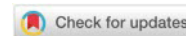


UNVEILING THE 'TRUE LIGHT': BRICK CRYPTOGRAMS AT ST. GEORGE CHURCH IN STARO NAGORIČINO

Jasmina S. Ćirić*

¹University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Philology and Arts, Department of Applied Arts - Department of General Education, Republic of Serbia, e-mail: jasmina.ciric@filum.kg.ac.rs



Abstract: This article delves into the intriguing ΦΧΦΠ cryptograms on the west facade of the St. George Church in Staro Nagoričino, shedding light on their connection to the era of King Milutin and their profound theological significance. It explores the convergence of architecture and symbolism, focusing on these cryptograms as a representation of the "True Light" within Christianity and its correlation to the concept of victory. The study delves into the influence of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. It investigates how placing these cryptograms above the church's doorway resonates with architectural and spiritual narratives. It examines the architectural features of the church's west façade, reflecting King Milutin's depiction on the north wall and his role as the "New Constantine." The cryptogram ΦΧΦΠ (Φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν/ "The light of Christ shines upon all") is strategically placed above the bifora in the central axis of the facade, marking the four sides of the Cross. The motif depicting the true light coming into the world is painted on both sides of the interior of the west entrance, creating a liminal space. This motif references the ancient Biblical verse from the Gospel of John 1:9: "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world". Apart from the biblical reference, the patronage inscriptions and the prayerful mention of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin Nemanjić and Queen Simonis are also highlighted. Their names are inscribed on the lintel of the portal. This study uncovers the intricate symbolism and architectural nuances of the St. George Church in Staro Nagoričino, shedding light on the interplay of liturgical and historical context in this remarkable Byzantine architectural gem.

Keywords: ΦΧΦΠ brick cryptogram, St. George Church in Staro Nagoričino, King Milutin, True Light, architectural symbolism, Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts.

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

In art history, where each architectural detail holds a specific meaning, the St. George Church in Staro Nagoričino (Fig.1; nowadays near Kumanovo, North Macedonia) emerges as a captivating tableau of devotion and historical narrative. The church, initially constructed by Romanos IV Diogenes in the 11th century, underwent restoration in the early 14th century under Serbian King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282-1321). The restoration during 1312/13 transformed the church into a five-domed cross-in-square structure (Todić, 1993, p. 328; Korać, 2003, p. 38). What makes this church particularly intriguing is its polychromatic lateral facades and, more specifically, the symbolic triumphal character of the west facade. The building's exterior is easily recognizable due to a triumphal arch adorned with various ornamental brickwork units (Piltz, 2011, pp. 173– 188; Ćirić, 2015, pp. 206–215). These ornamental elements carry profound symbolic significance, making them powerful transmitters of meaning.

This article explores the intricate narratives concealed within the church's architecture, focusing on a particular cryptogram carefully positioned in the lunette of the bifora window above the western doorway. As we delve into the confluence of spirituality, symbolism, and the potent force of light, we aim to decipher the hidden meanings encapsulated in this intriguing element, shedding light on its creators' profound beliefs and artistic intentions.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study aims to comprehensively provide a detailed analysis of the meaning of the west facade of St. George Church in Staro Nagoričino by focusing on its construction, dedication, and artistic elements.

To ensure replicability, the research employed established methodologies in art historical research, outlining step-by-step procedures undertaken during the investigation.

- Historical data in situ: The study extensively connects inscriptions, particularly the one above the portal, to unveil crucial insights into the church's construction. References to established works in the field

*Corresponding author: jasmina.ciric@filum.kg.ac.rs



provide a robust contextual framework (Todić 1993, p. 328).

Architectural Image: This involved an exploration of unique decorations and contextualization within the historical milieu based on previously published works. Identifying specific decorated cryptograms, each carrying profound liturgical connotations related to Christian theology, enriched the analysis (Ćirić, 2017, pp. 206–215). The unpublished “Restoration Diary” with drawings and photographs of architect Đurđe Bošković served as one of the crucial archival documents. They provided detailed, valuable information on the conservation work and original brick ornaments on the facade.

