranged directly over the



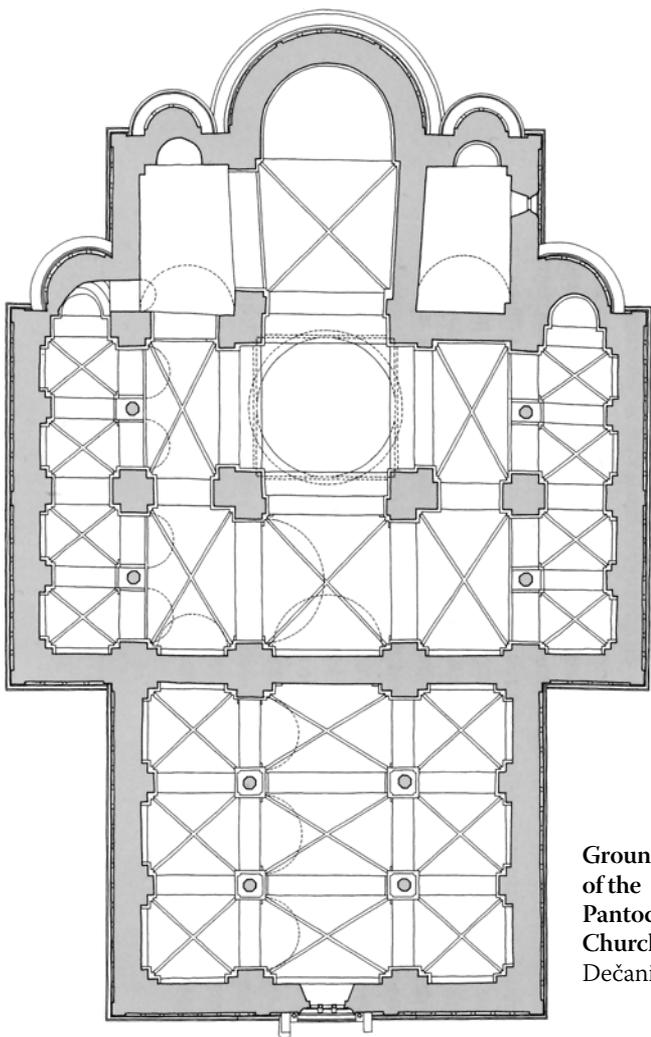
Panoramic view of Dečani Monastery, 1930

vaultings, whose form they repeated—but rather over a wood construction which, as in Gothic monuments, could hide the true height or character of a section.

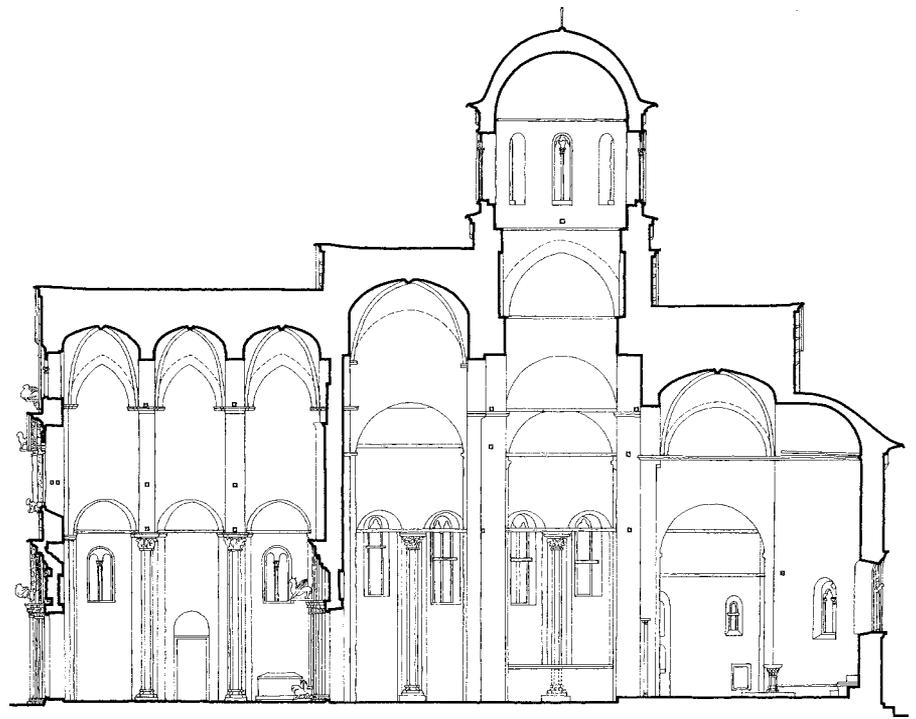
Certain damaged areas of painted decoration also allow the method of construction to be examined in the interior. The vaultings are made with bricks, as were the ribbings which in some places have parts of crystalline calcium carbonate, while the arches are regularly made by altering these materials. The walls themselves are, on the other hand, built with straight-cut or only chiselled blocks of stone, mortar and rows of bricks, so that during the three to four years—at least as long as the fresco painters had to wait to allow the building to settle—the interior appeared colorful. After the completion of masonry work, the church was consecrated according to tradition, and thus divine services were conducted in it without wall paintings.

The exterior face of the building is built of rows of perfectly cut golden-white and red quader. Here also Grigorije Camblak, describing the beauty of Dečani, expressed wonder at the skill with which its façade was cut and all *fitted together... so that it appears that the entire face of this church is one stone, so miraculously combined with skill that it is as though it has grown into one... thus appearing in unutterable beauty.*

The great smooth façade is framed with shallow lezens, and completed beneath the roof by a row of small, blind arcades resting on relief-inscribed consoles. Their clean planes have only openings, spaced in a measured and logical rhythm. On all sides of the narthex the only entrances into the church are marble portals, and alongside them, as well as on the areas of the naos and the altar area, single and double windows with semi-circular or interrupted arches and characteristic Gothic profiles. Of large dimensions and well placed, all the openings are enough of a source of light for the interior; in the central area of the naos, light comes in through the dome, and from the western and eastern ends—over the great portal and on the apse of the sanctuary—through wide three-light mullioned windows.



