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GRAČANICA AND THE CULT OF THE SAINTLY PRINCE LAZAR

The article explores a virtually unknown episode in the history of Gračanica Monastery, a late nineteenth-century restoration of the monastery church. The results of this undertaking were still visible during the conservation of the church conducted in the 1960s and early 1970s. At that time the nineteenth-century interventions were only partially recorded before some of them were removed and permanently lost. The nineteenth-century refurbishing of the frescoes in the main dome was signed by one Mihail Iourokosk Debrel and is dated 1898. More significant, now lost and hitherto unpublished, was the refurbishing probably by the same Mihail, of an arcosolium in the south wall of the church. This arcosolium, whose original function is unknown, was painted and inscribed with a lengthy inscription indicating that the remains of Prince Lazar (who died in the Battle of Kosovo, on June 15, 1389) was temporarily deposited in this tomb before being moved to the monastery of Vrdnik — Ravanica on Fruška Gora. While the content of the inscription is a total fabrication, its implications are nonetheless interesting in several ways. The mastermind behind the project was probably the Metropolitan of Raška — Prizren, Dionisije, who died on Dec. 5, 1900. In accordance with his own wishes, he was buried in the very arcosolium identified as the ‘temporary burial place’ of Prince Lazar. The rising importance of the cult of the Saintly Prince Lazar around 1900 provides the background for this historical fabrication whose construction was actually made up of several disparate elements, each marked by a degree of historical accuracy in its own right, thus collectively contributing to its general relevance.

The church of the Dormition of the Mother of God at Gračanica Monastery has been a subject of numerous studies.1 Its history, architecture and art, as a result have been thoroughly studied and are well documented. Even so, an aspect of its later history deserving attention has escaped previous notice. The episode of Gračanica’s history in question is also linked with the growing importance of the cult of Saint-Prince Lazar in the course of the nineteenth century and as such is of double

1 S. Ćurčić, Gračanica. Istorija i arhitektura, Beograd i Priština 1988 [also in English: Gračanica. King Milutin’s Church and Its Place in Late Byzantine Architecture, University Park and London 1979]; B. Todić, Gračanica. Slikarstvo, Beograd — Priština 1988, are the most recent comprehensive monographs on the history of the church, its architecture and art.
interest for the students of Serbian history and art. The study that follows relies on several inscriptions — some of which no longer preserved — that offer insights beyond their original intentions.²

Having survived the darkest moments of its history toward the end of the eighteenth century, Gračanica began to receive its first foreign visitors during the first half of the nineteenth century.³ Its fortunes, despite the fact that it remained on the territory of the Ottoman Empire, continued slowly to improve during the second half of the century. It was during this period of time that the first efforts at church restoration took place with the financial aid received from the Serbian government in Belgrade.⁴ Between 1887 and 1900, Gračanica underwent very extensive ‘restoration’ under the auspices of Archimandrite Gedeon Marić.⁵ The work, according to an inscription above the church portal was begun on August 20, 1897, when the church was covered with a new lead roof. This was followed by plastering of the facades with mortar and painting them with designs that emulated the actual building technique.⁶ Archimandrite Gedeon Marić had also envisioned an extensive ‘restoration’ of the church interior. Only a part of this plan was implemented before the contemplated re-painting of the entire interior was brought to a halt at the order of the Serbian consul in Priština and following the intervention of a teacher, Josif Popović from Mitrovica.⁷

Among the executed interventions in the church before the suspension of work were the repairs of damaged areas of the frescoes in the main dome and the painting of the arcosolium in the south wall of the church. The repairs on the frescoes in the main dome were relatively limited in scope.⁸ They were confined to the filling of small areas where fresco mortar had fallen, the largest of these being on the breast of the Pantokrator image including a corner of the book that he is depicted holding in his left hand. (Fig. 1) The filling and the missing corner of the book, re-painted at the time, were removed in 1971 and replaced by unpainted mortar filling still visible today.⁹ The work in the main dome gave the nineteenth-century artist-restorer an opportunity to sign his name and date his work. His name MIX[AH]A and the date 1898 appear in

