

Branca Ivanić

Pilgrimage in medieval Serbia and "proskynetaria" : pilgrims' icons from Jerusalem

Series Byzantina 4, 55-69

2006

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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Pilgrimage in Medieval Serbia and Proskynetaria – Pilgrims' Icons from Jerusalem

Branca Ivanić
Belgrad, National Museum

I am very pleased that the topic and occasion make it possible to draw a few lines from the medieval history of the Balkans, not only about objects of art originating from the Holy Land and found in Serbia, but also about the importance and essential links which connected the Serbian Orthodox church, dignitaries, monks and laymen, whether rich or not, to the center and source of every piety – the Holy Land and its pearl, the city of Jerusalem.

As in other parts of Europe, Jerusalem was understood as the key model. Thus St. Sava of Serbia when he returned from Palestine decided to build churches based on the church on Mount Sion, also similar to the monastery of St. Sava of Palestine, following the common medieval practice of building churches modelled on the churches from the Holy Land, in particular the church of the Holy Sepulcher. The church of the Holy Apostles in Peć, built after the Palestinian model, is the Mother church of the Serbian Orthodox Church.¹ Secondly, St. Sava thought that the constitution of Jerusalem was better and more perfect than the constitution of the Great Church in Constantinople. The Jerusalem regulations are stricter concerning the performance of duties by the monks in continuously observing the canonical hours and psalms, but certain regulations concerning fasting had been less strict in the Jerusalem constitution. The Russian Church under its Patriarch Cyprian introduced the Jerusalem constitution based on the Serbian model.²

Thirdly, it is known from various sources that St. Sava brought into the country from his two voyages to the Holy Land many books, liturgical

¹ В. Ј. Ђурић, С. Ђирковић, В. Коран, *Пећка патријаршија*, Београд 1990, pp. 26–32.

² П. Симић, *Рад св. Саве на осавремењавању литургије у српској цркви*, *Св. Сава, Споменница поводом осамстогодишњице рођења*, Београд 1977, pp. 181–205.

objects, garments and relics.³ The combination of national saint and temporal ruler provided long-lasting respect for the teaching of St. Sava and his final decision in favour of the Jerusalem regulations for religious ceremony, which even today are observed in the Serbian Orthodox Church.

In order to strengthen these connections, St. Sava bought from the Latins the monastery of St. George in the seaport of Akko. With the permission of the Jerusalem patriarch he also bought from the Saracens the monastery of St. John the Theologian on Mount Sion as the second Serbian monastery in the Holy Land. The Serbian king Milutin after successful wars against the Persians and Turks in the beginning of the 14th century built the monastery of the Holy Archangels and endowed it lavishly with revenues and presents.⁴ After the fall of the Serbian state assistance for this monastery came from the Russian rulers and nobles. For some time this monastery was abandoned because of plague but later on the monks returned and from 1505 on the Serbian monks even ruled the Greek Lavra of St. Sava of Palestine for the next 150 years. In order to protect the monastery from the Bedouins the Serbian monks constructed a large defensive tower in the monastery and in it the chapel dedicated to St. Symeon which they completed with the help of the Russian emperor in 1612.⁵

The history of pilgrimage depends on the general history of a nation. General conditions of survival also dictate cultural needs so they can be to a certain extent understood as a consequence of a surplus of resources and time. They are difficult to accomplish in periods of war and oppression if we except waves of the poor who set off on pilgrimages driven by the possibility of social promotion, or had followed some more respected pilgrim, counting on his generosity and piety. While for the period from the end of the 12th to the 16th century direct material evidence for Serbian-Palestinian contacts is hardly preserved (pectoral crosses, ampullae), and indications and assumptions about such contacts are based mostly on subtle stylistic and iconographic analyses of our monuments, the collection of Palestinian pilgrim souvenirs and liturgical objects from later periods preserved in Serbian territories offers more ground for investigation.

From 15th-century Serbia two texts are known, descriptions of Jerusalem and the holy places in Palestine, both originating from the ruling circles – one

³ Доментијан, *Житије св. Саве*, Београд 2001, р. 397; М. Башић, *Старе српске биографије*, Београд 1924, р. 214.

⁴ Р. Грујић, 'Палестински утицаји на св. Саву приликом реформисања монашког живота и литургијске праксе у Србији', *Светосавски зборник*, 1 (1936), рр. 277–312.

