

## Introduction

Speaking in Ljubljana in 1913, the Slovene poet Ivan Cankar called for a political union of the South Slavs, lamenting the historical circumstances that had brought about the cultural estrangement of the “Yugoslav tribe”: “By blood we are brothers, by language cousins, by culture -- which is the fruit of centuries of separate upbringing -- we are less familiar with one another than the Upper Carniolan peasant is with the Tyrolean, or the Gorizian vintner with the Friulian” (Cankar 2009). The postulate of cultural separation, or “separate upbringing” as Cankar eloquently expressed it, is built on the premise that ethnic and national features are forged over the *longue durée*, through centuries of constant and unwavering exposure to one cultural model or civilization. The national predispositions and inclinations thus acquired are believed to supersede evident commonalities such as language and local custom -- as in the case of the Serbs and Croats, who are bound by language but separated by confessional and perceived historical allegiances. This premise is central to the narratives of the Balkan nationalisms. Thus, according to Croatian nationalists and historians such as Ivo Banac, Franjo Tuđman, and Branimir Anzulović, the Orthodox Serbs, whose medieval principalities bordered the Byzantine Empire until their destruction by the Ottomans in the fifteenth century, had over the centuries developed different habits and worldviews from the Catholic Croats. Their cultural origins, these authors claimed, lie in the Byzantine civilization (Banac 1984: 65 et passim; Tuđman, cit. in Bellamy 2003: 68; Anzulović 1999: 17 et passim).

Many nationalists in Serbia would agree with the assessment that the Byzantine civilization left a deep imprint on the formation of their culture and identity (Perica 2002: 6-9). Here of course, as with other nations whose identities are grounded in Orthodoxy -- for example Greece and Romania (Mango 1965; Clogg 1988; Fischer-Galati 1988) -- the notion of “Byzantine” assumes vastly different connotations. Instead of contempt, it arouses unusual reverence. Byzantium’s legacy in these countries is generally regarded as the nation’s cultural and spiritual foundation and as a component of the national character that has endured since the Middle Ages. In the Serbian nationalist discourse this is often referred to as “Serbian Byzantium” (Srpska Vizantija), a term often used during the Yugoslav Wars to instill in the population a sense of distinctiveness and spiritual preeminence over the Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks. The mystique of Byzantium as a spiritual refuge, which has so overwhelmingly captivated the Serbian imagination, is epitomized by the poetic fantasies of Milorad Pavić, the novelist who saw himself as the “last Byzantine” (Bakić-Hayden 1995: 925), and the surreal blend of folklore and mysticism in the paintings of Milić od Mačve, the “mad painter” who dreamed of capturing Istanbul from the Turks and refounding the Byzantine Empire (Živković 2011: 153-154, 167; Thomas 1999: 171). Even historiography, in tones reminiscent of fiction, reiterates this infatuation with the Eastern empire. Thus Dejan Medaković, art historian and prominent member of the nationalist intelligentsia, contemplating the impact of the Byzantine civilization on Serbia, remarks: “... our contemporary ethical integrity and especially our spiritual portrait was crucially influenced by ... [Byzantium’s] closed theological consciousness [that was] molded and established on the unsullied sources of Orthodox learning” (Medaković 2003: 11). Medaković’s somber tone and ornate

language are presumably intended to evoke the poetic depths of Byzantine spirituality and convey reverence for a mystical bond that, in the nationalist worldview, transcends rational experience; borrowing from Nicolae Iorga, he designates this bond “Byzantium after Byzantium.” Even seemingly more coherent accounts by nationalist historians are often wrapped in unsubstantiated assertions. It suffices here to cite as typical the claim by one such historian that, from the very beginning of their medieval history, the “Serbian people” were firm in their resolve “... to choose Orthodoxy [as their religion] and join the Byzantine cultural realm” (Dragojlović 1993: 208).

We are not concerned here with perceptions of “otherness” and cultural stereotypes, nor with the social dynamics and political culture commonly ascribed to the Balkans’ “Byzantine” legacy (cf. Angelov 2003). Rather, we are interested in the origins of the Serbian fascination with Byzantium. The question to be asked therefore is whether the Serbs’ historical affiliation with the Byzantine Empire was indeed so pervasive, as is claimed in the nationalist discourse, that it determined (through historical memories or surviving traditions) their development and national formation in the modern age. It is proposed here that the Serbian case is different from that of other predominantly Orthodox cultures such as Greece and Romania, where a “Byzantine” identity was sustained (among the Phanariote elites) during the Ottoman centuries and which did indeed leave a trace on the formation of national identity in the modern age (Loizides 2009: 208; Kitromilides 1998; Vryonis 1988: 113-114). The Serbs arose as a nation and developed their national culture and memories within the Habsburg Monarchy -- well outside the domain of the Byzantine “commonwealth” and long after this empire’s demise. These “Habsburg” Serbs were the descendants of the Orthodox populations who had fled Ottoman-controlled Serbia in the late seventeenth century and, migrating northward across the Danube and Sava rivers, settled in the Habsburg lands, largely in the southeast of the Pannonian Plain that came to be known as Vojvodina. Over the following two centuries a bourgeois culture emerged in the Danubian towns of Vojvodina, which engendered a keen sense of history and heritage among patriotic intellectuals and, later, Romantic nationalists. The spread of nationalism among the Habsburg Serb elites conformed to the phases outlined by Miroslav Hroch (1985). Of critical importance in this process was the development of a printed vernacular language, which -- as described by Benedict Anderson (1991) -- was indispensable for the proliferation of the national sentiment and for the imagining of the nation, its history and heritage (cf. Wachtel 1998: 31-32).

In Serbia proper, which had been under Ottoman Turkish rule since the fifteenth century, the picture was very different. This was a peasant society with an overwhelmingly illiterate population whose identity was grounded in confessional and regional/clan affinities. When they rebelled in the early nineteenth century, the Orthodox *reaya* in this Turkish *pashalik* did not even challenge the Sultan’s sovereignty (Stokes 1976; Stoianovich 1959: 250; Stavrianos 2000: 245-246). The autonomous principality that they somehow managed to establish in 1830 did not arise from ideals of national liberation or from the desire to restore the Serbian medieval kingdom. National consciousness and awareness of history came later, with

the spread of nationalism, just as their vernacular culture, largely consisting of the songs and orally transmitted poetry of the peasantry, became “national” only after it was collected and adapted by Herder-inspired folklorists and nationalists from the Habsburg Monarchy (Lord 1963: 268-272; Lord 1972: 54; Greenawalt 2001: 51-52, 60). In a similar fashion ecclesiastical culture, consisting largely of medieval hagiographies of Serbian saints, was appropriated by these Romantic nationalists, secularized, and placed in the budding national imaginary alongside the vernacular lore. One example of this nationalization is the transformation of Prince Lazar from a Christian saint into a national hero. Soon after his death in 1389 at the Battle of Kosovo, where he led a Christian coalition that confronted an invading Ottoman army, the Orthodox church declared Lazar a saint. This was in accordance with the local practice of canonizing secular rulers. After the demise of his family and the dissolution of his principality following the Turkish conquest, Lazar quietly faded into oblivion as a warrior and a prince. He was paid due obeisance only as a Christian saint -- on the feast day marking his martyrdom and by the monks of his foundation, Ravanica Monastery, according to his special privilege as their monastery’s founder and patron (*ktetor*). It was from this rather unexceptional position that Saint Prince Lazar was recast as the secular hero of the Battle of Kosovo, the account of which was compiled from disparate strands of the vernacular lore into a national myth (Pantelić 2011; Greenawalt 2001; Lord 1972: 54).

The example of Prince Lazar and the Battle of Kosovo shows how the ecclesiastical and vernacular traditions that had developed separately over the centuries were ultimately joined to form the national narrative (Pantelić 2011). This account of the Serbs was first outlined by Leopold von Ranke in 1829 on the basis of oral sources and materials provided by Vuk Karadžić, and further constructed in the course of the nineteenth century by the Romantic nationalists of Vojvodina. These nationally minded Serbs from the Habsburg Monarchy brought nationalism and nationalist ideas to the autonomous principality where many of them had found employment.

