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**MIRACLE AND ITS SACRED SPACE IN THE MEDIEVAL VISUAL CULTURE OF PRILEP:
THE CULT OF WONDERWORKING VIRGIN MARY OF
THE MONASTERY OF TRESKAVEC**

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to point out the influence of the phenomenon of miracles and wonderworking in the creation of the sacred space of the medieval visual culture of Prilep. Special attention is devoted to the cult of the wonderworking Virgin Mary of the Monastery of Treskavec. The focus is to show the creation of visual culture, both within the sacred space of the church and in the sacred landscape.

Key words: miracle, sacred space, visual culture, wonderworking, Virgin Mary, Monastery of Treskavec

The aim of this article is to point out the relationship between the phenomenon of miracle, visual culture and sacred space in the visual culture of Prilep, especially in the case of the Monastery of Treskavec. Visual culture occupies a prominent place in the representation of the phenomenon of miracles and the miracle phenomenon has strongly influenced the creation and visual decoration of sacred space in the medieval Balkans. One of the key questions posed in this paper is 'How can a miracle be framed, shaped and memorialized in visual culture?' The idea of this paper is to show how the phenomenon of miracles influenced the shaping, duration and continuous rebuilding and recreation of the sacred space in the visual culture of the monastery of Treskavec.



In medieval history, the miracle is often linked to material space as a mental and devotional phenomenon. As defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium and the Lexikon des Mittelalters, a miracle is believed to be created by God or to appear with the help of Divine Providence – via saints – as a sign (σημεία) of the supernatural (The Oxford Dictionary..., 1998 s.v. Wunder, 351-353; s.v. Wunder B. Byzanz, 353-354; Miracles 1378-1379; Лома 2000: 7-21; Трифунџовић 1990: 382). The miracle is one of the most important categories in the Christian religion, but it is also applicable in Hebrew and pagan religions and cultures (The Oxford Dictionary..., 1998 s.v. D Judentum, 361-362). In Judaism, wonderworking is an accepted idea, and yet Jewish theology does not emphasize the role and the power of post-mortem representation, which in Christian religious practice is materialized through relics.¹

Confirmations of miracles can be found in primary sources like lives of saints or in separate written miracles as well as in travelogs composed by pilgrims, foreign visitors and regional chroniclers. In medieval and Byzantine culture, a miracle appeared as part of the religious experience that was transferred directly to human beings under God's influence, through the Mother of God or saints. For the medieval person, a miracle was produced by contact with powerful spiritual forces and physical contact with holy objects, as a reward for the aid sought through prayer, visitation, pilgrimage, looking, gesture or touch.

A miracle was generated through divine action, and in this manner, God distributed his power in order to punish or reward. It is also very often connected to a designated mediator on earth through whom God's miraculous divine act is transferred. The mediator may be a male or female saint, a saintly monk, a nun or their relics, as well as the very icons, artifacts and reliquaries, through which this miraculous event is continually transferred. The realm of thought containing the belief in miracles, as formed in line with Christian theology, erases completely the border between the divine and the earthly, which are clearly delineated in today's world. Whether an event was connected to the healing power of a saint's earthly relics, the miraculous power of an icon, the successful exorcism of a demon, a natural event or a catastrophe, a miracle is yet another piece of proof of God's presence as something unusual and extraordinary.

The question of miracles and the creation of sacred space is controlled by church authorities. This one of the most important questions upon which the Christian religion is based and it can often be found both in Biblical and patristic narratives. It should be emphasized that the conception of miracles within the framework of early Christian and subsequently Byzantine theology is variable and that it changes in different time periods.²

¹ The Old Testament testifies to the existence of and belief in miracles in Jewish history, where one first finds mention of resurrection and the miraculous restoration of health through contact with reliquaries and relics. (Goodich 2007: 1150 - 1350).

² In the second and third century, the history of miracles was connected with the miracle of contemporary believers in the work of Christian apologists. Thus, in the writings of apologists, like those of Irenaeus (2nd century - c. AD 202) and Tertullian (ca. 155-220), a key problem is the establishment of a guiding principle to determine the significance and the relevance of the miracles performed by believers and their relationship to the miracles of Christ. Tertullian insists on the role of Christ in miracles and bases his doctrine on New Testament theology. He stresses

In the Middle Byzantine period, the Monastery of Treskavec (Prilep), with a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, was built at the site of the temple of Ephesian Artemis (Смолчић-Макуљевић 2019: 37-42). Numerous ancient marble artifacts have been preserved on the site of the Treskavec Monastery. Several inscriptions from the Roman period (second-century A.D.) indicate that there were two sanctuaries: one consecrated to the goddess Ephesian Artemis and second to a local Apollo, whose epithet is attested in three forms: Oteudanikos, Oteudanos, Eteudaniskos (Ότευδανικός, Ότευδανός, Έτευδανίσκος) (Ricl 1994: 151-163). A Hellenistic inscription from Treskavec, built into the dome of the Treskavec Church, published in the 1930s, tells us about a woman who, alarmed by Ephesian Artemis, freed the slave, Helena, and her son, Perister, with the heirs (female) at the locality of Kolobaise (Κολοβαιση). The inscription that mentions the Ephesian Artemis testifies to the cult, to the belief in the wonderworking power and the intermediary role of this goddess, the veneration of whom was widespread in the Western Balkans. The inscription also testifies to the need to remember in visual culture the event of deliverance in which Artemis helped.