² As such, the topic is perceived as an appropriate offering to Academician Gojko Subotić, the unsurpassed master of ‘reading history’ from ignored or unobserved inscriptive evidence found on walls of scores of medieval churches throughout the Balkans.
³ Čurčić, Gračanica, op. cit., 32–33.
⁵ J. Popović, Manastir Gračanica, Beograd 1927, 46.
⁶ Parts of this external plastering and painting had been preserved, especially on the exonarthex, but were removed in their entirety during the restoration of the church carried out between 1963 and 1967. For the photographs showing the state of the church facades prior to the 1963–67 restoration cf. Čurčić, op. cit., figs. 37–39.
⁷ Popović, Manastir. op. cit., 46.
⁹ Ibid. 192–93, where the exact nature of the intervention is described in detail.
unusual places — within the two capital letters C — within the two-part monumental inscription IC XC framing the head of the Pantokrator (Fig. 2). 10

The same artist was also responsible for the repainting of the cornice at the base of the main dome drum. Executed relatively crudely, this painting consisting of a vine scroll depicted against a white background was removed during the 1971 conservation with the exception of a 0.5m-long section on which another signature of the painter Michael has been preserved. 11 (Fig. 3) Here, his full name — Mihail Iurokosk Debrel — appears flanked by his initials and the date 1898. The name of this artist may eventually appear in another context, though at the present he remains an enigmatic figure.

The same Mihail may have been involved in another intervention in Gračanica that is of prime interest in our context — the re-painting of the arcosolium in the south wall of the church. (Fig. 4) The elaborate re-decoration of this arcosolium tomb was apparently done by the same hand as the work in the main dome and probably at the same time, in 1898. 12 Unsigned and undated in this case, the decoration bore unmistakable similarities both in the stylistic characteristics of the painted floral elements and in the use of a distinctive cobalt blue color with the restored parts in the main dome. The entire painting of the arcosolium tomb as executed at this time was removed and destroyed during the restoration of the church in the 1960s. Below the removed re-decoration came to light the remains of its original fourteenth-century fresco decoration. (Fig. 5) It is immediately apparent that the artist repainting the arcosolium in 1898 (?) followed closely the original decorative scheme. This involved the monumental double cross in the middle of the composition with elaborate floral branches symmetrically framing the cross. As important as the fourteenth-century fresco may be for the understanding of the original arcosolium and its intended function, our attention here will be turned to its nineteenth-century refurbishing. Be-

10 These added inscriptions were not removed during the said 1971 interventions.
11 Grguri, Slikarsko-konzervatorski, op. cit., 195.
12 I owe the information on the decoration of the arcosolium tomb in question to the late Professor Branislav Vulović, in charge of the restoration of Gračanica from 1963–67, who in 1971 kindly put at my disposal his unpublished drawings, notes, and a photograph of this tomb along with other material related to his restoration work, at the time when I was beginning my own research on Gračanica as a subject of my doctoral dissertation. In his unpublished notes, Vulović gives the date of 1897 for the refurbishing of the arcosolium in question, tough without any explanation on what this information was based.
cause of the loss of the nineteenth-century original, the only surviving evidence we have is the information recorded by Professor Vulović prior to its removal.

The nineteenth-century decoration involved, in addition to the monumental floral double cross, also four smaller floral double crosses on the soffit of the arcosolium arch. While all of the mentioned elements repeat those from the fourteenth-century decoration, the new scheme also included two bands bearing a lengthy inscription. The two bands — the top one red, and the bottom one blue — were arranged to fit the arched profile of the back wall of the arcosolium, their colors clearly based on those of the Serbian national flag. The inscription appearing on the two bands read as follows:


The inscription, despite several historical inaccuracies that it contains, is of considerable interest for a number of different reasons that are worth exploring. Serbian Prince Lazar, as is well known, died during the Battle on the Field of Kosovo between the Serbian and the Ottoman armies, on June 28, 1389.14 His remains, as is also well known, were interred in the Church of the Ascension (Vaznesenje) in Priština.15 A year or two later, they were ceremonially transferred to his own foundation, the monastery church of Ravanica, from where they were taken at the end of the seventeenth century to a new, safer location, the monastery of Vrdnik, subsequently renamed Ravanica, on Fruška Gora in Srem. The apocryphal account given in the Gračanica arcosolium inscription introduces several mistaken notions. In the first place, the temporary resting place of Prince Lazar was in the Church of the Ascension in Priština, and not at Gračanica. Secondly, form his temporary resting place Lazar’s remains were transferred to his mausoleum church at Ravanica monastery in central Serbia and not to Vrdnik (subsequently re-named Ravanica) on Fruška Gora. The ‘folk tradition’ that the inscription invokes was obviously created long after 1389, and the events it purportedly records.16 What matters here, is not to prove that the in-

13 (first band) “According to a folk tradition, in 1389 here was buried St. and Great Martyr, Serbian Prince and Tsar Lazar who rested here two year and afterwards” (second band) “(was) taken further = where his saintly relics are still resting = to Vrdnik later Ravanica in Srem, on Fruška Gora +”. The English translation is the author’s.
16 The ‘folk tradition’ was evidently in circulation throughout the nineteenth century, for it was recorded by B. Dj. Nusić, Kosovo. Opis zemlje i naroda, Beograd 1986, 228–30, as well as a number of travelers (A. F. Gil’ferding, as well as G. Muir Mackenzie and P. Irbi); cf. B. Todić, Mitropolija u Prištini — prva grobna crkva kneza Lazara, Sveti knez Lazar. Spomenica o šestog godišnjici Kosovskog boja, 1389–1989, Beograd 1989, 164; it should be noted that at the time of writing his text (1989) Todić was unaware of the 19th-century arcosolium decoration, removed during the restoration of the church in the 1960s: «U Gračanici, međutim, ne postoji bilo kakav trag da je tu nekada počivalo kneževo telo…». 
scription is wrong, but actually to demonstrate why the decision was made to place it in this location. What may have been the real motives for the invention of this fictitious ‘locus sanctum’? It seems that several different factors may have contributed significantly to its making. In the first place, it should be noted that at least one, and possibly the oldest hagiographical text — the so-called “Prološko žitije” — does mention that Lazar’s body was temporarily deposited at Gračanica. Equally important must have been the fact that the Church of the Ascension in Priština must have been destroyed, thus eliminating the physical evidence of the actual ‘locus sanctum’ by the time the ‘folk tradition’ recorded in the inscription had come into being.

The arcosolium adapted as the “temporary tomb of Prince Lazar” was actually built as an integral part of the fourteenth-century church. Frescoes discovered within the arcosolium following the removal of the nineteenth-century paintings did not reveal whether it may have contained a tomb, nor who the occupant may have been. The arcosolium in question is one of three such arcosolia built integrally with the church, clearly indicating that the building was planned with the idea of accommodation of important burials in mind. The larger problem of the original intended function of Gračanica in relationship to the role of its patron, king Milutin, has been discussed by me at length. The argument need not be repeated again, except to remind the reader, that the placement of tombs in the south-western part of churches in medieval Serbia was a privilege reserved for ruler-patrons in their own mausoleum churches. It must have been this factor, above all, that must have lead to the selection of this arcosolium in Gračanica as the alleged location of Prince Lazar’s original tomb.

The time when this particular episode took place also has a great deal to do with the decisions that were made. In the first place, the entire nineteenth century saw a growing importance of the cult of the Saintly Prince Lazar. Equally important and directly related to the rising importance of Prince Lazar’s cult must have been the realization that the original place of his burial, the Church of the Ascension in Priština was no more. Thus Gračanica must have emerged as an appropriate surrogate that could claim this ‘historical role’. Not unimportant in the construction of this legend may have been another historically dubious tradition, that related to the relics of Apostle Luke whose fifteenth-century translation from Rogos to Smederevo may have included Gračanica as one of the intermediate resting stations.