The fact that the Serbs originated as a nation and developed their national identity in the same setting as the Catholic Croats and Slovenes is commonly disregarded, since it diverges from the widespread perception of historical/cultural allegiances as “natural” extensions of religious affiliations. It also contradicts the local historical accounts, which not only adhere to strict confessional demarcation but also are further constricted by a rigid national perspective. Serbian historiography thus rarely ventures beyond ethnic or claimed historical borders (cf. Stanković 2013) and remains narrowly confessional: connections with other Orthodox Slavs or with the Byzantines are presumed even where there are none, while cultural interaction with Catholic South Slavs is ignored or played down.

What follows, therefore, is an inquiry into Serbia’s cultural origins that will put to the test these and other established notions and paradigms underlying the official historical account. With a focus on material culture, this inquiry will consider a range of issues concerning the cultural policies, ideologies and identities that have underlain Serbian development since the Middle Ages.

### **Svetosavlje: Ideology and Narrative**

In our search for the origins of this “Byzantinism” in Serbia we need not look into the distant past. We shall find the earliest references to Byzantium as a cultural concept in connection with Svetosavlje (“Saint Savaism”), a doctrine that is widely regarded to be the ethnic/national principle of the Serbs (for Svetosavlje, see Buchenau 2006). Although it is named after Saint Sava and commonly believed to be his teaching, Svetosavlje is not even an indigenous Serbian philosophy but a derivative of Slavophile ideas propagated by émigré Russian clerics who had established themselves in Serbia in the 1920s (Buchenau 2011: 117). As we can surmise from the views held by the most senior among these Russians, Metropolitan Antony Khrapovitsky, a fervent nationalist and anti-Catholic polemicist, these ideas, revolving around the mysticism of Aleksei Khomiakov and the religious moralism of Fyodor Dostoevsky, were centered on promoting Russia as the new Byzantine Empire and leader of all Orthodox nations. Constantinople had had an emotional and mythical appeal in Russian popular and religious culture since the Middle Ages, but it was only with the Slavophiles in the mid-nineteenth century, and in particular Aleksei Khomiakov and Ivan Kireevsky, that Byzantium came to be seen as part of Russian culture and as a source of their faith (Obolensky 1994: 193-194, 196). The Slavophiles praised Byzantium’s spirituality as superior to the materialism and rationalism that guided Western civilization, and as complementary to what were imagined to be indigenous Slavic traits such as communalism (*sobornost*) and the “Slavic soul.”

These ideas had a powerful imprint on Serbia’s provincial clergy and found adherents among traditionalists whose confessional and ethnic loyalties toward Orthodox Slavdom rendered them susceptible to Russian propaganda. In particular they were inclined to accept the old myth of Russia as the “Third Rome”; a myth which now, in the Slavophile context, positioned Russia as the focus of a new “Byzantine commonwealth” (Agadjanian and Rousselet 2005; Duncan 2000; Sidorov 2006: 323 et passim; for its original eschatological meaning cf. Meyendorff 1991), a notion that was to become an important instrument of Russian expansionism. This was made clear in an open letter addressed to the Serbs in 1860 by a group of Russian Slavophile intellectuals warning them not to succumb to Western influence and to stay close to their Orthodox roots and to Russia (Stoianovich 1958/9: 259-260; Duncan 2000: 31). Russian influence was now channeled through Svetosavlje, the localized Serbian version of the Russian Slavophile ideology whose development and dissemination is commonly associated with the influential theologian Nikolaj Velimirović. A lecture delivered by this cleric in 1935 entitled “The Nationalism of Saint Sava” (Velimirović 2003) in which he argues for a national religion and the attempt by Danilo Medan, another clerical ideologue, to formulate it as a worldview and way of life (Medan 1937), are the defining documents of this ideology. After the war, in socialist Yugoslavia, the influence of the church dwindled and Svetosavlje was largely forgotten. Nikolaj Velimirović had emigrated to America, and his writings, circulated as *samizdats* or smuggled into the country, were relegated to the

obscurity of Orthodox coterie such as the one around Justin Popović in his monastic refuge (Byford 2008: 63-64; Buchenau 2011: 118).

Svetosavlje rose to prominence again in the 1980s after Velimirović's followers (Amfilohije Radović, Atanasije Jevtić, Artemije Radosavljević and Irinej Bulović) were placed in key positions in the ecclesiastical establishment (Byford 2008: 79-80; Lis 2014: 161). These protagonists of the resuscitated Svetosavlje who were initially formed under the aegis of Justin Popović, archimandrite and main ideological exponent of Svetosavlje in Serbia during the communist years, went on to study in Athens, where they were exposed to the ideas of the emerging Neo-Orthodoxy and this movement's utopian fascination with the Byzantine civilization (on the Neo-Orthodox movement, Makrides 1998: 144 et passim and Lis 2014: 159-160, 162).

Svetosavlje can be thought of as a blend of ethnic nationalism and religion. Its narrative is grounded in an organicist doctrine that views the "essential nature" of the nation as having been conceived through a mystical union of Stefan Nemanja (canonized as Saint Simeon), founder of the Serbian medieval principality and progenitor of the ruling Nemanjid family, and his son Rastko (canonized as Saint Sava), founder and first archbishop of the Serbian church. Through the oneness of father and son, according to this doctrine, the secular and sacral merged to become a fundamental principle of the national disposition, where church, state, and nation are united into an inseparable whole. The Serbs' "innate" inclination toward the spiritual was fulfilled two centuries later at the Battle of Kosovo (1389) by Prince Lazar, who relinquished worldly glory for divine grace (the "earthly kingdom" for the "heavenly kingdom"), offering thus a blood sacrifice analogous to that of Christ (Mock 2011: 158-159 et passim). Saints Sava, Simeon, and Lazar form a Trinitarian concept known in the discourse of Svetosavlje as the "Kosovo Covenant," which has come to epitomize the Serbs' divine calling. This messianic history -- in fact an ethnic ontology -- establishes a bond that connects all Serbs into a mystical unity with the progenitors of the nation.

This notion of a metaphysical union that has sustained a community over the centuries was of far greater appeal than the earlier account that imagined the source of the nation in folk art and poetry (Buchenau 2011: 113). The vernacular tradition was swept away. It was no longer the village priests with their liturgies, and the peasantry with their folk customs and lore, who had sustained Serbian ethnic/national identity during the "Turkish slavery," as had been claimed in the secular narrative since Ranke (1829: 40; 1844: 55). Now, in Svetosavlje's narrative, it was only the church (Falina 2007b: 521). The first challenges to the secular narrative came in the 1930s when theologians and church intellectuals from Serbia proper started to denounce the nationalists for appropriating the ecclesiastical tradition. One example that illustrates the church's challenge to secular nationalism is the scathing book review by the clerical intellectual Đoko Slijepčević of a biography of Saint Sava published in 1934 by the novelist Miloš Crnjanski. This nationalist author was criticized for stressing Saint Sava's political and diplomatic prowess while ignoring the saint's spiritual achievement (Buchenau 2011: 117; Falina 2007b: 523-525).

Svetosavlje views the Serbian church not only as a link with medieval statehood, as does secular nationalism, but as a spiritual force that rises above history and society -- a transcendental entity deeply woven into the "national being." In view of such religious bias it is not surprising that the second rise of Svetosavlje in the 1980s was accompanied by a surge of religious artifacts (such as Byzantine-style icons and prayer beads) which supplanted the traditional products of folk arts and crafts, while medieval saints and patriarchs took the place of the ancient heroes of popular song and epic poetry (Pantelić 2007). Svetosavlje implanted into the ethnic/national ethos an irrational dimension that blurs the distinction between ideology and religion and history and myth.