Fig.1. St. George church, upper register of the west façade, Staro Nagoričino, photo: © Jasmina S. Ćirić



3. RESULTS

According to the inscription above the portal, King Milutin, alongside Queen Simonis, commissioned the construction of the Church of St. George in Staro Nagoričino in 1312/1313, declaring victory over the Turks: *V touë ahto kray izbj turki* (Todić, 1993, p. 328). It is particularly noteworthy to emphasize the mention of Simonis's name in the inscription, as it is the only inscription during King Milutin's reign where her name is referenced above the portal as a liminal space. This does not seem coincidental, especially when considering the unique architectural characteristics of the church that will be repeated later in the Church of Sts. Joachim and Anne in Studenica). The architectural features of the western facade of the St. George Church in Staro Nagoričino vividly reflect the prevailing characteristics of the reign of King Milutin, portraying him as the “New Constantine” (Cvetković, 1995, pp. 251–276; Cvetković 2023, pp. 667–692). This interpretation is particularly evident in the design elements that convey the idea of triumph, resembling a triumphal arch (Ćirić, 2016, pp. 179–186). In the upper part of the facade, the central archivolt stands out with its distinct characteristics. Notably, the bifora, a motif previously examined in our research, takes centre stage. Within this bifora, the “nodius Herculeaneus” prominently signifies prayerful devotion to saintly warriors. Remarkably, a similar motif was identified at the east window of the Sts. Joachim and Anne church (King's church) in Studenica, highlighting a connection in symbolic language across different architectural contexts (Ćirić, 2020, pp. 81–100; Ćirić, 2023, pp. 465–488). King Milutin emphasized the cult of saintly warriors through the church's dedication and incorporation of symbols associated with St. George. (Ćirić, 2016, pp. 179–186). As shown in the book of drawings and photographs of the architect Đurđe Bošković, above the bifora in the central axis of the facade, a strategically positioned cryptogram, ΦΧΦΠ (Φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν/“The light of Christ shines upon all”), marks the four sides of the Cross. The brick with the cryptogram, initially crafted during the time of King Milutin, had been recorded in the documents yet never before interpreted. Architect Đurđe Bošković's drawing emphasized the historical

continuity of the Heracles knot. It provided a tangible link to the original construction of the bifora, but there is no description of the detail mentioned above. Beneath the cryptogram, within the lunette of the window adorned with brick crosses (ceramoplastic acoustic tiles), the inscription ΙΣ ΧΣ ΝΙΚΑ was executed (Walter, 1997, pp. 193–220; Korać 2003, 46, cf. drawing of the west facade and fig. 14; similar examples at Rhoby 2017, fn 9, 10,11). This cryptogram extends beyond its textual significance; it is an integral part of the entire image of the bifora, contributing to the overall structural logic. It was not just the exterior that had the cryptogram; it was also discovered in blue paint on the interior left and right sides of the west portal of St. George's Church in Staro Nagoričino. Moreover, during our exploration, we uncovered analogous cryptograms at the apse of the Virgin Peribleptos church in Ohrid (ca.1282) and later examples at Ljuboten (1336/37), specifically on the architrave of the portal and at the south side of the apse closer to the diaconicon (Ćirić, 2015, pp. 162–172; Korać 2003, 114, 122) and south portal of St. Archangel Michael church at Lesnovo (Gabelić 2021, pp.251–272, esp.257). This discovery establishes a fascinating connection across different architectural contexts, suggesting a shared symbolic language of architecture during the first half of the 14th century.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Unlocking the significance behind the utilization of the cryptogram at the west facade of Staro Nagoričino can be illuminated through an exploration of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts—a solemn observance in the Eastern Orthodox Church held during the weekdays of Great Lent, excluding Saturdays and Sundays. Unlike traditional liturgies, this ritual focuses on the distribution rather than the consecration of the Eucharist, emphasizing themes of repentance, fasting, and anticipation of Christ's sacrifice. The liturgy encapsulates its essence in the profound words, “Τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον” (“The true Light, which enlightens every person coming into the world”).

Fig.2 St. George church, west façade and bifora with ΦΧΦΠ cryptogram and the note of the architect Đurđe Bošković (May 2nd, 1927), photo: ©Archaeological Institute – Belgrade (Republic of Serbia)



A profound correlation emerges in considering the connection between the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts and the architectural elements of the portal and window at the west facade of the church. Portals and windows, acting as transitional spaces, symbolize the threshold between the earthly and the divine, allowing light to represent the spiritual enlightenment brought by Christ metaphorically. Consequently, the widespread use of the cryptogram ΦΧΦΠ and its resolution Φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν finds its roots in the liturgical practices of this service.

