Abstract: Being one of the most popular in the whole Christian Ecumene, the cult of Saint George attracted and still continues to attract the attention of scholars who research medieval Christian cults, cultic practices and phenomena. When medieval Serbia is in question, scientific attention was so far mostly paid to the royal aspect of the cult of Saint George. This work aims at various forms of veneration of saint George in medieval Serbia, manifested by archaeologically discovered items, as well as by architectural monuments and works of art. It will concentrate on accentuating different aspects of veneration of this saint, as the protector of Serbian medieval rulers, patron saint of some of the most important churches and monasteries but also as a recipient of very private piety of believers from different social strata.

Keywords: Medieval Serbia, Saint George, the cult of saint, private piety, church, fresco-painting, encolpion, icon.

During the medieval period, on the territories that were under strong cultural influence from Byzantium, the intensive spread of the cult of St. George can be traced, among them in medieval Serbia. This work aims at explaining various forms of veneration of the saint and their manifestations, through archaeological material, most important eponym churches and works of art. It will concentrate on accentuating different aspects of the cult of this saint, as the protector of Serbian medieval rulers, patron saint of some of the most important churches and monasteries but also as a recipient of private piety of believers from different social strata.

1 This text is the result of work on the projects Processes of Urbanisation and the Development of Medieval Societies (no. 177021) and Serbian Medieval Art and its West-European Context (no. 177036), financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.
Being one of the most popular in the whole Christian Ecumene, the cult of saint George attracted and still continues to attract the attention of scholars who research Christian cults, cultic practices and phenomena during the Middle Ages. As one of the prominent martyrs of the Great Persecutions, his martyrdom and later performed miracles are well known. His cult, the oldest sanctuary of which is tied to Lydda (Diospolis) (today Lod in Israel, southeast of Jaffa), can be positively traced from the 6th century onward, although there are indications that it appeared a century earlier. Namely, the oldest source for St. George’s martyrdom is the so-called Vienna Palimpsest dated to the 4th – 5th century, containing the “apocryphal” version of his passion. It put the life of the saint in a Near East region, where his cult can be noticed in the 5th century, spreading from his sepulcher in Lydda/Diospolis (Delehaye 1909, 50 – 51; ODB II, 834; Penkova 2008, 401; Woods 2009, 144). According to all available sources, St. George was born in Diospolis and some legends tied his martyrdom to the same city, in the time of the legendary king Dadianos of Persia. Later accounts placed his death in Nicomedia, during the reign of Diocletian, which is now mostly accepted as historically possible version (Delehaye 1909, 56 – 58, 71; ODB II, 834). After his martyrdom in Nicomedia, saint’s earthly remains were brought back to the city where he was born, creating thus the sacral focus of his cult.

Despite numerous versions of his life, martyrdom and posthumous miracles (BHG 1909, 93 – 96), St. George is believed to be a roman soldier, martyred during the persecutions of the 4th century after many severe and painful ordeals (Acta Sanctorum Aprilis. Tomus III, 100 – 163; ODB II, 834; Woods 2009, 142 – 143; Стоюкова 2013, 41). His Passion was quite early translated to Latin, probably not much later than cc. 500 AD, which is suggested by Decretum Gelasianum, an early 6th century manuscript which prohibited St. George’s Passion as an apocryphal work (Woods 2009, 144). During the early Byzantine period, the city of his birth and his final resting place was an autonomous archbishopric under the jurisdiction of the patriarch of Jerusalem, as well as an important pilgrimage site where miracles were performed at saint’s tomb. One brief note affirms that the church of St. George existed in the city in the late 5th or the early 6th century and it can be found in the topography of certain Theodosius, otherwise historically unknown traveler to the Holy Land (Delehaye 1909, 46; Wilkinson 1977, 65; Woods 2009, 151). The positively testified church was erected in the 10th century. The remains of a monastic church dedicated to the saint are still visible in Lod. They date from the times of crusaders, who erected a temple above the older Justinianic foundations (ODB I, 633 – 634; Grotowski 2010, 108).