Ground plan  
of the  
Pantocrator  
Church,  
Dečani



Longitudinal section through  
the Pantocrator Church, Dečani

The fundamental idea of the area, the exterior appearance, structural elements, relief designs and the building material itself moved researchers to look for an analogy among churches, on the Adriatic coast and in Italy, but also in Serbia itself, where masters of western building culture left their works.

The similarity of the endowment Dečani to some five-naved churches in the West has long been noticed, especially to Portonovo near Ancona. The spatial organization, however, particularly in the upper zones, is quite different. It appears that there were certain similarities with the earlier Cathedral of Dubrovnik, which is poorly known, a three-nave basilica with a dome, damaged in the great earthquake of 1667. On the other hand, comparison to the layout of Saint Stephen's in Banjska shows in essence not only the same order or area elements, but also literal repetition of their forms and measures. At first sight, this is not obvious because on the older church all forms are clear, defined by full walls, while in the younger thus only marked by parapet slabs—i. e., in Dečani Monastery in the upper levels of the main naves they are immersed within the unique basilical area. The plans of the two churches when placed one over the other, assuredly show an unusual similarity, and so it is possible that at least one of the masters took part in the construction of both of these churches.

No less interesting is the similarity with the Cathedral of Saint Tryphon in Cattaro, for which, in consideration of the origins of the builder of Dečani, should first be considered as serving as an example. Fr. Vita, however, remembered a somewhat different appearance of the church. Certain parts of it had to be changed after a number of quakes hit not only the region of Dubrovnik but also of Cattaro. Valuable information is therefore offered by recent excavations of its foundations where, in the northern nave, parts of walls and supports were found whose order and mutual relationships in great measure match those of Dečani. This is not a question, it should be understood, of the limited experience of local builders, but rather the respect for an example and the fostering of a defined method of work. This is confirmed also by the fact that the width of Dečani and main church of Cattaro are almost identical, even up to the number of units of measure which the masters made use of in planning.

Further research into the origins of certain structural elements, e. g., the vaultings with ribbings of brick, point to Lombardy from which they could expand to the southern parts of the Apennine Peninsula and the eastern Adriatic coast. Besides others, Dečani with its façade also reminds one of the churches of northern Italy, and especially of those of Tuscany built of interchanging rows of red and white cut stone.

Of special interest for the knowledge of builders' conditions is the person of master builder Vita himself, a member of the order of Friars Minor, who, according to the order of the Monarch, here entirely appropriate to the ritual need of the Orthodox flock, left a work of beauty. The efforts of experts to recognize Fr. Vita among the citizens of Cattaro of that time have offered certain, if probably not

conclusive, results. In the city archives in much of the plentiful material which dates from exactly the time when Dečani was being built, one person of this name is often mentioned. His activity is well-known—he was a priest in the Franciscan church of Saint Mary and guardian of the well-known



Monastery of Saint Francis nearby, which was, according to tradition, built by Queen Helen, wife of Uroš I, outside the city walls (*extra muros*). There is not, however, any factual information which would bear witness that the Vita mentioned, a proven member of the Franciscan community, was also a builder.

Indirect witness to the extent of the engagement of masters from Cattaro in the construction of Dečani Monastery is given by documents of the period. This city, which had many stonecutters, was left without them during the construction season: in its notary books they are mentioned only in the winter months when they returned from the great construction sites in the interior of the country and took care of the jobs awaiting them at home.

The artists also brought to the façade of the “Church of the Pantocrator” experience which they gathered cutting relief decorations in their home regions. Portals and windows with their profiles and reliefs broke up the peaceful outer surfaces, and with a specialized artistic language added to the design which, in any case, richly interpreted the wall-paintings in the interior. Sculpturing in the southern regions of the Adriatic basin was different from the developed and especially rich complexes in the West in the extent of scenes and personages. Iconographically more humble and simple, the compositions in Dečani were limited mostly by the lunettes of the portals and windows. On the archivolt and frames of the entrances, the consoles and capitals, however, a world of mythological creatures and symbols lived, illustrating for the faithful in its own way beliefs, warnings and promises of protection.

On the festive western portal, in a semi-circular field, Christ is on a throne with lions and beside him are angels, iconographically unusual—on his left one praying with folded arms, and the one on the right blowing a trumpet. The figure of the patron himself, traditionally over the main entrance into the church, is not, however, named by an inscription which would iconographically more definitely determine him. In harmony with the Apocalypse, not only on the cutfronts of western cathedrals but also on the painted surfaces of Byzantine churches, custom showed angels blowing trumpets as one of the basic iconographical motifs of the Last Judgment. With reason therefore, experts have seen in the relief of Dečani the central part of the eschatological vision of Saint John the Theologian. On the other hand, the church of Christ the Pantocrator celebrated the Day of His Ascension into Heaven where, along

with others, he was awaited by angels with trumpets. Thematically, the design of the portal, as well as other decorated surfaces, must have been established in agreement with spiritual counselors, first of all with Archbishop Danilo II, who had a great part in the building and decoration of Dečani;

the iconography of this relief itself was the work of a local artist from Cattaro.