⁵ Х. Жефаровић, *Описаније Јерусалима*, ed. Д. Давидов, Нови Сад 1973, р. 13.

written 1428–1430 by the biographer of the Serbian despot Stefan Lazarević where Belgrade is compared to Jerusalem⁶ and the other as an epistle and spiritual message of the priest Kyr. Nikon of Jerusalem to his sister Jelena, at that time the widow of herzeg Sandalj Hranić (1440).⁷ From the second half of the 15th century the revenues intended for the monastery of the Holy Archangels in Jerusalem had been collected regularly, since for this monastery a tribute was intended, which was due every two years from the merchants of Dubrovnik. Immediately after the monastery was finally abandoned Kyr. Nikon returned to Serbia and the tribute, after a few decades of persistent diplomatic activity, was transferred in the 1470s to the Serbian monasteries of Chilandar and St. Paul's on Mount Athos, thanks to another famous woman from the Serbian ruling house, Mara Branković, daughter of the last Serbian ruler Djurdje Branković. The Dubrovnik merchants paid this tribute until the time of Napoleon Bonaparte.⁸

On the other hand, the Latin two-century adventure in Palestine finally collapsed in 1291. However, despite the loss of the Holy Land influences from western Europe could still be felt in the Near East in the 14th and 15th centuries via the islands of Cyprus and Rhodes. Within the Muslim surroundings monastic orders from the west found a *modus vivendi* in Palestine. After the arrival of the Franciscans in Bethlehem in 1347 a more active development of the production of memorabilia started. As cultivable soil was in the hands of Muslims, local Christians were mostly engaged in trade and commerce. In 1438 it was permitted by law that Muslims, Jews and Christians could engage in artisan trades, and that contributed to a more active development.⁹

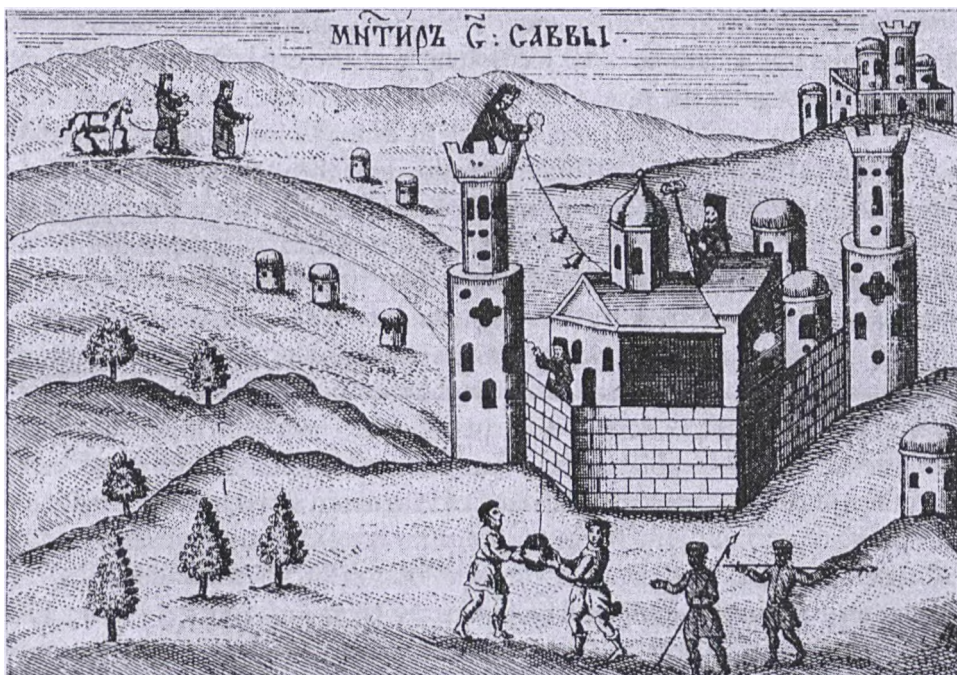
In the second half of the 16th century the production of material souvenirs was intensified in Palestine. The artistic craft of woodworking developed (Bethlehem) as well as the production of objects of mother-of-pearl and mother-of-pearl marquetry (Jerusalem and Bethlehem). Serbian-Palestinian contacts were once again improved at this time. Many manuscripts for the Serbian monasteries were commissioned here. The revised edition of the Serbian translation of the Jerusalem typicon in the 16th century indicates the possibility that Palestinian influence was not lacking in the new organization of the Serbian Church after the collapse of state independence.

⁶ Константин Филозоф, *Слово о писменах, Живот деспота Стефана Лазаревића*, Београд 1989, р. 101.

⁷ Д. Богдановић, *Историја старе српске књижевности*, Београд 1980, р. 224.

⁸ Р. Ђук, 'Царица Мара', *Историјски часопис*, 25–26 (1978–1979), рр. 75–80.

⁹ В. Хан, 'Значај палестинских еулогија и литургијских предмета позније уметности за Србе', *Zbornik, Muzej primenjene umetnosti*, 5 (1959) рр. 45–46.



