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GRAND KNEZ STEPHEN VUKANOVIĆ AND THE MORAČA MONASTERY

Abstract: The Morača Monastery was built in the mid-13th century by Grand knez (prince) Stephen Vukanović, a member of a cadet branch of the Nemanjić dynasty (1166–1371), as his burial place. Interpreting the actions its founder reveals interesting details about the relationship of the center of power with the political periphery, ruling ideology, and the monk's place in society. The completion of the frescoes and other ornamentation at this monastic church of the Dormition of the Mother of God and Stephen's withdrawal from his political life to take monastic vows partially coincides with the action of King Uroš I (1243–1276), who consolidated his royal power during this time by eliminating the principalities in the Serbian coastal regions. Prince Stephen's transition to life as a hermit may have gone through two stages that included tonsuring and then admission into the Great Schema. These actions were motivated by his personal piety and his age or by a desire to emulate the Nemanjić dynasty's model of sanctity—which was a key feature of the ruling dynasty's political ideology—were possibly the result of political upheaval.

Keywords: Grand knez Stephen Vukanović, Morača Monastery, sanctity of the Nemanjić dynasty, Monasticism, Little Schema, Great Schema.

1. The Morača Monastery and its Founder

The Morača monastery was founded in the mid-13th century, and since then, apart from when it was damaged by the Turks, it has been a powerful spiritual and cultural center in the Serbian Dinarides.¹ Its ktetor (founder) was *knez* Stephen, son of Vukan and grandson of Nemanja (1166–1196), and it was built in the *župa* of Morača. Its construction was funded by the administrative area under his control.² The *župa* of Morača included the upper course of the Morača River, after which it had been named, was part of Raška, and belonged to the Eparchy of Budimlja. The Morača's lower course flowed through Zeta and the Eparchy of Zeta.³ The *župa* of Morača was connected to the valley through which the Lim River's upper and middle courses flowed and where many of the Nemanjić family's hereditary estates were located.⁴

The main church was built as the ktetor's mausoleum. It was built in the Raška style, and its architecture and aesthetics were based on the Church of the Holy Virgin at Studenica.⁵ Following in the footsteps of his famous ancestor, Stephen dedicated his burial church to the Dormition of the Mother of God and the Theotokos Evergethida.⁶ The ktetor's inscription on the lintel of the main western entrance highlights the strength of their family bond:

СН С(ВЕ)ТЫН ХРАМЬ ПРѢС(ВЕ)ТЫЕ Д(Ѣ)ВЫ Б(О)ГОРОДНЦЕ СЪЗДАХ И ОКРАСНХ В НАМЪ ВСПЕННИА Е АЗЪ
СТЕФАНЪ, С(Ы)Н БЕЛНЕГА КНЕЗА ВАКА, ВНСК С(ВЕ)Т(А)ГО СЪМЕОНА НЕЦАН(Н). И СІА БЫШ(Е) В
Д(Ь)НИ БЛА(А)ГОУ(Ь)СТНВА(Г)О КРАЛА Н(А)ШЕГО УРОШ(А), В ЛѢТ(О) · 5 · 7 · 2 · ННА(Н)КТА · 7 · ГО.⁷

I, Stephen, son of the Grand *knez* Vukan and grandson of Saint Simeon Nemanja, built this holy temple in honor of the Dormition of the Most Holy Virgin, during the reign of our glorious King Uroš, in the summer of 6760, indiction 10 (1251/2).

In medieval Serbia, a ktetor had the exclusive right to choose where to build his endowment and to suggest what iconography should be incorporated into the frescoes. He

¹ The most significant works on the Morača Monastery are Okunev 1939–1946: 109–144; Mijović 1969: 179–196; Petković 1986. A collection of papers regarding this church, ed. B. Todić, D. Popović, was published on the 750th anniversary of the founding of the monastery.

² The members of the ruling class, including princes, could only donate a portion of their estate to their endowments with the ruler's permission and the blessing of the local bishop, Blagojević 2004: 36–43.

³ Aleksić, Koprivica 2019: 66–67. For the sake of formality, the term Zeta will be used, which replaced the name Duklja in the 13th century.

⁴ The *Župa* of Morača had a similar status as those in the Lim River basin. Ćirković 2000: 27; Blagojević 2006: 44.

⁵ Stephen Nemanja's main endowment, the Church of the Holy Virgin at Studenica, established a model followed by his descendants, both in the construction process and the temple's decoration. Čanak-Medić 2016: 233; Đorđević 2008: 207–223, 228–240; Živković 2016: 209. Hence, Studenica immediately ascended to the top of the monastery's hierarchy. Blagojević 2004a: 196.

⁶ Church of the Holy Virgin at Studenica was inspired by the Evergethida Monastery, an important monastic center in Constantinople. Saint Sava, who visited the latter several times, held it in high regard. Furthermore, he translated and adapted the Typikon of the Evergethida Monastery for use in organizing monastic life in Studenica. Živković 2016: 193–197, 200–202.