During the late antique and early medieval period, the cult of St. George started gradually to spread throughout Byzantium and western Europe. His popularity in Byzantium has especially risen since the 10th century, within the imperial court and household. Among other military saints, St. George was venerated by rulers in times of Byzantine military expansions. The popularity of the cult in the West, on
the other hand, especially grew in the time of Crusaders, when he was considered
to be one of the most meritorious saints for their crucial victories in the Holy
Land (Walter 2003, 134; Бабић 2014, 142 with older literature). What is also quite
interesting is that from the 8th century onward his cult can be traced with certainty
among the Muslim population (Delehaye 1909, 47; Стоїкова 2013).

Wish to visually represent “the invisible”, in our case a saint, and thus to ad-
minister saintly power to originally profane object, is as old as the cult itself. Like
other pan-Christian saints, St. George was represented differently through centu-
ries, although he was firstly depicted in full military attire quite late in Byzantium.
For example, his standing image with spear and sword appeared on the seal of
byzantine official Romanos Skleros, contemporary of emperor Constantinus IX
Monomachos (1042 – 1055). Skleros’ choice of the saint was the result of his close
relation to the emperor, so he embraced the saint-protector of the Monomachos
family. Namely, written sources inform us that a fragment of St. George’s sword
was kept in the palace of Monomachos, while the emperor himself erected a
Constantinopolitan monastic church of St. George in Mangana, subsequently his
final resting place (ODB II, 1283; Корап, Јлпут 2010, 155 – 156). The emperor’s
personal choice of the saint influenced likewise Isaac Komnenos, an important
official during the reign of Monomachos who is later to become emperor Isaac I
(1057 – 1059), and his brother John (Cheynet 2002, 116, 119 – 122). Their choice
of personal protector-saint was conveyed to the future emperors of the Komnenian
dynasty. One issue of John II Komnenos (1118 – 1143) introduced for the first time
the standing image of St. George in military garb (ODB II, 835; Papadopoulou
2016, 189, T. 12.2). The appearance of St. George on this coin is quite similar to his
representation on the seal of the emperor’s paternal uncle Isaac I. The mentioned
coin is important because it marked the dominance of venerating and representing
St. George as a military saint in the Byzantine world.

Putting the saint on the coin as the most powerful agent of propaganda and
imperial ideology during the Middle Ages was one of decisive means for cult
spreading, especially within the Empire and in those regions that had commercial
relations with it. Although territories, where Serbian medieval state expanded,
changed their rulers (Byzantine, Bulgarian and Serbian), organized Church con-
tinuously existed there (Крсмановић 2012, 23, 36 – 38 with older literature).
This is what enabled the cult of St. George and other pan-Christian saints to dis-
seminate among the Serbian population during the early medieval period. One
fresco from a niche on the southern wall of the church of St. Michael in Ston,
which is suggested to be the foundation of prince Stefan Vojislav, a very eloquent
example of its popularity. It depicts the standing image of the saint holding a sword
in one and shield in other hand, and was placed directly opposite the image of
the ruler on the northern wall (Fig. 1) (Бабић 2014, 137; Marković 2016, 154;
Preradić, Milanović 2016, 104). The saint was also depicted on the lead seal
of Stefan Vojislav’s grandson, king Constantine Bodin (1081 – 1101), now kept
in the Archaeological museum in Istanbul, which on the reverse had the bust of St. George with lance and oblong shield, obviously one of Bodin’s personal protectors (Cheynet 2008, 90, 95). It is interesting to stress that Constantine Bodin chose St. George to be the protector-saint of his son by naming him George, in that way transferring the cult to the next generation. After becoming the king, George (1113 – 1118; 1125 – 1131) himself used a seal with incised saint’s name on the reverse (Preradović, Milanović 2016, 104), which can be understood as a substitution for visual representation and kept the same symbolical value. The importance of the cult during the early Middle Ages is likewise testified by several quite early eponym churches, such as the cathedral church of Bar which was chosen by king Grubeša (1118 – 1125) as his burial place (Марковић 1995а, 602; GRS I, 175.5; Preradović, Milanović 2016, 104).

