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The Symbolism of the Knotted Column in the Architecture of King Milutin

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Abstract

The essay analyzes the ornament known as the “Heracle’s knot” and its usage in sculpture in the late Byzantine sacred context. It is a less known fact that the motif of Heracle’s knot, apart from its wide usage in Antiquity in all ranges of artistic production, blossomed during the Palaiologan period especially in the architecture of King Milutin of Serbia (r. 1282–1321). Heracle’s knot is depicted on the bifora on the west façade of the church of St. George at Staro Nagoričino and the bifora of the apse of the church of St. Joachim and Anna (widely known as King’s church) in Studenica Monastery, both dating to 1313. Usage of Heracle’s knot represents a continuation of King Milutin’s triumphant intentions and in that sense functions as an apotropaic symbol. On the other hand, usage of this symbol could also be connected with the visual response of his prayer for posterity with Queen Simonis, his young Byzantine wife.

Keywords: Heracle’s knot, King Milutin, Queen Simonis, King’s church in Studenica, Architecture.

Kral Milutin Mimarisinde Döğümlü Sütun Sembolizmi

Öz

Makale, “Herakle’nin döğümü” olarak bilinen süslemeyi ve bunun geç Bizans kutsal bağlamında heykellerdeki kullanımını analiz etmektedir. Herakle’nin döğümünün motifinin, Antik Çağda sanatsal üretimin her alanında geniş kullanımının yanı sıra, özellikle Sırbistan Kralı Milutin’in mimarisinde (r. 1282-1321) Paleologos döneminde geliştiği daha az bilinen bir gerçektir. Herakle’nin döğümü, StaroNagoričino’daki St. George kilisesinin batı cephesindeki biforada ve her ikisi de 1313 yılına tarihlenen Studenica Manastırı’ndaki St.Joachim ve Anna kilisesinin (yaygın olarak Kral kilisesi olarak bilinir) apsisinin biforasında tasvir edilmektedir. Herakle’nin döğümünün kullanımı, Kral Milutin’in muzaffer niyetinin bir devamını temsil eder ve bu anlamda apotropaik bir sembol olarak işlev görür. Öte yandan, bu sembolün kullanımı, genç Bizanslı bir eş olan Kraliçe Simonis ile gelecek nesillere yönelik duasının görsel tepkisi ile de bağlantılı olabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Herakle’nin döğümü, Kral Milutin, Kraliçe Simonis, Studenica’daki Kral Kilisesi, Mimari.

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During the last decade of 13th century and in the 14th century as well, emperors and kings, noblemen and priests understood the multilayered nature of ornament relative to historical events and contemporary contexts, and deployed it in decorative programs as an expression of artistic creativity and as a symbol.¹ The patrons and their advisors also often saw symbols in the church as realities that bring together heaven and earth; the holy and the mundane.² This article supports these statements and underscores their theological-cultural implications in Palaiologan sculpture. Among the complex motifs of Byzantine sculpture, Heracles knot (*nodius Herculaneus*; ὄφις), within a specific chronological focus, offers a peculiar case study.³ Named after a mythological figure, in antiquity, this knot could strengthen love and marriage. According to the myth, Heracles invented the knot, which he used to tie the front legs of his magically impenetrable lion-skin as shown in numerous artistic representations: from monumental kouroi to apotropaic gorgons, Athena's protective aegis and the girdles or scarves of virgin goddesses where it serves as an amulet that protects virginity. The knot, with twisted and bound locks, was understood to have a similar theurgical power for ensnaring or averting evil spirits.⁴

Byzantine Instances of Heracle's Knot

Knots were thought to encourage the knitting together of wounds. Although there are no preserved Byzantine written sources about this motif, it is interesting to mention that the power exerted by this magic knot was mentioned by Pliny the Elder. He wrote that wounds bandaged with the *Heracle's knot* healed faster and that Roman doctors used this knot to tie bandages.⁵ Having in mind this source and assumption that the decorative device of the Heracle's knot could cure wounds, its popularity suggests that it was thought to have the power to avert evil.

Apart from its wide usage in Antiquity in all ranges of artistic production,⁶ this motif blossomed during the Palaiologan period.⁷ Ioli Kalavrezou has recognized this motif on the

¹Oleg Grabar, *The mediation of Ornament*, Princeton university Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1992, passim; Fryde 2000, pp.91-102.

² Sophia Kalopissi – Verti, "Patronage and Artistic Production in Byzantium during the Palaiologan Period", in S. Brooks, ed. *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557). Perspectives on Late Byzantine Art and Culture. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Symposia*, New York 2006, pp. 76-97 with references; Vassiliki Dimitropolou, *Giving Gifts to God: Aspects of Patronage in Byzantine Art*, A Companion to Byzantium, ed. Liz James, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 161 – 170.