In the Middle Byzantine period, a monastery was built at the site of the temple of Artemis with a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The written and material sources testify that the monastery that existed as a cult place from the early Christian period was renewed several times during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and during the reigns of the Byzantine emperors Andronikos II and Michael IX (1295- 1320), and the Serbian Kings Milutin (1282-1321) and Dušan (1331-1355).

Treskavec itself is situated on the slopes of Babuna Mountain, and its holy peak, Zlatovrh, rises above the medieval town of Prilep, Prilapos (Πρίλαπος) (Смолчић-Макуљевић 2014: 242-261). Since the middle Byzantine period, the monastery has fostered a strict monastic typikon, which King Stefan Dušan compared to the rules obeyed on the holy mountains of Athos and Sinai.³ As an important cultic place for the miracle-working Mother of God of Treskavec, the monastery enjoyed the patronage of Byzantine rulers, which can be proven with certainty for the rule of Andronikos II and Michael IX.

Due to the belief in the miraculous help associated with the monastery dedicated to the Mother of God, Treskavec was a pilgrimage center in the Middle Ages from the period of Ottoman rule to today. Apart from describing the area and the Mountain of Treskavec as a place of anchoritic life similar to other medieval holy mountains, King Dušan's charters also speak about the existence of the cult established and connected to

that, according to the New Testament, Christ will produce wonders and signs. Tertullian strongly condemns miracles performed outside the institution of the Church, which were many judging by available data (Kelhoffer 2000: 326-330).

3 Cf. Treskavac, charter I, 1 [Споменици IV 1981: 77-78]. On the forms of organization of monastic life on Mount Athos presented through the concrete legal and economic relations within the institutions of Mount Athos and relations of monasteries and Kellia (Живојиновић 1972: 37-46). On establishing Athonite monasticism and on types of monastic life and organization see also (Morris 1997: 37-46). On complementary relations between cenobitic and anchoritic life on Athos cf. (Papchryssantou 1975: 3-164).

the miracle-working Holy Virgin, the monastery and the church devoted to her. Dušan's charters describe the cult of the Holy Mother of God and the possible existence of the wonderworking icon of the Holy Virgin of Treskavec.

In the arenga to the third charter of the Monastery of Treskavec, King Dušan stresses one of the reasons for his attachment to this monastery as well as the confirmed and given offerings by stating: "my Kingship has grown to love the Beauty of Thy home, the Purest Mother of God, and the place of the Universe of Thy Glory, oh Thee who art called the Wonderworker of Treskavec" (Споменици IV, 1981:153, charter III, 103). The stated sanction against possible failure to comply with the regulations issued in the third charter also contains the protection and the curse of the Holy Mother of Treskavec: "Should anyone, prompted by the devil, take anything from the Holy One, The Mother of God, (even) one line of this chrysobull, by my Kingdom, may he be cursed by Almighty God and the purest Mother of God of Treskavec" (Споменици IV, 1981:153, charter III, 103). In the second charter, the sanction mentions only the name of the Mother of God the Wonderworker, which refers to the Holy Virgin of Treskavec: "From God Almighty and the purest Mother of God the Wonderworker" (Споменици IV, 1981: 126; Трескавец, Повелба II, 94). A testimony to the cult of the Holy Virgin of Treskavec, which was prominent in the 14th century in the monastery above Prilep, can also be found in the evidence of royal pilgrimage. The royal couple, King Dušan and Queen Jelena agreed to send King Uroš to pay homage to the Holy Virgin of Treskavec. This was recorded in the third charter of Treskavec: "(And) my Kingship agreed with the Queen to send our most loved son, King Uroš, to bow to the Purest Mother of God" (Споменици IV, 1981: 126; Трескавец, Повелба III, 97). King Uroš' pilgrimage to the Holy Virgin implied prayer and homage to the monastery dedicated to the Holy Mother. However, we can also assume, based on the texts that the monks of Treskavec kept, the wonderworking icon of the Holy Virgin with the same topographic epithet in the monastery where it was the main holy object and relic, was visited by pilgrims (Belting 2011; 2001; 2003; Sacred images 1995; Чудотворная 1996).