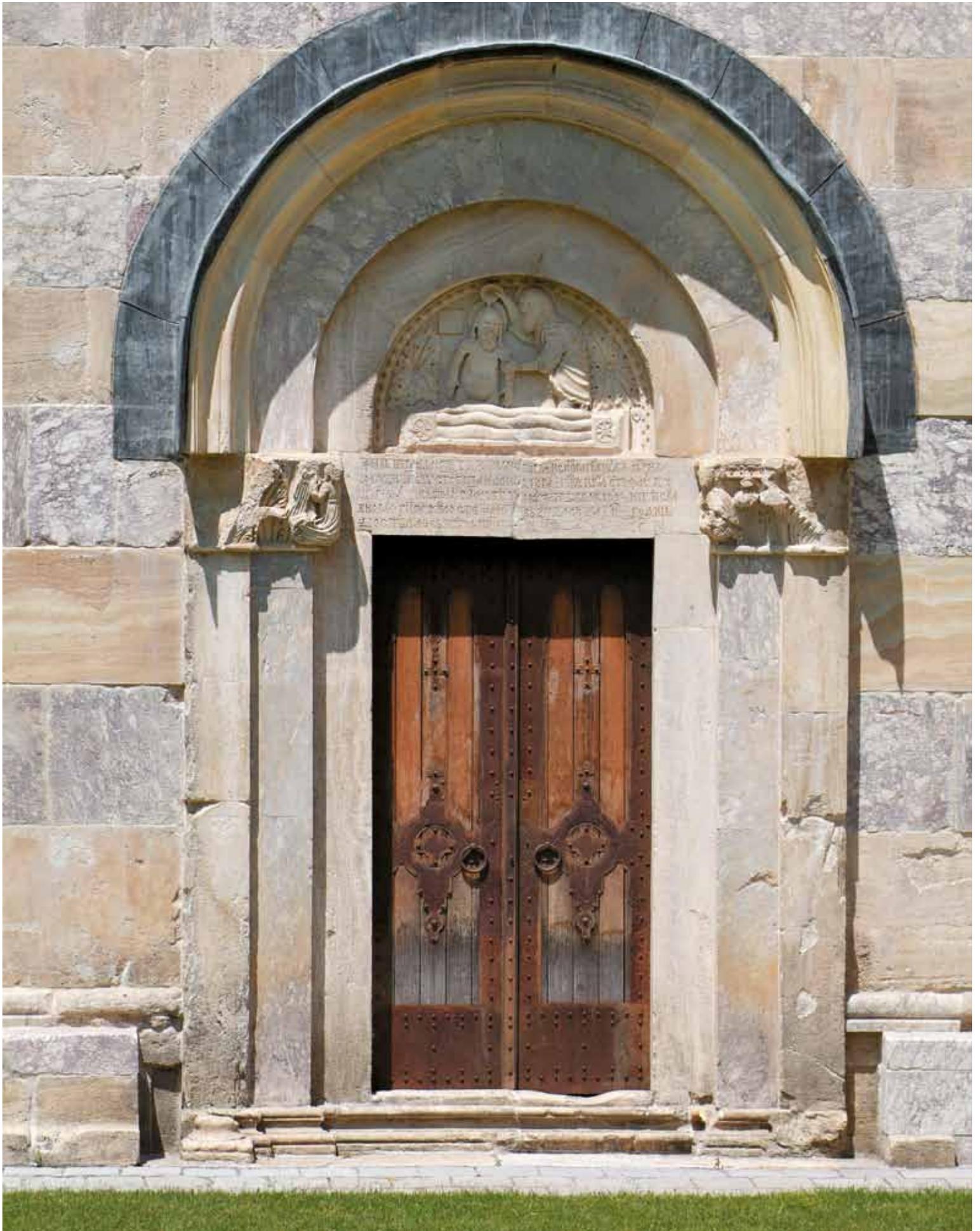
The strong and rough lined, thickset figures of Christ and the angels are models in the tradition of Romanesque relief on the Coast, but the drapery of Christ’s cloak finishes with broken lines characteristic of Gothic; pointing also to this are the trefoil arches at the foot of Christ’s throne, whose contour is also seen at the ends of some two-light mullioned windows.

The presence side by side of two styles, in a special local symbiosis here also marked the life both of sculpting and of architecture, noticeable on the eastern shore of the Adriatic as well as on the Apennine Peninsula. Totally in the Romanesque spirit there were also vines on the archivolt and door frames intertwined with scenes of centaurs, horseback riders with spears, lions, dragons, warriors with Phrygian headwear, a wolf with a lamb in its jaws, cherubim, birds which are biting grapes, et al. Many of them, together with the figures on the consoles, by themselves or fighting amongst themselves, personified the forces of good and evil. Great in number, these representations had an apotropeic meaning known to people of the Middle Ages, and in Serbia are found already in Studenica Monastery in the 12<sup>th</sup> century; near the openings of doors and windows they protected the interior of the church. It is, however, difficult



Capitel of the column in the narthex, detail: griffin, Dečani





South portal of the Church of Christ Pantocrator, with inscription of master builder Fra Vita from Kotor (Cattaro) on the lintel

Three-light altar apse window,  
Church of Christ Pantocrator, Dečani

to determine a sense of the entire decoration, and efforts at foretelling certain meanings and solving messages in all these representations in the belief of respected authorities of iconography and literary sources, are doomed to failure.

The southern, lesser portal has in a lunette a relief of the Baptism, connected with the appropriate rites on this side. The composition itself, both iconographically and artistically concentrated only on the main participants makes a true apposition to the representations on this theme in the wall-paintings, with a great number of figures, details and dynamic action.

On the northern side, the field above the entrance is filled with a geometrical carefully carved and balanced cross and full-leaved branches, with a vine rising from its step-like base. In exactly this shape it is, almost regularly, painted on the sides of entrances, where it blocked the entrance of evil powers in the interior of a church. At the same time, it also expressed hope in resurrection, for which reason it was carved on the upper sides of the stone tombs, for instance, of the heads of the Serbian Church who lie at rest in Peć.

In the interior, better protected under the roof, the reliefs on the portal in front of the naos have preserved, among other things, excellent figures of griffins and lions on the upper consoles, with a sharply-cut motif of an acanthus on the archivolts, and at the base a strong lion's body on which free-standing columns rest. Both one and the other, the personification of evil, hold in their claws animal and human heads.

A special place in the entire relief decoration is taken by excellently proportioned Romanesque three-light windows, with narrow mullions, richly sculpted archivolts, and frames alongside which were free-standing columns and consoles. On the western façade, in the lunette of the three-part window, scene of Saint George killing the dragon is brought into direct connection with the vow which Stefan Dečanski himself gave to this Holy Warrior, calling upon his aid before going into battle of Velbužd. The appropriate opening on the eastern side, in the main apse, has, however, almost the exact likeness as that in the Church of the Theotokos in Studenica. It has already been said that this three-light mullioned windows was an example for the stonemasons when

they worked on the reliefs on the façade on the later mausoleum-type church in Banjska where it found its replica. The sources themselves, in all truth, do not mention that the benefactor of Dečani also attempted to follow the pattern of Nemanja's endowment, but the coincidence with its representative window confirms that also on this occasion the stonemason remembered the church in Studenica and repeated certain of its forms.