⁷ Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi I: 7, br. 17; Okunev 1939–1946: 110; Blagojević 2006: 33; Popović 2006: 55.

could set the legal structure and the rules for monastic life.⁸ The Morača monastery is considered an early example of a royal or noble endowment in medieval Serbia because of its size and date of construction.⁹

Almost nothing is known about Stephen Vukanović's role in Serbian politics during the early 13th century. Stephen received the title of *župan* by birth, which was in accordance with his noble origins.¹⁰ The absence of Stephen's title in the church inscription is explained by the fact that it was most probably equal to his father's.¹¹ Stephen is explicitly mentioned as *knez* in the charter establishing the landholdings of the Eparchy of Hum. The estates in Hum are confirmed in a charter from King Uroš (1243–1276),¹² which delineated the borders of Hum, which bordered Travunia near the village of Osolnik. Bishops Methodius of Hum and Bishop Spyridon, presumably of Dabar or Budimlja, also helped resolve this territorial dispute.¹³ The charter could have been issued as early as 1250 or as late as 1253. When determining the chronology, it was assumed that *knez* George, Stephen's older brother, was no longer alive in 1248.¹⁴

Stephen undoubtedly had jurisdiction over Travunia at the time and also over Zeta, but with the caveat that they would be unified as a single territorial and administrative unit only after his brother's death. He may have taken over his older brother George's lands at the end of the 1240s or beginning of the 1250s. Of course, for a time, the brothers were able to rule over two distinct parts of this vast historical and administrative unit simultaneously, as was often the case with Hum at this time. The presumed fragmentation of jurisdiction and territories between two members of one of the dynasty's branches would reduce the two Vukanovićes overall political influence. The title of *knez* was not hereditary in principle, but rulers typically kept it within the circle of the previous rulers' closest relatives, mostly sons or brothers. The king's approval of the transfer of power from George to Stephen reflects the political climate during period.¹⁵

Sources from later periods refer to Stephen as *knez*. His portraits in paintings of the Nemanjić family tree from the early 14th century found in the churches in Peć and Dečani are the most closely related to Stephen's time. The artists could not have been mistaken about this detail because they had access to reliable information the dynasty's genealogy.¹⁶

2. The Historical Context of the Frescoes in the Morača Monastery

It is impossible to know when exactly the frescoes in Stephen's church were created or when it received liturgical books and religious objects. The prevailing view is that all

⁸ For more about the church benefactors and the regulation that stipulated their rights and obligations in Serbia see Marković 1925: 100–124; Troicki 1935: 79–132.

⁹ Foundations by the nobility did not become commonplace until Stephen Dečanski's reign (1322–1331). Đurić, Babić-Đorđević 1997: 67–74; Đorđević 1994: 13–126; Đorđević 2008: 465–506.

¹⁰ Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi I: 17; Blagojević 2006: 33–35; Popović 2006: 55.

¹¹ Blagojević 2006: 33–34.

¹² Ibid. 37; Aleksić, Koprivica 2019: 62.

¹³ Aleksić, Koprivica 2019: 67.

¹⁴ Blagojević 2004: 37–38; Božanić 2013: 376–378.

¹⁵ Blagojević 2004: 35.

¹⁶ Ibid. 37; Blagojević 2006: 38–39. For further evidence, cf. Vojvodić 2006: 80.

construction work and the frescoes may have been completed in 1251 or 1252, but certainly sometime in the mid-13th century.¹⁷ Based on a depiction on the wall of the apse in St. Stephen's chapel of a procession of Serbian archbishops, it was assumed that the church was decorated in stages during the 1260s and 1270s. However, this segment of the fresco is not a reliable guide for determining the chronology for the frescoes' creation.¹⁸ Although this is still an open question, it can be roughly dated to the middle of the 13th century with possible subsequent refinements and additions.¹⁹

Although several important variations are noticeable, the portraits of the founder and his family are mostly realistic depictions of their clothing and primary physical characteristics that match the original compositions. *Knez* Stephen is depicted in the nave of Morača wearing secular clothing and in the narthex in monastic robes.²⁰ When considering inconsistencies in visual historical sources, it is vital to understand the general historical context of the era. It is particularly significant that Stephen's brother, *župan* Demetrius (David the Monk), built his burial church in the *župa* of Ljuboviđa, which was adjacent to Morača.²¹ Furthermore, Stephen's brother Rastko, and possibly even Mladen, or alternatively Bladinus, all become monks.²² It is important to remember that the founder of the dynasty and Stephen's spiritual role model had actively fostered monasticism by abdicating after a period of time and becoming a monk at Studenica, his own endowment. This sequence of events was viewed as an appropriate end to secular life, so Nemanja's descendants willingly followed in his footsteps.²³ Therefore, despite the lack of completely authentic visual evidence, it is reasonable to assume that *knez* Stephen became a monk sometime between the creation of the paintings in the nave and those in the narthex.²⁴

In the absence of written historical sources about *knez* Stephen, the surviving images of him in the Morača frescoes indirectly attest to his historical role. In the diaconicon, a small room on the south side of the altar, there is a fresco cycle depicting the accomplishments of the Holy Prophet Elijah.²⁵ This part of the church was presumably

¹⁷ Okunev 1939–1946: 109–144; Skovran-Vukčević 1958: 149–172; Radojčić 1966: 52–54; Mijović 1969: 179–196.

¹⁸ Todić 2006: 93–116.

¹⁹ This was the case with the main church at the Studenica Monastery, which was built between 1186 and 1196 and painted in 1208/9. Đurić, Babić-Đorđević 1997: 60–63, 172–176; Živković 2019: 37–44; Vojvodić 2016: 587, n. 2. Furthermore, around 1230, King Radoslav (1228–1234) authorized the exonarthex to be built and painted. Đurić, Babić-Đorđević 1997: 133; Todić 2016: 213–214, 220.