Another secondary source from the mid-fourteenth century supplies further information on the cult of the Holy Virgin of Treskavec, namely a transcript of a prayer from a breviary originally composed for King Vukašin (1365-1371) probably in the Monastery of Treskavec (Михаљчић 1980:80; Аџиевски 1994: 211). Even though the breviary has not been preserved, a transcript of some of its prayers has. In one of them, dedicated to sick people, the Holy Virgin of Treskavec is asked for help. The prayer for the sick is a prayer for all saints, who are summoned according to a clear hierarchical principle, or the category of saints to which they belong. The Mother of God of Treskavec is included in this breviary in the prayer for intermediacy, which is also directed to other regional wonderworking icons: the Holy Virgin of Ephesus, The Holy Mother of Edirne, The Holy Mother of Rakli, the Holy Virgin of Kidohot (Kovačević 1878: 280-282; On the wonderworking icon of the Holy Virgin of Ephesus and its Russian replicas see Шалина 1996: 200-236). Some of the wonderworking icons mentioned are well-known, whereas the cults of some icons contemporary to the breviary's appearance have not yet been the subject of academic study. The prayer devoted to the Holy Virgin of Treskavec praises her

as the “Holy Virgin of high mounts”, (“Sveta Bogorodice visokih gora”), also naming her the merciful one.

Therefore, we can conclude that this is a wonderworking icon which was symbolically connected to Mount Athos and the high mountains protected by the Mother of God. This is the case with the Holy Virgin of Ephesus and other Holy Virgins of mountain monasteries like those on Mount Athos and Sinai. In this manner, the Holy Virgin of Treskavec becomes a part of the group of similar wonderworking icons known to have existed in this part of the Balkans, according to the data from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The painting programs of monastic churches, which celebrate the Mother of God and which span the medieval period down to the 19th century, testify to the continued restoration of this holy place in accordance with the development of the cult of the Mother of God of Treskavec. Painting programs from different periods are evidence of a permanent cult and a reflection of the theological interpretations of the protective role of the Mother of God at the time.

Within the paintings of the northern dome in the twin-domed exonarthex of the Treskavec church, the central ring contains the image of Christ as King of Kings and the Deisis (1343-1434) (Смолчић Макуљевић 2019: 156-159). The Deisis is a prayer, and the image of the Mother of God, the Empress and the Mediatrix, is unique in its iconographic pattern. Moreover, the example of the King’s Deisis from Treskavec is one of the oldest preserved images of this type in the Byzantine world. The Holy Mother’s apparel and insignia imply that the Mother of God is presented both as an empress and a sovereign lady. Apart from the crown, which represents the insignia of imperial dignity, the Mother of God is also wearing a cloak that resembles a polystavrion. This resemblance to a polystavrion testifies to the special role of the Holy Mother of God, who is celebrated in liturgy and Patristics as a church and the sovereign lady.

The cult of the Mother of God was emphasized in the fifteenth-century painting layer (1430) through the icon of the Mother of God in the lunette above the southern entrance into the church from the south nave (Смолчић Макуљевић 2019: 356-359). This entrance is believed to have been used during the fifteenth century and to have connected different parts of the monastery to the church. Tradition connects the cult with the space of the side nave which people entered using the south door. In the painting of the naos, which was also restored at the end of the 15th century, the program of the prophets’ scrolls in the dome testifies to the influence that the feasts of the Mother of God had on the choice of texts; it has been found that the texts written on these scrolls can be connected with the liturgical readings associated with the feasts of the Holy Mother.

The painting program of the altar space, which was restored during the 16th century (1570), emphasizes the role of the Holy Mother in the celebration of the Holy Trinity, which was characteristic of the introduction of this topic into the painting around that time (Смолчић Макуљевић 2019: 281-290). The painting in the trapeza of Treskavec Monastery was restored during the Ottoman period (Смолчић Макуљевић 2019: 369-389). In this restoration, particular attention was devoted to the Feasts of the

Virgin Mary, as the scenes from the cycle of the Mother of God have been preserved in this monastic trapeza.

In the nineteenth century (1849), the Mother of God was celebrated with the monumental composition “All of Creation Rejoices In You” in the painting of the narthex calotte (Смолчић Макуљевић 2019: 331-339). The composition of the Annunciation, one of the most important feasts of the Holy Mother, was also painted in the nineteenth century on the main church facade.