At the same time, the interior has a marble iconostasis with relief decorations and a throne on which—the founding Charter expressly warns—only the King had the right to sit. Also, carefully fashioned marble sarcophagi under which lie the bodies of Stefan Dečanski and his wife Maria Palaeologina in the southwestern part of the naos belong to the same cycle. Sometime later, after rumors of miracles which occurred at the grave and the proclamation of his sainthood, most probably in 1343, the relics of the benefactor were moved to a pre-prepared wooden coffin, a masterpiece of wood carving, placed in front of the iconostasis itself, south of the royal doors.

The most spacious church in early Serbian architecture also claims the largest assemblage of painted decorations in the world of Byzantine art. On the surfaces of the tall walls, vaultings and arches there are hundreds of scenes and thousands of people in greater and lesser thematic sequences, in which the Divine Order of the universe is presented to the faithful, the Incarnation of the Son is shown, the history of the Christian Church is displayed and her dogma is interpreted. The twenty cycles of which the Calendar had 365 illustrated days, and Genesis 46 scenes, as well as hundreds of individual figures and busts, contain often rare and sometimes unique images.

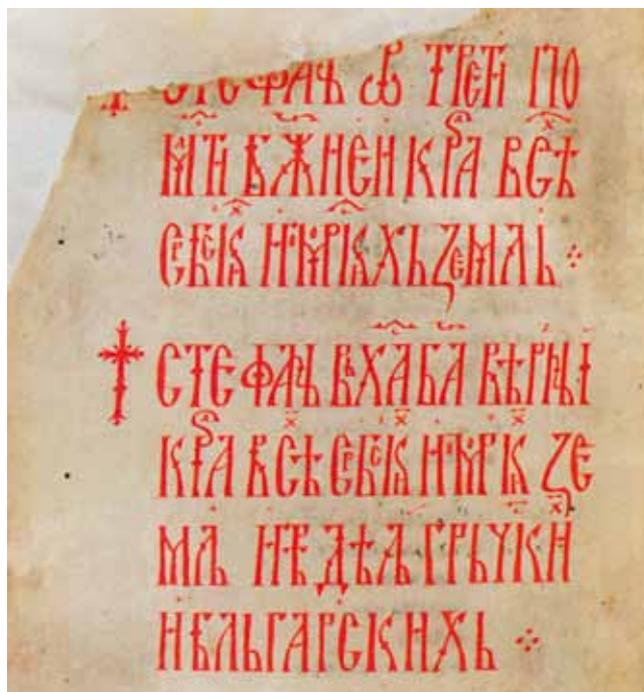
Even though more numerous than in other churches, the scenes in the Dečani church are not in general of small dimensions—its interior was not dissected nor were walls divided as they were in Gračanica Monastery, so the available surfaces also allowed the representation of monumental scenes. On the other hand, neither were all the scenes “readable,” especially the Menologion, whose individual days without designation are difficult to differentiate. The faithful, therefore, were faced with difficulties attempting to understand the language of frescos; along with this, but



The Founders inscription on the completion of the painting of the church, naos, west wall, Dečani, 1347/48



Opening lines of the Third Charter of the Dečani Monastery, 1343–45, Archive of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts

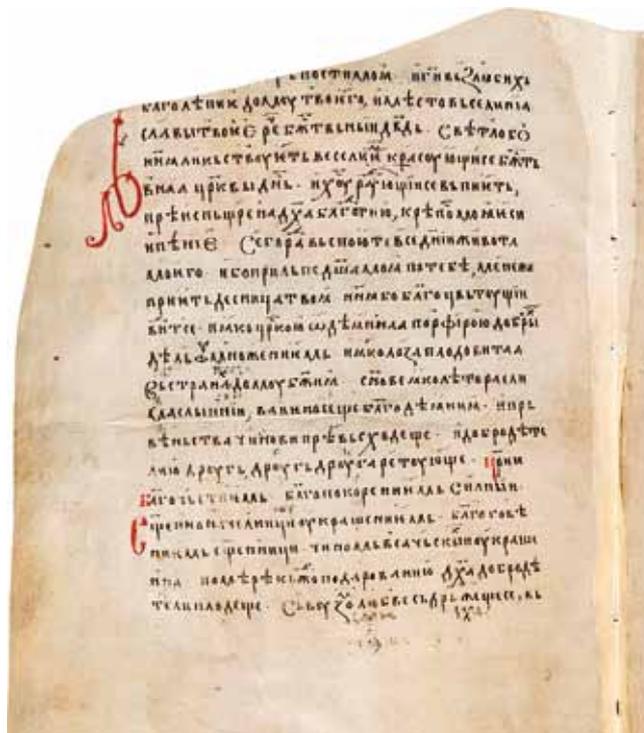


Signatures of Kings Stefan Uroš III and Stefan Dušan in the Third Charter of the Dečani Monastery

also because they were at a great distance from the observer or were placed in fields where the person who had ordered them and the painter knew full well that no one would be able to see them. The act of painting was, therefore, similar to the discreetly written signatures and prayers of zoographers (painters), an act of a higher order, realized for viewing from the other side, as if the scenes were not meant only for earthly eyes: certain truths had to be stated regardless of whether they would be understood by anyone.

The painting of frescos lasted ten years. The earliest inscription including a year was written on one crossbeam of the northern nave, 1338/9, and the latest, over the entrance to the naos, 1347/8. But as the season for fresco-painting in the interior on still wet mortar ended usually in autumn, the work was most probably finished in September or October of 1347.