1. Tower of the monastery of St. Sabas, *Opisanije Jerusalima*, 18th century
(Photo D. Davidov)

This influence was in fact an element in the process of restoration of the Peć patriarchy in 1557, when dioceses were established, churches and monasteries restored and built, manuscripts copied and liturgical vessels and garments obtained. In the 16th century the Serbs held the Lavra of St. Sava of Palestine and at that time they erected defensive towers. These towers are represented (il. 1) in *Opisanije Jerusalima* by Zefarović.¹⁰

At the same time activity had been restored in Jerusalem as well. This development took place in territory where antique, Coptic, Syrian, Byzantine, Persian-Islamic currents interconnected with the influence of western styles, Romanesque and Gothic. Centuries of existence of monastic orders and fraternities that maintained in an Islamic milieu continuous contacts with home institutions, and which were transmitters of Christianity between East and West, ensured the influx from the West of heterogeneous influences of iconographic and stylistic and technical character.

In the period from the beginning of the 17th to the end of the 18th century the artistic quality of objects of heterogeneous material of Palestinian manufacture was rather variable and often did not exceed the average

¹⁰ Давидов, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

level of craftsmanship. In that time no unique style in the small arts of Palestine appeared, but still the characteristics either of iconography or in the application of distinct materials or in the methods of their working mark these products as different from objects produced in other Near East countries at the same time.

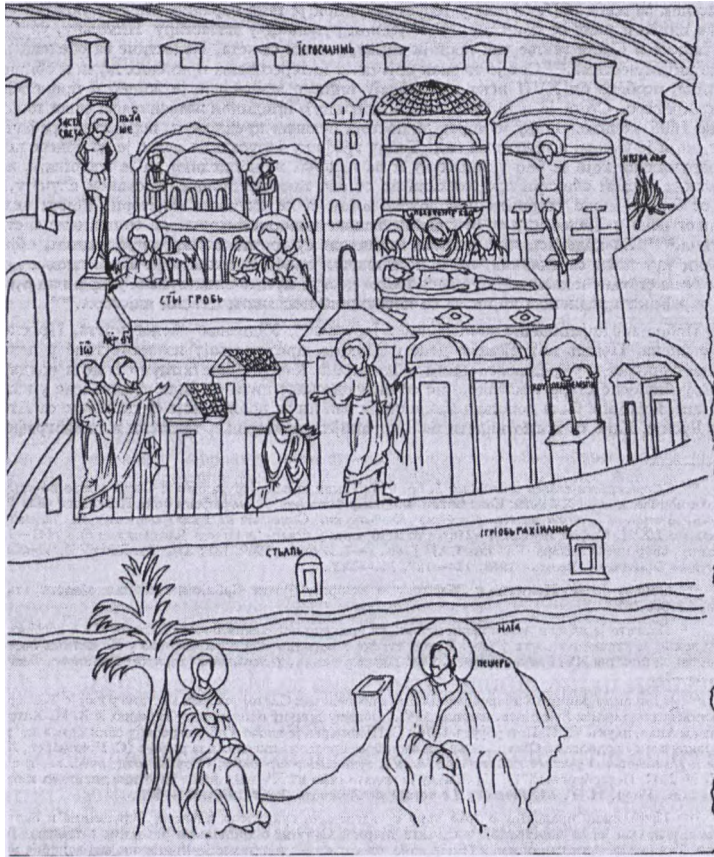
During the 17th and 18th century Serbian pilgrims brought back from Palestine modest material 'blessings' of symbolic meaning. They could have been natural souvenirs such as a desert pebble, dried palm leaf, water from the Jordan, fragments of the True Cross, soil from consecrated locations, or alternatively objects, which resembled by their shape, picture, inscription or technique of manufacture the 'memoriae', and were considered as evidence that the pilgrim really visited them. Such pilgrims' objects included rosaries, pitchers, sticks as emblems of pilgrims, silver mounted crosses, panagiria, icon lamps, belts, boxes, reliquaries, models of the Holy Sepulcher, antimensia, books and icons.¹¹

Although written sources suggest frequent Serbian-Palestinian contacts in the 17th century, there is a relatively small number of preserved pilgrims' objects. Therefore it is interesting that there is an early fresco representation of Jerusalem in the monastery of Piva in Montenegro (il. 2) dating from 1606.¹²

Some graphic print of western origin must have been used as the model for the painting of the unusual composition of the so-called 'Jerusalem' in the Piva monastery in 1606. On this wall painting was represented the city of Jerusalem and its surroundings and there are also depicted certain places and events as they were mentioned in the Holy Scripture, including a series of sites within the city related to the passions of Christ, the site of Abraham's sacrifice, and outside the city walls the baptism of Christ in the Jordan, St. Ilija in a cave, the grave of Rahila, the place where David composed the psalms, and Bethlehem. The picture of Jerusalem at Piva suggested to future pilgrims the sites in the Holy Land which they should visit, and also offered to others some idea of interesting places in the cradle of Christianity. This illustration in Piva is an exceptional phenomenon but not entirely unexpected. In a few of our preserved manuscripts from the 16th and 17th century there are short descriptions of the Holy Land indicating locations that should be visited. Thus, for example, the monk Savatije, vice-abbot of Hopovo monastery, describes briefly in a Psalter written for

¹¹ Хан, *op. cit.*, p. 46-47.

