

Introduction

Now a backwater town in Kosovo province, Peć was once the ecclesiastical seat of Serbia and a thriving commercial center on a trade route connecting the Balkan mainland with the Adriatic coast. Some fifteen kilometers to the south, in a picturesque valley at the very mouth of the gorge of the Bistrica River lies the monastery known in popular tradition under the name of Visoki (Tall) Dečani. This sobriquet is due to the monumental grandeur of its katholikon, a Romanesque edifice which by any account is one of the most outstanding Serbian monuments of the Middle Ages and certainly the largest Orthodox church built in the fourteenth century. Its overwhelming architecture, exuberant polychrome façades enriched with elaborate stonework, and the sophisticated fresco program covering the walls of its interior, have been admired for centuries. (Fig. 1)

Dečani was appreciated by contemporaries as one of the *mirabilia* of Serbian medieval art; in the late fourteenth century an anonymous citizen of Belgrade thus expressed his admiration: "For this reason the people of that region say that the pavement of the Prizren church [i.e., Holy Archangels], the church of Dečani, the narthex of Peć, the gold of Banjska and the painting of Resava, are nowhere to be found."¹ As a royal foundation housing the relics of its saintly founder King Stefan III, Dečani became under Ottoman rule a monument to past glory, the symbol of national aspirations of the Serbian people – a place of prayer and pilgrimage for the faithful, and in later times a source of inspiration for romantic nationalists, amateur historians, and antiquarians.

The beginning of serious scholarly interest in the architecture, sculpture, and frescoes of the katholikon of Dečani, the only structure of the original monastic complex that has survived into our time, coincides with the work of Fyodor I. Uspenskii, director of the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople. The photographic documentation and architectural surveys made by Uspenskii in 1908 never came to be published.² Another early attempt to critically analyze the monument was made by Andra Stevanović, but his entire documentation and surveys were lost during the First World War. Two decades after these pioneering efforts, Aleksandar Deroko published some photographs and sketches of the ground plan, elevation, and randomly chosen sculptural details.³

A far more extensive examination was undertaken soon thereafter by Vladimir Petković and Đurđe Bošković, and published in 1941 as a two-volume

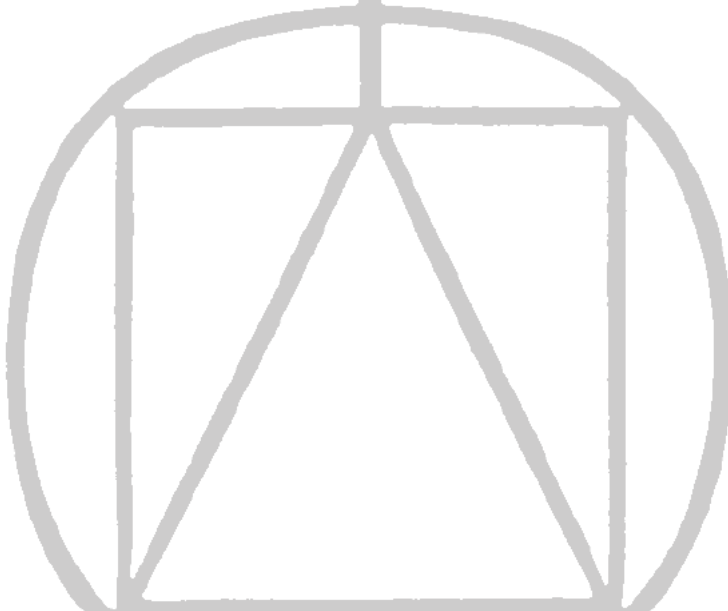
1 D. SP. RADOJIĆIĆ, *Antologija stare srpske književnosti XI XVIII veka* (Belgrade, 1960), 161, 338.

2 A. V. BANK, "Iz istorii izucheniia pamiatnikov serbskogo iskusstva v Rossii," *ZLUMS* 4(1968): 239 45. This was probably due to the political controversy between Serbia and Russia over the monastery which was then governed by a Russian brotherhood from Mount Athos. M. ŠAKOTA, *Dečanska riznica* (Belgrade, 1984), 74 75.

3 A. DEROKO, "Crkva manastira Dečana," *Glasnik SND* 12(1933): 135 46.

study which remains the standard monograph on the monument.⁴ The exhaustive description of the architecture and sculptural decoration and in particular Bošković's good architectural surveys render this publication an important source for the study of the monument.⁵ On the other hand, serious methodological deficiencies, whether outdated interpretations or conclusions that frequently verge on speculation, make it unacceptable from the viewpoint of modern scholarship.

The intention of the present study is not to supplant the extant monograph but to reassess the architectural position of this edifice. Specifically, our first goal is to evaluate its formal, functional, and typological characteristics, its relation to the local heritage and to contemporary currents in Byzantine architectural design. This will entail an investigation of the physical evidence. It should be noted, however, that we shall treat only those aspects of Dečani's architecture that have bearing upon our thesis; otherwise, the reader will be referred to the monograph. Our second goal is to place into fuller conclusions the results of our analysis and relate them to the major historical currents. This will involve an investigation of the external factors that had bearing upon the appearance of Dečani, and in particular the political and cultural developments that shaped the architectural scene of Serbia in the first half of the fourteenth century.



4 V. PETKOVIĆ and Đ. BOŠKOVIĆ, *Manastir Dečani*, 2 vols. (Belgrade, 1941).

5 Petković's detailed description of the frescoes in the second volume of the monograph and his extensive photographic documentation, for long the only comprehensive body of material on the subject, was recently supplemented with a topographic survey of the fresco program: *Zidno slikarstvo manastira Dečana. Građa i studije*, ed. V. J. Đurić (Belgrade, 1995).