²⁰ Popović 2006: 60. In total, the following deviations from the original wall paintings were noted: Portraits of Abbot Toma and *knez* Vukić Vučetić were added to the depiction of founder in the nave. *Stephan* is also given the title of king, while his insignia and clothing details are the result of later improvisation. The Theotokos is holding a scroll in her left hand instead of the founder's hand, as is customary in medieval art. Inauthentic details on the garments and an incorrect inscription, were incorporated to the depiction of the family in the narthex. Milanović 2006: 158–180; Popović 2006: 58, 60; Vojvodić 2006: 76, 82, 88.

²¹ Ljubinković 1961: 113–123; Tomović 2003: 47–62.

²² Rastko was buried as the monk Theodosius at the Monastery of Studenica. Popović 1992: 45–46; Ječmenica 2018: 53, 61–74. Mladen is only known from a document dated 1208, but it has been cautiously assumed that he was the first hegumen of the Monastery of Sopoćani, and was eventually buried there. Todić 2006: 423–429.

²³ Marjanović-Dušanić 1997: 46, 274–286; Popović 2006a: 19–21, 41–74, 192–193.

²⁴ Popović 2006: 60.

²⁵ For more information on the compositional arrangement and a detailed description of the frescoes, see: Okunev 1939–1946: 117–123; Skovran-Vukčević 1958: 154–170; Radojčić 1966: 52–54; Mijović 1969: 179–

dedicated to this biblical figure.²⁶ This selection of the episodes from the prophet's life is unique in 13th century Byzantine art.²⁷ According to some scholars, the themes in this iconography were meant to highlight events connected to St. Elijah's monastic deeds. Due to his piety, he is sometimes credited with establishing eremitic and coenobitic monasticism. Thus, Elijah might have been used as a representation for both kinds of disconnection from worldly values.²⁸ As plausible as this explanation appears, it is preferable to claim cautiously that St. Elijah, whom Stephen had chosen to emulate, was a spiritual beacon for him. As a result, the events depicted in the diaconicon may have inspired Stephen to embrace the noblest of Christian values. Furthermore, this may relate to the idea of a pious secular lord, inspired by St. Elijah's zeal, who wanted to follow the purest religious rules to the letter. The integration of the scene "The Slaughter of the Prophets of Baal" in the Morača diaconicon supports this hypothesis. This idea may have reached *knez* Stephen through literary works attributed to members of the sacred Nemanjić dynasty's founding member. For instance, Sava Nemanjić included these verses in the *Service for St. Simeon*:

Venerable Father [St. Simeon of Serbia],
 You have found a good ladder
 by which you ascend to the heights,
 with which Elijah also acquired the chariots of fire,
 but he left no salvation for others,
 and you, after your death
 you showed the way to the kings in your fatherland,
 Oh heavenly man,
 Oh earthly angel,
 like the lighthouse to your fatherland,
 Oh blessed Simeon,
 pray for the salvation of our souls!²⁹

Stephen the First-Crowned wrote the *Life of Saint Simeon* between 1208 and 1216, in which the State Assembly convened by Stephen Nemanja is described. Its goal was to convict dualistic heretics and penalize their leaders in accordance with canonical norms.³⁰ When describing this event, Stephen the First-Crowned compared his father to Saint Elijah: "Like the ancient prophet Elijah, who rose up against shameless priests, he too railed against

192; Petković 1986: 26–39.

²⁶ The members of the Nemanjić family usually dedicated the church's side rooms to saints they admired or who were their personal patrons. Parekklesia were generally consecrated in this manner, and in some cases so were protheses and diaconica. Thus, in Mileševa, the diaconicon is dedicated to St. Stephen, whereas in Sopoćani and Arilje, it is dedicated to St. Nicholas. Petković 1986: 28–29; Pavlović 2016: 253–254.

²⁷ Skovran-Vukčević 1958: 154, 169–170; Petković 1986: 29. Morača's frescoes share many similarities with the wall decorations from the narthex of the church dedicated to the prophet Elijah near Suceava from the 16th century and main church at Romania's 15th century Neamț monastery, see Bedros 2008: 117–125.

²⁸ Petković 1986: 29–31, 33; Marjanović-Dušanić 2006: 48. Although Morača was designed primarily for coenobitic monasticism, there were a few hermitages nearby. Regrettably, there are no sources indicating when they were used. Petković 1986: 30. n. 105.

²⁹ Sveti Sava 1986: 123.

³⁰ Stefan Prvovenčani 1988: 70–72.

their evil natures.”³¹ It clearly alludes to St. Elijah’s encounter with the idolatrous prophets of Baal at the brook Kishon. Similarly, Stephen Nemanja resisted the heretics who worshipped idols: “some were burned, others were punished with various reprimands, others were expelled, and the tongues of the teacher and the chief were cut off.”³² This scene from the *Life of St. Simeon* exemplifies the basic premise that Nemanja brought peace to the land and led his people to the “true faith” throughout his reign.³³

