

BETWEEN  
THE WORLDS:  
MAGIC, MIRACLES,  
AND MYSTICISM

Vol. 2



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INSTITUTE OF ETHNOLOGY AND FOLKLORE STUD-  
IES WITH ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM  
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E-collection of Conference Proceedings

**BETWEEN  
THE WORLDS:  
MAGIC, MIRACLES,  
AND MYSTICISM**

Vol. 2

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**Paradigma**

Sofia • 2020

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# PAINTERS' NAMES AS SAINTS' AMULETS: OF INSCRIBING ONESELF INTO SACREDNESS

*Jakov Đorđević*

**Abstract:** Michael Astrapas, Eutychios and John Theorianos are the three Byzantine painters who are known to have left signatures painted somewhere amidst the attire of the warrior saints they depicted (swords, armour, shields, or garments). Whether in the form of simple monograms or as part of a more complex formulation, this paper aims to show that they envisioned their names as amulets for the chosen saints, intentionally instigating paradox. After exploring the customary ways in which painters usually acquired a 'sacred share' of their work, the paper analyses the conceptualised understanding of inversion as an instrument pregnant with power and possibilities. Special attention is given to the examples of signatures on painted vessels in narrative scenes, for they do not imply any obvious connection to the proximate saintly figures, and thus seemingly undermine the delivered argument. Finally, by making an illustrative comparison with the famous Wilton Diptych and its angels represented as though they are in service of King Richard II while tending the Virgin Mary, it is argued that the three Byzantine painters relied on the magical conception of inversion, as well as the notion of gift exchange, in order to achieve their ultimate goal – gaining lasting divine protection.

**Keywords:** Byzantine amulets, painters' signatures, gift exchange, vows, mutual bonds

## Introduction

In the late Byzantine period, we encounter signatures of a few fresco-painters hidden somewhere amidst the attire of the saints they depicted. A number of studies were dedicated to this phenomenon. Besides the considerable endeavour that has been made toward the proper identification of the names, certain scholars argued that this practice expressed the painters' devotion to the chosen holy personages, whose cults were widespread at the time (Todić, 2001: 652–662), while others explained the signatures within the context of the artists' deliberate self-presentation (Papadopoulos, 2017), or as an attempt to claim higher prestige for their craft (Drpić, 2013). However, if the signatures had been envisioned as agents in acquiring greater dignity, they ought to have been clearly noticeable to a broad audience. Yet, their veiled nature undermines this notion. On the other hand, if they were markers of the painters' devotion to the saints they were 'inscribed' on, one might ask what the reasoning behind this understanding was or, to put it another way, why would the saints recognise them as the expressions

of devotion toward them? This paper will try to find an answer through a particular ‘thought experiment’ by attempting to penetrate the very logic the practice in question was based upon by analysing signatures of the three late Byzantine painters – Michael Astrapas, Eutybios and John Theorianos. Taking into account that the main issue here is establishing the painters’ potent relation to the sacred through the deliberate act of their own craft, the notion of approaching sacral power will be considered in a broader conceptual framework of the supernatural, which also includes magic.

## Acquiring the sacred share

In order to find out the purpose of the painted signatures, it is first necessary to see how Byzantine artists generally acquired the ‘sacred share’ of the holy figures they depicted. This will also help showing why we are not dealing with the more usual means of forging relationships with the divine often employed in the Byzantine East here, but with the one that connects orthodox needs to ‘magical thinking’, thus strengthening the delivery of the main argument later on.

At the beginning of her article on the *vita* icons, Nancy Patterson Ševčenko (1999: 149) summed up the words of an anonymous author of the *Life of St Nicholas*:

If someone celebrates the memory of the saint with all his heart and soul, says this anonymous author, he will not go away disappointed. If someone builds a chapel in the saint’s name, he will confound the devil as well as all his enemies, and God will increase his possessions, as He did for Job. If someone writes down the life and miracles of the saint, he will be granted release from sins on the Day of Judgment. And if someone expounds the saint’s life and miracles before other men, he will earn his reward in heaven and eternal life.

Later Ševčenko (1999: 150) stated that the *vita* icons did not only recount the saints’ lives by being visual biographies but did so publicly. We also know of a Gregorian monk Ioannes Tohabi, who painted a group of six icons that includes four calendar icons – four panels with images of saints devised in the order they were celebrated during the liturgical year (Lidova, 2009). Thanks to one of the inscriptions he left, we have no doubt about his intentions. Monk Ioannes intended them as a votive gift to the heavenly court so that its depicted members might be his mediators on the day of the last judgment.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, it might be quite reasonable to suppose that painters felt profoundly serious about their work of frescoing churches.