It is difficult today to conjecture the magnitude of work in which, considering the size, only one group of master painters did not take part. Undoubtedly, firstly an order was made of the entire thematics on drawings with well measured relationships of the surface, and then the work was divided and carried out at the same time on different sides. The frescoing would usually run from east to west and from the highest, first of the spherical surfaces, downwards. In Dečani one of the artists with his co-workers might have begun work also in the Chapel of Saint Demetrius, where he in the inscription wrote down the name of Abbot Arsenije. According to a unique idea, realized in a scope which is difficult to comprehend in the manner in



Opening lines of the Charter of Princess Milica for Dečani Monastery, 1397, Archive of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts



**Family Tree of the Nemanjić Dynasty, Dečani, 1347**

From the bottom to the top, and from the left to the right: St. Sava, son of Stefan Nemanja, the First Archbishop of the Serbian Church; St. Simeon monk, previously the Great Župan Stefan Nemanja; Stefan Prvovenčani, son of Stefan Nemanja, the First Crowned Serbian King; Stefan, son of Vukan, Prince; Vukan, son of Stefan Nemanja, Prince and King of Zeta; St. Sava II, son of Stefan Prvovenčani, the Third Archbishop of the Serbian Church; Stefan Dragutin, son of King Uroš I, the King of Serbia; Vladislav, son of King Dragutin; Stefan Uroš II Milutin, son of King Uroš I, the King of Serbia; Stefan Radoslav, son of Stefan Prvovenčani, the King of Serbia; Stefan Uroš I, son of Stefan Prvovenčani, the King of Serbia; Stefan Vladislav, son of Stefan Prvovenčani, the King of Serbia; Urošić, son of King Dragutin; Carica, daughter of King Milutin; Brnjača, daughter of King Uroš I; Dušan, son of Stefan Dečanski; Todora, daughter of Stefan Dečanski; Jelena, daughter of Stefan Dečanski; Stefan Uroš V, son of Emperor Dušan, the King of Serbia; Stefan Uroš IV Dušan, son of Stefan Dečanski, the First Serbian Emperor; Simeon Siniša, son of Stefan Dečanski; Stefan Uroš III Dečanski, son of King Milutin, the King of Serbia; two angels; Christ Emmanuel.



Donor portraits of Kings Stefan Uroš III Dečanski and Stefan Dušan, south wall, Chapel of Saint Nicholas, Dečani, ca. 1343



Queen Jelena, Young King Uroš and Simeon Siniša, west wall, Chapel of Saint Nicholas, Dečani, ca. 1343



Kings Stefan Dušan, Young King Uroš and Queen Jelena, apse of Chapel of Saint Nicholas, Dečani, ca. 1343



Saints Simeon Nemanja and Sava, south wall, Chapel of Saint Nicholas, Dečani, ca. 1343







*Previous pages*

above: **Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace and Daniel in the Lion's Dan;**

below: **Christ is Talking to Peter and John, southwest bay of the naos, south wall, Dečani**



**The Akathistos Hymn, the eighth and ninth strophe (5<sup>th</sup> kontakion and 5<sup>th</sup> oikos), south choir, south wall, Dečani**

There is no sweeter name to the lips of Orthodox Christians than that of the Panagia (the All-Holy Mother of God). Orthodox people's tender love for her, which nourishes them, is so deeply rooted that we are compelled to wonder why such extraordinary honor is afforded her. The first and most significant reason is that the Panagia is the person within whom was revealed all the love of God, and the salvation of world was accomplished.



**Baptism of Christ,**  
detail, subdomical area, west side, Dečani, ca. 1339



Crucifixion of Christ,  
detail, subdomical area, west side, Dečani, ca. 1339





Acts of the Apostles, detail: Arrest of Peter and John, An Angel Appears to Peter and John in Prison, and Release Apostles from Prison, northwest bay of the naos, north wall, Dečani



which it was done in other, smaller churches, the frescos are placed in harmony with the general feel of a church, with the meanings of certain of its parts and functions of the services. As in Gračanica, the correlation of area elements in the upper zones did not prevent a view of the surfaces which, strictly speaking, belonged to parts of the Church with serving purposes. Due to this, not even certain thematical wholes limited themselves to appropriate segments of space—they passed onto the walls and vaultings of neighboring aisles, and in that way made it easier for the faithful to follow certain ideas. It is understood that for the painter himself this was an indispensable condition for realizing the complicated task which, in the spirit of the time, was expected of them. Also in the tall dome at the top is Christ the Pantocrator, and beneath him the Divine Liturgy being served by the Heavenly Powers, while prophets are between the windows. In the pendentives the evangelists are represented in a wide plane.

The area below the dome and neighboring sections on the sides received, alongside the Great Feasts, a multitude of pictures connected with Christ's Life—scenes of his miracles, parables which he made use of in his sermons and public acts, and especially his suffering. Alongside these, on the southern side is a part of the verses from the Akathist to the Theotokos, hymns during which when sung at services one could not sit.

Part of the miracles of Christ, his activities and, especially, his appearance after the Resurrection passed, as it has been said, into the sanctuary. In them, the basic theme, as is understood, was made up of scenes with a liturgical content: the Communion of the Apostles with Christ adorned in a rich episcopal sakkos, the Theotokos with archangels representing the Incarnation of the Logos and the Service of the Hierarchs alongside which is connected a greater number of Fathers of the Church, placed on the adjoining surfaces.

On the wide arch toward the prothesis there are, among others, scenes from the Old Testament which, in harmony with the character of the area, have a eucharistic meaning; they, however, represent a prefiguration of the Theotokos whose cycle, together with liturgical and other Old Testament scenes, has a place in the prothesis. On the underside of the arch toward the naos part of the scenes of Christ's parables, miracles and his activities, have expanded also, and of living historical persons, Arsenije, the deserving first abbot of the Dečani brotherhood, received his portrait.