The historical context of the Old Testament scene in which Saint Elijah anoints Hazael and Jehu as kings and Elisha as a prophet has long been speculated.³⁴ The scene is augmented by a bust of Christ, who bestows one crown to the kings and a scroll to the prophet. The fresco depicts two distinct Old Testament events as one. The originality of this visual solution complements the presence of Christ’s bust, which adds overtones of the New Testament to the scene. One explanation is that this fresco could have been inspired by two Serbian Kingdoms (Duklja and Nemanjić state), and by the anointing of Stephen the First-Crowned (1196–1228) as king of Serbia in 1217.³⁵ After being incorporated into the Nemanjić state, the Serbian southern Adriatic region was ruled for a time by Vukan Nemanjić. He became semi-autonomous king of the defunct Kingdom of Duklja and Dalmatia but lacked real royal authority and international recognition.³⁶ This was probably passed to his eldest son George, who is mentioned as a king on 3rd July 1208.³⁷ After that, George was not explicitly referred to as king. However, Stephen the First-Crowned claimed the right to the royal throne in part as lord of Duklja, which was regarded as a “great kingdom of old.” However, after 1217, the memory of the Kingdom of Duklja began to fade.³⁸ It should be noted that Stephen Vukanović is identified as a king in legends depicted in paintings created at Morača three or four centuries later.³⁹ The same pattern can be found in Morača’s *Pomenik* (Commemorative Book) of King Stephen the First Ktotor, the oldest extant transcript of which dates from the 1570s.⁴⁰ This was a reflection of efforts by the Serbian clergy to strengthen the ktotor’s reputation.⁴¹ Furthermore, distorted historicism should have turned Morača into an Orthodox shield against Roman Catholic proselytism,⁴² yet there is no indication that *knez* Stephen aspired to be the most powerful political figure in the country.

Returning to the frescoes of St. Elijah in the diaconicon, according to our analysis,

³¹ Ibid: 71.

³² Ibid.

³³ Popović 2006a: 45.

³⁴ Marjanović-Dušanić 2006: 45–52.

³⁵ Ibid.: 46, 50–52.

³⁶ On the tradition of the Kingdom of Duklja see Bubalo 2011: 79–93; Komatina 2016: 15–34. According to the ktotor’s inscription, the Church of St. Luke in Kotor was built *sub tempore d(omi)ni Nemanje, magni iupani, et filii sui Velcanni, regi Dioclie, Dalmatie, Tribunie, Toplize et Cosne*. Tomović 1997: 26. Despite his royal title, Vukan acknowledged the supreme authority of the Serbian Grand *župan*.

³⁷ Komatina 2020: 28, with a modern Serbian translation of the text of the oath. For a plethora of information about George Vukanović in one place, see Ječmenica 2018: 41–48.

³⁸ Komatina 2016: 30–32.

³⁹ These facts are supported by later written records of local monks and by local oral legends. Popović 2006: 60–70.

⁴⁰ Mošin 1960: 564–565.

⁴¹ Bubalo 2011: 88–89.

⁴² Popović 2006: 60; Bubalo 2011: 89.

Stephen had the right to identify himself as God's anointed who, by divine will, shepherds his blessed flock. Both the St. Elijah cycle and the fresco depicting the anointing subtly present a person determined to renounce all that is worldly to prepare himself spiritually for the afterlife. According to the interpretation offered here, Stephen was voluntarily renouncing his authority over his vast lands.

A chapel dedicated to St. Stephen was built along the northern side of the narthex. Judging by the coincidence of their names, the First Martyr was most likely the *knez*'s protector.⁴³ This relationship had already been established through baptism but had been continuously venerated. St. Stephen was regarded as the protector of the Nemanjić dynasty and, indirectly, of the "Serbian fatherland." The monastery of Morača is part of the extended family's practice as well as the ktetor's devotion.⁴⁴

Most of the frescoes date from the monastery's renovations in the 16th and 17th centuries,⁴⁵ and the focus here will be on portraits of the ktetor from that era. Although they are not contemporary to the church's construction, they still provide a good general illustration of his life and activities. In 1574/5, all the frescoes on the altar and nave were repainted and are thought to have mostly replicated the previous layout and content, including Stephen's burial portraits on the south wall of the nave's western transept above his sarcophagus.⁴⁶ In these, Stephen Vukanović, the first ktetor, holds a model of the church, his left hand in a gesture of prayer following the Mother of God, who presents him to Christ enthroned. Hegumen Toma and *knez* Vukić Vučetić, the second ktetors who restored the church, are both portrayed on the west wall behind Stephen. Stephen Vukanović is portrayed as an elderly man with a long white beard, dressed in clothing characteristic of a late-13th century Serbian lord's uncrowned sons and brothers, which denoted his membership in a holy ruling dynasty.⁴⁷ It was customary in Nemanjić dynasty endowments for founders to be buried in the western part of the nave,⁴⁸ and for scenes from the ktetor's life to be painted on the walls as part of long-term preparations for the afterlife.⁴⁹

The narthex was repainted in 1577/8 and 1616/7, but the new paintings most likely preserved traces of those from the 13th century.⁵⁰ In the first round of renovations, the ktetor's family was depicted on the lowest part of the narthex's north wall. On the east wall,

⁴³ Đurić, Babić-Đorđević 1997: 140.

⁴⁴ Chapels dedicated to the first martyr were built at the monasteries of Žiča, Sopoćani, and Gradac, Milutin's burial church at the monastery of Banjska (1282–1321) was dedicated to St. Stephen. On the significance of St. Stephen's cult in the Nemanjić state, see: Čorović-Ljubinković 1961: 45–62; Marjanović-Dušanić 1997: 42–59; Vojvodić 1995: 537–565.