Within the liturgy, specific instructions emphasize the priest's proclamation Σοφία, ὀρθοί, φῶς Χριστοῦ φαίνει πᾶσιν” (“Wisdom: stand up, the light of Christ shines for all”). Here, the cryptogram is an adornment and a potent apotropaic and protective sign. Rather than being an arcane element, tetragrams function as signal words, elucidating the meaning of inscriptions even for those not fully literate. In essence, the cryptogram's resonance with the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts establishes a profound connection between the architectural elements, liturgical practices, and the spiritual tapestry embedded

in the traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The placement of the potent symbol on the west side of the church is further emphasized by the depiction of the ktetor accompanied by Sts. Constantine and Helena in the ktetorial composition. This connection strengthens the association with the concept of the New Constantine and the Finding of the True Cross. The west facade, almost perpetually bathed in sunlight, serves as a continual reminder of Christ as the Sun of Righteousness, casting His rays upon us and illuminating our spiritual journey. During the liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts, where we approach the Lamb with reverence, ringing bells to prompt humility resonates: "To those who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness shall arise, and health will be on His rays," declares the prophet Malachi (Mal. 4, 2). In the heart of the Great Lent, as we carry forth the triumphant Cross of the Lord, the church echoes Christ's call to "deny ourselves and take up our cross" for those who choose to follow Him. Denying ourselves transcends subjugating everything to personal desires, necessitating a willingness to relinquish comfort for others. The symbolism of the Cross speaks to us all over the facade and portal as a liminal zone, inviting contemplation on choice (Ćirić, 2016, pp. 146–151; Isar 2021, pp. 181–199.). This choice holds the key to the world's destiny, without which the world descends into darkness and the triumph of evil.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In unraveling the intricate layers of symbolism embedded in the St. George Church in Staro Nagoričino, our exploration has led us to a poignant revelation. The cryptogram, ΦΧΦΠ, strategically positioned on the west facade, transcends mere ornamentation, becoming a profound link to its time's spiritual and cultural context. This cryptogram, resonating with the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, is more than a linguistic puzzle—it embodies a connection to the spiritual realm (Schmemmann, 1969, pp. 45–61; Phoyntoyles & Fundulis, 1971; Jocić 2017, pp. 177-184). As the "true Light" that enlightens all, it becomes a beacon of faith, seamlessly woven into the architectural fabric of the church. This radiant message is not isolated; instead, it converges with the representation of the ruler and ktetor on the north wall, alongside Queen Simonis and the revered St. George to whom the church is devoted.

In the 14th century, the age of faith, where symbols and apotropaic signs spoke a language understood by the devout, the cryptogram became a testament to the ruler's devotion, transcending earthly triumphs to embody the divine light that shines upon all. As we contemplate the west facade, we glimpse not just architectural prowess but a spiritual narrative—a story told in cryptic symbols, invoking the medieval consciousness and reinforcing the connection between earthly rulership, faith, and the eternal light that guides the path of believers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author extends sincere gratitude to the Archaeological Institute (Belgrade, Republic of Serbia) for granting permission to access and utilize the legacy of architect Đurđe Bošković, including his drawings and photographic materials from restoration works conducted from 1927 to 1930.

REFERENCES

- Cvetković, B. (2023). Royal imagery of King Milutin in historical context revisited. In J.S. Ćirić & S. Ubiparić (Eds.) Holy King Milutin and His Age : History, Literature, Art : thematic Collection of Papers / The International Scientific Conference 'King Milutin and the Palaeologan Age: History, Literature, Cultural Heritage (pp. 667-692) Kragujevac: Kalenić. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.46793-6008-065-5-667c/>
- Cvetković, B. (2022). "The Royal Imagery of Medieval Serbia". In Meanings and Functions of the Ruler's Image in the Mediterranean World (11th–15th Centuries). Leiden, The Netherlands: BRILL EBooks Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004511583_007
- Ćirić, J.S. (2023). Beyond Constantinople: Constructing Χώρα in The King's Church of Studenica. In J.S. Ćirić & S. Ubiparić (Eds.) Holy King Milutin and His Age : History, Literature, Art : thematic Collection of Papers / The International Scientific Conference 'King Milutin and the Palaeologan Age: History, Literature, Cultural Heritage (pp.465–488) Kragujevac: Kalenić Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.46793-6008-065-5-465c/>
- Ćirić, J.S. (2021). Aesthetic Concept Or Disharmony? Brick In The Architecture Of King Milutin. In T. Borić (Ed.) Art, and culture today: harmony and disharmony: book of abstracts / IX National Scientific Forum with International Participation Balkan Art Forum 2021 (BARTF 2021) Niš, 8-9th October 2021, Niš: University of Niš, 2021, 29–30.
- Ćirić, J. S. (2020). The Symbolism of the Knotted Column in the Architecture of King Milutin, The Legends Journal of European History Studies, S.I, 81–100. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.29228/legends.41923>
- Ćirić, J. S. (2017). Brick by brick: Textuality and Textuality in the Architecture during the Age of King Milutin. In A.A. N. Tachiaos (Ed.) Cyril, and Methodius: Byzantium and the World of the Slavs, , (pp. 206 – 214). Thessaloniki Municipality of