In the western parts of the naos the Acts of the Apostles and Last Judgment are shown in detail, presented in 33 scenes. The Dormition, as is custom above the entrance, has special episodes and makes up a small totality in itself, as with the scenes of the sermon of Saint John the Forerunner and his conversation with Christ about the Baptism. Special also are the Old Testament scenes in individual groups, making up the Wisdom Sayings of Solomon and episodes from the Book of the Prophet Daniel, having ma-



Stefan Dečanski's chandelier medallion in Dečani

ny levels according to dogmatic meaning. Finally, on a greatly lengthened surface of the western wall, in the southern part of the naos is the largest and most complicated scene of the Tree of Jesse—the tree of Christ's ancestors with His Countenance at the top, with the fundamental genealogical line, having a number of parallel rows in which there are many numerous scenes, not only from the history of the Old but also the New Testament, to which the spoken prophesies applied.

In the southern chapel are scenes from the life of patron Saint Nicholas, and then the second part of the illustration of the Akathist to the Theotokos and other scenes from the activities of Christ, his miracles and parables. It is similar also to the farthest northern nave, dedicated to Saint Demetrius: alongside scenes of the life and sufferings of the famous Thessalonican Martyr, in segment of the vaulted surfaces and under them is presented an exceptional cycle of Genesis.

In the narthex the greater surface in the upper zones is taken up by the Calendar. All the feasts and personalities celebrated by the Church are shown in a manner adapted to the area not only by choice but also by the character of its scenes—entire compositions when important events are illustrated, simplified scenes of suffering, or only "portraits" of persons, who have found themselves a place in the great Christian community. Their order starts from 1 September with which the year began according to the Byzantine manner of reckoning time, and goes from left to right, clockwise, the sequence in the zones and in the frame-

work of certain parts of the building in greatest measure attempting to make the following of this great cycle in painting in general easier.

Individual scenes represent the history of the Christian Church through the Ecumenical Councils, which confirm her dogmatic foundation, all together six (without the Seventh, dedicated to the condemnation of iconoclasm), each having two compositions: one with portraits of the Emperor and leading Hierarchs and the Council, and the second with the opposing bishops.

The cycle of Saint George, with scenes from his life and suffering, makes a special appearance in the northeastern aisle of the narthex. Its surfaces are, in fact—one can see from the scene of the Service of the Hierarchs in the lowest belt—divided up by the special cultic part dedicated to this saint. The chapel was in any case constructed according to the desire of landowner Djordje Ostouša Pećpal who participated here through his donation. As in western art, where certain parts of the church or altar were furnished by respected individuals, in the Orthodox Church there were rare cases when, during their construction or later, other benefactors also joined in with their own means. In Dečani the area also had a sepulchral intent: tomb-markers bear witness that members of the Pećpal family were also buried here.

Alongside the abundance of pictures of sacral content, Dečani has preserved a multitude of historical portraits, in the first place of its benefactors. The ruler's ideology and its expression in art already in the time of King Milutin appeared in a number of iconographical variants, and sometimes made up exceptional totalities. In the great church of Dečani rare solutions also appeared, thought up or adapted to the conditions which were changing at the exact time it was painted. The period of military campaigns and the amassing Byzantine regions, especially after 1342, influenced the state-judicial understanding in the Serbian milieu and found an immediate expression in rulers' titles, so that changes could also be very clearly followed in the inscriptions near their countenances. Due to this, certain parts of the wall decorations can be more exactly chronologically determined, especially in the lower zones where the majority of portraits are located.

Interesting changes were also brought about by events connected to the cult of the founder of the monastery, Stefan Dečanski. His oldest portrait, on the southern wall, following respected older members of the dynasty (Saint Simeon Nemanja, Archbishop Sava, and King Milutin) was painted only somewhat later, together with the figure of his wife



### The Tree of Jesse,

detail: Destruction of Sodom, west wall,  
Chapel of Saint Nicholas, Dečani, ca. 1343

Maria Palaeologina. On a newer layer, Stefan Dečanski is with his son, the other benefactor of the church, with whom he holds its model, while from a beam of light Christ blesses them with both hands. At the same time, the family picture of Stefan Dušan on the western wall also has been altered where in the new compositional scheme Empress Helen has received the place between the heir to the throne, young Uroš, on one side and most probably Dušan's half-brother. The later Emperor of Thessaly Simeon, on the other. All of these changes on the portraits near the sarcophagus of Stefan

Dečanski were made, it appears, after his canonization. Dating also from that time is his excellent countenance on the pilasters in front of the iconostasis where, as we have seen, his remains were moved to at that time. And here with a model of the church which he offers up, the Sainted Benefactor bowing slightly, mouths his long prayer to Christ.

In all cases, the countenances of the rulers and members of his family show that they continued the tradition of dress in example of the Byzantine emperors, whose etiquette and royal ceremonies they faithfully followed. To a great extent this can be seen in the aristocratic portraits of the time. The differences in their clothing allow, however, the possibility that elements of costumes of another origin can be found—especially with those people who did not belong to the highest circle of social hierarchy, so neither did their titles agree with those of Byzantium. Thus Djordje Pećpal is shown as a humble landowner of unknown rank and status in a short tunic with flower ornamentations, a belt around his middle and a decorated cape, whom Saint George, holding him as a protector, leads to Christ on His throne.

In humility the kings Stefan and Dušan also bow to the glory of Christ the Pantocrator in the large bust above the entrance into the naos, receiving from cherubim a scroll with the Divine Word. Even though they, as benefactors, are illustrated here in the known tradition of representation “over the doorstep,” their countenances, here in an individual thematic context, reveal complicated ideas: on the book held by Christ is written the metaphor of the gates and salvation of those who enter, in connection with the mission which has been entrusted to them, while at the sides are figures of David and Solomon, also father and son with whose appearance the Serbian rulers are also compared in local literature.