³ Ioli Kalavrezou – Maxenier, "The Byzantine Knotted Column", *Byzantine Studies in honor of Milton V. Anastos*, ed. S. Vryonis Jr. Malibu 1985, pp.95 – 103; Helen C. Evans – William D. Wixom, *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era*, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York 1997, p. 157.

⁴ Ioli Kalavrezou - Maxenier, "The Byzantine Knotted Column", p.96; Ann M. Nicgorski, *Apollo akersekomas and the Magic Knot of Herakles*, Regionalism and Globalism in Antiquity: Exploring Their Limits, *Colloquia Antiqua*, 7 (monograph supplement of the journal *Ancient West and East*), ed. F. De Angelis, Peeters Publishers, Leuven, Belgium 2013, pp.177-200.

⁵ Bettini - Eisenach 2013, pp. 79- 80.

⁶ Ivana Jevtić 'The Antiquarianism and Revivalism in Late Byzantine Court Culture and Visual arts', in A. Odekan, N. Necipoglu and E. Akyurek (eds.) *The Byzantine Court: Source of Power and Culture. Papers from the Second International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium*, Istanbul 2013, pp.209-217; Elena Boeck *Imagining the Byzantine Past: The Perception of History in the Illustrated Manuscripts of Skylitzes and Manasses*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2015. About phenomena of Antiquity in the society, identity and art of Byzantium: Antony Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium. The Transformation of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007 (with bibliography); Thomas F. Mathews, *Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, Yale University Press, New York 2010; Ivana Jevtić, *The Return to 'Antique' in Palaeologan Art: Conservatism or Sign of a Revival?*, in *Faces of Byzantium. Sharing and Cultural Filters in the Arts of the Palaeologan period*, eds. I. Jevtic, A. Vasilakeris, Istanbul, Koç University Press [forthcoming]. Cf. Also the articles about concept of perception of the past in: David Bloch, *Theodoros Metochites on Aristotle's De memoria*, *Cahiers de l'Institut du Moyen-Âge Grec et Latin* 76 (2005), 3

altar table depicted in the middle of Holy Communion composition in the altar the cathedral church of St. Sophia in Ohrid (852-889, restored in the twelfth century where she compared this knotted column with the one incorporated into the ciborium of the mimbar placed in Pantokrator monastery, which was brought as spolia from the church of St. Polyeuctus in Constantinople (524–527) (**Fig. 1**).⁸ The remarkable motif of knotted column Kalavrezou interpreted through the prism of Solomon's temple. For Kalavrezou, Heracles knot has not only preserved the ancient protective power but received a new religious meaning. According to Ioli Kalavrezou, knotted column can be seen at the iconostasis, usually on columns that are part of an arch or separate the main icons of the altar screen. Its occasional usage on the apsidal windows denotes the function to protect the holy space from the outer world with which it communicates through these openings.⁹

Knotted columns are usually carved or painted within specific architectural settings and usually consist of two shafts looped in the center of the column. When observed closer, the location of the knotted column implies protective powers with apotropaic not aniconic significance.¹⁰

The symbolism of the knot survived well beyond its religious use, and was a known motif in Byzantine art. One notable example is the steatite icon from Vatopedi Monastery. It shares a number of iconographic elements, including the shape of the shield and the positioning of the figures under a palmetted arch reposing on a pair of columns, with the familiar Heracles knot prescribed to the triumphant attitude of St. George as a victorious warrior and defender of the Christian faith, as well as of the icon's owner, who frequently bore the name of the saint depicted. This knot is visible also in the miniature of the Homilies of St. James Kokkinobaphos (depiction of the colonettes that support the structure of the church), on the columns that support the arch above St. Theodore with the sword, shield, and spear in the steatite icon from Museo Sacro della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican (1099), and in the fresco-icons of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ from Protaton Monastery on Mount

-30; Michael J. Featherstone, *Theodore Metochites's Semeioseis Gnomikai: Personal Encyclopedism, Encyclopedic Trends in Byzantium?*, ed. P. van Deun—C. Macé [Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta 212], Leuven 2011, 333-344.

⁷ Ioli Kalavrezou – Maxenier, “The Byzantine Knotted Column”, p.96.

⁸ Ibid. It is important also to stress that the same motif of knotted column was noticed by Snežana Filipova who photographed it in lapidarium of Saint Sophia church. She presumed that this column belonged to another piece of furniture, maybe “part of the ambo ciborium somehow lost or damaged”. Snežana Filipova “The Byzantine Knotted Column”, *Patrimonium.Mk* Year 9, N° 14(2016), p. 112. See also Østein Hjort, “The Sculpture of Kariye Camii”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979), fig.116; Robert G. Ousterhout “The Pantokrator Monastery”, *Byzantine Constantinople: monuments, Topography and Everyday Life*, ed. N. Necipoglu, Brill, Leiden – Boston – Koln 2001, p.145.

⁹ Ioli Kalavrezou – Maxenier, “The Byzantine Knotted Column”, p.100.