- Thessaloniki.
- Ćirić, J.S. (2016). Open up, ancient doors, and let the King of Glory enter. Meaning of the entrances in the Byzantine architectural setting: Preliminary thoughts. In: M. B. Panov (Ed.), *Byzantium and the Heritage of Europe. Connecting the cultures. Proceedings of the 3rd International Symposium "Days of Justinian I", Skopje, 30–31 October, 2015* (pp. 146–151) Skopje: University "Euro Balkan".
- Ćirić J. S. (2015). Beyond the Wall: Structure and meaning of East Façade of Perivleptos Church in Ohrid. In M. B. Panov (Ed.) *Samuel's state and Byzantium: history, legend, tradition, heritage Proceedings of the International Symposium "Days of Justinian I," Skopje, 17-18 October, 2014* (pp. 162 – 172). Skopje: University "Euro Balkan".
- Gabelić, S. (2021). Reljefni ukras južnog portala Lesnova. Prilog vizantijskoj arhitektonskoj plastici 14. veka / Relief Decoration of the Southern Portal of Lesnovo. A Contribution to the Byzantine Architectural Sculpture of the 14th Century. (pp. 251–272). In V. Ivanišević et al. *Svet srednjovekovnih utvrdjenja, gradova i manastira / The Medieval World of Fortresses, Towns and Monasteries*, (pp. 251–272). Beograd: Arheološki institut.
- Isar, N. (2021). Revealing/Concealing: Dazzling Presence in the Byzantine Χώρα. In H. Hofmann et al., *Enthüllen und Verbergen in der Vormoderne / Revealing and Concealing in the Premodern Period*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 181–199.
- Jocić, N. (2017). Liturgija predeosvećenih darova u srpskim rukopisnim služabnicima u srpskim rukopisnim XVII veka. G. Jovanović (Ed.), *Dani srpskoga duhovnog preobraženja XXIV, Srednji vek u srpskoj nauci, istoriji, književnosti I umetnosti VIII / naučni skup, Despotovac – Manasija, 20-21. Avgust 2016;* (pp. 177-184). Despotovac: Narodna biblioteka "Resavska škola"; Beograd : Institut za srpski jezik SANU.
- Korać, V. (2003). *Spomenici Monumentalne srpske arhitekture XIV veka u Povardarju*, Beograd: SANU, Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture.
- Piltz, E. (2011). "King (kralj) Milutin and the Paleologan tradition", *Byzantinoslavica - Revue internationale des Etudes Byzantines* LXIX, 173– 188.
- Phoyntoyles, I. M., & Fundulis, J. M. (1971). *Leitoyrgia proegiasmenon doron. Thesalonike: Ekdoseis Poyrnara.*
- Rhoby, A. (2017). «Secret Messages? Byzantine Greek Tetragrams and Their Display», *In-Scriptio: revue en ligne d'études épigraphiques [En ligne]*, Livraisons, Première livraison, mis à jour le : 17/11/2017, Retrieved from : <https://in-scription.edel.univ-poitiers.fr:443/in-scription/index.php?id=180>.
- Schmemmann, A. (1969). *Great Lent*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Todić, B. (1993). *Staro Nagoričino*, Beograd: Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture, Prošveta, SANU.
- Walter, C. (1997). IC XC NI KA. "The Apotropaic Function of the Victorious Cross". *Revue des Études Byzantines* 55 (1997) 193–220.