If we were to select one symbol of Serbian identity grounded in the Svetosavlje ideology, it would be the Church of St. Sava in Belgrade. (Fig. 1) Although this building has an older history -- the foundations were laid in 1935 -- it is primarily associated with Slobodan Milošević, with whose rise to power its construction coincided. The beginning of the construction of St. Sava's in 1985 heralded the "unholy" alliance between the nationalists within the communist bureaucracy and the clerical establishment, an alliance that made possible Milošević's rise from an obscure apparatchik in the communist hierarchy to a forceful populist leader. St. Sava's was the first statement of the resurgent Serbian nationalism, preceding by a year the Serbian academy's draft of the national agenda known as the Memorandum (for the Memorandum, see Lampe 2000: 347-348.) The placement of this monument, on the (presumed) spot where the Ottoman Turks burned the relics of Saint Sava, evokes the overarching theme of Serbian nationalism -- that of perpetual victimization (cf. Bieber 2002). It is indeed hard to imagine a more poignant display of Serb suffering than the placement of the national monument on the site where the nation's most honored saint was desecrated. The Church of St. Sava is a martyrrium. But at the same time it is a place of celebration, reiterating the Christian doctrine of rebirth through death. This notion is central to Svetosavlje's ethnic-religious principle -- symbolically represented by the defeat at the Battle of Kosovo -- that imagines the history of the Serbs as a history of suffering, a continuum of conflated time and space where symbols of glory alternate with symbols of sorrow and where earthly defeat is a step toward eternal victory. The discourse of victimhood and national glory that we find embodied in St. Sava's does not, however, evoke noble ideals of temperance and forgiveness; rather than offering hope for the future, it called for the amendment of historical injustices. Svetosavlje's message was taken up by the state-controlled media and echoed almost daily through images of medieval Serbian monasteries and icons juxtaposed with images of mass graves (from World War II) and other sites of atrocities committed against Serbs.

Nationalists take pride in pointing out that St. Sava's is the largest Orthodox church in the world. It is indeed a large building; yet it is one that fails to impress: its bland and uninventive design conveys nothing but the pomp and pretension of monumental historicism. In one way, however, this building does stand out. Church architecture in the 1930s was generally expected to reflect the "national" character by drawing from

the medieval heritage. Some churches are even outright copies of historical prototypes (St. Mark's in Belgrade, for instance, replicates the early fourteenth-century church of Gračanica Monastery). The Church of St. Sava, on the other hand, is not even remotely reminiscent of the local building practice. Its low profiled dome and abutting semidomes were intended as a reference to St. Sophia in Istanbul. To corroborate this we may refer to the writings of Amfilohije Radović, one of the main contemporary ideologues of Svetosavlje and an influential metropolitan of the Serbian church. In his deliberations on Orthodox art and culture, Radović echoes the thoughts of Christos Yannaras, the ideologue of Greek Neo-Orthodoxy, who praised Byzantine architecture for its "divine" properties in contrast to the "spiritless" Gothic cathedrals (Yannaras 1982: 216-230; Buchenau 2006: 162; Lis 2014: 162). Like Yannaras Radović singles out St. Sophia, whose form according to him "... embraces the inexpressible Mystery and timeless Beauty ...." He then concludes that some of these ethereal qualities of St. Sophia have been attained also in the Church of St. Sava (Radović 2003: 27-28).

It is not therefore for the originality of its design that this church is seen to stand out from countless such uninspired historicist structures, but rather for the meaning it conveys. And this meaning has little to do with religion. According to Patriarch Varnava, who commissioned and selected the design in the 1930s, St. Sava's was to represent "... our entire history, life, and events [depicted] in marble, reliefs, ornaments, mosaic, and frescoes" (Pešić 1988: 41); or, to use the more poetic language of contemporary Svetosavlje: "... [it] is the embodiment of the very essence of the national Being" (Radović 2003: 54-55). The "Temple of St. Sava" (*Hram Svetog Save*), as this monument is commonly referred to, is a temple to Serbdom -- the centerpiece of a narrative written around a mystical ontology of the nation. The reference to Justinian's Great Church was meant to symbolize the new national identity, as defined by Svetosavlje, whose narrative describes Byzantium as the great Orthodox empire and its culture as the common heritage of all Orthodox nations.

### **Visualizing Identity: the Byzantine Aesthetic**

The Church of St. Sava is an expression of Serbia's professed Byzantine legacy and ethnic/religious affinity with Russia. Its Byzantine form stands in almost perfect juxtaposition to Zagreb's cathedral whose neo-Gothic design conforms to the Croats' self-perception as the guardians of Catholicism and European civilization -- the *Antemurale Christianitatis* (Žanić 2005). Visuality is an intrinsic part of identity formation: it refers to aesthetic systems and sets of visual references believed to be deeply woven into the ethnic makeup or to echo history and tradition. To those who imagine themselves to be connected by ethnic bonds or by culture and history to the Byzantine civilization and Eastern Orthodoxy, this imagery consists of a transcendent world of monks in candlelit churches amidst ethereal saints represented in icons and scintillating gold mosaics. Byzantine religious images are appreciated for their perceived metaphysical properties and connection with the otherworldly, but most of all they are valued by the proponents of pan-Orthodoxy for their distinctive visual language. We learn about this from Metropolitan Radović, according to whom the true principles of Byzantine iconography were those defined in 787 at the Second

Council of Nicaea. This artistic vision, the cleric tells us, was best achieved in the “circle of Byzantine-Slavic painting and iconography.” He then cites examples of artistic perfection: the mosaics of the Christ-in-Chora Monastery (Kariye Cami) in Istanbul, the frescoes of the churches of Mileševa and Sopoćani monasteries in Serbia, and the icons by the Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev (Radović 2003: 63) -- all of which are routinely included in popular surveys of Byzantine and Russian medieval art. The metropolitan then reiterates the Russian Slavophiles on icon painting, explaining that, unlike religious art in the West which since the Renaissance has been stifled by naturalism and didacticism, Orthodox art cannot be measured by human standards; it is untouched by the mundane: “... [it is] neither abstract nor surreal, although it exceeds the given reality and goes beyond its limits ... it is ecstatic in nature and in aspiration” (Ibid: 61, 63; cf. Belting 1994: 19-20).

### **Visualizing Identity: Constructing the Heritage**

When immersed into the national imaginary, this ethereal Byzantine aesthetic becomes a powerful designator of cultural affiliation: it is a visual code that defines belonging. In predominantly Orthodox societies this Byzantine aesthetic was seen as deeply rooted in history and heritage. The construction of “Serbian Byzantium,” however, was far more challenging, since only a small part of Serbia’s heritage was Byzantine in inspiration and hardly any of it was properly Byzantine. The cultural patrimony to which Serbian nationalism could lay claim consisted primarily of the monastic churches from the medieval Nemanjid kingdom and its successor realms. These had recently been studied by the French researcher Gabriel Millet, who classified them into three distinct groups or “schools” (Millet 1919). The first group, the “École de Rascie,” consists of monuments displaying variants of the Romanesque idiom; these are concentrated in ancient Rascia (Raška), the core Nemanjid lands in the central and southern parts of the country. The second group, named by Millet “École de la Serbie byzantine,” comprises monuments in Kosovo and northern Macedonia (FYROM) that feature regional variants of the Late Byzantine building technique and formal vocabulary. These all date to the first half of the fourteenth century. The third and last group of monuments identified by Millet was “École de Morava,” an indigenous local architecture in central Serbia notable for its excessively ornamental polychrome facades. This architecture is associated with the principalities that emerged after the demise of the Nemanjid kingdom in the second half of the fourteenth century, just before their subjugation by the Ottoman Turks. In the northern province of Vojvodina the picture is very different. We find here a typical Central European landscape ranging from the Baroque religious culture of the eighteenth century to the secular culture of the nineteenth, including some of the earliest national institutions of culture established by the Serbs of the Habsburg Monarchy.