⁴⁵ Okunev 1939–1946: 110–111; Skovran-Vukčević 1958: 165; Petković 1986: 44, 65–76, 93–94; Milanović 2006: 141–182.

⁴⁶ Skovran-Vukčević 1958: 165; Petković 1986: 44; Matić 2019: 19–27.

⁴⁷ Petković 1986: 42, 45; Vojvodić 2006: 74–76. On the physical appearance of second founders see Matić 2019: 19–27. The hoop-shaped wreath is a symbol of power renunciation and represents the likeness between the person represented and St. Joasaph. On the fresco in the southern parekklesion of Radoslav's narthex in Studenica, Saint Symeon the Myrrh-streaming is depicted with a similar insignia. Vojvodić 2016: 587–588.

⁴⁸ It is assumed that Stephen's body was buried in an underground tomb in front of an above-ground sarcophagus. It would be in accordance with the burial practices of the time. Popović 2006: 56–58.

⁴⁹ Popović 2006: 58; Vojvodić 2016: 587–591.

⁵⁰ Milanović 2006: 141–182.

an image of Christ sits on a throne while a depiction of the Theotokos on the north wall leads the founder Stephen to him, holding his left hand. The Stephen in this image is depicted as an elderly monk with a long gray beard wearing the Great Schema (μεγαλόσχημος) and holding in his right hand a model of the church bearing the inscription “кРАЛЪ СТЕФАНЪ ПРИЕЛШИ ИНОЧАСКИ ЧИНЪ” (King Stephen receiving the Great Schema). The differences between this inscription and the 13th century original are the result of the brotherhood’s view of the past.⁵¹ Following behind him is a woman dressed as a nun who is identified as “ГОСП(ОЖ)ДА КРАЛИЦА СТЕФАНА” (the lady of King Stephen). Her left hand is extended toward Stephen and the Theotokos, while in her right arm she holds her son, identified only as “ВЛАДИСАВЪ” (Vladisav).⁵² The son has long dark hair and a mid-length beard and is dressed in clothing characteristic of the nobility. It is believed that the appearance of the original fresco was completely preserved. These images are overshadowed by the Tree of Jesse, and the remaining walls of the narthex contain depictions of The Last Judgment and the Ecumenical Councils.⁵³ Depictions of the most revered holy fathers cover the entirety of the lower walls, making these images part of an even more complex collection of iconography.⁵⁴ The founder Stephen and his unnamed wife are thus presented as part of a series of holy mystics.⁵⁵ All of this together is indicative of the ktetor’s wish to be a part of the ecumene of venerated monastics. The original fresco appears to have been created to mark the enormous shift that had resulted from Stephen taking monastic vows.⁵⁶

The parekklesion of St. Stephen was repainted in 1642/3 and primarily contains modified versions of the original frescoes.⁵⁷ In this depiction, Stephen is identified as “СВ(Е)ТЫ КР(А)ЛЪ СТЕФАН(Ъ) С(И)НЪ ВЕЛНКАГО КНЕЗА ВЛ(Ъ)КАНА” (Holy King Stephen, son of the Grand *knez* Vukan).⁵⁸ He is dressed as a layman crowned with a wreath of pearls with two prependiculars hanging down the sides. This is the first instance of the ktetor being depicted as a saint.⁵⁹ In this portrait, he appears noticeably younger than in the other frescoes at Morača. The best estimates place him in his forties or fifties when the parekklesion was painted. In the nave fresco he appears somewhat older, and in the narthex he is an old man. The parekklesion was probably not painted before any other parts of the church. It is possible that this rejuvenation was intended to idealize the founder.⁶⁰ Although the extent

⁵¹ Vojvodić 2006: 82.

⁵² Popović 2006: 60.

⁵³ Petković 1986: 46; Milanović 2006: 154–156, 160–162; Pavlović 2016: 253–254.

⁵⁴ Holy Christian hermits are depicted in the nave of Studenica. However, in the iconographic programs of Žiža, Mileševa, and the so-called “royal” monasteries erected later, they are depicted in the narthex. Regarding the distribution of the images of the holy monks, columnists, and apostles in Serbian monumental paintings see Radojčić 1966: 33–76; Đorđević 2008: 207–271; Pavlović 2016: 249–259.

⁵⁵ Pavlović 2016: 254–255.

⁵⁶ Popović 2006: 60–62.

⁵⁷ Petković 1986: 93; Vojvodić 2006: 87–88.

⁵⁸ Vojvodić 2006: 87.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 88.

⁶⁰ The original frescoes, it is hypothesized, were painted after Stephen’s death. The artist might have used Stephen’s authentic depiction, which could have been created shortly before the portrait in the nave. For examples of frescoes created after the death of the person depicted, see Pavlović 2015: 112–113.

to which the original and the replica are related remains and open question, the visual representations of Stephen at this time in his life are multiplied.

3. Stephen as a Monastic

According to a theory that the symbolism of the name Stephen in the medieval Serbian context served to convey the status of a ruler, Stephen may have been born during the brief period after his father Vukan had usurped the throne of the Grand *župan* in the early 13th century. Although they are not contemporary, the portraits in the narthex create an image of a man in his later years.⁶¹ A preliminary examination of King's Uroš document, provisionally dated at the early 1250s suggests a possible timeframe when Stephen took monastic vows.