¹⁰ Until recently, art historians classified numerous symbols that do not belong to the corpus of floral, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs under the term “aniconic motifs“ overlooking that in fact, these are completely iconic, semiotic markers whose narrative plays an essential role in understanding of Byzantine church, especially in 13th and 14th century where complete surfaces of the walls were transformed into a kind of optical illusion. Bente Kilerich ‘Saved off, frames and parergonality’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59:3 (2001), pp.320-323; Leslie Brubaker, “Aniconic Decoration in the Christian World (6th–11th Century): East and West,” in *Cristianità d'Occidente e Cristianità d'Oriente, secoli 6.–11;* 24 - 30 aprile 2003 (Vol. 1-2) - Spoleto (2004), 1, 573-590; Bente Kilerich ‘Abstraction in late antique art. Envisioning Worlds in Late Antiquity’, ed. C. Olovsson, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018, pp. 77-94; Jasmina S. Ćirić, ‘Brick by Brick: Textuality in the architecture during the Age of King Milutin’, *International Scientific Conference ‘Byzantium and the world of Slavs’, Thessaloniki 28 – 30th November 2013*, Thessaloniki, Museum of Byzantine culture, Municipality of Thessaloniki 2015, pp.206, 207, esp.209-214.

Athos and the Metropolitan church in Mystras.¹¹ In the key of parallelism of St. George with Heracleian powers it is important to notice that a knotted column appears on the interior painted colonette of the apsidal bifora of St. George church in Kurbinovo (ca. 1190) (**Fig. 2**).¹² It seems interesting to notice that the bifora with Heracleian knot is depicted right above the altar table prepared for a liturgical ceremony, where the Amnos (the body of the newborn Christ) is depicted. This depiction is possible to connect with the idea of transubstantiation depicted on the Holy Communion fresco in Saint Sophia in Ohrid. Nevertheless, unusual examples were found by Snežana Filipova who mentioned the church cloths that decorated the altar of St. Sophia or St. Clement in Ohrid, and purple cloth with the representation of the Holy Communion of the Apostles, where one frontal column of the ciborium above the table has embroidered Heracles' knot.¹³ These examples imply that it is possible to discuss of a kind of "clothing" of the altar, e.g. that the altar conch is empowered by Heracles' knot, shown on the column in the middle of the altar table, because the column testifies security and support of any architectural construction.

To the list of unidentified Heracleian knots should also be added the knotted columns carved on the marble spolia of the enthroned Christ, brought from Constantinople and placed on the upper register of the north wall of St. Mary cathedral at Rab in Croatia.¹⁴

Of particular importance for this rather short study are knots found between the sculptural fragments of Christ the Chora church (Kariye Camii), which belonged most probably to the structure dated to the twelfth century.¹⁵ In the year of 1282, when emperor Andronicos II Palaeologos (1282–1332) acceded to the throne, he broke with the church of Rome and proclaimed the inauguration of Orthodoxy. But Andronicos' choice to proclaim as his statesman the *logothete* Theodore Metochites (1270–1332) indicates, among other things, the emperor's strong preferences toward the antiquarianism of, and admiration for, the ancient Greek culture.¹⁶ Within the circle of cultivation of ancient ideas during the reign of Andronicos II, it is possible to say that Byzantine art at the very end of 13th c. was created out of a fusion of Greek and Roman antique literacy and native Byzantine iconographic elements permeated by an Orthodox church.¹⁷ That is to say that Byzantine art employed certain antique quotations both in the monumental painting and architectural sacred context. The process of artistic creativity and the origin of inspiration confused researchers to explain the usage of

¹¹ Ioli Kalavrezou - Maxenier *Byzantine Icons in Steatite*, (*Byzantina Vindobonensia*, 15/1, 2.), Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna 1984, 1, 2; Kypraiou Loula *Βυζαντινή και μεταβυζαντινή τέχνη*, ed. K. Loula Athens Cultural Capital of Europe 1985. Catalogue. Athens 1986, pp.30-31.

¹² Elizabeta Dimitrova *The church of St. George at Kurbinovo. The most significant values of the cultural and natural heritage*, Skopje 2016, p.8, 15.

¹³ Snežana Filipova "The Byzantine Knotted Column", p.111.

¹⁴ Magdalena Skoblar, "Marble Relief with Enthroned Christ from Rab", *Starohrvatska prosvjeta* ser. 3, 39 (2012), p. 172. Although Magdalena Skoblar described in detail the throne, due to devastated parts and probably inappropriate lighting in the cathedral she did not notice this ornament. I noticed this detail during the conference in honour to professor Cvito Fisković (XVI Days of Cvito Fisković) held in the city of Rab from 26th to 29th September 2018.

¹⁵ Østein Hjort *The Sculpture of Kariye Camii*, fig.26, p.114, 115.