There are also some small finds, mostly items of personal piety, that testify to the popularity of the cult on the central Balkans before the intensifying of Serbian military expansion. Some of them have the representation of St. George, while others only have inscriptions bearing his name. Still, one exceptional find differs from all the others. It is a processional cross kept in the National museum in Niš, originating from nearby Bogdanci (Fig. 2) (Николич 1961; Шпехар 2017, 191 – 192). Its obverse is decorated with five medallions with incised busts of Christ, St. Gerontius, St. George (on the crossing), St. Theodore Tyron and St. Polychronia. All saints are signed in Greek, and the item was dated to the 10th – 11th century. In our opinion it can more probably be tied to the 11th century, i.e. to the time of the intensive spread of the cult in Byzantium, as well as of the Byzantine rule in this part of the Balkans. Throughout the early Middle Ages Niš was a strategically important spot on the crossroads, therefore desirable for all those who wanted to control the central part of the Balkan Peninsula. During the period of strengthening and expansion of Bulgarian state, Niš was, most probably, one of the eparchies of independent Bulgarian church. After the victories of Basil II (976 – 1025) and establishing of Ohrid Archbishopric in 1018, Niš acquired the role of Byzantine anchorage which is testified by written sources. Namely, in the first sigilion of Basil II, considering newly founded Ohrid Archbishopric, Niš was named as the seat of one of the eparchies (Gelzer 1893; Снегаров 1995, 25 – 26, 55 – 59; Живковић 2004, 177; Крмаковић 2012, 29).

Therefore, the appearance of processional cross can be explained by the presence of strong Byzantine church organization and it can be tied to one of the church centers of the eparchy, maybe nearby Svrljig, medieval Sfelogobos, which is mentioned among parishes of Niš (Gelzer 1893, 52; Снегаров 1995, 180). The processional cross from Bogdanci is very interesting for one more reason. Namely, the parents of St. George, St. Gerontius and St. Polychronia, are depicted on it. At the time when this item was made, the popularity increases of a legend that included both of St. George’s parents, which most probably emerged as an interpolation of Byzantine hagiographers in an attempt of standardizing older
versions of the life of the saint. Hagiographic sources mentioned that his father, Gerontius, was prominent Roman dignitary, while his mother Polychronia was a Christian who strongly influenced her son’s religious choice (Delehaye 1909, 66–68; Penkova 2008, 401–403).

Other archaeological finds that testify about the worship of St. George’s cult in this period on the central Balkans are mostly items of personal piety – encolpia and small icons, most of them being discovered by accident. One encolpion is unearthed somewhere in the vicinity of Novi Pazar, and was dated to the 10th–11th century (Fig. 3/1) (Петровић 2001, 121, кат. бр. 49). Only one part of the said encolpion is preserved, with the representation of praying St. George on the revers, dressed in chiton and himation. The presence of saint’s cult in this area can likewise be explained by the activity of eparchic center in Ras, Novi Pazar, as one of the westernmost bishopric of Ohrid Archbishopric (Калић 2007, 197; Крсмановић 2012, 29). The same iconographic solution can be seen on one encolpion which is kept as an accidental find in the National museum in Belgrade, and is dated to the 11th–12th century (Fig. 3/2) (Марјановић-Ђујовић 1986, 5–6). To the same, quite a long period belongs an encolpion from Ravna on the Danube (Fig. 3/3) (Ерцеговић-Павловић 1983, 255; Марјановић-Ђујовић 1987, 45–46, кат. бр. 42; Њехар 2016, 134), which had the representation of two saints, one on each side, both holding books and dressed in chiton and himation. Incised Greek inscriptions actually name four saints: holy bishops Nicholas and Blasius, and holy warriors Demetrius and George. An encolpion discovered in the vicinity of Kladovo was dated to the 12th century (Fig. 3/4) (Марјановић-Ђујовић 1987, 48, кат. бр. 4). It has a representation of the praying St. George on the revers, dressed in chiton and himation, while on the obverse is the Virgin Orans. Since the precise archaeological context for the specimens discovered on sites along the Danube is lacking, we can only assume that the appearance of St. George’s cult in this area should be tied to the activity of Ohrid Archbishopric, the northern border of which ran along the Danube river.