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17 L. Pavlović, Kultovi lica Srba i Makedonaca, Smederevo 1965, op. cit., 117. This piece of evidence clearly carries little weight in view of the fact that numerous other sources unequivocally suggest that Lazar was actually buried in the Church of the Ascension in Priština.

18 Todić, Mitropolija, op. cit., 163–69.

19 Ćurčić, Gračanica, op. cit. esp. 154–56.


so-called “Branković Chronicle” (*Brankovićev letopis*) is the only source that makes this reference, but gives no mention either as to where in the church St. Luke’s relics may have been displayed, or how long they remained at Gračanica. The episode is nonetheless of interest, for it would have given the church an aura of a ‘martyrium’, even if only of a temporary variety. It would not be too difficult to imagine the two separate episodes — involving the relics of St. Luke and Prince Lazar — as having been conflated. To put it differently, it is possible that the recorded episode of St. Luke’s relics having rested at Gračanica, may have much later inspired the making of the story of Prince Lazar having been temporarily buried at Gračanica.

Another element that must be considered in the making of this ‘tradition’ is the fact that Metropolitan of Raška — Prizren Dionisije, who died on Dec. 5, 1900, and “in accordance with his own wishes” was buried in the very arcosolium tomb identified as the temporary tomb of Prince Lazar. The actual tomb has not been archaeologically explored, adding yet another unknown piece to an already complicated puzzle. If Metropolitan Dionisije was indeed interred in the arcosolium tomb “in accordance with his own wishes” it seems highly likely that he may have been the mastermind behind the refurbishing of the arcosolium tomb in question. By doing so, he would have been the direct beneficiary of having been buried within the ‘locus sanctum’, itself having been ‘sanctified’ by a ‘temporary burial’ of the illustrious martyr.

In conclusion it is necessary to stress that any number of scenarios explaining the origins and the implementation of the fictitious ‘tradition’ placing Prince Lazar’s original tomb in Gračanica seem plausible within the particular historical framework of the period in question. The entire nineteenth century may be characterized as the century of the formation of Serbia’s modern statehood. Starting with the First Serbian Uprising in 1804 and ending with the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, witnessed Serbia’s gradual reclaiming of its territories lost to the Ottomans in the fifteenth century. The process was driven by an intensive re-awakening of national consciousness. Substantially spurred by the Serbian Orthodox Church, this national re-awakening was marked not only by the rebirth of historical consciousness, but also by the growth of the cults of national ruler-saints, above all by that of the Saintly Prince Lazar. Numerous myths and historical fabrications also sprung during this time as corollaries of excessive enthusiasm and national zeal. Among these is the well known introduction of the title “car” (tsar) alongside Lazar’s name. Lazar only held the title of knez (Prince). In the case of the inscription at Gračanica, he was declared both — “knez i car” (Prince and Tsar) Lazar. This, along other such quasi-historical claims strengthened in the people’s minds the notion of the legitimacy of his succession to the Serbian throne. The choice of Gračanica, and of the arcosolium in its south wall as the specific place of Prince Lazar’s ‘temporary burial’ may have had yet another dimension in this context. If the arcosolium in question was originally planned as a

epizoda, in Popović, Pod okriljem svetosti, op. cit., 295–317. For the Gračanica episode in this context see ibid., 303; and also Ćurčić, Gračanica, op. cit., 26.


burial place for the patron of the church King Milutin, who may also have contemplated retiring in Gračanica as a monk, the ‘burial’ of Prince Lazar in this location would have linked him in yet another way with the Nemanjić dynastic tradition.24

The last element that may be invoked in this discussion introduces yet another association that may not be irrelevant for understanding the thinking that went into the creation of the ‘legend’ regarding Prince Lazar’s ‘initial burial’ may be the typological similarity between Gračanica and Prince Lazar’s own mausoleum church at Ravanica Monastery. We do not know what the Church of the Ascension at Priština — Prince Lazar’s actual place of original burial — may have looked like. In the aftermath of its destruction, the choice of Gračanica as its ‘surrogate’ may have been informed — among other ‘legitimate’ factors — also by its formal similarities with Ravanica.