¹⁶ Metochites stressed the importance of the Byzantines being the descendants of the Hellenes: 'ἡμῖν οἱ καὶ τοῦ γένους ἐσμὲν καὶ τῆς γλώσσης αὐτοῖς [τοῖς Ἕλλησι] κοινωνοὶ καὶ διάδοχοι'. Theophilus Kiesling *Theodori Metochitae Miscellanea philosophica et historica. Graece. Textum e codice Cizensi descripsit, lectionisque varietatem ex aliquot aliis codicibus enotatam adiecit Christianus Godofredus Müller*. Editio auctoris morte praeventa, cui praefatus est Theophilus Kiessling, Lipsiae : Sumtibus F.C.G. Vogelii, 1821 (reprinted Amsterdam 1966), pp. 14 – 16.

¹⁷ Angeliki Laiou, *Constantinople and the Latins. The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II, 1282-1328*, Cambridge, Mass. 1972, ref. I.7, p.8.

antique metaphors, both within the phenomenon of the classical period of antiquity and in the period of Hellenistic mysticism.¹⁸

What follows is discussion about the knot as a healing charm in the church of St. Joachim and Anna in Studenica and its connection with the idea of the ruler's ancestors and dynastic connections with Christ, topic which gained ideological connotation. The second part of the essay is structured so that it represents an additional example that frames the idea of knotted column and the cult of St. George in Staro Nagoričino.

The central person for understanding of meanings and functions of Heracle's knot in sculpture in the late Byzantine sacred context sculpture (precisely, the last decade of the 13th century and the first quarter of the 14th century) is the Serbian King Stephan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282–1321).

Dynamic changes occurred synchronously in the artistic production of the Serbian lands during the reign of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (**Fig. 3**). It is possible to say that the cultural background at King Milutin's court contributed to cross-cultural Constantinopolitan transfers not only in social contexts, by appropriating of Byzantine cultural models, but also in art and architecture.¹⁹ Milutin conquered the Byzantine regions in the south, expanded the borders of the Serbian state considerably, and heightened his reputation in the Balkans. After his marriage to Simonis in 1299, the daughter of Andronicus II Palaiologos, King Milutin, secured by a lasting peace with Byzantium, established new borders. For several decades, the political ideas of the new Serbian state were shaped in line with those of Constantinople.²⁰ Moreover, architecture in the age of King Milutin truly embodied the expression of Constantinopolitan sacrality and essence of sacred space. Milutin's royal iconography and most of all décor of all his preserved endowments are contemporary with the Kariye Camii in Constantinople which contains potent symbols of political power.²¹

Antiquarianism and antique quotations were not visible only in monumental painting, but also in sculpted ornaments that have remained almost unrecognized by Byzantinists.²² Analyses of the architectural features of Milutin's endowments generally summarized the overall appearance of the monuments, as well as their layout and articulations of the facades.²³ Therefore, rather small motifs like the Heracleian knot remained either unnoticed or inappropriately interpreted in the exceptionally complex architectural contents of Milutin's

¹⁸ Andrea Matiello, "Visual Antiquarianism in Mystras", *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 60. Bd., H. 1, *Antichità, identità, umanesimo: nuovi studi sulla cultura antiquaria nel Mediterraneo in età rinascimentale*, 2018, pp. 9–32.

¹⁹ Visually speaking, the monumental art sublimated within the endowments of the King Milutin express the perception of antiquity in shaping of the bodies of saints, costumes, painted architectural backgrounds. Such powerful antique gallery of images is visible even in the Virgin Mary of Ljeviša church in Prizren. It seems that architecturally speaking the idea of arcus triumphalis was also integrated in the idea of the façade. Cf. Jasmina S. Ćirić, "Things in Heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible: triumphal arch at the west facade of the Mother of god Ljeviška Church in Prizren", *Structure and meaning*, Niš & Byzantium 15: Vizantija kroz vreme i prostor, Niš: Grad Niš – Univerzitet u Nišu – Pravoslavna eparhija niška – Niški kulturni centar, 2017, pp. 179–186.

²⁰ Complete historical and historiographical issues about the Serbian King Stefan Uroš II Milutin and his times: Vlada Stanković, *Краљ Милутин (1282 – 1321)*, Београд 2012.

²¹ Dragan Vojvodić, "Serbian Art from the Beginning of the 14th Century till the Fall of the Nemanjić State", *Byzantine Heritage and Serbian Art II*, eds. D. Popović, D. Vojvodić, Belgrade 2016, pp. 271 – 275.

²² Exception is broad overview of the art of carving between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries written by Nicholas Melvani, *Late Byzantine Sculpture*, Brepols 2013 (with selected bibliography).