Yet, at least at first glance, characteristic formulations usually left by Byzantine painters next to their names seem to negate this impression. For instance, the inscrip-

<sup>29</sup> These are the painted verses: ‘The four-part phalanx of glorious martyrs/ together with a multitude of prophets and theologians/ all priests and monks successfully painted Ioannes/ as he sent them as prompt mediators before the Lord/ in order to receive redemption from what he is sinful of’ (Lidova, 2009: 83).

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tion in the church of St Demetrios in the Patriarchal Monastery in Peć says: ‘God’s is the gift, by the hand of John’ (Đurić, Ćirković and Korać, 1990: 205). It appears as if the painter is dismissing his true role in rendering the frescoes. Such humbleness is also often underlined by the well-known medieval expression of being ‘a servant of God’, and for that matter, a ‘sinful servant’. However, there is an unusual example from the church of Christ the Savior in Veria with the self-flattering words of painter George Kallierges who proclaimed himself to be ‘the best painter in all Thessaly’. These peculiar words are part of the dedicatory inscription and, therefore, as Sophia Kalopissi-Verti (1994: 146) argued, the donor’s widow wanted to emphasise that she hired the most skilful artist in the region to honour her late husband and incite prestige. Still, if we compare the words delivered in the first-person voice with the customary examples practised among the painters but without contrasting them, we might be able to deduce a strangely similar notion. For instance, painter John was pronouncing himself the vehicle for God’s work. One should not dismiss the position of pride in such a statement, the same as in the proclamation of being God’s servant. Moreover, it is similar to the prestige given to the Emperor’s servants because such loyalty placed a person under the sovereign’s protection. Within this context, Kallierges’ words can sound ‘vain’ only in the sense that they imply his ability to ‘convey’ divine interference in its utmost potential through his work (Đorđević, in print).

Some painters were honoured by the inclusion of their names in the prominently placed inscriptions on church walls, just like George Kallierges, who became part of the dedicatory epigram. Permission depended on the will of the ktetor, and it might have been part of the painter’s fee, maybe even serving as a kind of ‘advertisement’. However, intertwining oneself with the memory of the ktetor in a holy space certainly had a much more essential role for the artist. Remembering church founders meant praying for the salvation of their souls (Đorđević, in print). It was the obligation of the community to cherish the ktetors’ memory because its continuity and prosperity rested upon it. Thus, prominently positioned inscriptions, especially those set in the liminal places, were read aloud at specific events, most probably during particular services (Papalexandrou, 2001; Papalexandrou, 2007). At those times, the gathered congregation would become familiar with the name of a master painter (or master mason) and would include him in the intercessory prayers (Đorđević, in print).

Nevertheless, a number of surviving inscriptions were not intended for the eyes of many potential readers, if any at all. The one from the church of St Demetrios in the Patriarchal Monastery in Peć was frescoed in the apse, which means that painter John’s name could only be seen by the clergymen. In the church of the Virgin in the Studenica Monastery, the painter left words on the base of the drum, and they must have mentioned his name.<sup>30</sup> Today the inscription is damaged and faded, but it would

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30 The remaining words that can be still read today are: ‘Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy and save... and... the sinful and...’ (Kalopissi-Verti, 1994: 141).

not be clearly visible to anyone standing in the naos even at the time of its creation, for it is positioned quite high. This implies God as the primary viewer, which is also indicated by the placement choice, which is charged with exceptional sacredness within the hierarchy of the church space. Taking into account that apse and dome are both marked by God's presence, both inscriptions were conceptually re-enacting the plea of the Good Thief crucified beside Christ, who was promised the Heavenly Kingdom according to the gospel of Luke (23:42). By entrusting their names to God, painters were actually supplicating: 'Jesus, Lord, *remember me* when thou comest into thy kingdom' (Đorđević, in print).

However, there are three painters who devised their names as 'decoration' for the saintly attire. While painter John Theorianos is known to have only signed the blade of the sword of Archangel Michael in the scene of David's repentance in the gallery of the narthex of Hagia Sophia at Ohrid around the year 1350 (Papadopoulos, 2017: 105, 110), Michael Astrapas and Eutykhios, two brothers or father and son (Marković, 2004; Marković, 2010), left their names in a variety of forms in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century, whether it was on saints' swords, shields, garments, or even on the painted liturgical vessels (Papadopoulos, 2017). Sometimes we are dealing with simple monograms (pic. 1), and sometimes these are formulations which precisely stress that the image is painted 'by the hand of' the given painter (pic. 2). How should we understand this practice? Was the simple proximity of the name to the body of the holy person enough to engage the saint as the painter's heavenly guardian, or was there some deeper logic involved? Were they mere expressions of the painters' devotion to the chosen holy personages? But then, how should we understand the examples of painted liturgical vessels? Should we consider these instances only as statements of the painters' identities, with no other intention in mind? The previously discussed examples suggest that we should not.