The diversity of Serbia’s heritage could hardly be representative of a nation constructed on a religion-based exclusionism. The lack of an overwhelming and consistent orientation toward Byzantium and exposure to Byzantine cultural models had to be explained within the Svetosavlje narrative, even if this meant stretching the limits of credibility. Archimandrite Justin Popović explained this bias toward Western

cultural models as part of a divine plan. The Serbs, according to this cleric, were placed on “the knife-edge between the East and the West” (Popović 1953: 55) -- presumably an analogy to the temptation of Christ -- to test their allegiance to Orthodoxy. This is reiterated in the so-called “Letter to Irinej,” purportedly written by Saint Sava himself, where Serbia’s cultural position is described as “... doomed by fate to be the East on the West, and the West on the East ...” (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992: 1). Although it is an obvious forgery this text has been widely quoted and is even referenced as a historical source. The author of this “letter” may be unknown, but its purpose is clearly to add historical weight to Svetosavlje’s claims and relativize the impact of Western cultural models on Serbia’s heritage. Such efforts are aimed in particular at the Romanesque architecture of the Nemanyid era (Millet’s *École de Rascie*), which is typically referred to as “Byzantine” even in scholarly literature (for example by Erdeljan 2011: 93-94) and in some extreme cases even physically modified to appear more “Byzantine” -- a remarkable case being the addition of a Byzantine-style dome to the Romanesque church of Studenica Monastery. (Fig. 2) Although the new dome, featuring curvilinear eaves-lines and painted red in the Athonite manner, purportedly replicates the appearance of the original dome, this is not corroborated by the historical and structural evidence (cf. *Saopštenja* 1979), which is inconclusive at best.

While the Romanesque heritage is explained away or “Byzantinized,” the heritage in Vojvodina is dismissed outright. It is viewed as the unfortunate and “unnatural” outcome of the Serbs’ migration to the Habsburg Monarchy, where they were exposed to Catholic influence and ultimately integrated into Western culture. The proponents of Svetosavlje are particularly critical of the developments at Sremski Karlovci (Karlowitz), the see of the Orthodox church in the Habsburg Monarchy, where in the mid-eighteenth century medieval visual conventions were abandoned and the Baroque was adopted as the official mode of representation (Pantelić 2007: 132-134). The brilliant colors, dramatic settings, and dynamic compositions thus introduced into Orthodox religious imagery were worlds apart from the somber icons produced by uneducated monks and provincial iconographers in Ottoman-controlled Serbia. To be sure, this “Serbian Baroque,” as it is referred to in national historiography, did not produce any significant works. Even at its high point, represented by the work of such talented and innovative artists as Teodor Kračun and Teodor Ilić Češljarić, this art remains provincial and often awkward (for these artists, see Davidov 1972: 37-38). But what it did bring was a diversity and previously unseen opulence to Orthodox religious art, which played a significant role in the acculturation of these former Ottoman subjects to this new, highly competitive urban milieu. From this foundation there emerged a secular culture that in the nineteenth century generated a national identity based on the vernacular developed by Vuk Karadžić and his mentor Jernej Kopitar (Burke 2009: 36-37; cf. Butler 1969).

Normally, it would be perfectly conceivable to view this influx of Baroque aesthetics as a historical development comparable to the development in Italy from the Byzantine *maniera greca* to the realism of the Trecento. But to the ideologues of Svetosavlje this was not about aesthetics: it was about religious doctrine and political

ideology (Sidorov 2006: 323 et passim). From their viewpoint, the introduction into the Orthodox religious image of illusionist techniques and rational spatial settings, including linear perspective, was a violation of the immutable image of the divine and an intrusion of Western rationalism into the spiritual domain of Orthodoxy. Similar ideas pervaded academic discourse. It is not unusual among art historians to find dismissive attitudes toward the Serbian Baroque, especially in comparison with the much-revered medieval achievement. Although these authors do not exalt the divine and spiritual in the medieval murals and icons as the clerics do, they speak with equal reverence about “purity of style.” According to this doctrinaire formalism, Western influence was detrimental to the stylistic integrity of Serbia’s Byzantine-inspired medieval painting; the art historian Svetozar Radojčić (1979) even claimed that it was more damaging than the Turkish conquest of the medieval Balkan principalities, for although the country was eventually liberated from the “Turkish slavery,” its “authentic” art tradition was lost forever.

### **The Myth of Byzantine Spirituality**

By far the most apparent feature of this Byzantine aesthetic -- its mystical appeal -- is considered by the ideologues and followers of pan-Orthodoxy to be a manifestation of Orthodoxy’s inherent spirituality. They are inclined to believe that the lack of realistic texture and setting in Byzantine imagery reflects the artists’ conscious rejection of the mundane for the sublime. Such a view relies on that hallmark of Byzantine painting widely known as “inverted perspective” (or “reverse perspective”), an irrational spatial setting that purportedly depicts the world from God’s point of view. In the words of Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović, inverted perspective is “... [the] unearthly perspective, present here through the inexpressible all-depth of the Logos incarnate” (Radović 2003: 61). Thus we are asked to believe that Byzantine iconographers were aware of the principles of linear perspective long before Filippo Brunelleschi but rejected it in favor of a more “spiritual” representation (cf. Lossky and Ouspensky 1999: 40-41; Florensky 2002: 197-272). Conventional wisdom describes inverted perspective as a spatial setting where parallel lines diverge instead of converging in one point. Sometimes they do indeed diverge, but in many instances we find that they remain parallel. The more images we examine, the more different spatial settings we encounter; frequently, several systems coexist in the same image. The truth is there was no consistent rule for the representation of space in Byzantine art. It is safe to assume that “inverted perspective” was not devised by pious Byzantine iconographers to represent the divine; it was invented, as a concept, centuries after the demise of the Byzantine Empire, by Russian Slavophiles who applied it retroactively to substantiate the paradigm of a uniquely Orthodox perception of the world.

The same is true of another myth that holds an important place in the pan-Orthodox imaginary -- that of the immutability of Byzantine art. According to this view, Byzantine art was produced by God-fearing monk-iconographers disconnected from the material world, who were less interested in innovation than in faithfully repeating established models. It is true that Byzantine art is typically monotonous and repetitive. Orthodox thinkers praise this repetitiveness as constancy, which they

believe denotes divine perfection. But, as in the case of “inverted perspective,” this repetitiveness is not due to spirituality or adherence to the religious principles, established in the eighth century, that preclude innovation (cf. Belting 1994: 18-19); rather, it is due to conformism and lack of creativity (cf. Ibid: 26-27).

Byzantium was not a magnificent empire of profound spirituality inhabited by pious monks and wise emperors, as imagined by the Slavophiles and other proponents of pan-Orthodoxy. It was not even a compact and uniform society, but rather a composite of interlocking regional identities where the only unifying concepts were the state religion and the ideological framework of “empire” (Mango 1980: 13-31; Treadgold 1998). In other words, the Byzantine Empire was not “Byzantine” enough for these idealists, and had to be re-imagined to conform to the utopian fantasy of Byzantium as the great Orthodox realm and the source of all Orthodox nations (Lis 2014: 162).

### **The Myth of “Serbian Byzantium”**

Serbia’s fateful bond with the Byzantine Empire is also a myth that conceals complex currents of overlapping and interlocking traditions. Instead of a constant and unwavering orientation to the East or West, we find amongst the various principalities in the medieval Balkans a network of shifting political alliances and religious and cultural affiliations. In those principalities that displayed greater consistency in their adherence to Byzantine-sponsored Christianity, as in the Nemanjid domain, Byzantine liturgical practice and iconographic models prevailed. The influence of Mount Athos, the religious center of Eastern Christianity, was indeed overwhelming there. Athonite influence, however, pertained mostly to the monastic community and the clergy (Obolensky 1971: 248). Similarly, the Roman legal codes, adopted from Byzantium, were largely restricted to canon law and had little if any impact on the wider population; in daily life, customary law prevailed (cf. Sedlar 1994: 306-307). This customary law was closer to Western and Central European legal practice than to Byzantine. The same is true of other practices and institutions, such as the municipal autonomy which was enjoyed by cities in the Nemanjid realm but which was unknown in the Byzantine Empire (Obolensky 1971: 249).