Depicted this way on the items of private piety, i.e. dressed in chiton and himation and not in military garb, St. George appears as a fast-helper whose prayers are on behalf of the owner of the item. Such an iconographical solution is much closer to the older type of saint’s representations, visible in pre-Macedonian iconography, but these items suggest that it continued to be popular later (Марковић 1995а, 571). Still, already before or in the 12th century, i.e. contemporaneously to some above described examples, we do possess some small finds where the saint is represented in typical warrior ornate (Марковић 1995а, 602; Прерадовић, Milanović 2016, 104). One Byzantine seal is discovered on the site Ras–Pazarište, that has a bust of St. George holding a spear in his right hand and a bust of St. Nicholas on the reverse. It is dated to the 12th century, but since it is an anonymous seal we do not possess more accurate dating nor context, although the seal itself testifies about the importance this area had in the provincial organization.
of the Empire and in its efforts to maintain the power in this part of the Balkans (Ivanišević, Krmanović 2013, 458, no. 9).

One small square icon with the representation of St. George as a soldier, dated to the second half of the 12th century, is particularly interesting. The saint is in armour, with a spear in right and shield in his left hand (Fig. 4). A cloak is draped over his shoulder and fastened by agraffe. He is signed in Greek, and along the edges of the icon is a votive inscription of a commissioner which states that the image was made out of silver. Since it is a bronze icon not platted in silver, it is not completely clear whether this is a copy of some today unknown original made entirely of precious metal. If that is the case, the inscription would have been only automatically copied. We must stress that the icon was discovered in a hoard consisting of twelve items in total, eight of which were icons, all dedicated to some of the most venerated pan-Christians saints, in the vicinity of destroyed Dombo monastery near Rakovac in Srem (Баришић 1968, 214–215, фиг. 3; Средњовековна уметност 1969, 42, кат. бр. 16; Nagy 1971, 161–163, 168–169, 174, сл. 4; Andrić 2006, 166). Four of those icons bore the image of the Virgin, one of Christ Pantokrator, one of St. Procopius, one joint representations of Sts. Nicholas and Basil, and one of St. George. Strictly speaking, this was not the territory controlled by Serbia during the Middle Ages, but despite that this find has to be mentioned. Namely, the hoard was most probably buried within one late antique grave, in the area that was somehow related to the Benedictine abbey of Dombo, presumably as its property. The church within the abbey was itself dedicated to St. George. The fact that this is a Benedictine abbey can suggest that the cult could have arrived with Benedictine monks from the West, especially if having in mind the rising popularity of St. George in the time of Crusades. Yet, the abbey was founded by Beloš, Magyar high dignitary, who was of Serbian origin as the middle son of Serbian grand zhupan Uroš I (1112–1145) and Anna Diogenissa, the grand-daughter of emperor Romanus IV Diogenes (1068–1072). He became high ranking officer on Magyar court of Bela II (1131–1141) and, after the death of Bela II, the regent for Geza II (1141–1162), who was a child at the time of his father’s death (Калић 1997, 64–68). This complex and still not completely clear political situation opens a possibility to better understand how icons of exquisite artistic quality, among them that of St. George, undoubtedly of Byzantine provenance since inscribed in Greek, are to be found on the territory under strong western influence. The answer most probably lies in the vicinity of St. George church of Dombo monastery, whose ktetor was not only a Magyar regent and high officer, but also a Serbian and a Byzantine prince.

When considering the period of Nemanjić dynasty, which is better documented thanks to the written sources and preserved monuments and works of art, the cult of St. George can be traced with greater certainty. Actually, one of the most prominent motives in the hagiography of the founder of the dynasty, the canonized myrobłite Simeon Nemanja (around 1168–1199), is the one describ-
ing his miraculous salvation from the imprisonment in the cave as the result of Nemanja’s intensive prayers to St. George. His son, heir and biographer, Stefan the First-crowned king of Serbia (1196 – 1227), cited the words of his father who invoked St. George by listing his numerous passions and sufferings, hoping for saint’s help in this, from the author’s perspective, decisive moment for the dynasty. Although the appearance of the saint as the savior of those who suffer can be observed as a topos in medieval literature, this episode is of great importance for comprehending some of Nemanja’s later moves (Стефан Првовенчани, 68).

According to Domentian, the saint emerged once again as a partaker in Nemanja’s decisive victory over his brothers at Pantina in 1168. Before the battle St. George appeared to one priest in the church dedicated to him in Zvečan, announcing Nemanja’s victory (Доментијан, 250; Ђурић 1968, 71; Марковић 1995а, 600 – 601; Тријић 2011, 73). After winning the battle, Nemanja started building a church dedicated to St. George (Fig. 5), within the monastery of Djurdjevi Stupovi (Pillars of St. George) in the vicinity of medieval Ras. The church is dated to 1170/1171 thanks to the fragmentary preserved inscription in the lunette above the western entrance (Нешковић 1984, 12 – 13; 25; Чанак-Медић, Бошковић 1986, 55). Although still a theme for itself, the appearance of the western towers most possibly defined the church as ruler’s endowment, symbolizing the final domination of Stefan Nemanja over his brothers. In the church, St. George was represented on the eastern wall of narthex, above the portal that led from narthex to naos. He was depicted as a young horseman, with cloak fluttering behind his back. On the preserved part of original vault in the narthex, two pale scenes from the cycle of St. George’s martyrdom are likewise recognizable. Frescoes from the narthex are dated to the period of king Dragutin (1276 – 1282), although below the visible St. George on the horse conservators detected an older drawing of a horseman, presumably of the same saint, that belonged to the original fresco-decoration of the 12th century (Милошевић, Нешковић 1983, 33 – 47). By the erection of this church St. George was definitely enthroned as the protector of the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty, which additionally increased the importance of his cult among the Serbs. Since it can be supposed that the appearance of already mentioned encolpion from the museum in Novi Pazar can be tied to important Byzantine and later Serbian stronghold in Ras, we have to mention another find, a lead icon with the representation of St. George (Fig. 3/5), likewise discovered in the same area (Popović 1999, 348, kat. br. 431, sl. 209). Saint is depicted with a spear in his hand on one side of the icon, while on the other was the cross on Golgotha. This icon is quite late in comparison to the above-mentioned items of private piety, since it was dated to the late 12th or early 13th century, and it suggests that at that time the already existing and functioning Nemanja’s monastery of Djurdjevi Stupovi acquired an important role in dissemination of saint’s cult in this area.

Stefan Nemanja was not the only member of the family who worshiped St. George and believed that had acquired the power by saint’s intervention and help.
Actually, his nephew Stefan Prvoslav, the son of Tihomir, Nemanja’s eldest brother and antecedent on Serbian throne of grand zhupan, erected on his private estate in Budimlja and dedicated his funerary endowment to St. George. The reason for dedicating this church to St. George is not completely clear, because of the complex political situation and ambiguous relations among members of Nemanja’s family and families of his brothers (Пириватрић 2011, 53 – 54, 63 – 66). Nevertheless, including St. George within the narrow circle of the most important saints of the ruling dynasty led to the fact that several following Nemanjić rulers perceived the same saint as the role-model, as well as one of the most valuable receivers of their prayers in wars (Марјановић-Душанић 1997, 249). Stefan Prvovenčani, the First-Crowned son of Nemanja, himself named St. George as decisive helper in his war against Michael I Angelos of Epirus (1205 – 1214/15) (Стефан Првовенчани, 94; Марковић 1995а, 601). Saint’s role was further visually accentuated by a relief placed above the western entrance to the exonarthex of Nemanja’s foundation dedicated to Virgin in Studenica. It has the representation of St. George on the horse, slaying a dragon. The exonarthex itself is a foundation of Stefan the First-Crowned’s oldest son Radoslav, later monk John. This somewhat unorthodox iconographic choice for relief can possibly be understood as a sculptural “copy” of the older fresco above the portal that led from narthex to naos of Djurdjevi Stupovi. This way, the importance of St. George for the successes of the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty, is once again emphasized.

Although there are many later examples of dedicating churches to St. George, the most prominent are those built by king Stefan Uroš II Milutin (1282 – 1321), Nemanja’s great-grandson. Being one of the most important rulers of his times, Milutin erected four foundations dedicated to martyr-saint George. Those are the churches of St. George in Dabarska Orahovica, in the vicinity of Kičevo, at Serava River near Skopje and in Staro Nagoričino (Данило II, 133). Actually, two of those churches, monastery katholikons of St. George Gorg near Skopje and St. George in Staro Nagoričino, are older foundations that were restored by king Milutin as their second ktetor. According to two chrysobulls, the one by Constantine I Tih Asen (1257 – 1277) and the other by king Milutin, the church near Skopje was the foundation of “holy Romanos the Emperor”, maybe Romanos III (1028 – 1034) or even Romanos IV. It was the reason why the church was highly respected by Byzantine, Bulgarian and Serbian rulers (Бошковић 1956, 73 – 74, 81; Благојевић 2009, 149 – 150). St. George’s church in Staro Nagoričino was likewise built over an older structure, the outer walls of which were kept for the lower zones of Milutin’s foundation (Тодић 1993, 35 – 43).

Even in some Milutin’s churches not dedicated to St. George, such as the Holy Virgin of Ljeviška in Prizren, one parekklesion above the narthex was dedicated to this saint, in which the cycle of the saint is only fragmentary preserved (Тодић 1998, 185, 314). It must be mentioned that there are several examples that parekklesia were dedicated to St. George. For example, during the 14th century rebuild-
ing of Uroš I’s (1241/1242 – 1276) church of Holy Trinity in Sopoćani Monastery two parekklesia were created by walling up the spaces between choirs and chapels leaning to the narthex of the church. The southern parekklesion was dedicated to St. Nicholas and it leaned upon the chapel of St. Simeon Nemanja, while the northern was dedicated to St. George and it leaned upon the chapel of St. Stefan the First-Crowned (Preradović, Milanović 2016, 115). That way two of the most prominent and most venerable saints in medieval Serbia gained their place just beside the chapels dedicated to founder’s canonized father and grand-father.

Dedicating churches or chapels to the saints venerated by Stefan Nemanja was very sensitive political as well as religious decision of his successors, who wanted to propagate their relation with canonized myroblite founder of the dynasty. In the case of king Milutin, this topos can be recognized by the dedicatory inscription above the portal in Staro Nagoričino and by a scene of his investiture in the same church (Ђуринић 1968, 68; Тодић 1993, 119; Тодић 1998, 55 – 56; Марковић 1995а, 601; Марјановић-Душанић 1997, 249 and fn. 254). King Milutin is depicted as offering his endowment to the saint, while in exchange the saint, dressed as Byzantine dignitary, is giving a sword to the Serbian ruler as „an emblem of divine character of his conquests“ (Fig. 6) (Dimitrova 2007, 368 – 369). This is an iconographic solution originating from Byzantium, and as a member of the family that already gave several canonized saints king Milutin considered that such a close „gift-exchange“ is a natural consequence of his role of earthly protector of the state. The reason for such a scene can be searched for in one historical event. Namely, military units of king Milutin managed to defeat the Ottoman army in Asia Minor in 1313, so it can even be suggested that the restoration of the church of St. George „Tropaiophoros“ in Staro Nagoričino could have been the fulfillment of a vow (Ђуринић 1968, 71; Тодић 1993, 119 – 121; Тодић 1998, 56). That way, the correlation between St. George and victorious Serbian ruler was further stressed, to which testify the fact that the church of Staro Nagoričino possessed an icon, probably the fresco-icon on iconostasis, in front of which Milutin’s son Stefan Uroš III Dečanski (1322 – 1331) prayed before the battle at Velbužd in 1330. According to written testimonies, Dečanski asked St. George to help him like he helped Simeon Nemanja against his enemies, and made a vow that he would adorn the icon and bestow the church with gifts (Ђуринић 1968, 71; Максимовић 1971, 99 – 100; Ђорђевић 1978, 87; Ђорђевић 1979, 137; Тодић 1993, 27). After gaining the victory, he platted that icon in silver, believing it to be a miraculous mediator between himself and the saint-protector of his family at war (Ђорђевић 1979, 139). The saint also gained a very prominent place in the painting program of Stefan Uroš III’s endowment, Pantokrator church in Dečani and was represented

2 Of course, in this, as well as in other Serbian medieval churches dedicated to St. George, fresco cycles with scenes of saint’s life, passion, deeds and miracles had very important place. For the cycle of St. George in Staro Nagorično c.f. Тодић 1993, 113 – 115; Тодић 1998, 185 – 186.
in a relief on western church façade, above the representation of Pantocrator in the lunette (Максимовић 1971, 101; Малковски 1989, 208; Марковић 1995а, 567; Preradović, Milanović 2016, 115). Like the rest of Dečani sculpture, this relief can also be understood as a „copy“ of the sculpture of Studenica, namely of the relief above the entrance into the exonarthis of Radoslav.

Later Serbian medieval rulers of Lazarević and Branković dynasties continued to venerate St. George, and in temples depicted during their rule military saints had very important place. Usually he is depicted in military garb, although there are rare examples that the saint was depicted as a martyr (Стародубцов 2016, 159 – 161). He kept the role of protector of a ruler in battle in the time of Lazarević dynasty, which can be read on the famous text embroidered in 1402 by Jefimia on the shroud of prince Lazar (Марковић 1995b, 192 – 193). To the popularity of the saint among Branković dynasty testify, for example, the fact that despot Djuradž (George) built a church dedicated to his protector-saint within the monastery of St. Paul on Atos, which is known to us thanks to a founder’s inscription but the church itself is not preserved (Тријић 2011, 71; Стародубцов 2013, 142). Such accentuation of St. George can be understood as a consequence of the growing fear from the Ottoman army, so the warrior saints in general, and St. George always among them, were the necessary helpers in battles and wars.

Not only rulers’ but several medieval aristocratic endowments were likewise dedicated to St. George, such as pareklession in Dečani, or churches in Pološko, Rečani, Vračevšnica or within Maglič castle in Ibar Gorge (Preradović, Milanović 2016, 105 with older literature). One scene in St. George’s church in Pološko monastery (Ђорђевић 1994, 147 with older literature; Павловић 2015, 109) can be used as the best demonstration of why the nobility chose this saint as their patron and how they understood their own position within the complex earthly/divine hierarchy of the Middle Ages (Fig. 7). Namely, on the western wall of the church naos, St. George „Tropaiophoros“ appears as the intermediary between the imperial family, portrayed in the upper register of the scene, and the donors’ family in the lower register. Saint George acted as an intermediary also on one fresco in Dečani pareklession, the family mausoleum of Đorđe (George) Ostouša Pekpal, although there the saint is depicted bringing this renowned Serbian aristocrat to the enthroned Christ. The saint is also depicted on several scenes of his cycle in the same parecclesion (Ђорђевић 1994, 151 – 152). Patron cycle can also be seen in the church of St. George in Rečani (Ђорђевић 1994, 180; Стевановић 2012) so we can assume that such cycles could have also existed in those churches where they are not preserved, such as in Maglič or Vračevšnica (Стародубцов 2013, 138–139). Among other warrior saints, throughout the Middle Ages St. George was depicted in churches that were not dedicated to him, from the Virgin church in Studenica in the late 12th to Resava in the early 15th century, equally in royal and aristocratic endowments. On the 13th century representations the saint was
depicted both as a warrior and as a fast-helping martyr-saint, while in the time of king Milutin military type of the saint became dominant³.

From all the above said it can be noticed that St. George was indeed among the most venerated saints in Serbia during the Middle Ages. As a saint of many abilities and roles, he was worshiped by various strata of medieval society. Understandably, he was best recognizable and understood as an official protector of the ruling dynasties. Such practice can be noticed in Zeta, where Stefan Vojislav and all of his successors venerated St. George as their protector. Some of them even chose to be buried within churches dedicated to him. The same concept can be seen once again among the rulers of the Nemanjić dynasty. Namely, the cult was strengthened by the founder of the dynasty, Stefan Nemanja, and was most probably tied to the relations he had with the Komnenian court in Constantinople. The fact that it continued to flourish throughout the Middle Ages can be comprehended as an intentional need to pay due respect to the saint who miraculously saved dynasty’s progenitor, but also to underline his successors’ personal ties to the saint as well as to their Myroblite ancestor. Of course, since it was a turbulent epoch, the political situation of which was burdened by inner struggles for power, when wars were fought for territorial expansion and for survival of the state, military saints in general gained an important place among celestial helpers of state. Therefore, St. George was respected by rulers and aristocrats, but he also was a protector of some maritime cities under Serbian rule, which is testified by his appearance on coins, which underlined him as a patron (Odak Mihailović 2016, 146).

In those cases, when the representations of St. George could positively be tied to rulers’ or aristocrats’ endowments, his iconography was mostly that of a soldier. That can be seen on frescoes from St. Michael’s church at Ston to Resava katholikon. Those rare representations of him as rider and slayer of the dragon testify that this aspect of St. George as a savior and a victor over evil, was very important primarily as a paradigm of a perfect ruler. In search for the similar saintly protection for themselves and their troops, founders from the strata of military aristocracy embraced the saint, built churches to honor him and encouraged the visual representations of St. George, as well as of other military saints. Yet, his cult can be likewise observed on items small in size, but of great importance, since St. George was one of the most frequent recipients of private veneration. To this mostly testify archaeological finds, primarily encolpia and icons. It can be suggested that he was comprehended as personal protector of those who wore or possessed said objects, guarantee of their personal well-being. What is most striking is that on encolpia, as the most private object of one’s devotion, he is exclusively depicted as fast-helper in the guise of orans praying for the owner’s benefit. Unfortunately,

³ In southern parekklesion of St. Stephen in Žiča monastery, St. George is depicted in chlamis and with a cross in his hand, although the fresco is dated to the time of king Milutin. The reason for this can be searched in a fact that the frescoes of the 14th century imitated original frescoes of the 13th century (Тодић 1998, 308 – 309).
since almost all the archaeological material is actually found accidentally without adequate archaeological context, we cannot observe all the aspects of the saint's cult. Therefore, we are deprived of very important information that would enable us to envision what role cult the played in diverse aspects of life of the medieval Serbian population. What we do know is that the majority of those items can be dated to the pre-Nemanjić period, which means that the cult was actively disseminated during the period of de facto Byzantine domination of the area, i.e. during the 11th century. Therefore, items of personal piety that bore his image are more often to be found in those areas that had strong Byzantine church organization.

After establishing independent Archbishopric in 1219, the Serbian clergy assumed the main role in spreading the cult. In the case of St. George, important churches dedicated to him were the bearers of that process. The increase of saint's popularity can be observed by increasing number of churches and parekklesia whose patron he was, as well as by numerous depictions of the saint. Only one saint outnumbers St. George when the dedication of churches in medieval Serbia is in question and that is St. Nicholas, who is also worshiped as a fast-helper and whose cult was also very closely tied to Stefan Nemanja (Špehar, Tomić Đurić 2015).

Transferred from Byzantium and firmly rooted in Serbian ruling dynasties during the early Middle Ages, the cult of St. George became one of the most venerated in medieval Serbia. Its popularity did not diminish even after the fall under the Ottoman rule. Saint George continued to be venerated until this day, primarily in churches that are still being dedicated to him, as well as by celebrating his feast day within Serbian families who cherish him as their protector-saint.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**Cheynet 2008:** J.-C. Cheynet. La place de la Serbie dans le diplomatie Byzantine à la fin du XIe siècle. – ŢRPB, XLV, 2008, 89 – 98.


**Ђурић 1979**: И. М. Ђорђевић. Две молитве краља Стефана Дечанског пре битке на Велбуџду и њихов одјек у уметности. – Зборник за ликовне уметности, 15, 1979, 135 – 150. /I. M. Đorđević. Две molitve kralja Stefana Dečanskog pre bitke na Velbuždu i njihov odjek u umetnosti. – Zbornik za likovne umetnosti, 15, 1979, 135 – 150.