²³ Slobodan Ćurčić, "Articulation of church façades during the first half of the fourteenth century. A study in the relationship of Byzantine and Serbian architecture", *Византијска уметност почетком XIV века*. Научни скуп у Грачаници 1973, Београд 1978, pp. 18 – 27.

buildings. The Heracles knot appeared most probably for the first time in the context of Milutin's ideology on the iconostasis of katholikon of Chilandar monastery (ca. 1293 or decade after).²⁴ Afterwards, it is found in only two other extant buildings: at bifora of the apse of the church of St. Joachim and Anna (widely known as King's church) in Studenica monastery from 1313 (**Fig. 4**) and on the west façade of the church of St. George at Staro Nagoričino from 1316–18.²⁵

The Church of St. Joachim and Anna in Studenica Monastery

The bifora at the altar of the church of St. Joachim and Anne²⁶ is divided with a knotted column. On the capital of the column is a representation of the Cross and the abbreviated inscription on the capital IC XC NI KA (**Fig. 5**). Below this carved inscription on the upper register of the knotted column is carved the Flower of Life.²⁷ On the one hand, it is of utmost importance to underscore that the church of St. Joachim and Anna in Studenica was built as a pure expression of King Milutin's propaganda (the dedication of the church is tied with the cult of the Virgin Mary, patron of the main church in Studenica).²⁸ On the other hand, placing the knotted column in the most sacred part of the church, at the apse, encapsulates both the idea taken from Chora monastery as the closest parallel and the visual response of Milutin's prayer for posterity with the Queen Simonis, after their marriage. As such, found throughout the span of Byzantine art, the apses of extant Palaiologan churches profoundly reflect Byzantine spiritual thoughts.²⁹

In the church of St. Joachim and Anne, the knotted column should be interpreted not only as an apotropaic symbol but also as the marriage-knot, a strong knot created by two intertwined ropes, originated as a healing charm and protective amulet, most notably as a

²⁴ Đurđe Bošković, *Manastir Hilandar, Saborna crkva, Arhitektura*, Beograd 1992, 35-36. In the katholikon of Chilandar this motif is placed on the iconostasis. Certainly on the iconostasis existed two knotted columns which framed the main icons around the Royal Doors. Although I do not possess adequate and precise photographic documentation, and due to the fact that the first altar screen made of stone was covered with a wooden one, it is my assumption that Heracles knot as peculiar iconographic element carved at the iconostases could reveal the symbolism of the Holy Trinity mysteries and the archpriesthood of Christ in the liturgical sense. Placed in the altar area, it stands as continuation of the idea of the knot and the symbolic representation of consecration of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. It is possible to establish a relationship between this knot and triple representation of Heracles' knot in the apse of Kurbinovo church dedicated to St. George. Triple representation, similar as on Chilandar iconostasis, is a condensed iconographic symbol for the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The network of relations indicates that the more extensive research is required to reach a deeper understanding of the knot carved in Chilandar.

²⁵ Branislav Todić, *Staro Nagoričino*. — Republički zavod spomenika kulture, Prosveta, Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, Belgrade 1993, 43–70.

²⁶ About the architectural features of the church: Gordana Babić, *Kraljeva crkva u Studenici*, Beograd 1987, pp. 27 – 35.

²⁷ Danica Popović *Цветна симболика и култ реликвија у средњовековној Србији*, Зограф 32 (2008), pp.69-81; Jasmina S. Ćirić *Ражско цветање: Цвет Живота на западном порталу цркве Св. Николе у Павловцима, структура и значење*, in: *600 година манастира Павловац*, Младеновац: Градска општина Младеновац 2017, pp.95-114.

²⁸ Branislav Cvetković, "König Milutin und die Parakklesiai des Hl. Joachim und der Hl. Anna im Kloster Studenica", *Balkanica*, XXVI. (1995), pp.251-276; Miodrag Marković, "Michael Astrapas and the wall paintings of the King's church in Studenica", in: *Studenica monastery – 700 years of the King's church*, eds. Lj. Maksimović, V. Vukašinović, Belgrade 2016, pp.173 – 184.

²⁹ The problem of exterior decoration of the apses in Byzantine architecture is almost completely excluded from broader analyses and interpretations of space and ritual. By so far study of Sharon Gerstel is the only one dedicated to the problem of painting in this compartment of the church. Sharon Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary*, Seattle – London, Washington University Press 1999. Cf. Jasmina S. Ćirić, "As the Byzantines saw it: sensoria, sources, apse and brickwork at the end of 13th-century", *Niš & Byzantium 14: Gradovi i građani vizantijskog sveta*, Niš: Grad Niš – Univerzitet u Nišu – Pravoslavna eparhija niška – Niški kulturni centar, 2016, 303 – 312.

wedding symbol, incorporated into the protective girdles worn by brides, which were ceremonially untied by the new groom.³⁰ This custom is the likely origin of the phrase “tying the knot.” In antiquity, the knot symbolized the legendary fertility of the God Heracles; it probably relates to the legendary Girdle of Diana captured from the Amazon Queen Hippolyta.³¹ The knot of Heracles was supposed to bring good fortune toward the union’s fertility, since it is said that Heracles fathered seventy children. The knot in this church at Studenica thus serves as a model for the husband who, in the act of untying the knot, became a kind of Heracles himself. This would make the knot both a feminine and a masculine symbol, meant for both the King and Queen. In other words, the woman who is about to be married is protected by the Heracleian knot, while the husband unties the knot with the hope that his wife will deliver many children.³²