Modern historians of Serbia’s medieval history have substantially succeeded in separating mythical aspects of Prince Lazar’s reign from those that are historically verifiable.25 Nonetheless, some vestiges of Romantic constructions still remain, and will continue being uncovered. As the above lines illustrate, history of Serbian art and architecture no less than other historical disciplines can make its own contributions to this important process.26

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24 It is well known that King Milutin never became a monk and that he was buried in the Church of St. Stefan at Banjska monastery. What we do not know is whether the aging king may at some point had other ideas related to these matters. The relative position of the arcosolium in question and the fact that it was built as an integral part of the royal foundation should not be dismissed too lightly as unimportant elements in this context.


26 The problem as it relates to ‘historical portraits’, for example, has recently been illuminated by D. Vojvodić, Ktitorski portreti i predstave, ed. G. Sabotić, Manastir Hilandar, Beograd 1998, 260–61. For a comparable effort related to architecture see S. Ćurčić, The Exonarthex of Hilandar, ed. V. Korać, Osam vekova Hilandara. Istorija, duhovni život, književnost, umetnost i arhitektura, Beograd 2000, 477–86.
ГРАЧАНИЦА И КУЛТ СВЕТОГ КНЕЗА ЛАЗАРА

Циљ овог чланка је да осветли једну готово непознату епизоду у новијој историји манастира Грачанице. У жижи истраживања је рестаураторска интервенција спроведена у манастирској цркви крајем деветнаестог века. Њени остаци су још били видљиви у току конзерваторских радова изведенih шездесетих и раних седамдесетих година прошлог века. Том приликом су рестаураторске интервенције из деветнаестог века биле само делимично забележене, док су друге уклањене и заувек изгубљене. Рestaураторске интервенције на фрескама биле су у 19. веку поверене сликару, чији се потпис — Михаил Иурокоск Дебрел, заједно са годином 1898 — сачувао у централној куполи манастирске цркве. Важније од ових биле су сликарске интервенције, вероватно истог Михаила, у аркосолијуму у јужном зиду цркве, од којих је сачувана фотографија направљена непосредно пре њиховог уништења. Аркосолијум о коме је реч био је у току радова крајем 19. века у потпуности осликан и обележен написом, према коме су посмртни остаци кнеза Лазара, после његове смрти (у Косовском боју 1389. г.) били привремено положени у овај гроб, а потом пренети у манастир Врдник — Раваницу на Фрушкој Гори. Мада је неоспорно да садржај овог написа не одговара историјским чињеницама, он ипак наговештава да напис није у потпуности без значаја. Сачињен у јеку успона српске националне свести, крајем деветнаестог века, напис о коме је реч указује на то да ја састављен уз познавање одређеног чињеничног материјала везаног за локалну историју и историју манастира Грачанице. Аутор овог написа био је највероватније митрополит рашко-призренски, Дионисије, који је преминуо 5. децембра 1900. г. Из других извора је познато да је митрополит Дионисије по сопственој жељи био сахрањен у гробу у коме је 'некада привремено лежао и кнез Лazar'. Култ светог кнеза Лазара, у значајном успону око 1900. г., представља кључну компоненту у стварању овог мита, чија се конструкција састојала од више појединачних елемената, од којих сваки, понаособ садржи трунку историјске истине. Њихов заједнички допринос стога није занемарљив. У разлучивању историјских чињеница од популарне митологије везане за култ светог кнеза Лазара, српска историјска наука је направила огроман напредак у последњих неколико деценија. Истраживања у овом домену се настављају уз допринос широког дијапазона научних дисципли- на међу којима историја уметности и архитектуре, као што се види из овог прилога, имају своју улогу.
Fig. 2. Gračanica. Main dome, fresco of the Pantokrator (photo: author)
Fig. 3: Gračanica. Main dome drum base. Inscription with name of painter Mihail (photo: author)
Fig. 4. Gračanica: Arcosolium in S. wall; late 19th c. refurbishing before removal (photo: B. Vuković)
Fig. 5. Graécina. Aresosoliwm in S. wall; remains of 14th c. frescoes, present state (photo: author)