It is also frequently noted that Stephen is the only one of Vukan's sons depicted on the Nemanjić family tree, which suggests he was given the most prestige in the royal courts of the 14th century, and that he never strained relations with the Serbian crown.⁶² Nevertheless, this is deceptive. Dragutin's (1276–1282) son Vladislav, for example, came into conflict with the ruler in 1323, yet he was still included in the Nemanjić family tree painted in the church complexes of Peć and Dečani Monasteries.⁶³ Yet members of the Vukanović family, although greatly respected locally, were not included in commemorative books listing the leading figures from the Nemanjić past.⁶⁴

It has long been noted that Stephen is depicted like the monk of the Great Schema in the 16th century portrait in the narthex.⁶⁵ This distinction also included the privilege of wearing the headdress and cape called the *koukoulion* (κουκούλιον) and the *analavos-paramandyas* (παραμανδύας), which is a rectangular cloth that covers the shoulders and is decorated with circles and ribbons sewn onto the corners. They were ritually dressed on the occasion of public initiation, which shows just how important these garments were as a sign of the monk's new status.⁶⁶ The Great Schema, the highest and most demanding rank in Orthodox monasticism, was usually attained in old age. It required greater seclusion and more intense prayer. Monks of the Great Schema were viewed with special reverence, and if the church canon was consistently followed, the reception of this title would have been preceded by many years of spiritual devotion.⁶⁷

There was a set timeline for entering each level of monasticism. The first rank, the *Rassophore*, was granted to those who had completed a three-year novitiate. This is followed by the *Stavrophore*, or the *Little Schema* or *Lesser Schema*, which came after faithfully fulfilling customary monastic vows. This meant that experienced clerics closely

⁶¹ The portraits' authenticity, as well as the painted program that surrounded them, were particularly scrutinized. It is certain that painters from the 16th century restoration largely preserved the frescoes' original appearance. Skovran-Vukčević 1958: 165; Petković 1986: 42–45; Vojvodić 2006: 74–76, 82–86; Milanović 2006: 141–145, 156–181.

⁶² Blagojević 2006: 144; Popović 2006: 62.

⁶³ Radojčić 1996: 38–39, 49, 58.

⁶⁴ Danilović 1994: 35–63.

⁶⁵ Popović 2006: 60; Vojvodić 2006: 73–76.

⁶⁶ Mirković 1961: 160, 172. Simeon Nemanja is depicted as a monk in Studenica as well. Vojvodić 2016: 604.

⁶⁷ On the Great Schema see Mirković 1961: 170–173.

supervised and guided their spiritual development.⁶⁸ The rigorousness of the criteria for receiving the highest rank, known as the Great Schema, explains why there are so few documented cases of it in medieval Serbia. It has been noted that these monks followed canon law to the letter and had first passed through the previous stages. Nikola Radonja, son of the sebastokrator Branko Mladenović, and Dorotheos, who later became the Great Schema monk John Kalyvitis, were examples of those who had honored these strict rules.⁶⁹ According to some, Stephen Nemanja also followed a similar path.⁷⁰

It has been noted that representatives of the ruling house and other influential nobility would quickly enter a monastery out of political necessity or if their health had abruptly declined. Stephen the First-Crowned's quickly taking monastic vows is an example that resulted from an impending death or political retreat. According to both of St. Sava's hagiographies, Stephen received the Great Schema from his younger brother on his deathbed. If this is taken at face value, he must have been a Great Schema monk.⁷¹ Additional recorded examples of this include Stephen Radoslav (1228–1234) his brother Uroš I (1243–1276), Caesar Hrelja (1342), and Voivode Nikola Zojić (1398).⁷² Those who entered the monastery for reasons of ill health include Queen Helen (1276–1314) and, most likely, King Dragutin.⁷³ Interestingly, wives of local rulers and noblemen typically took their vows as widows. Nevertheless, as co-rulers of their dynasties, they wielded considerable power in secular and public affairs by participating in diplomatic missions, overseeing commerce, and issuing charters. These include Princess Milica (Eugenia, Euphrosyne), Theodora Nemanjić, widow of the despot Dejan (Eudokia), and Empress Helen, wife of Stephen Dušan (Elizabeth).⁷⁴

This illustrates that the choice to enter a monastery was the result of a variety of personal, political, and social influences. This makes it extremely difficult to contextualize Stephen's far-reaching and short-term intentions in a broader social or historical context. When exactly he received the Great Schema cannot be determined solely based on the revised portrait in the narthex. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the original image is commonly interpreted as having been painted during his lifetime.⁷⁵ If one adds to this the visible differences in physical appearance between his secular portraits in the nave and the chapel of St. Stephen and that of the image of him in the narthex as a hermit, it would seem that Stephen had spent many years as a monk adhering to canonical norms.

Since there is no information in the sources indicating he had previously been a Stavrophore, it is worth referring back to the earlier discussion of the extensive presence of the cult of St. Elijah on the walls at Morača. This unique presentation of the Old Testament

⁶⁸ Milaš 1890: 698–699, 704–705.

⁶⁹ Spremić 1997: 81–100; Aleksić 2015: 131–139.

⁷⁰ During his two-year stay in Serbia after his abdication, Stephen Nemanja was a monk of the Little Schema. There are indications that he was promoted to the rank of Great Schema after going to Mount Athos. Popović 2001: 53–78.

⁷¹ Domentijan 1988: 167–168; Teodosije 1988: 222.