Serbian medieval culture developed through a variety of regional connections with Hungary and Italy (through the Adriatic littoral) as well as Thessaloniki and Mt. Athos (cf. Obolensky 1971: 247). We find a more consistent influence of cultural models from Constantinople only in the early fourteenth century, after King Milutin’s (Stefan II Nemanjid) acquisition of northern Macedonia and his marriage into the imperial family (Fine 1987: 222-223). This was noticed in 1299 by an imperial envoy to Milutin’s court, the statesman and scholar Theodore Metochites, who noted that the king wished to emulate the “Roman” (i.e. Byzantine) nobility. Metochites was referring to the dress codes, insignia, and deportment at Milutin’s court, which were now modeled on the court in Constantinople. The Byzantinization of the medieval Serbian kingdom reached its high point under Milutin’s grandson Stefan Dušan, who established a vast Greco-Serbian empire extending deep into Byzantine territory,

where he implemented many of the state-legal concepts, ideologies and institutions of Constantinople (Obolensky 1971: 252).

This Byzantine fashion was adopted by the elites who had developed a Christian identity. The general population, mostly farmers and herdsmen scattered in self-sustaining kinship communities, remained untouched by such trends; it is even doubtful that they abandoned their ancestral beliefs for the Byzantine religion forced on them by the Nemanjid churchmen (rather, it was the clerics who often adjusted to the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasantry). Furthermore, this Byzantinization of the Nemanjid kingdom in the early fourteenth century was restricted to the traditionally Byzantine regions in the south (Kosovo and northern Macedonia). This is best reflected in monumental architecture, where Byzantine designs and building techniques -- including banded masonry, elaborate brick patterns, and elongated domes with curved eaves-lines -- remain confined to the southern regions, while in the core Nemanjid land of Rascia, and especially in the coastal region of Zeta (ancient Doclea, today's Montenegro), Byzantine influence is barely perceptible. In Rascia, rather, we find an aesthetic of marble facades with corbel tables, sculpted windows and elaborate portals. This Romanesque idiom (Millet's *École de Rascie*), stemming from the Adriatic littoral, was the hallmark of Nemanjid architecture from its beginnings at Studenica Monastery in the twelfth century until the end of the dynasty in the later fourteenth century.

The Rascian Romanesque was even exported to the southern provinces. Standing out prominently in Kosovo's Byzantine landscape are two monumental marble-clad churches. One is King Milutin's burial church at Banjska, the other that of his son Stefan III at Dečani -- the former a ruin, although preserving sections of the polychrome marble revetment and fragments of sculpted windows; and the latter, almost perfectly preserved, boasting a banded marble exterior interspersed with Early Gothic elements. (Fig. 3) The two patrons went to extraordinary lengths to build their foundations in the Romanesque manner, for that purpose bringing master builders, masons, and stone carvers from the Dalmatian coast. This was not solely for aesthetic reasons. The Romanesque formal-decorative language was associated with the church of the Virgin at Studenica Monastery, where the progenitor of the dynasty Stefan Nemanja lay buried and which served as the model for all subsequent burial churches of his lineage. This link with the sacred prototype was a powerful assertion of dynastic continuity and legitimacy. But an even stronger source of legitimation was provided by association of the Romanesque idiom with the core Nemanjid land of Rascia, which could have evoked among the population of Rascia and Zeta feelings not unlike the modern sentiment of the "national." The Byzantine idiom, on the other hand, had imperial connotations and was probably regarded as "foreign" and thus unacceptable for the royal mausolea.

For his other major foundation in Kosovo, the church of Gračanica Monastery, King Milutin decided to build in the manner of the Byzantines. This was not out of respect for local tradition, but rather served as a means to proclaim his affiliation with the imperial family and his ambition to ascend the throne of Constantinople (Ćurčić

1979: 5-11, 128-143). (Fig. 4) Although Gračanica is often cited as representative of Serbia's Byzantine culture, this monument is more of an exception. Byzantine-style architecture in the Nemanjid kingdom was not only geographically restricted but also quite sporadic. Gračanica is one of only a few Byzantine-style churches built *de novo* by Nemanjid rulers in their domain; the other monuments of Millet's École de la Serbie byzantine were mostly restorations or reconstructions of existing churches in Macedonia and Kosovo originally built during Byzantine rule by Byzantine patrons. Such are the Church of Staro Nagoričino near Kumanovo and the Church of the Virgin of Ljeviša (Bogorodica Ljeviška) in Prizren, both restored by King Milutin (Mango 1985: 178). It should be noted, furthermore, that Gračanica is not even a typical Byzantine church. Its unusual height and soaring forms (even featuring pointed arches) have no parallels in this architectural tradition; Mango has even suggested that this church could have been the work of masons from outside the Byzantine realm (Ibid).

The only major area (beside religious literature) where the impact of Byzantium appears to be incontestable is religious painting. Almost without exception the frescos in the interiors of the Nemanjid foundations were derived from Byzantine models. This in itself, however, is not proof of any deep-rooted cultural bonds. Iconography and idiom were not necessarily tied to liturgical practice or to cultural and political orientation. The Byzantine artistic tradition was by far the longest established and the most widely practiced in the region in both Orthodox and Catholic contexts; examples of the latter abound -- from Venice to southern Italy and the Dalmatian coastal towns. In the southern Adriatic littoral this "exported" Byzantine idiom was practiced by "pictores graeci," Greek artists who had set up their workshops in coastal cities such as Dubrovnik and Kotor, the major port and city of Zeta (Obolensky 1971: 351; Đurić 1975: 58. The mobility of these artists and their exposure to diverse artistic trends and traditions (through employment by Orthodox and Catholic patrons) resulted in some iconographic and idiomatic peculiarities that we often find in Nemanjid painting. One example is the fresco program at Dečani Monastery, painted largely by artists from Kotor. We encounter still greater divergence from Byzantine conventions in the frescoes of the École de Morava. Dating to the very end of the "Serbian Middle Ages," not long before the final Turkish onslaught, this art betrays unmistakable links to the art of the Dalmatian littoral and to Venetian art (Beckwith 1979: 322-324); it even conveys some of the courtly elegance and spirit of chivalry that are commonly associated with Gothic art.

### **The Myth of Cultural Separation**

Another myth that contributes to the perceptions of the Serbs' separate development is that of strict confessional separation among the South Slavs. It is commonly claimed in the discourse of Svetosavlje that the Serbs developed in close contact and interaction with the Greek-speaking Byzantines and other Orthodox, such as the Bulgarians and later the Russians. But their association with Catholics, and in particular the Catholic Slavs with whom they shared language and custom, is either ignored or at best relativized. Cultural connections and ethnic belongings among the South Slavs in the central and western Balkans were interlocked in a close-knit

network of family ties and regional affiliations that traversed the fluid and vague confessional and political borders. The Nemanjid principality was no exception. Although the majority of the population was affiliated with the Orthodox church (at least nominally), the Slavic populations in Zeta and the coastal regions of the Nemanjid realm were largely Catholic. These Catholic subjects, together with the Saxon miners, mercenary soldiers and assorted other foreigners in the king's service, were administered by the bishopric of Kotor (Fine 1987: 141-142, 199-200). Some members of the Nemanjid family were also Catholics, notably Vukan, Stefan Nemanja's son, who ruled Zeta as his appanage. Even King Milutin, the most "Byzantine" of all Nemanjid rulers, together with his mother Jelena, a Catholic of French origin, regularly patronized the Catholic churches in their kingdom as well as beyond; notable examples include the basilicas of St. Nicholas in Bari and Sts. Sergius and Bacchus near Lake Skadar (Scutari), which Milutin and Jelena rebuilt and endowed with considerable income.

The most conspicuous interaction between Catholic and Orthodox Slavs was at the high levels of royal patronage, and indeed we find that some of the most prominent churches of the Nemanjid dynasty were built by Catholic Slavs (Pantelić 2002: 36-43 et passim). This collaboration is famously documented in an inscription above the south entrance of the church at Dečani, which identifies the master builder (*protomaistor*) as one Fra Vita "from the city of Kotor," whose name and religious identity (friar minor) are displayed alongside the name of the royal patron (Ibid: 25, fig. 65). These contacts continued in the Habsburg Monarchy, where evidence of such cultural connections and interdependence extends to some of the most prominent symbols of national pride -- such as the Croatian and Serbian national anthems, composed respectively by a Serb (Josip Runjanin) and a Slovene (Davorin Jenko). A powerful testimony to this bond between the South Slavs is the fact that some of the most compelling images of Serbian nationalism were the work of Croatian artists: take, for example, the sculptures of Ivan Meštrović, which by any account rank among the most formidable renditions of Serbian myth and history (Wachtel 1998: 54-55, figs. 2-3). Even the *Maiden of Kosovo*, the iconic image of Serbian national mythology, painted by a Serb, Uroš Predić (Pantelić 2007: fig. 6), was based on an iconographic model developed by Ferdo Quiquerez, author of the quintessential image of Croatian nationalism *Antemurale Christianitatis* (Žanić 2005: 37).