¹² С. Петковић, *Зидно сликарство на подручју Печке патријаршије 1557-1614*, Нови Сад 1965, p. 200.



2. Jerusalem, fresco in the Piva monastery, 17th century
(Photo S. Petković)

him when he was in Jerusalem in 1607 what sites he visited and paid tribute to. In a manuscript in Nikoljac monastery along with a description of Jerusalem and the Holy Land there is also a map, like a sketch, of Palestine with places of interest marked.¹³ This is all a sign of increased interest among churchmen and ordinary believers, especially in the 17th century, in becoming better acquainted with the country where Jesus Christ had lived and preached. That is the reason why this composition was created when the frescoes in the new church at Piva were painted in 1606. There must have been some model, most probably a graphic print. Such a print of Jerusalem could have been brought by one of those who commissioned the frescoes, who had been on pilgrimage, and who ordered the painters to copy

¹³ Ibid., pp. 104–106.

it; or the painters might have suggested representing this scene. In any case it is impossible for the time being to identify the original or model used by the painters. Large groups of believers from all parts of Europe poured into Palestine during the entire medieval period to pay tribute to the holy places. Many illustrated guidebooks, travel books with pictures and even individual graphic prints had been published for those pilgrims. The number of such works amounts to hundreds and even thousands and they are not easily available so it makes it impossible to distinguish one particular model used by the unknown masters at Piva monastery.

Among earlier representations of Jerusalem is also the drawing of the church of the Holy Sepulcher in the manuscript *Poklonik* (Pilgrim) by Gavriilo Tadić (il. 3) dating from 1662.¹⁴ This schematic representation of the Rotunda is also depicted on a pilgrim's wooden icon of Tsar Lazar, the Kosovo martyr (il. 4), the first saint to be included in the ancient sacred dynasty of Nemanja. Connecting prince Lazar, ruler of Moravian Serbia from 1375 to the battle at Kosovo in 1389, when the Turkish Sultan Murat also lost his life, was in a way an illustration of popular culture but also related to the place of Christ's passion.¹⁵

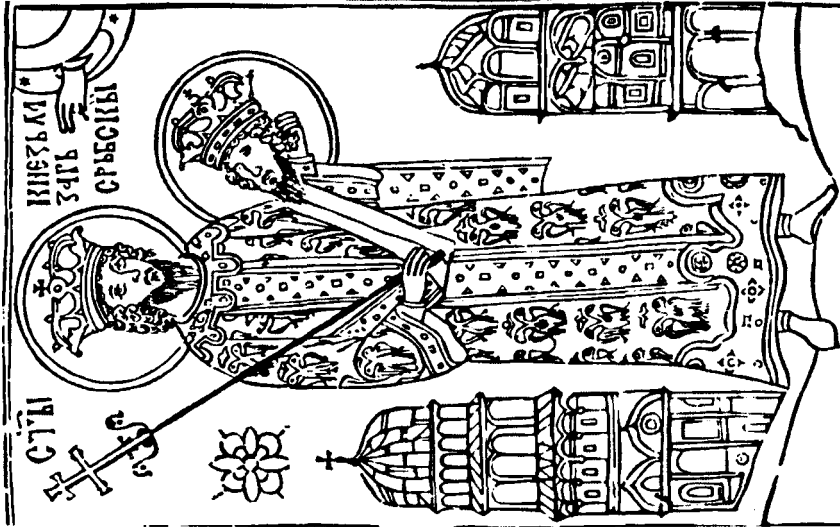
On the basis of written sources and surviving originals we know that Serbian pilgrims used to bring from the Holy Land large canvas-painted icons called 'Jerusalem'. They had probably already been brought at the end of the 17th century. The basis for such a conclusion suggests that the 1697 inscription of the Athonite monk Makarije recorded in the Jerusalem manuscript of the painting manual of the priest Danilo. From that note we are informed that one icon of Lower and Upper Jerusalem from 1697 found in the Lavra of St. Sava 'had been copied by Joasaf, metropolitan of Tyre and Sidon, for the general benefit of Orthodox Christians', while Makarije gives himself credit for its distribution among Orthodox pilgrims. As the description of this icon corresponds with the heavenly and earthly picture of the Holy City on the pilgrims' Jerusalems it cannot be ruled out that it might have been its prototype.¹⁶

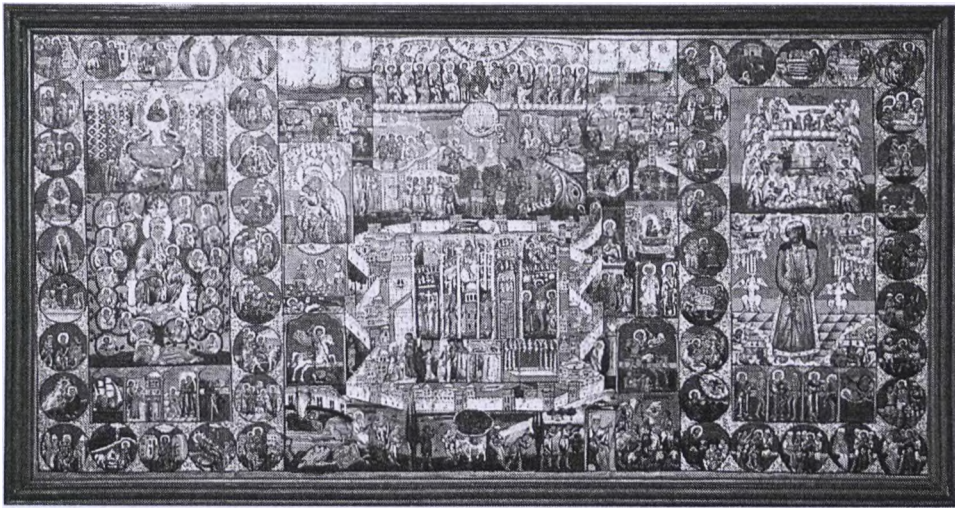
According to inscriptions, signatures and some local iconographic details the Jerusalems – the pilgrims' panoramas of the city – are identified in the Balkan territory as Greek, Macedonian and Serbian specimens. On one Jerusalem, now in Bosnia, the image of St. George Novi in Macedonian dress indicates that picture should be attributed to the Macedonian group.

¹⁴ Давидов, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-18.

¹⁵ Хан, *op. cit.*, pp. 71, 74, Pl. II/c.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.





5. Pilgrim's icon, Jerusalem, 19th century, National Museum, Belgrade
(Photo National Museum)

Portraits of St. Sava and St. Symeon on the Jerusalem of 1794 from the National Museum in Belgrade (il. 5) suggest Serbian origin of the painter or rather of the commissioner. The inscription, although in Serbian, corresponds to the Greek inscription *PROSKINITIS TU PANAGIU KAI ZODOH TAFU* that accompany this representation. The mistakes in translation reveal that text had been written by someone who did not know the language but used an existing pattern. Such mistakes have also been encountered in Serbian texts on other objects of indisputable Palestinian provenance. It is certain that most of Serbian Jerusalems, regardless of Serbian inscriptions, come from Palestinian workshops.

The central piece of the Palestinian pilgrim's icon is the picture of the city of Jerusalem surrounded by characteristic walls within which the church of the Holy Sepulcher dominates. Its architecture is depicted as a cross-section of stories with rooms displaying realistic scenes and iconographic characteristics.¹⁷ A similar principle of composition was also applied on a Russian icon. These similarities could be explained as a result of strong Russian-Palestinian contacts in the artistic domain. It is well known that Theophanes, patriarch of Jerusalem, commissioned icons for the same church of the Holy Sepulcher in the Moscow imperial workshops.¹⁸ During the second half of the same century other eastern patriarchs also obtained icons from the same workshops.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

The unknown Serbian icon painter possibly conceived the architecture of Golgotha on the icon from the orthodox cathedral church in Šibenik on the basis of indirect inspiration from the pilgrims' Jerusalems.¹⁹ The same pattern was repeated in the printed guidebook *Opisanije Jerusalima* by Hristifor Zefarović published in Vienna in 1748, two years after the return of this calligrapher from the Holy Land, and his work was paid for by the Jerusalem Archimandrite Symeon Simeonović, the guardian of the Holy Sepulcher.²⁰

Along with unrealistic representations of the Holy City encountered in earlier Serbian painting there also appear in the first half of the 18th century in northern areas some realistically conceived pictures of the pilgrims' goal. The real panorama of Jerusalem with typical domes and belfries appeared on the composition 'Descent from the Cross' in the monastery of Bodjani. It could be assumed that this realistic concept of the Holy City was influenced by the Jerusalem antimimension by George from Trapezus from 1733. It was a printed antimimension that was widely used and influenced greatly other printed antimimension of that century, for instance the antimimension of Pavle Nenadović.²¹

Apart from printed antimensia the Holy City was also depicted on painted antimensia, whilst some details on embroidered specimens suggest Palestinian-Serbian contacts as is the case with the embroidered eight-pointed star on an embroidered veil from 1659 from Trebinje, now in the Savina monastery in Montenegro. There is a realistic representation of the Holy Sepulcher on an embroidered epitaphios from the orthodox church in Győr in Hungary.²²

Belts were also a form of souvenir. We have confirmation of their existence in Serbian culture in the hagiography of St. Sava, where it is mentioned that this saint sent a belt to Spiridon, the abbot of Studenica. It is interesting that Sava said that he placed this belt on the Holy Sepulcher, clearly indicating how such objects became pilgrims' souvenirs.

The composition on the belt included ornamental elements consisting of inscriptions, decorative friezes, a representation of the Holy Sepulcher, the cross on Golgotha with the symbols of Christ's passion. On the belts was information about the pilgrim woven in by the masters on the spot, and there were also general phrases like HAGIA POLIS JERUSALIM [HOLY

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 51.

²⁰ Давидов, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–45.

²¹ Хан, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–59.

²² Давидов, *op. cit.*, p. 26.



6. Pilgrim's belt, 17th century Museum of Applied Arts, Belgrade (Photo V. Han)

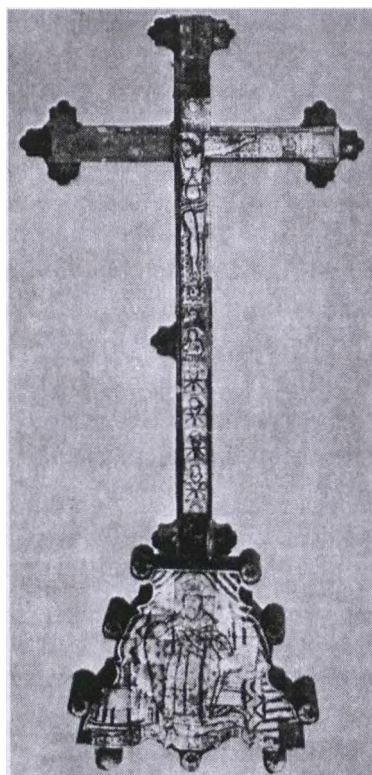
CITY OF JERUSALEM]. On the belts the image of the so-called rose of Jericho was also represented (il. 6), which had an important role in the cult of the Virgin and was also painted on icons of the Virgin.²³

Serbian pilgrims also brought from the Holy Land objects decorated with mother-of-pearl. Although the initiative for the use of mother-of-pearl for production of souvenirs is attributed to the Franciscan monk Pacifiko Rigi in the 16th century, it is more probable that this method developed under influence from Constantinople. Written sources state that marquetry was used in Jerusalem workshops by the second half of the 16th century for memorabilia made of mother-of-pearl, including crosses, rosaries and models of the Holy Sepulcher. This work continued during the 17th and 18th centuries on a larger scale, including more and more different objects. A reliquary of typical Jerusalem workmanship was recorded in the Hopovo monastery in 1753 and is still preserved. This object is particularly interesting as its engraved inscription mentions German, a Jerusalem Archimandrite and guardian of the Holy Sepulcher, who in the 1740s visited Serbian territories under Austrian rule. This is evidence that representatives of the Jerusalem Church were in contact with Serbian monasteries and churches.²⁴

Jerusalem crosses were distinguished by their type and ornament. They stand on Baroque shaped or Classicist pedestals, which evoke the hill of Golgotha. Fragments of the cross were painted black if they were not decorated with mother-of-pearl and bone. The front and back sides of the cross were covered with small mother-of-pearl plaques with engraved scenes and ornaments. This decoration is rather similar to the decoration of Russian printed books in the 17th century. Particularly interesting is the appearance of a multi-petalled rose as in it can be recognized the stylized Jericho rose. Constantinople influences on Jerusalem marquetry can be detected in inlaid cross corners with oblique pieces of black wood. This characteristic of Turkish marquetry appeared on Serbian works by the end of the 16th century. Furthermore, inlaid carnations as typical Turkish flowers on the Jerusalem crosses confirm the connections with Constantinople marquetry masters.

²³ Хан, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

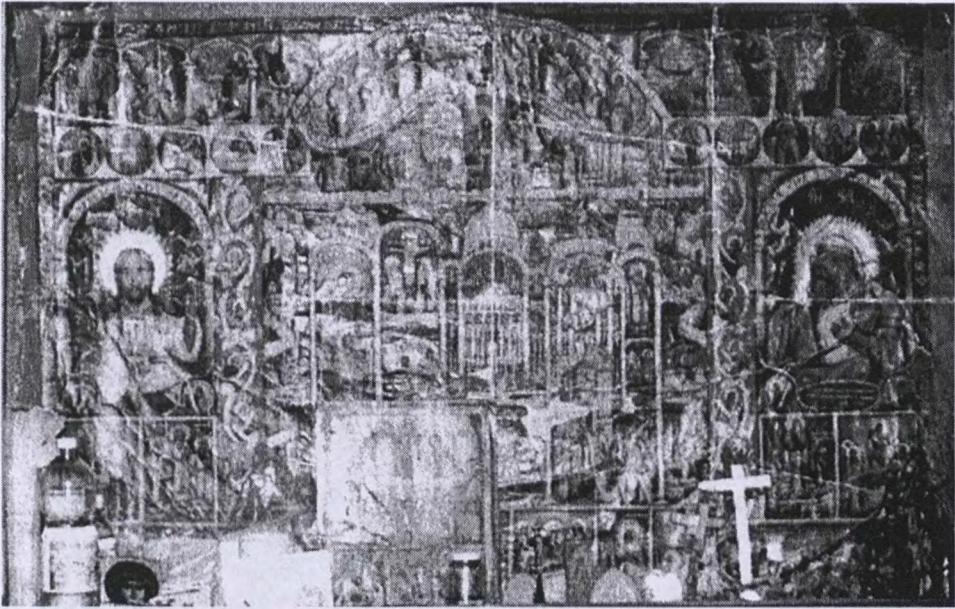


7. Cross from Jerusalem, 18th century, Museum of Serbian Orthodox church, Belgrade (Photo V. Han)

The iconography of Jerusalem crosses found in Serbian territory also offers certain interesting elements. The engraving on the cross from Vrdnik (il. 7) from the middle of the 18th century is a replica of the portrait of Tsar Lazar from the famous *Stematographia*. As the cross from Vrdnik according to its type and technique undoubtedly originates from Jerusalem workshops, it seems probable that this engraving with the portrait of Lazar was made according to the order of some Serbian pilgrim who brought the model for this engraving from his home country. Jerusalem crosses were also produced for the Catholic churches as is confirmed by the specimen from Fojnica monastery. These influences from Jerusalem also encouraged Serbian artisans to produce objects of mother-of-pearl, especially in Janjevo, Peć and Prizren.²⁵

The earliest metal object that we can relate to Jerusalem with certainty is the 7th-century censer from Pepeljevac with the rose of Jericho on the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.



8. Pilgrim's icon, Jerusalem, 19th century, House of Hadzi Spasić family, Velika Hoča
(Photo Art Forum Velika Hoča)

base, and after that there are many pectoral crosses dating from the 7th to the 13th centuries.²⁶ Two bronze ampullae for holy oil were found in the coffin of the holy king Stephen Dečanski.²⁷ From the 17th century dates the image of the Virgin from Piva monastery (1645) made in Jerusalem. On the crucifix, which is attributed to Tsar Dušan but which actually dates from the 17th century, is engraved a protective trellis which had been placed by the 4th or 5th century on the cave of the Holy Sepulcher in order to prevent pilgrims from breaking off pieces.²⁸

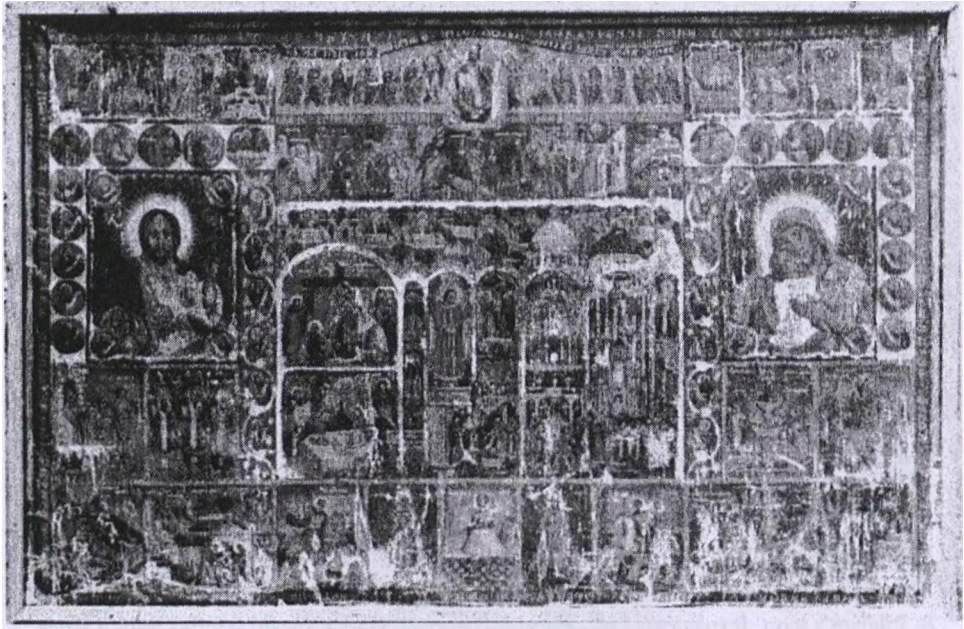
The interest of church people and orthodox believers from our territories in the Holy Land increased during Turkish rule, and pilgrimages became more and more frequent. From time to time appropriate notes – some kind of memoranda about places of pilgrimage – did appear. Thus the monk Savatije, vice-abbot of Hopovo monastery, brought from Jerusalem a Psalter copied for him there and he himself marked down everything he had seen in the Holy Land.²⁹ Similarly, a slightly more comprehensive description of

²⁶ М. Ђоровић-Љубинковић, 'Стара крстионица из Куршумлије', *Музеји*, 5 (1950), pp. 70-86.

²⁷ М. Шакога, *Ризница манастира Дечани*, Београд 1984, p. 193.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 202.

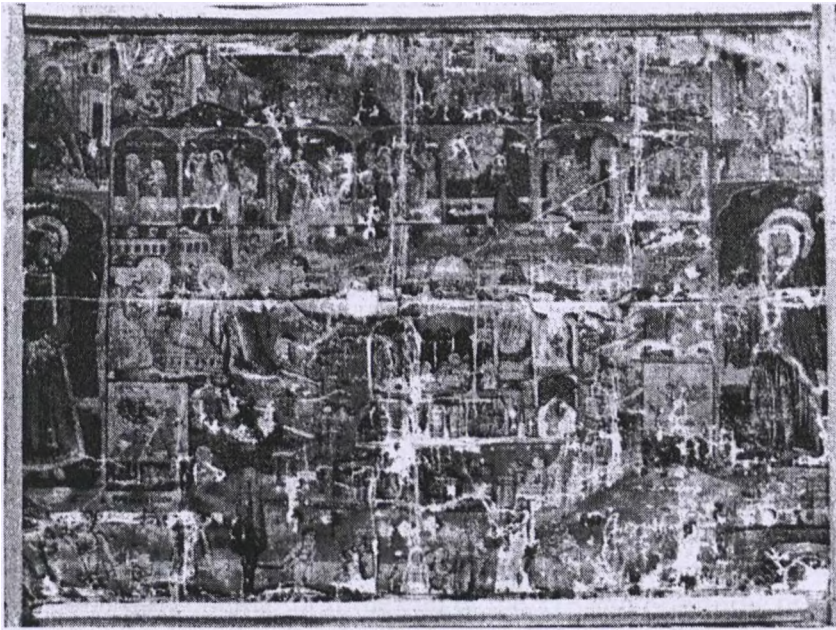
²⁹ Давидов, *op. cit.*, p. 14.



9. Pilgrim's icon, Jerusalem, 19th century, chapel of St. Triphun, Velika Hoča
(Photo Art Forum Velika Hoča)

Jerusalem including a topographic map of sites that should be visited was discovered in a manuscript in the monastery of Nikoljac.

The above-mentioned examples speak clearly about the active connections of the Serbian church and Christians with the Holy Land. As it sometimes happens, due to an interesting and unusual web of circumstances three *proskinitaria* from the Holy Land were preserved in a single village in Kosovo and Metohija. Two of them were in the possession of the church and one is the private property of the Hadzi-Spasić family, and had been housed in a special, most elaborately furnished room traditionally known as the 'Jerusalem room'. The pilgrim's representation of Jerusalem on a special pedestal and covered with glass dominates the room and is surrounded by mother-of-pearl crosses, sacred oil and printed holy pictures. This arrangement reveals how representations of Jerusalem were traditionally treasured in Christian houses (il. 8). Also at Velika Hoča, a present day Christian enclave in Kosovo and Metohija two more pilgrims' icons were preserved in the chapel of St. Triphun (ils. 9–10). St. Triphun, the traditional patron of viticulture has his shrine in Velika Hoča in an ancient property of the Dečani monastery. This complex within the walls consists of a wine-cellar from the 16th century, old monastery lodgings from the 16th



10. Pilgrim's icon, Jerusalem, 19th century, chapel of St Triphun, Velika Hoča
(Photo Art Forum Velika Hoča)

century now turned into the small church of St. Triphun, and new lodgings from the 19th century.³⁰ In this small temple fragments of frescoes, icons and liturgical objects are carefully being collected from neighboring churches and monasteries that have suffered destruction. There is also a group of objects including icons, crosses – souvenirs from the Holy Land the significance of which is increased by the fact that in Serbia although pilgrimage was respected from the time of St. Sava, because of permanent wars and turmoil only a small number of pilgrims' objects have been preserved.

³⁰ *Задужбине Косова*, Призрен-Београд 1987, pp. 412–413.