As with Byzantine emperors, humble before God whose servants they are as are all others, and glorious in their power on earth, the Serbian kings also clearly express this two-



**Services of the Hierarchs, detail:**  
Saint Nicholas and Saint Gregory the Theologian,  
altar apse, north side, Dečani, ca. 1339



**Services of the Hierarchs, detail:**  
Saint Athanasius and Saint Gregory of Nyssa,  
altar apse, south side, Dečani, ca. 1339

fold rank with the portraits in Dečani. Thus, alongside the northern entrance to the narthex, Stefan Dušan once more is shown in an official way, between his wife and son-heir, but this time with a rank which reveals changes that have in the meantime taken place. After conquering Serres, an important city on the old road from Thessalonika to Constantinople, Dušan at the end of 1345, maybe on Christmas, there proclaimed himself, and in April of next year, on Easter, in Skoplje, was crowned, Emperor of the Serbs and Greeks. His portrait in Dečani with the Emperor's title, as is understood, did not also show the changes in appearance, because, as has already been said, Serbian rulers even before, as Kings, copied the dress of Byzantine emperors. The picture of the royal family makes up, on the one hand, a totality with the portraits of spiritual figures on the neighboring surface of the western wall—the abbot of Dečani Arsenije, once more Saint Sava, as the founder of the Serbian Church, and Joanikije, her patriarch at that time. Rather, the last of these in the inscription is still described as archbishop, which tells one that the first part of the scene in the northwestern corner of the narthex was painted in autumn of 1345 before the changes in which he gained a new title, and the second painted later: i. e., before the one-

time great logothet of the king and a person of trust, Archbishop Joanikije, before the crowning of Dušan as Emperor was consecrated as patriarch.

As also in Gračanica, finally a place was ordained for a group portrait of the dynasty in the form of a tree which grows from the roots of Stefan Nemanja. It stands on the same wall on which, on the other side, in the naos, is the Tree of Jesse—a scene whose iconography suggested the same manner for royal origins of the family of Serbian rulers.

Rich in their scope, the frescos of Dečani are often mentioned as an example of so-called encyclopedism, in whose spirit generations of painters created in the decade around the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In its iconographical abundance—even though not in the same scope nor collected together in one place—the wall paintings of this character were already known in churches built and decorated during the time of King Milutin. Besides this, the frescos of Dečani were not, even though this is sometimes stated or at least hinted at, an expression of dried-up academism which left behind the original freshness of meaning. It holds true that artistic reforming of examples chosen from art history characteristic for churches of the first quarter of the century lost rhythm and creative charge; but the scenes



Saint Theodor Tyro, naos, north choir, Dečani

looked at in their entirety and mutual relationships still showed a lively and clever control of ideas which lends them a different and complicated meaning. It might be said that a passion for the showing of dense compositions with innumerable episodes and facts was missing, whose most obvious representatives were—keeping only to local ones and not the wider region of the Byzantine style of this time—in the King's Church in Studenica, Saint Nicetas, Staro Nago-ričino and Gračanica. In Dečani this compressed exhibition of content is often represented in numerous scenes

and sometimes made into entire small cycles. Its narrative was different, but in no way larger than in shrines which received wall paintings two or three decades earlier.

The decoration of the expansive interior was also a great challenge for the master painters and for artist-counselors, since they had never had the occasion to create such a sophisticated composition, with the responsibility that its parts, in the spirit of the constantly developing interpretation of pictures and ideas which they express, be mutually connected. On the other hand, the great worksite brought together a number of groups of painters, of whom it was expected that they would coordinate their method of work. Behind the desired oneness, especially successful in the general gamma, one can nonetheless recognize artistic individuality and talent. Of the names of the master painters who participated, only one is known however, written down in color on the capital near the place where he painted: Srdj the sinner. The character of this name leads one to think that he was one of the artists of Cattaro who had come as did Fr. Vita at the invitation of the ruler. Sources in Cattaro mention, of the other hand, so-called Greek painters (*pic-tores graeci*) masters who in the coastal cities in the 14<sup>th</sup> century worked for Orthodox clients. For this reason, it is often thought that they also joined with their knowledge in the great work in Dečani. Nothing more is known, however, about their method of work nor of their true capabilities in decorating such a large interior. On the other hand, frescos in a number of local churches show a similarity in style to such an extent that there is no doubt that they originate from one artistic climate and that the master painters of Dečani, with appropriate experience, should be sought within the country itself, in the regions in which the Serbian state existed, while they continued to employ Greek artisans who, painting in the same spirit, closely cooperated with local painters over a number of decades.

Better preserved than other large churches, Dečani also has on its marble altar railing icons from the time the walls were decorated, even in the same style, surely the work of the masters who painted the frescos here, who, as was often the case, did the icons at the same time. The Royal Pictures of Christ and the Theotokos, on one and the other side of the royal doors, and Saint Nicholas and Saint John the Forerunner next to them, today make up a very rarely preserved totality of an iconostasis in the entire Byzantine world, as does the great collection of ancient works representing one of the greatest treasuries of Serbian art from the time of political independence but also from the centuries of Ottoman rule. In its own right, the monastery's library preserved excellent collections of ecclesiastical manuscripts and literary works, one part of which was written in Dečani itself.

*The Sacred Land: Art of Kosovo*,  
New York: The Monacelli Press 1997, pp. 177–197.



**Saint John the Baptist,**  
west bay of the naos, west wall, Dečani, 1348



**Saint Nicholas *Quick Helper*,**  
west bay of the naos, west wall, Dečani, 1348



**Last Judgment**, detail: Deisis, west bay of the naos, west wall, Dečani, 1347–1348



**Last Judgment**, detail: Righteous Archbishops and Hermits, west bay of the naos, west wall, Dečani, 1347–1348



**Last Judgment**, detail: Righteous Emperors and Noblemen, west bay of the naos, west wall, Dečani, 1347–1348



Memorial Book,  
written and illuminated by Aleksije Lazović, Dečani, ca. 1818



ДѢЛІАСТХЪ АТІЛЪСТІСІ

СТЫМЪ АПЛОМЪ ІЕУАНСТОМЪ ЛОУ

КОЮ. ВЪВЕЛНІКОУЮ НЕЛЮ ПАСХЫ

И НАВЪЗНЕННІЕ ГНѢ, НА МЪРГН. АПЛА

РЪВОН ОУБО СЛОВѠ СТВОРНХЪ ѠВЕСѢХЪ

ѠТІОФІЛЕ. ѠННУМЕ НАЧЕТЫС ТВО

РНТНМЕ НОУУНТН. ДОНГОМЕ ДНЕ ЗА

ПОВѢДОУНЕ АПЛОМЪ ДХѠМЪ СТЫМЪ,

НУМЕ НЗБРА НВЪЗНЕСЕЕ. ПРѢДННАН

МЕ НПОСТАВН СЕБЕ ЖИВА ПОСТРАНИН



Book of Four Gospels, Opening Page of the Gospel of Luke, Manuscript No 6, ca. 1400