### **Separation and Appropriation**

From the beginnings of nationalism among the South Slavs of the Habsburg Monarchy the prevalent view was that all speakers of the *štokavski* dialect (spoken in Serbia and most of Croatia), regardless of confessional belonging, were of one nationality. This view followed contemporary theory that saw language as the most profound expression of nationality. The rest was a matter of nomenclature: for the Serbian language reformer Vuk Karadžić and his Slovene mentor Jernej Kopitar, following the authority of the slavist Josef Dobrovský, they were all Serbs (Karadžić 1849; cf. Tanner 2001, 103); for Ante Starčević, the first and foremost ideologue of Croatian nationalism, they were all Croats (Prpa-Jovanović 1997, 45). However from the later nineteenth century onwards, as Serbia gained independence (1878) and the Orthodox

church was integrated into the state structure, religion increasingly replaced language as the main designator of ethnic and thus national belonging. For the Serbs and Croats, bound by language but divided by confessional barriers, this meant strict separation. Evidence of cultural ties and memories of shared traditions were now eradicated (cf. Gallagher 2001: 56). One such tradition was the feast of the family patron saint known as the *slava*. Originally celebrated by both Orthodox and Catholics throughout the Balkans, this feast was appropriated by nationalists as a uniquely Serbian tradition and claimed as a key ingredient of the Serbs' ethnic/national definition (Kaser 1993; Todorova 1993: 123-129; Halpern and Kerewsky-Halpern 1972: 10). In the decades leading to the Balkan Wars the *slava* assumed an important role in the expansionist policies of the newly-formed Serbian kingdom. The focus was on "Old Serbia," the historical lands that formed part of the Serbian medieval principality (northern Macedonia and Kosovo) and whose liberation from the Ottoman Turks was an obsession that dominated cultural life and politics (Gallagher 2001: 56). Nationalist agitators who traversed these lands in search of Serbian ethnicity and culture -- usually individuals of questionable academic integrity such as the notoriously untrustworthy historian Miloš Milojević and the adventurer and part-time nationalist Spiridon Gopčević -- were guided in their national enterprises by the dictum, promoted by Milojević, "wherever there is the *slava*, there is a Serb!" (Milojević 1871; Gopčević 1889; Hristov 2002: 70).

While ethnographers and historians were drawing up ethnic maps, archeologists and antiquarians were drafting the nation's history and heritage. The most notable such scientific-patriotic missions were undertaken in the 1870s by Mihailo Valtrović and Dragutin Milutinović, professors at Belgrade's Technical Faculty, to record and document Serbia's medieval architecture (Valtrović 1889). The research of these scholars into the stylistic properties of these monuments provided the visual guidelines for the charting of the national heritage until Gabriel Millet published his classification of Serbian medieval architecture in 1919. The rule of thumb in these "nationalizing" enterprises was similar to the one employed in the ethnic/national definition: just as those Orthodox Slavs in "Old Serbia" who were found to celebrate the *slava* were designated as Serbs, monuments of Orthodox provenance within the medieval "Serbian lands" were assigned to the Serbian national patrimony. Beside the churches of northern Macedonia and Kosovo, these included the Orthodox heritage in Bosnia.

Croatian nationalists for their part appropriated monuments within Croatia's own "historical" domains, Slavonia and Dalmatia, using the same confessional criteria; this too was done indiscriminately and with disregard for regional identities and shared traditions. A typical case is Dubrovnik, the ancient maritime republic on the Dalmatian coast and an important center of South Slavic culture. Dubrovnik today is in Croatia, and many of its citizens undoubtedly share a Croatian identity. But looking back into Dubrovnik's past one would have difficulty finding anything Croatian about this city, whose citizens spoke and wrote in the Italian or Slavic language and for centuries cherished their independence and their (Ragusan) identity. Despite this, the heritage and history of Dubrovnik and its literary tradition have been

included in the Croatian national imaginary as a repository of “ancient Croatian culture”; its literature in Slavic was written, of course, in the “old Croatian language” (cf. Fine 2006: 155-156, 299 et passim). It takes the mental acrobatics characteristic of nationalism to claim, as Croatian historiography does (cf. Bellamy 2003: 87), that when the ancient Ragusans were speaking about “Slavs” they meant “Croats” and that when they expressed their Slavic identity they really wanted to express their Croatian national feelings!

### **The Secular Narrative**

Dubrovnik was not allotted to Croatia (within the Yugoslav kingdom) because of historical memories or traditions, as Croatian nationalists insist, but for its Catholic culture. Following this same rule, the Serbs were associated with the Byzantine civilization on account of their Orthodox faith. But despite this, the fact remains that the “cradle” of Serbian culture and nationhood was not in Byzantium, or more specifically in medieval Kosovo (as imagined by nationalists and proponents of “Serbian Byzantium”), but in the Habsburg Monarchy. It is in Vienna and Pest and in the urban centers of Vojvodina such as Novi Sad and Sremski Karlovci that the obscure and partly forgotten heritage of the medieval Nemanjic church and the scattered oral poetry of the peasantry were assembled and reimagined as the national heritage. Even the myth of Kosovo was constructed here (Pantelić 2011; Greenawalt 2001; Popović 1998). In saying this, we contradict the local nationalist accounts which exaggerate the already harsh judgment on the Habsburg Monarchy as being the “prison of peoples,” and tend to agree with the recent tendency toward a more positive assessment of the historical role of this multinational empire (Wank 1993). Whether or not the Serbs here were indeed threatened by assimilation and Catholic proselytism, as national(ist) historiography is all too eager to contend, is of little consequence; for not only were they not assimilated, but they ended up developing their national identity and culture -- an instructive comparison can be made between these “Habsburg” Serbs and those Serbs who migrated to Russia and disappeared without trace. The Habsburg state may not have been particularly liberal or progressive, but it did provide a beneficial multinational environment that made the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment and rationalism accessible to the nascent Serbian culture, as it did to Croatian, and so positioned it within the European cultural framework (Rossi 2013: 859 et passim). Though comparatively disadvantaged in their social and intellectual foundations -- the latter mainly because of their use of the Cyrillic alphabet -- the Orthodox population adjusted with relative ease. Confessional difference was not a barrier to accommodation, especially after their traditional religious practices and customs were codified and institutionalized and made to conform to the norms of Habsburg society. Even the Orthodox high clergy adjusted to high Baroque culture; portraits of these hierarchs reveal a self-conscious elite who resembled their Catholic counterparts in both dress and demeanor (Todorović 2006; cf. Živković 2011: 160-161). Their Orthodox churches, Baroque and classicist in design, were indistinguishable from Catholic churches: often, as at Sremski Karlovci, churches of both denominations stand side by side while their combined bell towers form the distinctive Central European skyline.

These educated Serbian elites in Vojvodina had more in common with their South Slav compatriots of the Catholic persuasion (Croats and Slovenes) than with their estranged Orthodox brethren in Serbia proper. They did not reflect their purported “Byzantine heritage” in any way. Byzantium to these burghers was nothing more than a faint notion: a historical reference to some, and a mythical one to others; and with no bearing on the formation of national and cultural identity. From the early eighteenth century enlightened individuals such as Zaharija Orfelin, Dositej Obradović, and Joakim Vujić strove to educate their compatriots and improve Serbian society (Stokes 1976: 79-80 et passim). They did not set out to restore Byzantium or create an Orthodox empire; they would have shared the sentiments of Adamantios Korais, who despised the Byzantine Empire for its mysticism and decadence and looked instead to revolutionary France (Mango 1965: 37-38; Loizides 2009: 212). Even later, nationalists such as Vuk Karadžić and Đura Daničić were not guided by their confessional affiliation; nor were the young Romantics from the United Serbian Youth and the literary clubs who came after the revolutions of 1848. Their fascination with the medieval past and ambition to restore Serbia to past glory lies fully within the scope of Romantic imagination. It was only to be expected for a nation not fully fledged and still awaiting liberation, that the dreams of the young Romantics should have been expressed with such extreme obsession and emotion.