⁷² Teodosije 1988: 232; Šuica 1997: 19; Aleksić 2015: 134; Aleksić, Živković 2020: 241–244.

⁷³ Danilo II 1935: 64. The politically motivated background of Dragutin's admission to the ranks of monks was explained considering the decades-long dynastic problem that arose because of the decisions made at the state assembly in Deževno. Aleksić, Živković 2020: 239–264.

⁷⁴ Aleksić, Živković 2020: 244–245.

⁷⁵ Petković 1986: 46; Popović 2006: 65; Vojvodić 2006: 81.

prophet may have reflected Stephen's persistent desire to, at an opportune moment, renounce the privileges of a powerful nobleman. This could be a strong indication that he had had been seeking a balance between his secular and religious views. His unnamed wife also became a nun. This is yet another repetition of the pattern established by Nemanja and Ana, who very quickly took monastic vows after the state assembly in Ras in 1196.

Once tonsured, the Stavrophore receives a new name that usually shared the same first letter of his or her secular name. Several factors can influence the choice of this new name, including the saint who was being celebrated on that day or a recommendation from an experienced priest who has taken monastic vows.⁷⁶ Stephen's monastic name and that of his wife have not been recorded.⁷⁷ However, Stephen could have preserved his baptismal name until his death, despite being (as is assumed) twice tonsured.⁷⁸ This absence of a different monastic name may not be solely attributable to ignorance on the part of the monks at the Morača Monastery. Stephen was inspired by the traditions of the Nemanjić state, of which one was the veneration of the cult of St. Stephen. Thus, it is possible that Vukan's son kept his secular name even after becoming a monk. Furthermore, it is strongly held that Stephen ended all political involvement without any major political upheavals. Otherwise, there would have been no motive for so persistently preserving the name that was a basic symbol of Nemanjić ambition.⁷⁹

Forcing wielders of political power to take monastic vows also entailed the renunciation of most secular rights. Little is known about what motivated Vukan's son to become a monk, but it must have occurred after 1254. The principality of Hum had ceased to exist after an international conflict.⁸⁰ During this time, it appears that *knez* Stephen had no influence on the major political events that unfolded in the Ragusan hinterland in 1254. Unfortunately, the causal link between the details of the conflict and Stephen's abdication remain unknown. The possibility exists that Uroš's victory over the international coalition laid the groundwork for quietly suppressing a secondary member of the dynasty by forcing him to take monastic vows. Yet it is also possible that the Vukanović principality in Zeta and Travunia gradually lost internal cohesion without any foreign interference, resulting in a total decline in the strength of the Serbian political periphery. This could have pushed *župan* Radoslav, a grandson of *knez* Miroslav of Hum who ruled the western part of Hum, to choose a desperate act of rebellion, as many of his predecessors had done, and forced Stephen Vukanović to completely abandon his political ambitions.⁸¹ Unfortunately, this is all a matter of speculation, although the history of the Morača Monastery points to the second scenario being closer to actual historical events. Regardless of these quandaries, what is certain is that Stephen's monastic vows had far-reaching consequences for the very fabric of the Serbian

⁷⁶ Grujić 1937: 237–239; Mirković 1961: 166–167.

⁷⁷ Vojvodić 2006: 81.

⁷⁸ Such practice was not uncommon. Uroš's widow Helen kept her secular name even after becoming a nun. Danilo II 1935: 64. This was also true of Angelina Branković, the wife of Stephen Branković, who became a nun between 1502 and 1509. Tomin 2011: 180. These are not isolated examples in Serbian medieval history. Grujić 1937: 239.

⁷⁹ Vojvodić 1995: 544–549, 551, 553.

⁸⁰ War broke out in 1254, when a coalition, led by *župan* Radoslav of Hum, and Dubrovnik, and the Bulgarian Czar Michael II Assen (1246–1256), came out against the Serbian king Uroš. Blagojević 2004: 32–34.

⁸¹ Mišić 1996: 50–53; Blagojević 2004: 32–34.

state because it marked the final end of the principality in Zeta and Travunia.

Whether Stephen took his vows voluntarily as a result of illness or deep and sincere piety, or if he was forced to by the king, it was then impossible for his son to continue his political career through the inertia that comes with princely dignity. Jurisdiction over Zeta and Travunia was not entrusted to Stephen's son Vladislav. In a 16th century fresco, Vladislav is depicted without any symbols of a ruling position.⁸² This of course does not mean he did not have secondary administrative responsibilities as Demetrius's descendants did. Nor were his hereditary lands chipped away at, which may have provided income to further ornament the family church. Interestingly, Stephen's brother Demetrius Vukanović did not inherit the title of *knez* and is only mentioned as a layman with the hereditary title of *župan*.