In this late Byzantine example, the marriage-knot was probably a representation of the fertility of Simonis who is depicted inside the church on the south wall (**Fig. 6**).³³ A quite intriguing and unnoticed detail is that above the portrait of Queen (κράλαινα) Simonis is depicted the fresco of Holy Anargyroi twins, Sts. Cosmas and Damian (**Fig. 7**). St. Cosmas is represented with his medical instrument in his right hand gesturing toward the ktetor King Milutin, and St. Damian is gesturing toward Queen Simonis—an image inscribed with “Simonis, by the Grace of God, Queen Comnena Palaeologina”.³⁴ The royal couple is following both St. Joachim and Anna to whom they dedicated the church. Additionally, in the middle register of the wall, above the ktetorial composition, the Kiss of Joachim and Anna and the Birth of the Virgin Mary are represented. Finally, the idea of conceiving and birth are stressed in the highest register of the south wall where the Birth of Christ appears.³⁵ Altogether, with the marriage knot carved at the apsidal bifora at the east end of the church, it is possible to interpret these as a visual expression of prayer for posterity addressed both to Joachim and Anna and to the Holy Anargyroi.³⁶ Holy Anargyroi above the ktetorial couple should be understood as the extension of Heracleian knot symbolism. It is necessary also to stress the importance of written sources and to what degree historical tool could be juxtaposed to the written sources. As the historian Nicephorus Gregoras confirms, Milutin “did not abide by the legal requirements for the wife to reach legal age and raped her at the age of 8, causing

³⁰ Maurizio Bettini, *Women and Weasels: Mythologies of Birth in Ancient Greece and Rome*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London 2013, pp.69 – 80.

³¹ Madonna Gauding, *The Signs and Symbols Bible: The Definitive Guide to Mysterious Markings*, Sterling, New York 2009, p.45.

³² Paul Wolters, “Faden und Knoten als Amulett,” *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 8 (1905), pp.1-23. For Christian comments and interpretations cf. Laurent 1989, 83 – 98; Simonetti 1994, 455.

³³ Gordana Babić, *Kraljeva crkva u Studenici*, Beograd 1987, pp.22- 24, p.68, p.182.

³⁴ Branislav Todić *Staro Nagoričino*, 328. About the instruments of Holy Anargyroi cf. Sanja Pajić, “Representations of medical instruments and equipment in Serbian medieval painting”, *Zograf* 38 (2014), 2014, p. 63.

³⁵ Branislav Todić, *Staro Nagoričino*, 328.

³⁶ In the available bibliography of articles related to the monumental painting of the King’s Church in Studenica, this iconographic detail was not particularly observed. Dedication of the church was analyzed in: Branislav Cvetković, *‘König Milutin*, 251-276. Having in mind that this portrait was painted ca 1313/14, same year when Milutin’s son Stefan Uroš III (Dečanski) was sent to Constantinople to be blinded (Fine 1994, 260) it is my assumption that this written source is not completely accurate and that in Gregoras’ narration about King Milutin should be redeemed ironic layer by the actual events especially if described iconography of the south wall truly testifies about visual transferring of the prayer for posterity and the birth of the successor (son) who would inherit the throne in Constantinople.

injuries of the womb, which prevented her from bearing children”.³⁷ Having in mind that this portrait was painted ca 1313/14, same year when Milutin’s son Stefan Uroš III (Dečanski) was sent to Constantinople to be blinded it is our assumption that this written source is not completely accurate and that in Gregoras’ narration about King Milutin should be redeemed ironic layer by the actual events especially if described iconography of the south wall truly testifies about visual transferring of the prayer for posterity and the birth of the successor (son) who would inherit the throne in Constantinople.³⁸ Not only that the King’s Church was built at a time when Stefan Dečanski was blinded and expelled from Serbia to Constantinople, but it is an indisputable fact that both Milutin’s sons, Stefan and Constantine, were bastards. Simonis was the only one at that moment who could give birth to a legitimate heir to the throne, which everyone in Milutin’s Kingdom certainly wished.³⁹

It appears that the usage of the knotted motif on the apse was also additionally understood as a model of the female womb, the place of knots and binding. Bearing in mind the association of the apse – interior and exterior – with the Virgin’s womb at the same time these images were created, suggests a codified meaning of incarnated Logos and illumination through Him, vision of the senses: “the Truth will shine, illuminating the eyes of the soul with its own rays.”⁴⁰ Perhaps influenced by texts of Andrew of Crete emphasizing the Incarnation, it was important for Milutin and his foundation to bring in closer relation (visually and spatially) the knotted column and the figures of Queen Simonis, Joachim and Anna, Virgin Mary and Christ, as well as the space of the altar.⁴¹