The hero of these young Romantics was not King Milutin, who introduced Byzantine culture into his kingdom, but his grandson Stefan Dušan, the conqueror who established a multi-ethnic empire on Byzantine territory. They called him “Dušan the Mighty.” These Romantics’ perception of Stefan Dušan and the other personages from Serbian history was formed largely under the impact of Shakespeare’s history plays. A veritable cult of Shakespeare arose among the Serbian elites of Vojvodina after the festivities held in Novi Sad in 1864 to celebrate the anniversary of the Bard’s birth. This “Shakespeare-mania,” as the literary historian and critic Jovan Skerlić called it (Skerlić 1906: 395), fanned the flames of the Serbs’ infatuation with history. They believed his dramatic works to be of universal value for their psychological depth and insight into the human condition. But it was Byron with his proud and passionate nature, as well Schiller and Heine, who inspired the young Romantics to pursue their ideals through literature and the visual and dramatic arts (Goethe was too cold and rational for these impassioned youths).

The Western orientation of the Serbian national imaginary remained unchanged into the twentieth century and in the years leading to the Balkan Wars. The *Wedding of Emperor Dušan*, painted around 1900 by Paja Jovanović, is a typical rendition of the “national” medieval history. (Fig. 5) It was not imagined within an Orthodox or Byzantine setting, but as a delightful spectacle featuring caparisoned horses in heraldic colors and arms, fanfare trumpeters, ladies-in-waiting and knights with lance banners. Jovanović’s painting could easily pass for an illustration from *Ivanhoe* or an Arthurian episode.

The role of Byzantium in the Serbian Romantic imagination was indeed small. When Byzantium was invoked it was by way of an association of art and architecture with

religion or “nationality,” similar to Pugin’s attribution of a link between Catholicism and Gothic architecture. It was precisely out of such consideration that Felix Kanitz, the Austrian researcher and traveler, pleaded in 1862 with Mihailo Obrenović, ruler of the autonomous Serbian principality, to authorize only designs in the “Byzantine style” for new churches in his domain (Kanitz 1904-1909 vol. 2: 365). This historicism was not ideological or political. It also had little to do with Byzantine architecture. Serbian architects learned about Byzantine architecture from European academic curricula where the style that passed for Byzantine was nothing more than a picturesque blend of polychrome designs derived largely from the work of Theophil von Hansen in Vienna. This pseudo-historical idiom was widely practiced even after the field research conducted in the 1870s by Valtrović and Milutinović led to a better understanding of historical typologies and idioms in the region (Valtrović 1889).

The relaxed attitude toward religious architecture reveals how negligible the role of religion was in the formation of Serbian national identity. This should not surprise us, for many of the Serbian Romantics were fiercely anticlerical and as critical of the ecclesiastical establishment as the rational-minded Dositej Obradović had been; the poets Đura Jakšić and Jovan Jovanović Zmaj scorned the Orthodox hierarchs, not sparing even the patriarch (Skerlić 1906: 262-268). These Romantic nationalists were imagining a nation grounded in language and history, not religion. Their pan-Slavic sympathies thus went to Catholic Poles and Czechs no less than to Orthodox Bulgarians and Russians. During the January Uprising in 1863 many of the Serbian Romantics, who saw in Adam Mickiewicz a Slavic messiah, sided with the Polish insurgents against the Russians -- some even went to fight as volunteers on the Polish side. As was only natural for Romantics, they were critical of the West for its rationalism. But even those inclined toward the myth of Slavic spirituality and communalism were not necessarily disposed toward Russia as an alternative to Western culture; thus the playwright Stevan Sremac, a conservative, warned against influences stemming from both the West and the “Byzantine east.”

### **From Russia to Byzantium**

Unconditional sympathy for Russia persisted in particular among the rural clergy and peasantry of Serbia proper. Indeed, if we can talk about “separate upbringing,” a difference in culture and historical circumstance, then it could be applied to these populations. They were certainly a culturally different people than their brethren in the Habsburg Monarchy (whom they even called “Germans”). Subjected to Ottoman rule since the fifteenth century, they did not enjoy the benefits of intellectual advancement and had not developed an educated class (Stoianovich 1958/9: 243-244; Stavrianos 2000: 245-246). Travelers from Habsburg Vojvodina who ventured among these peasants were appalled by these peasants’ ignorance and superstitious beliefs (Pantelić 2011: 446); a prominent member of the Vojvodina elite, the bishop and poet Lukijan Mušicki, referred to them as the “turban-wearers.” The Orthodox population of Serbia proper had indeed little in common with the Serbian elites in the Habsburg Monarchy. Bounded by clan and confessional loyalties, they were far more inclined toward Orthodox Russia than to Habsburg Vienna and the urban culture of Vojvodina.

This deeply traditionalist former Ottoman province was where Svetosavlje and the Byzantine narrative originated in the 1930s. But it was not derived from an indigenous tradition or “shared memories.” Even here, where one would indeed expect to find at least some echoes of Byzantium in popular culture, there is hardly any reference to the Eastern empire; we encounter only the myth of Tsarigrad -- the “city of the tsars,” as Constantinople was known to the Slavic *reaya* of the Ottoman Balkans; only among Greeks did memories of Christian Constantinople survive, mostly in the form of millenarianist fantasies and in folklore (Mango 1965: 34-36; Roudometof 1998: 7-8; Vryonis 1988: 113). In Serbia these “tsars” were not Byzantine emperors but Ottoman sultans, for it is they who feature in popular song and story. The Byzantines were long forgotten. The situation was very different in Habsburg Vojvodina where scholars and educated individuals who had access to Western academic literature were acquainted with the Eastern empire. This is particularly true of historians for whom Byzantine history was an important resource for the study of Serbian and South Slavic history. The earliest historian to cite Byzantine sources (albeit in Latin translation) was Jovan Rajić in his history of the South Slavs of 1794/5 (Radić 2008: 177; Pirivatrić 2010: 481). One century later the situation was unchanged. A Byzantine studies seminar established by a group of historians at Belgrade University in 1906 was intended to further the study of “national” medieval history and heritage (cf. Pirivatrić 2010: 483); there is no indication that these academics’ interest in Byzantium was motivated by ideology or feelings of cultural or confessional affinity.

This changed after the formation of the first Yugoslavia in 1918 (Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes). Increasingly, Byzantium came to be viewed as an integral part of Serbian history and identity. This “Byzantinism” was furthered by the indigenous intelligentsia of Serbia proper, mostly priests and theologians of modest or narrowly religious education, who had a dislike for Western civilization. In Svetosavlje and the Byzantine narrative they saw an alternative to the Western tradition that had prevailed in Serbia after its emancipation from Ottoman rule. One of these homegrown church intellectuals, Đoko Slijepčević, who received a seminary education in Prizren and studied divinity in Belgrade, claimed that the values of Western culture were “alien to the Serbian soul” (Slijepčević 1936: 1-2). Slijepčević blamed the intellectuals educated in the spirit of the Enlightenment and rationalism for the spread of these corruptive influences in Serbia (Ibid).

There was more to this than a merely traditionalist resentment of imported fashions and mores. The Serbian clergy’s anti-Western sentiment reflected their fear of modernity -- the advent of a world of religious pluralism and cultural diversity. They had hoped for an Orthodox kingdom where church and state would coexist in “symphony”: an enlarged Serbia incorporating neighboring Orthodox lands wrested from Turkey and Austria; instead, they were forced into multi-confessional Yugoslavia and cohabitation with the Catholic Church. The root of the problem was not to be found in any historical aversion toward the “Latins” (although that too should be taken into account), but rather in the church’s inability to accept the

religious pluralism that was officially proclaimed in the Yugoslav constitution (Falina 2007a: 252). It is important to note that this was not the Orthodox church of Sremski Karlovci that had lived for more than two centuries alongside the Catholic Church in the Habsburg Monarchy, but rather the “national” church of the Serbs, formed in 1920 when the regional Orthodox churches were subjugated to the patriarch in Belgrade. The Serbian Orthodox Church, as this new church was named, was dominated by clerics from Serbia proper; unlike Vojvodina’s clergy who had developed a considerably urbane Habsburg culture, these Serbian clerics were firmly rooted in the rustic traditions of this former Ottoman province. These clergymen distrusted Catholics, but perhaps even more than Catholics, they feared the “others” in their own ranks with whom they were now joined into one nation (within Yugoslavia) -- the Serbs of Vojvodina and the gentrified Orthodox clergy of Sremski Karlovci. And with good reason, for the urban and secular culture they were bearing was indeed an unprecedented challenge to the traditional structures of provincial Serbia.

Mistrust of the West and Western institutions was not limited to the church and church intellectuals: much of the political discourse in the 1930s was imbued with anti-Western and anti-modern attitudes, in particular among traditionalists such as the populist leader of the Radical Party, Nikola Pašić, who believed the Slavic communal spirit (as epitomized by the Serbian *zadruga* and the Russian *mir*) to be superior to the individualism governing Western civilization (cf. Dimou 2009: 106-107; Buchenau 2011; Stojanović 2013: 28-29). Despite such rhetoric the inclination of these traditionalists toward Russia was more for this country’s deeply patriarchal and authoritarian culture than for reasons of confessional or cultural affinity. Svetosavlje was their response to the challenges of modernity. For underneath the superficial layer of theology and ethnic mysticism was a compendium of parochial traditionalism and what might be termed “popular Orthodoxy” -- the religious beliefs, customs, and values underlying the identity structures of the Serbian *reaya* formed during the Ottoman centuries.

The three main points of Svetosavlje -- Serbian tradition, Byzantine culture, and Orthodox spirituality -- resounded strongly in the popular mind. Although a lively cosmopolitan culture continued to flourish in the capital Belgrade and in Novi Sad, religion-based ethnic/national identities prevailed, turning the Orthodox and Catholic churches in Yugoslavia into national institutions separated by rivalry but united in antagonism toward secularism and the ideal of pluralism that Yugoslavia embodied (cf. Rossi 2013: 861-862 et passim; Buchenau 2005, 551-552). This clerical challenge was upheld by the political right, the successors of Ante Starčević in Croatia such as the Frankists, and their Serbian counterpart the Radical Party of Nikola Pašić (Hupchick 2002: 198-199, 306-307).

The clerical conservative triumph effected a dramatic alteration of established perceptions of history and heritage: henceforth, the Serbs were invariably (and primarily) Orthodox and “Byzantine” (and thereby culturally different from the Catholic Croats and Slovenes.) In Svetosavlje’s new imaginary there was no place for

Shakespeare anymore. The hero now was Dostoyevsky, whose mystical allure as the prophet of Orthodox Slavdom fit well in the pan-Orthodox imaginary where he took his place alongside the saints, monks, and patriarchs and the glittering gold of Byzantine icons and mosaics. The fanciful Hansenesque idiom had no place here either, and was replaced by a somber eclecticism brought by émigré Russian architects. This bland and pretentious architecture was derived from the Russian revivalist/neo-Byzantine tendencies that had been disseminated in the later nineteenth century within the scope of tsarist pan-Orthodox expansionism; the Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky in Sofia is an example. The Church of St. Sava was at the forefront of this Byzantine trend in Serbia. But models that were more common than actual Byzantine monuments -- and more appropriate for a nationally particular expression of pan-Orthodoxy -- were found in the medieval heritage, in particular the “Serbian-Byzantine” Gračanica and the monuments of the indigenous École de Morava. Both were regarded as “national” variants of the Byzantine style. The Rascian Romanesque was hardly even considered.

When the antagonism between the Orthodox and Catholic churches erupted into open conflict in the later 1930s (the Concordat Crisis), the connection of Serbia with Byzantium was already firmly established. This connection continued in postwar Yugoslavia with the founding (in 1948, just months before Tito’s split with Stalin) of a Byzantine institute in Belgrade headed by the Russian George Ostrogorsky (Stephenson 2010: 486-487). In socialist Yugoslavia the notion of Byzantium was stripped of its religious connotations, and included in the pool of models drawn from the diverse heritage of Yugoslavia’s constituent republics that were used to promote the country’s multicultural identity. But even without the religious component, the perceived cultural association of Serbia with Byzantium persisted. Placed in juxtaposition to the Western heritage of Croatia and Slovenia, the monuments of the Byzantine East contributed to the paradigm of Non-alignment that so prominently defined Tito’s Yugoslavia. In this new, secular, environment, icons too had their place -- not as objects of devotion or ethnic/religious identity but as *objets d’art*, and as such were subjected to formalist analyses by art historians, exhibited in art galleries, and displayed alongside paintings on the walls of well-to-do urban households.

After this socialist interlude, Byzantium returned with unusual force. As Svetosavlje was resuscitated during the Yugoslav crisis of the 1980s it was accompanied by a Byzantine narrative that became, even more compellingly than in the 1930s, a tool of national homogenization and ethnic/religious exclusion. It was a powerful declaration by the clerical-minded conservatives and nationalists gathered around Slobodan Milošević -- who viewed the Yugoslav conflict as the ultimate showdown between East and West -- of Serbia’s non-Western origins, and cultural orientation toward the Byzantine East and Russia. It was adopted even by Milošević’s ex-communist associates and followers on the political left who, despite the nominal differences, had in common with the clergy and the nationalists a deep suspicion of the West (Perica 2002: 129-130). Milošević’s balancing act ultimately failed: he alienated the church for ignoring issues such as the restitution of nationalized church property and

the introduction of religious instruction -- although some influential clerics continued to support him to the end (Ibid: 143-144; Buchenau 2011: 119). Despite these less-than-enthusiastic relations between church and state, the basic premises of the Svetosavlje narrative were adopted by the state-controlled media and became part of public discourse.

This second “Byzantinization” of Serbian society was accompanied by a forceful visuality -- an aesthetic that can be more closely described as “monastic-pastoral,” featuring crude hand-carved wooden crosses, Easter eggs with painted rural/religious motifs, prayer beads and icons with rigid saints set against gold backgrounds and in inverted perspective. This surge of the Byzantine aesthetic has come to dominate the public space, including government offices, schools, and hospitals whose walls are decorated with icons and reproductions of medieval frescoes. The Byzantine idiom of this imagery is widely seen as authentically Orthodox, for it echoed the original principles of Christian iconography (as described by Metropolitan Radović) while the rustic undertone referred to the ancestral community of peasants and monks -- the true and uncontrived Serbia, as it appears within Svetosavlje’s ethnic/religious imaginary. By embracing the Byzantine aesthetic many Serbs felt they were reconnecting with their ethnic and religious roots.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this investigation was not to measure the degree of Serbia’s “Westernness” but to reconsider an important and highly controversial postulate of its cultural history. It has been shown that not only was exposure to Byzantine culture in the Serbian medieval principalities far less unequivocal than is commonly supposed, but that it produced no lasting effect; even those aspects of Serbian culture that could be regarded as “Byzantine,” such as the Orthodox faith and Cyrillic alphabet, did not define Serbian cultural and national development (although they hindered and ultimately delayed it.) Byzantium was of little consequence to Vojvodina’s secular-minded nationalists in the nineteenth century, and of no appeal to the elitist high clergy of Sremski Karlovci. Rather than a memory or a tradition, “Serbian-Byzantium” was a historical construct developed alongside Svetosavlje in the clerical and traditionalist circles of provincial Serbia. Sparked by the formation of pluralist and multiconfessional Yugoslavia, the myth of the Byzantine origins of Serbia was meant to dislocate Serbia’s cultural identity from its secular and European sources and reposition it closer to Orthodox Russia.

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Fig. 5. Paja Jovanović, *The Wedding of Emperor Dušan*, 1900

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