The year of Stephen's death is unknown, and the only source for it is a medallion with an icon depicting his death. It dates from 1644/45 and is built into the lower frame of an icon of Sts. Sava and Simeon located above his sarcophagus⁸³ and surrounded with scenes from Theodosius's *The Life of St. Sava*. *Knez* Stephen is depicted in the garb of a ruler without any symbols of the Great Schema, and with brown hair that suggests he was not particularly old at the time of his death, which is a deviation from his portrait as a monk in the nave. This one, however, should take precedence because it repeats the earlier representation originally created during Stephen's lifetime. The medallion contains a typical depiction rooted in a well established pattern. However, if it had been adapted, more or less successfully, to specific historical circumstances, or at the request of the person who commissioned it, then a question is raised as to whether the clergyman in Episcopal garments depicted on the medallion above Stephen is actually the bishop of Budimlja, who had prerogative and who, according to the customs of the time, could have participated in the event.⁸⁴

The Pljevlja Synodikon of Orthodoxy lists the bishops of Budimlja in the following order: Jacob, Kallinikos, Theophilus, Spyridon, and German. German was bishop at the time the Pljevlja Synodikon was written, which was during the reign of Archbishop Jacob (1286–1292).⁸⁵ Theophilus, however, is mentioned as the author of the Morača Nomocanon between 1 September 1251 and 31 August 1252.⁸⁶ He was most likely at the head of the Eparchy of Budimlja when Morača was consecrated sometime around 1251/1252, so he or his successor Spyridon could be this clergyman. The male and female figures in secular garb depicted in the middle are analogous to similar historical representations of this type, and must be members of his immediate family—namely his son Vladislav and his unnamed wife.⁸⁷

After a monk dies, canon law requires that his old vestments be replaced with a new *koukoulion* and *analavos*.⁸⁸ However, in the depiction on the medallion, Stephen is dressed

⁸² Vojvodić 2006: 83.

⁸³ Petković 1986: 79–101; Popović 2006: 66–67. The icon served to connect the local cult with already established forms of veneration of the Serbian fatherland's protectors, St. Sava, and St. Simeon.

⁸⁴ Bishop Danilo of Banja was present at Queen Helen's deathbed in 1314. Danilo II 1935: 71–72.

⁸⁵ Purković 1938: 28; Janković 1985: 151.

⁸⁶ Purković 1938: 28.

⁸⁷ Close to Stephen's death, frescoes in Sopoćani depicting the repose of Serbian Queen Ana Dandolo were created. The event was attended by her son King Uroš and his older brother, Archbishop Sava II (1263–1271), as well as her daughter-in-law Helen and grandchildren Dragutin and Milutin. Komatina 2014: 18.

⁸⁸ Mirković 1961: 184–186.

as a ruler and is bare-headed, therefore missing the symbols of the Great Schema. This corresponds with other 17th century portrayals depicting Stephen as a king rather than a monk, due to the monks at the time being primarily guided by a desire to present the founder of their monastery as a holy king. The oldest written evidence of his sanctification appears in a Zagreb chronicle from the 17th century in which there is mention of the holy relics of Vukan's son.⁸⁹

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ВЕЛИКИ КНЕЗ СТЕФАН ВУКАНОВИЋ И МАНАСТИР МОРАЧА

Резиме

О животу и политичком деловању Стефана Вукановића, унука великог жупана Стефана Немање, постоји свега неколико документа који указују да је деловао у областима српског приморја као удеоно кнез, оквирно до половине 13. века. Свакако, најпознатији је као ктитор цркве Успења Пресвете Богородице манастира Мораче у истоименој жупи, а за коју се овом приликом износи став да је била део Рашке „земље”, а не део историјске покрајине Зете. У основи овог рада је идеја да проучавање сликарства кнежеве гробне задужбине у контексту државног и идеолошког развоја Србије у истом том раздобљу делимично употпуњује слику о биографији ове личности. Значајне су ктиторске композиције на јужном зиду западног травеја наоса, где је Стефан представљен као властелин, односно на северном зиду припрате, где је обучен у монашку одору. Највероватније су настале за живота ктитора, те се претпоставља да се замонашио у периоду између њиховог настанка. Иако није могуће утврдити тачно време тог догађаја, додатне назнаке пружају остали елементи фрескописа, и поред тога што су и они у највећој мери ретуширани. Тако су ликови замонашеног Стефана и његове, именом непознате жене, у припрати окружени портретима светих отаца. Осим тога, оригиналне фреске у ђаконикону из 13. века посвећене су Светом Илији, који је узор подвижницима. Специфичност циклуса светог пророка се објашњава Стефановом тежњом да направи равнотежу између световних и духовних вредности, што је додатни наговештај о његовим истрајним плановима да се монашењем у одговарајућем тренутку повуче из државног и јавног живота. Анализа портрета и наша претпоставка да се Вукановић родио почетком 13. столећа упућују да је то било приближно ратовима које је краљ Урош (1243–1276) средином петог десетлећа водио у циљу централизације државе, када се гаси и удео кнежевина жупана Радослава Мирослављевића у Хумској земљи. Аутори су ближе идеји да је Стефаново повлачење са великокнежевске власти било добровољно, а да је тај чин са споменутим сукобима имао само посредне везе.

Стефаново отшелништво је можда било двостепено, односно укључивало је примање мале, а потом и велике схиме, која је налагала захтевније облике духовног подвигања. Занимљиво је да је, пролазећи кроз све монашке фазе, највероватније задржао своје првобитно име, можда као знак привржености идеолошким вредностима династије Немањића, које су у први план истицале светородност најистакнутијих чланова владајуће породице. Заправо, задужбинарство кнеза Стефана било је саставни део опсежног програма усмереног на учвршћивању државне власти под жезлом потомака Стефана Немање (1166–1196). Ово тумачење говори много о односу централне власти и политичке периферије у време док су удео кнежевине полако престајале да буду важна компонента државно-територијалног устројства.

Кључне речи: кнез Стефан Вукановић, Манастир Морача, светородност Немањића, монашење, мала и велика схима.

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