St. George at Staro Nagoričino

The other revealing example is from the church of St. George at Staro Nagoričino (Kumanovo, North Macedonia) (**Fig. 8, 9**). On the west façade where bifora is in the central register, a wreath of brickwork four-leaf ornament runs along the tympanum, and above is a Cross with a long horizontal base. It is made of brickwork crosses, and around it are four letters that create a cryptogram: ΦΧΦΠ (Φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν = “The light of Christ shines for all”).⁴²

Below is a cryptogram cross made of brick. Cryptogram (ἸϞ ΧϞ ΝΙ ΚΑ , Ἰησοῦς Χριστός νικά, “Jesus Christ conquereth”) is found on the tympanum divided with the knotted column.⁴³

Below this bifora is the west portal with the inscription of ktetorial donation of King Milutin

³⁷ John Lascaratos – Effie Poulakou-Rebelakou, “Child sexual abuse: historical cases in the Byzantine Empire (324–1453 A.D.)”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 24(8) (2000), pp. 1087. Cf. volume six of an edition of “Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije” (VIINJ) which offered translations and commentaries on excerpts from Nicephorus Gregoras. Frano Barišić – Božidar Ferjančić, *Византијски извори за историју народа Југославија* VI, ур. Ф. Баришић, Б. Ферјанчић, Београд 1986, 177, ft.55. In the article of Herbert Hunger – Otto Kresten, “Archaisierende Minuskel Und Hodegonstil Im 14. Jahrhundert. Der Schreiber Rheoktistos Und Die Kralaina Ton Tribalon.” *Jahrbuch Der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 29 (1980), pp.187-235, Archaisierende Minuskel 227 n. 121 for the first time in the historiography was expressed doubt in Gregoras testifying.

³⁸ John Van Antwerp Jr. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest*, University of Michigan Press 1994, p.260.

³⁹ Aleksandar Uzelac, “О српској принцези и бугарској царици Ани - прилог познавању бракова краља Милутина”, *Историјски часопис* 63 (2014), 29-46.

⁴⁰ Herbert Musurillo *Gregorii Nysseni De Vita Moysis (Gregorii Nysseni Opera, Vol 7, Pars 1)*, ed. H. Musurillo, Brill 1991, p.19; I, p.20.

⁴¹ Jovanka Maksimović, *Relief de l’Annonciation de Split – une symbiose byzantinolatine*, Recueil de travaux de la faculté de philosophie VII – 1, Belgrade 1963, pp.227 – 240.

⁴² The source of the phrase “Φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν” is John 1, 9.

⁴³ Branislav Todić, *Staro Nagoričino*, p. 63. About tetragrams generally: Gordana Babić, “Les croix à cryptogrammes, peintes dans les églises serbes des XIII^e et XIV^e siècles”, in: *Byzance et les Slaves. Études de Civilisation. Mélanges Ivan Dujčev*. Paris 1979, p. 8. Cf. Emanuel Moutaphov, “Kriptogramite i bilingvizm na Paleologovoto izkustvo”, *Patrimonium.Mk* 7–8 (2010), pp.256.

and with stressing of ktetor's bravery: V toùe ahto kray izbj turki.⁴⁴ As mentioned above, knotted column appear within the sacred cult of St. George, a military saint and patron of this church, and intersect with the Theotocological context.⁴⁵ The faith of the soldiers in the Byzantine Empire was deeply rooted in supernatural protectors and beliefs in their magical, apotropaic powers and religious depictions of *dei militares*. According to Constantine VII Porphyrogenite (r. 913–957), St. George is closely related to Christ and the Virgin Mary and synchronously their names were used also as a sort of code words between the soldiers.⁴⁶ Military manuals of the tenth century prescribe that soldiers need to pray twice a day. Before the battle, soldiers receive Holy Communion and while the army approaches the enemy during the battle, the sound of the trumpets announces the time to pray to Christ who, along with the Virgin and St. George, will ensure victory.⁴⁷

Having in mind that King Milutin is depicted in the votive composition on the north wall while praying to St. George the Victory Bearer who delivers the sword to the King,⁴⁸ and also that St. George is depicted on the iconostasis with a large representation of the Virgin Mary breastfeeding Christ, it is possible to notice profound spiritual values seen as a metaphysical reality.⁴⁹ Such connections and intersections of the symbols are evident inside the church. The complex religious background of the fourteenth century is referring to the sacred realities of Heracleian knot. In this light, even its depiction on the column or in a fresco is justified.