2. The Trapeza of Treskavec Monastery, 13th-19th century

Another special form of veneration of the Mother of God can certainly be detected in the creation of sacred topography in the sacred landscape outside the monastery through the visual decoration of the pilgrimage route with painted rocks bearing the image of the Mother of God (Смолчић Макуљевић 2019: 156-159). There are two images of the Mother of God on these painted rocks that stand in accordance with the cult fostered in the monastery. One is situated on an old medieval road connecting the foot of this holy mountain with the monastery, and the other is in the immediate vicinity of the monastery itself. These paintings also served to guide believers to church. Although the paintings were renovated in the nineteenth century, judging by the style and the similarity with the paintings within the church, their iconography indicates a medieval model. One of the icons of the Mother of God on the rock near the monastery belongs to the iconographic model of the Virgin Hagiosoritissa. The iconographic pattern of the Virgin Hagiosoritissa from the rock in Treskavec is characteristic of the Byzantine painting style of the twelfth century.⁴ As this image incorporates the idea of the Virgin as the heavenly intercessor,

4 On iconography of the Virgin Paraklesis/Hagiosoritissa as an example of the 12th-century icon (Тагић-Ђурић 1966: 9-24). The Paraklesis is a variant of the supplicating Hagiosoritissa, which places particular emphasis on the Virgin's intercessory role. The Hagiosoritissa is believed by many scholars to have been the icon of Mary housed in the reliquary shrine or “Soros” at the Chalkoprateia church, the second-greatest Marian church in Constantinople. Cf. (Weyl 2002: 78). For the twelfth-century icon with five icons of the Mother of God and scenes of the miracles and Passion of Christ from Mount Sinai (Ibidem, fig. 1, 6. On the same iconographic type of Virgin Paraklesis with the epithet of Virgin Eleusa see for example (Cotsonis 1994: 53, Fig. 15, 16.

it visually implies the role of a protector of the whole place and the monastery, inviting the believers and pilgrims to enter it with the icon acting as a road sign. The fresco-icon on the medieval road from Dabnica to Treskavec represents a half-figure picture of the Mother of God, Hodegetria (Mother of God who shows the way). The iconography sublimates her symbolic and liturgical worship, as quoted in the sixth and tenth oikos of the Akathistos hymn: “[the] Unshakeable rock which gives water to those thirsty from life, The Holy Virgin, the rock of all Saints and comfort to the monks”, the Mother of God, a protectress of “high mountains” and as the Virgin of Treskavec, worshiped in the prayer in the Serbian Euchologion dating from the mid-fourteenth century (Православна литургија 1918: 22, 28). The Virgin on the rock is a substitute for Daniel’s high mountain from which Christ tore Himself away (Daniel, II) and which is called in the Psalms ‘the mountain where the Lord loved to abide’ (Ps. 68,16) (Радојчић 1965: 114-127).



3. Sacred landscape of the Treskavec Monastery, The Virgin Mary, rock painting

Fresco-icons on the rock surrounding Treskavec Monastery create an invincible barrier of protection, recall the Heavenly Kingdom and provide an invocation of the help of the Mother of God. The visual parallel of this outdoor painting phenomenon in Byzantine art is undoubtedly the clipeus with an icon of the Mother of God on the rock from the vision in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream as depicted in the Chludov Psalter (Moscow, Hist. Mus. MS. D.129, middle of the 9th Century) (Милановић 1987: 409-423). There are similar sacred spaces of icons on rocks in the vicinity of Prilep and in the vicinity of the villages Dabnica, Selce and Mariovo. In Byzantine practice, such paintings are known from examples that visualize a sacred landscape as with the holy mountain of Latros and different Balkan territories. Similar examples of sacralization of nature and anchoritic dwelling places through icons on rocks can also be found in the immediate vicinity of

Veles, at the locality of Pešti, on the shores of Lakes Ohrid and Prespa and the immediate vicinity of Serres.⁵

The cult of the Mother of God, nurtured in Treskavec Monastery, and the status the monastery gained through the patronage of Byzantine and Serbian rulers during the Middle Ages were crucial for the repeated restorations of the monastery. The rulers, landowners, religious people and priests took care of the monastery. The wonderworking cult would affect the mapping of the space of sacredness both inside the monastic circle and in the spaces of sacralized nature.

A special form of belief in miracles and the connection between the cult of the wonderworking Virgin of Treskavec and the monastery was also recorded in Macedonian folk religion (Ристески 2005). At Treskavec, not only is the cult of the medieval wonderworking Mother of God of Treskavec preserved, but it is also believed that her “steps” can be heard in monastic quarters even today. Recent anthropological and ethnological research has recorded numerous testimonies of miraculous events in this place that are connected to the Virgin Mary.



4. Pilgrim road village Dabnica – Treskavec Monastery, The Mother of God with Christ, rock painting

The sacred landscape and the monastery dedicated to the Virgin in Treskavec represent only one example of the creation of a visual culture that arises as a reception of belief in miracles and miracle-working.

⁵ I presented my initial observations on this phenomenon, which I will further analyze in systematic research, at 24th International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Venice and Padua 22-27 August 2022 with the topic: Designed and visualized landscape: Moving bodies and articulated nature.

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