Memorial Book of Dečani monastery, written and decorated by Dimitrije Daskal, 1595

Books are a special and precious part of the Monastery of Dečani treasury. About 160 manuscripts and 17 old printed books, which were part of the former monastery library, have been preserved to the present time, making it a Serbian collection second only to the one in the monastery of Hilandar. The manuscripts are written on parchment and on paper and almost all of them are in medieval Serbian. Judging from their contents, they were mostly intended for liturgical use: Tetraevangelia, Apostola (Epistle Lectionaries), Hieratica, Menaia, Horologia. There are also works of patristic and ascetic literature, a few of the oldest Serbian verse Prologues, as well as manuscripts directly associated with the cult of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani. Of special importance is the collection of charters and other documents bearing witness to the long and exciting history of the monastery.



Octoechos from Crnojević Printing House, 1494



Printed Festal Menaion of Božidar Vuković, 1536-1538



The Mother of God with Christ Child,  
mid 14<sup>th</sup> century, despotic icon on the iconostasis, Dečani



Archangel Gabriel,  
mid 14<sup>th</sup> century, despotic icon on the iconostasis,  
Dečani



Mother of God Pelagonitissa, icon,  
second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Treasury of the Dečani



Hagiographic Icon of Saint Nicholas,  
icon, second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century,  
the Treasury of the Dečani



Saint Anthony the Great,  
icon painted by Longin, 1572, the Treasury of the Dečani Monastery



Reliquary Crosses of Emperor Dušan (left)  
and King Stephen Dečanski (right),  
the Treasury of the Dečani Monastery



**Cup ornamented with hunting motives,**  
16<sup>th</sup> century, the Treasury of the Dečani Monastery



**Cup with a griffin,**  
16<sup>th</sup> century, the Treasury of the Dečani Monastery



**Cup donated by Hieromonk Sergije to Dečani Monastery,**  
1608, National Museum Belgrade



**Chalice,**  
1567/68, donated by Radivoj to Dečani Monastery



**Ripidion made by Kondo Vuk,**  
1569/70, donated by Radivoj to Dečani Monastery

Contemporary to Longin's icons, and only twenty or so years earlier than the painted cross on the iconostasis, these ripidia act as evidence that creative vigor had not vanished by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and that the fraternity of Dečani persistently kept to high standards in adorning their church with icons and liturgical vessels.

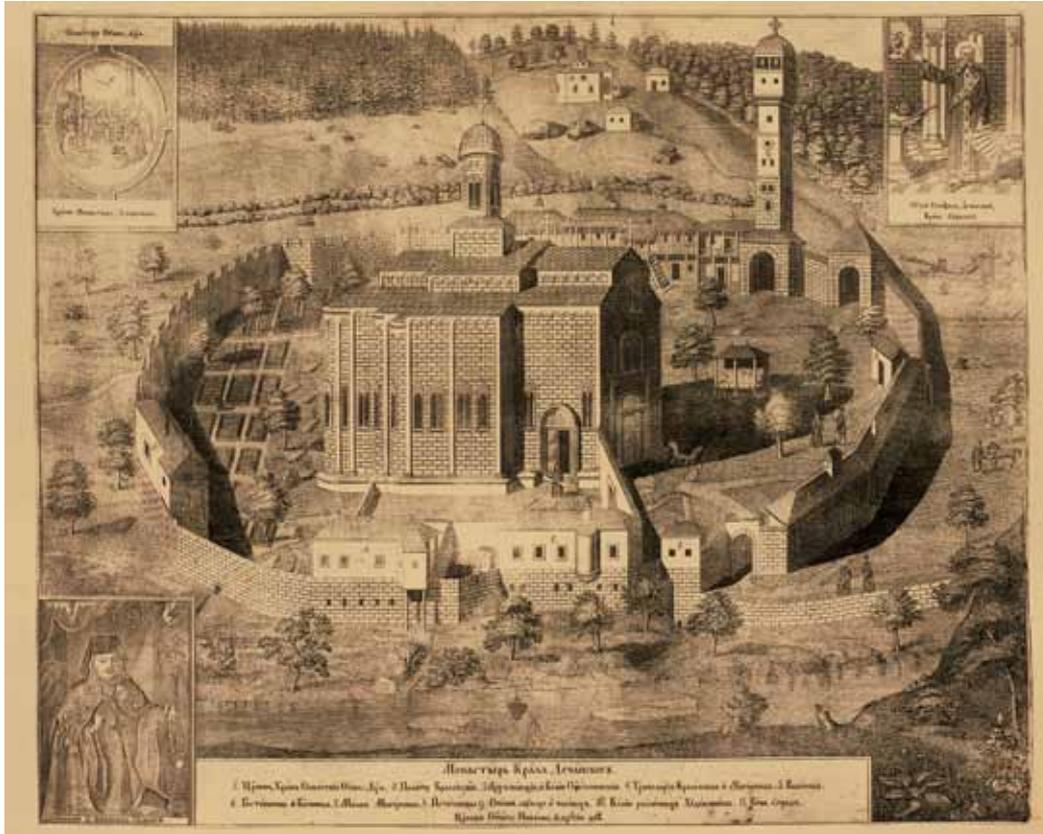


**Panagiarion**, 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Treasury of the Dečani Monastery

The panagiarion made of bone and set into a silver filigree casing is perhaps the oldest liturgical vessel in the Dečani collection.

**Iconostasis Cross**,  
Dečani, 1593/94





Engraving of Dečani Monastery, G. Stojanović-G.A. Miler, 1746



Firman (edict) of Sultan Bayezid II (left), 1506



Firman (edict) of Sultan Mustafa IV (right), 1808



Divine service, Dečani Monastery



People participating in Divine service, Dečani Monastery