On this occasion, I mention only one spiritual parallel necessary for understanding this phenomenon. Namely, in his homilies on the Biblical chant the Song of Songs, Gregory of Nyssa understands the soul as being the bride (Virgin) who, in a spiritual marriage with God, is hungry for the “knowledge of truth,”⁵⁰ the bishop is telling with conviction to his readers/listeners that once the soul is loved, “she” will “sustain you,” therefore it needs to be “fortified,” and “inseparable” from her bridegroom (Christ),⁵¹ and be “one spirit” with Him.⁵² That is one possible axis for understanding the parallel engagement of symbolism of St. George and the Virgin Mary. That is architectural transposition of prominent exponents of the *ecclesia triumphans and ecclesia militans*.⁵³ King Milutin as ruler of Serbia is the defender of

⁴⁴ Sima Ćirković, *Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije*, VI, Beograd 1986, 187; Vojislav J. Đurić, *Tri događaja u srpskoj državi XIV veka i njihov odjek u slikarstvu*, Zbornik likovnih umetnosti Matice srpske 4 (1968), pp.68-76.

⁴⁵ Similar interesction is notable in the Virgin Mary of Ljeviša church. Cf. Jasmina S. Ćirić, *Things in Heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible*, p. 184.

⁴⁶ Johan Jakob Reiske, *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris De Ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae libri duo*, rec. I.I, Reiske, I, Bonnae 1829, p. 481.

⁴⁷ Gustave Schlumberger, *Un empereur byzantine au dixième siècle. Nicéphore Phocas*, Paris 1890, pp.90-91; Gilbert Dagron – Haralambie Mihaescu, *Le traité sur la guérilla (De velitatione) de l'empereur Nicéphore Phocas (963 – 969)*, Paris 1986, p.62, p.88, pp.130 – 132.

⁴⁸ This iconographic type was taken from Byzantine tradition, especially from depiction of Manuel I Comnenus with St. George. Sima Ćirković, *Vizantijski izvori*, 187.

⁴⁹ This iconographic model is transferred from Chora monastery where the icon of the Virgin holding the infant was paired with an image of Christ. These icons were framed and set to either side of the templon screen, which separated the naos from the bema. For the illustration cf. Robert G. Ousterhout, *The Art of the Kariye Camii*, Scala Publishers, London 2002, p.13.

⁵⁰ Richard A. Norris (et al.) *Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily I”*, in *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Gregory of Nyssa; translated with an introduction and notes by Richard. A. Norris Jr., in John T. Fitzgerald (gen. ed.), *Writings from the Greco-Roman World*, Vol. 13, The Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, GA, 2012, pp.14-15.

⁵¹ Idem, pp. 22-23.

⁵² Idem, pp. 26-27.

⁵³ About the idea of *ecclesia militans* in Byzantium cf. Markus Bogisch, *Qalat Seman and Resafa/Sergiopolis: Two Early Byzantine Pilgrimage centers in Northern Syria*, Byzantino-Nordica 2004: Papers Presented at the

the true faith also militarily. St. George with prerogatives of the Heracles knot serves as an intermediary between God and the King. Through his interventions, Milutin achieved his conquests.⁵⁴ The triumphal character of the architecture and sculptural details, especially the impressive fitting of the ornamented column at the façade, is deeply imbued with old and new themes in a poetic way.

Conclusion

The ktetors, King Milutin and Queen Simonis, built the churches of St. Joachim and Anne in Studenica and St. George in Staro Nagoričino, and enhanced them with sculptural details that carry hidden symbols. These relate to the saints they trusted to help them in achieving their wishes both for posterity (Incarnation) and acts of prayer toward victory. In the case of the dedication and devotion to St. George, their requests were answered. The saints were intermediaries between the faithful and God, protecting the living and performing miracles on their behalf because they have been granted the “freedom of speech” (*parrhesia*) in front of the Creator. Saints and holy people were called upon, among other things, to offer up efficacious prayers standing in the court of heaven.⁵⁵ In this matrix, motifs such as the Heracle’s knot functioned in a larger context, directed toward an object that already embodies the images and ideas that spawn the analogy on which the sacred content depends.

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⁵⁴ Jasmina S. Ćirić *Things in Heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible*, pp.179 - 186.

⁵⁵ James Howard-Johnston – Paul Hayward, *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, eds. J. Howard-Johnston and P. Anthony Hayward, Oxford University Press, 1999, reprinted 2014, p. 3.

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Figures

Fig.1 Knotted column, Pantokrator monastery (Zeyrek Camii), Istanbul, photo: Vladimir Božinović

Fig.2. Knotted column painted inside of the apse of the St. George church, Kurbinovo, North Macedonia, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Fig.3. Ktetorial composition, St. Joachim and Anne church, Studenica Monastery, photo: Hadži Marko Vujičić

Fig.4. St. Joachim and Anne church (King's church), Studenica Monastery, view from the east side,
Marija Mihajlović Shipley

Fig. 5. Altar bifora of St. Joachim and Anne church, photo: Marija Mihajlović Shipley

Fig. 6. Queen Simonis, part of the ktetorial composition, St. Joachim and Anne church, Monastery Studenica, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Fig. 7. Sts. Cosmas and Damian, interior side of the window above ktetorial composition, St. Joachim and Anne church, Studenica Monastery, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Figs. 8, 9. St. George Church / Bifora at the west façade, Staro Nagoričino/ Skopska Crna Gora (North Macedonia), photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić