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# GRIGORIJE CAMBLAK'S DESCRIPTION OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DEČANI CHURCH: ITS FEATURES AND MODELS

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*Abstract.* In describing the life and deeds of Serbian Holy King Stefan of Dečani (1322–1331), the author of the second biography of the Serbian king and abbot of the Dečani Monastery, Grigorije Camblak (c.1364–1419/1420) gives an account of the construction of the Holy King's endowment dedicated to Christ Pantokrator (Figs. 1–2). He describes in detail the way in which the marble blocks of the church were carved with great skill, prepared and perfectly inserted into the overall structure of the building. He states, "...and the stones are wonderfully and most artfully joined together, so that it seems as if the face of the whole church is one stone wonderfully joined together with skill, so that it seems as if one piece of stone, appearing in an unspeakable beauty...since it is a perfectly carved stone and testifies to the dignity of those who created it" (Цамблак, 1936, p. 23; Трифуновић, 1985, p. 183). The paper notes that the quoted description of the church construction emphatically represents learned ancient literary topos used to describe the most representative architectural monuments, especially those made of marble and deals with the origin and tradition of this specific way of describing the building construction.

## Introduction

The *katholikon* of the Dečani Monastery, a magnificent endowment of Serbian king Stefan of Dečani (1322–1331) and his son Stefan Dušan (1331–1355), represents an exceptional phenomenon in Serbian medieval architecture and, in a broader sense of the word, the architecture of the Byzantine world, and was already considered one of the most representative and beautiful achievements of Old Serbian art in the Middle Ages (Beograđanin, 1960, p. 161). The anonymous author of the Genealogy of Karlovci from the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (1428–1427) counts among the five masterpieces of Serbian medieval art: the pavement of the church in Prizren, the gold of Banjska, the Church of Dečani, the narthex of Patriarchate of Peć, and the wall paintings of the Resava Monastery and says that they are to be found nowhere else (Beograđanin, 1960, p. 161). Among other factors, the monumentality and representative appearance of the facades of Dečani, completely covered with marble, certainly contributed to this assessment.

The peculiarity of the Church of Dečani is evidenced, among other things, by the specific description of its construction in *The Life of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani* (orig. *Живот краља Стефана Дечанског*) written by Grigorije Camblak (c. 1364–1419/1420), the abbot of the Dečani Monastery. This paper deals with the stone masonry method, characteristic of the Church of Dečani, and described by Camblak in his work. The focus of this paper is on the analysis and broader context of how the marble blocks were assembled into the structure, to which Camblak pays particular attention. Although noted in works of previous scholars, this specific manner in which marble blocks of the building were joined together to form a single whole remained as individual literary motif uninvestigated.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, this paper will focus on its origin, meaning, and significance, i.e., to

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<sup>2</sup> For the previous studies of the literary description of the facades of the Dečani Church in general, and remarks, see Поповић, 1936, p. XXVIII; Трифуновић 1985, pp. 183–188 (=Трифуновић, 2019, pp. 263–269); Чанак Медић, 2007; Тодић, 2019, p. 162; Марјановић Душанић, 2007, pp. 199, 280, 329, 363, 438; Гавриловић, 2020, pp. 347–370; for the facades of the Dečani Church and the effect of polychromy, see Петковић и Бошковић, 1941, pp. 19–95; Тодић и Чанак Медић, 2005, pp. 134–323; Кораћ, 1989, pp. 149–157.

the reasons for its appearance in the context of the biography of the Holy King. The paper will first deal with the data from Serbian medieval written sources describing the Dečani Church from the mentioned biography, then with the data from selected Byzantine sources relevant to this topic, and finally with the architectural, literary, and conceptual “model” of this type of building and the literary description of the specific work used in the construction of the Dečani Church and particularly described and emphasized in the second publication *The Life of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani* by Grigorije Camblak.



Fig. 1. Church of Christ Pantokrator, Dečani Monastery (1327–1335), view from north-east, © Blago Fund

Numerous historical, art historical and other testimonies confirm that Dečani Church was built as a monument of the highest importance and beauty. In *The Life of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani* by Danilo's pupil, it is pointed out that the Holy King made the entire decoration and fortification of the monastery “according to the model of the well-known royal monasteries” (Архиепископ Данило и др., 1866, p. 204; Архиепископ Данило, 1935, p. 155; Марјановић Душанић, 2007, p. 282). Its dedication of the highest sacral rank also eloquently confirms this fact, and it also shows the increased importance and position of the Serbian king in the hierarchy of states and rulers, which is gained after the victory at Velbužd in 1330 (Ђурић, 1987, pp. 13–25; Марјановић Душанић, 2007, p. 282). The marble as the most representative and luxurious stone and

material used for the construction of the church also testifies to the imitation of imperial monasteries. It was considered the most beautiful stone, so Camblak points out that “the beauty of the stone” always gives the temple the highest beauty (Дечани 99, fol. 63r–63v; Шафарик, 1859, p. 70; Цамблак, 1936, p. 23). The use of marble and the dimensions of the temple testify to the grandeur of the undertaking. In line with the above, Grigorije Camblak’s description of the construction of the church, which will be discussed in more detail in the next part, in a subtle way also testifies to the grandeur of the undertaking.

### *Camblak’s Description of the Facade of the Dečani Church*

Previous literature has pointed out that Camblak’s description of the facade of the Dečani Church is “neither a commonplace, nor a set of conventional phrases, nor a template, but a pure, direct description given from nature. There is a lot of perceived and real in it, though not really artistic; one can see that the author tries to say everything according to his own guidance, he gives real details at the same time” (Поповић, 1936, p. XXVIII). The above judgment can be agreed with only partially, as Đorđe Trifunović notes (Трифуновић, 1985, p. 185; Трифуновић, 2019, p. 264). Trifunović points out that Camblak’s description, however unconventional it may seem today, can only be partially understood and accepted as a description given directly by nature. He notices that the description is a combination of literary and artistic description and aesthetic discussion, and that aesthetic terms such as “beautiful”, “good”, “form”, etc. appear in the text itself (Трифуновић, 1985, p. 185; Trifunović, 2019, p. 264). In connection with Popović’s judgment, as well as the above-quoted statement of the anonymous author of the Genealogy of Karlovci, it should be noted that the Church of Dečani, as masterpiece of Serbian medieval art, is a truly unique, i.e., unrepeated architectural achievement, which really is “to be found nowhere else” (Beograđanin, 1960, p. 161). At the same time, it should be noted that the manner of its construction and the description of its construction in Camblak’s *The Life of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani* constitute a kind of literary and architectural topos. In other words, although it contains certain elements of realistic description, the key segments of Camblak’s description of the facade are precisely emphasized, with the clear intention of presenting the monastery and its architecture in a well-defined way.

The facade of the Dečani Church dedicated to Christ Pantocrator is completely covered with exceptionally regular, skilfully joined, and carefully assembled marble blocks (Fig. 2), to which Grigorije Camblak draws particular attention:

„ОТ ВЪНѢ ЖЕ, ОУСТРОУГАННИИ МРАМОРЫ СЪСТАВЛЕНЬ МНОГОЧЮДНѢ. БАГРОВИДНИИ КОУПНО И БѢЛНИИ. И КОТОРАГОЖДО КАМЕНЕ КЪ ДРОУГОМОУ СЪЛАНЕНІЕ, ДНВНО И ХОУДОЖСТВА ВЫСОУНШЕ. ЯКО ЕДИННѢ МНѢТН СЕ КАМѢНЬ ВЪСЕГО ОНОГО ХРАМА ЛНЦЕ ПРѢЧЮДНО КЪ ЕДИНОМОУ СЪРАСЛЪСТВА ВЪДОУ СЪЕТАННО ХНТРОСТ“ (Дечани 99, fol. 63r; for other editions: Шафарик, 1859,

pp. 43–94; Давидов и др., 1983). In Lazar Mirković's translation (1936) into modern Serbian, this passage reads, "And outside it (sc. the Dečani Church) is strangely composed of polished red and white marble, and the stones are joined together in a wonderful and most artful way, so that it looks as if the whole face of this church is one stone, joined together in a wonderful way and with artistry, so that it looks as if fused into one, appearing in an ineffable beauty..." (Цамблак, 1936, p. 23). In order to bring the thought of the medieval writer closer to the modern viewer, we also include the same passage in Đorđe Trifunović's translation: "But from the outside it is beautifully composed of polished marble, red and white at the same time, and the stones are beautiful and most united in art, so that it seemed as if one stone of the whole temple was a face beautifully joined by artistry into a fused form" (Трифуновић, 1985, p. 85; Трифуновић, 2019, p. 264). Both translations emphasize the fusion of all the stone blocks into a visual-artistic whole. In this passage, Camblak uses the words "многочуднѣ" ("beautifully", "marvellously", "strangely"), "прѣчудно", "дивно" ("wonderful, wonderfully") and "художства вышнше" ("in a most artful way") to refer to the way in which the stone blocks are joined together to form a whole. The author of *The Life of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani* points out that the stones are so harmoniously combined and joined into a whole that it looked as if the entire building was not composed of many stone blocks, but as if it was built from a single, monolithic stone block, owing to the excellent work of the artists, who are the masters of their craft. The exceptional quality of their work is reflected in the way they work, which is reflected in the peculiar appearance of the monastery facades.

Speaking about this way of describing the church building and its facades, it is important to note that this way of describing buildings appeared in literature long before the construction of the Dečani Church and its description in *The Life of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani* by Camblak. Thus, one of the seventy apostles, Hermas of Philippopolis (2<sup>nd</sup> century), in his work *Shepherd* quotes a similar statement about the way in which "splendid square stones" of the tower (i.e., church) were put together, which is perhaps the earliest use of such topos in Christian context, "for they (sc. the stones) were polished and fitted exactly one into the another that the lines of juncture could not be perceived. And in this way the building of the tower looked as if it were made out of one stone" ("politi enim arrant, et convenientes commissurae cum illis lapidibus; sicque conjungebantur alius ad alium, ita ut commissurae eorum non paterent. Et hunc modum apparebat structura turris, tanquam ex uno lapide aedificata"; Migne, 1857, pp. 901–902; Tornau & Cecconi, 2014, p. 46; Трифуновић, 1985, pp. 186–187; Трифуновић, 2019, p. 267).

We find similar descriptions in early Byzantine writers describing church buildings. The orator Choricus makes similar remarks about the portico of the Church of St. Stephen in Gaza, built at the beginning of Justinian's reign, around 536, "The sides of the porticoes consist, on the one hand, of walls reveted with



Fig. 2. Church of Christ Pantokrator, Dečani Monastery (1327–1335), north facade, © Blago Fund

slabs which have been artfully joined in a uniform composition ...” (Mango, 1986, p. 61). A similar description is found in Procopius of Caesarea’s work about the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople where it says “for walls of shining marble have been artfully reared here” (Mango, 1986, p. 92). Thus, among others, the patriarch of Constantinople, Photius (858–886; 878–886), describes the appearance of the Mother of God of Pharos, the court chapel of the Byzantine emperors in the Great Palace in Constantinople, more precisely its atrium as follows, “The atrium of the church is splendidly fashioned: for slabs of white marble, gleaming bright and cheerful, occupy the whole façade (*prosopsis*), and by their evenness and smoothness and close fitting they conceal the setting of one to another and the juncture of their edges, so that they suggest to the beholder’s imagination the continuousness of a single [piece of] stone with, as it were, straight lines ruled on it—a new miracle and a joy to see” («Προτύλαια μὲν γὰρ τῷ ναῷ περικαλλῆ διεσκευάσθαι καὶ γὰρ μαρμάρων διαλευκῶν πλάκες λαμπρόν τι καὶ χάρειν ἀποστίλβουσαι, ὄλην ἐναπολαβοῦσαι τὴν πρόσοψιν καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἀλλήλασα θέσιν καὶ τὴν τῶν περάτων σινάφειαν τῷ ὁμαλῷ καὶ λείῳ καὶ τῷ προσηρμόσθαι λίαν ἀποκρύψασαι εἰς ἑνὸς λίθου συνέχειαν, γραμμαῖς εὐθείαις ὡσπερ ἐπιγεγραμμένου, θαῦμα καινὸν ὄραθῆναι καὶ ἥδιστον, τὴν τῶν ὀρώντων φαντασίαν ὑπάγουσιν»; Mango, 1958, pp. 185–186; Mango, 1986, p. 85; Betancourt, 2018, pp. 166–167). The same passage in Roland Betancourt’s translation goes as follows, “The entrance to the shrine

is very beautifully composed: for the slabs of very-white marble, bright and graceful, shine brightly, and encompass the whole facade and are fitted against each other [so that] the union of their ends by their evenness, smoothness, and very close attachment conceals the connections as if it were a single stone with straight lines inscribed on it, a remarkable wonder and most-pleasant to see" (Betancourt, 2018, pp. 166–167). What is of particular importance, the passage emphasizes the invisible property of joints between white stones.

If we talk about the Byzantine monuments of the capital, chronologically close to Dečani, the most significant monument is the imperial monastery dedicated to Christ Chora, restored by Theodore Metochites (1259/1260–1332). To use the words of Paul Magdalino, Theodore Metochites, "was to early fourteenth century what Photius has been to the ninth and Psellos to the eleventh; enormously erudite, prolific, talented, and energetic" (Magdalino, 2002, p. 339). He not only designed the appearance of the interior of his foundation, but he also described it in verse. He expressed his understanding and his highest artistic ideals about beauty in the renovation of this monastery "quoting in large Hagia Sophia" (Стевовић, 2018, p. 146). The learned donor himself described its appearance in a highly classical way through 'his own' vision, basing himself in this sense on the work of Photius, and on other writers. Theodore Metochites stated, "I adorned it (*sc.* the monastery of Chora) with exquisite marble stones in most beautiful colours to be seen everywhere, well suited to each other and to the entirety of the work, both those supine on the floor and those which stand upright on both sides, here and there, reaching up on high in seemingly manner. It is a marvel to behold, brimming with pleasure: how each and every piece has been arranged, ordered in accordance with all harmony, fitted together in both alternating and interlacing fashion, each with those of its like; there is nought that is not done in such wise" (Featherstone, 2011, p. 223, I.1019; Стевовић, 2018, p. 146).

It is interesting to note that particular type of description could refer not only to building construction, but also to other construction projects, such as roads. For example, Procopius of Caesarea (500–565), in his work *History of Wars*, more specifically in the section dedicated to the Gothic War, describes the road built by the Roman censor Appius Claudius Caecus in Rome (340–270BC) known as the Via Appia, "...for after working these stones until they were smooth and flat, and cutting them to a polygonal shape, he fastened them together without putting concrete or anything else between them. And they were fastened together so securely and the joints were so firmly closed that they give appearance, when one looks at them, not of being fitted together, but of having grown together. And after the passage of so long time, and after being traversed by many wagons and all kinds of animals every day, they have neither separated at all at the joints, nor has any one of the stones been worn out or reduced in thickness, nay, they have not even lost any of their polish. Such, then, is the Appian Way" (Procopius, 1919, pp. 144–145. V, xiv. 7–12).



Evidently, the way in which Grigorije Camblak describes the facade of the Dečani Church “as if being made of a single piece of stone” was in fact one of the favourite topoi of classical literature on art, indicating the perfection of an artistic work (Lavin, 1998, p. 194). Apart from buildings, this traditional conceit could also refer to revetment and sculpture (Berry, 2011, p. 37). Camblak uses the phrase “so that it looks as if the whole face of this church is one stone, joined together in a wonderful way and with artistry, so that it looks as if fused into one,” which corresponds to the descriptions of classical writers who describe the beauty and quality of the marble work of art as if it were made “from one stone” or “from one block of stone” (*ex uno lapide*). The readers of *The Life of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani* as well as the observers of the Dečani Church were accustomed to such description and perception. This was a kind of expected practice of perception—the marble revetments lead on the beholder’s imagination to believe that they are crafted from a single piece of marble (Betancourt, 2018, p. 167). The first extant example of this expression appears inscribed on the plinth of the massive kouros that the Naxians had erected on Delos (600–590 BC), which in the form of a personified statue of Apollo asserts, “Of the Same Stone Am I, Statue and Base” (Berry, 2020, p. 65). Experts have encountered a confusing and difficult problem here, since this plinth is actually separate piece of stone from the statue. Pausania also observes that the colossal cult statues of Despoine and Demeter enthroned in the temple of Despoine at Lycosoura, in Arcadia (early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC) were hewn from a single block of stone, which today can be refuted from the remains (Berry, 2020, p. 66). Another example of the artwork praised in the similar way is the famous Laocoön group (50–20 BC; Fig. 3). The same scholarly incertitude attests to this marble sculpture. Namely, Pliny the Elder, praising the statue, claims that it was carved out of a single marble-block (Dietrich, 2021, p. 171). However, it is well known that three sculptors cooperated in its production and already in Renaissance, it was objectively established that this statement is incorrect. Referring to different statues, Pliny actually mentions the expression “in a single block of stone” several times in his work (Pliny, 1962, pp. 26–27, 28–29, 32–33). Therefore, it can be concluded, that the expression “in one piece of stone” (*ex uno lapide*) represents a particular kind of praise, suggesting the image of ideal artwork, not physical, fractographic reality. It is the ancient manner of praising a work of art, which represents an outstanding achievement, especially the one hewn in marble (Dietrich, 2021, pp. 171–179). The particular artwork described in such a way was so masterfully executed that it looked as if it were executed in one block of marble, although assembled from parts. The carving *ex uno lapide* constitutes a major technical feat. The use of marble also indicated a specific relation between the artistic technique and the material itself. The stone, i.e., marble as a simple product of nature through a technical process, becomes more complex end-product—the naturalistic statue made of marble (Dietrich, 2021, p. 174).



Fig. 3. Laocoön and His Sons, Vatican Museums, 50–20 BC, © public domain

Although the earliest extant artworks praised as *ex uno lapide* belong to medium of sculpture, the same kind of ideal was present in architecture from the very early age, though no body of theoretical writing now survives from antiquity to prove it (Berry, 2020, p. 66). Already Herodotus (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) describes in his history the admiration for buildings, roofs, and obelisks made of a single block of stone. In *The Account of Egypt*, he mentions “two marvellous stone obelisks” set up in the temple of the Sun, each of them “made of one single block” («ἕξ ἑνὸς ἑόντα ἑκάτερον λίθου»; Herodotus, 1841, p. 143, II.111). He also mentions “the shrine of Leto, the height and length of whose walls are all made of a single stone slab” («ἕξ ἑνὸς λίθου»; Herodotus, 1841, p. 200, II.155). He notes the traditional conceit for the third time, when referring to “the shrine made of the single block of stone” («οἶκημα μονολίθου»; Herodotus, 1841, p. II.175).

This kind of description forms part of a continuous tradition that goes back to the distant past. A structure built from a single stone was perceived in mind of ancients as a continuation of nature and a part of it, rather than an artificial creation (Berry, 2020, p. 66). In this way, the building hewn from the landscape in a single block, rather than constructed stone upon stone, aspired to be an



Fig. 4. Dormition Church, Grand Kremlin Palace,  
Moscow, 1479, © public domain

extraction from nature that assimilated the monument to a rock formation, and in the case of temples, the sacred mountain (Berry, 2020, p. 66).

The presence of the classical literary topos in the *The Life of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani* shows both the erudition of its author Grigoriје Camblak and the way the learned people of medieval Serbia perceived Dečani Church as the most prominent and representative church, the image of perfection and supreme beauty. Apart from the above-said, this literary topos connects Dečani with other monuments which were highly praised in the same way, as being made of a single (block of) stone. Another monument, which is being praised in the same way as Dečani is the Dormition Church in Grand Kremlin Palace in Moscow (1479; Fig. 4), the work of master Aristotele Fioravanti, shows how this topos is present in geographically distant Eastern Christian areas. When talking about Slavonic Christian heritage, the Dormition Cathedral in Grand Kremlin Palace is the closest analogy to the Dečani Church and its description.

Namely, in *The Life of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani* by Camblak one reads: “яко единь мнѣтъ се камѣнь” (Дечани 99, fol. 63r), while in the old Russian chronicle one reads “яко единь камень” (Московскій летписный свод, 1479/1480, fol. 456r; Московскій летписный свод, 1949, p. 324). Russian chronicle states that the Dormition cathedral in Grand Kremlin Palace was wonderful in its majesty, height, dimensions, and other characteristics, and that apart from the Church of Vladimir such church did not exist in Russia (Московскій летписный свод, fol. 456r; Московскій летписный свод, 1949, pp. 323–324).

### Conclusion

This paper led to several conclusions. Firstly, Camblak's description represents a particular and learned topos inherited from Byzantine literature and art which reaches back to ancient past. Secondly, this description of Grigorije Camblak once again affirms him as an excellent connoisseur of ancient culture.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, this description is very significant since it testifies to the highest Byzantine models, hailing from the capital, that the founder Stefan of Dečani had in front of him while he was building his endowment. Finally, this description equally testifies to the place of the Dečani *katholikon* in contemporary and later trends in the architecture of the ‘Byzantine world’.

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<sup>3</sup> On Grigorije Camblak as connoisseur of ancient culture, see Поповић, 1998.

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### Цамблаков опис градње дечанског храма: његове особености и узори

#### Резиме

Описујући живот и дела Светог краља Стефана Дечанског (1322–1331), аутор другог житија Светог краља, Григорије Цамблак (око 1364–1419/1420), посебне редове посвећује начину градње храма Христа Пантократора у Дечанима (1327–1335), прецизније, начину на који су камени мермерни блокови цркве спајани у корпус грађевине (сл. 1, 2). Том приликом, Цамблак наводи: „А камење једнога са другим сачлањено је дивно и најуметничкије, тако да изгледа да је лице целог онога храма један камен, пречудно састављен вештином да изгледа да је срастао у један, који се јавља у неисказаној некој лепоти, тако да се велика благодет сија онима који гледају, и увек лепота камена и величина даје храму највећу красоту, пошто је савршено извајан камен, на достојнолепност онима који су га учинили“ (Цамблак,

1936, стр. 23). У раду се говори о пореклу и традицији оваквог специфичног начина описивања изградње дечанског храма. У њему се износе аналогije оваквом решењу у књижевности и уметности, и, у складу са тиме, указује се на значај ових истраживања.

Примећено је да је у питању древни антички књижевно-уметнички топос, који се јавља при описивању грађевина и уметничких дела, посебно оних изведених у мермеру, или саме мермерне оплате (сл. 3, 4). Оваквим описом се истиче чињеница да су мермерни блокови здања сачлањени један са другим тако да се оку посматрача чини да они органски чине једну целину, која није састављена из делова, иако заправо јесте. Извођење „у једном камену“ (*ex uno lapide*) заправо је идеал, слика савршеног уметничког дела, пре него физичка, опипљива, фактографска реалност. Реч је о античком маниру похвале уметничког дела, које не представља само изузетно достигнуће већ и изузетно достигнуће изведено у мермеру.

Када је реч о дечанској цркви, у овом раду је закључено да Цамблаков опис представља специфичан и учен византијски топос, наслеђен из античке књижевности и уметности који сеже до Херодотовог времена и да овакав опис Григорија Цамблака још једном афирмише као врсног познаваоца античке културе. Осим тога, овај опис веома је значајан, будући да сведочи о највишим византијским престоничким узорима које је ктитор Стефан Дечански имао пред собом док је градио своју задужбину. Најзад, овај опис једнако сведочи о месту дечанског католикона у оновременим и познијим токовима архитектуре „византијског света“.

*Кључне речи:* манастир Дечани; архитектура; опис; градња; Григорије Цамблак; антички топос.



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