## The power of inversion

'Creative thinking' was not foreign to the Middle Ages. Finding different paths to fulfilling one's needs and desires by relying on common cultural norms, practices, and beliefs in extraordinary ways was practiced by certain medieval individuals. Positioned above the south portal of the katholikon of the Dečani Monastery together with the relief of the Baptism of Christ is the dedicatory inscription containing information about the building of the church, its founders, and the master builder. The master mason of this Orthodox church was a Franciscan friar named Vita, who came from the city of Kotor:

Fra Vita, minor brother, protomaistor from Kotor, the city of kings, built this church of the Holy Pantokrator for the lord King Stefan Uroš the third, and his son, the illustrious, most excellent, and most glorious lord King Stefan. It

was constructed in eight years and brought to completion in the year of 6843 [1334/1335] (Pantelić, 2002: 25).

Interestingly enough, the text ends with the image of a square divided by two diagonal lines and marked with four dots (pic. 3). Researchers have debated whether this symbol was meant to represent a measurement upon which the *katholikon*'s proportions were based, or the sign of Fra Vita's guild (Todić and Čanak-Medić, 2005: 208–209). Yet, it is possible that the square was envisioned to fulfil both roles simultaneously, intertwining the church's identity with that of the *protomaistor*. However, even more intriguing, this square symbol can be related to the empty square carved next to Christ's head in the tympanum. Taking into account that the relief is rendered as though Christ is standing in an opened sarcophagus, which is, in fact, the River Jordan, Janko Maglovski (1989: 201–202) interpreted the uncarved surface as 'tabula rasa' – the erased list of sins redeemed through the act of baptism and, in the context of the relief's image of an 'entombed Christ', through Christ's death. Therefore, it seems as though the 'inscribed' square with Fra Vita's identity was striving to 'imitate' the relief's square with its blank surface (i.e. empty of any sin), which can be compared to the devotional practice particularly popular among the Franciscan monks – *imitatio Christi*.<sup>31</sup> It seems that the markedly filled space of Fra Vita's sign was intended to be a pictorial translation of the words characteristic for the votive inscriptions: 'remember me, your *sinful* servant'. Being related to an icon in a liminal space, its potency did not depend on any public recognition, but on that of God, at whom the 'visual plea' was directed (Đorđević, in print). This is an astonishing example of creativity in gaining the 'sacred share' of one's own work. Is it possible to track down a similar creative impulse in the signatures of the three painters, 'hidden' in the images of the saints they depicted, and determine the belief structure behind their fashioning?

Anastasios Papadopoulos (2017: 110, 113, 117, 119–120) has interpreted them in an interesting way. He noticed that they are painted on objects in places where one might have expected to find signatures of craftsmen or signs of their workshops in real life. Therefore, the painters' signatures were imitating the living practice in a sort of amusing and witty way. However, there are examples of inscriptions on swords (Grotowski, 2010: 350, n.160), stamps on vessels (Caseau, 2012), and texts woven on textiles<sup>32</sup> that had the apotropaic or prophylactic function of protecting the carrier or the given object. What if the painters' names were intended to align with the latter possibility? Can it be that they were envisioned as a sort of a peculiar amulet paradoxically intended for the

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31 On the personal inclination of the Franciscan order toward the *imitatio Christi* practice, see Neff, 1999: 82–87.

32 There are many instances of adoring garments of the warrior saints in frescoes with pseudo-Kufic motifs. Taking into account that the origins of magical practice were often associated with Near Eastern roots, pseudo-Arabic motifs as apotropaic symbols were sometimes even employed in rendering the church temple; see Walker, 2015: 217, 228. Also, the known example of textile with Kufic inscription is the head shroud from the grave of Pope Clement II, Papadopoulos, 2017: 116.

saints and their protection? What kind of ‘magical conception’ would allow and justify such reasoning?

Among the variety of Byzantine amulets, there were those that relied on magical names, i.e. on the power of the ‘real’ names of the divine protecting forces. Beside various God’s names, those of his archangels and saints could also be invoked (Horníčková, 1998: 45; Foskolou, 2014: 334). They were sometimes incorporated in broader ritual formulae, i.e., ritual language, with supposed potency to perform specific (magical) actions (Horníčková, 1998: 45; Foskolou, 2014: 340). The amulets could also carry an image, even of a Christian subject, which was a symbolical representation of a particular ritual operation (Foskolou, 2014: 345). One fairly common example is the image of a holy rider killing a demon – an equestrian ‘portrait’ identified with different warrior saints and archangels (Ibid., 337–347). It is interesting to note that the three painters chose precisely those two groups of saintly figures to ‘attach’ their signatures to, almost as if they were determined to make fresco paintings into their own personal amulets. However, an essential aspect of amulets is the ability to carry them in close proximity to one’s body, which is obviously impossible to accomplish with the wall paintings. It might be that the choice of warrior saints and archangels was made because of the generally shared notion of their continuous vigilance and ‘readiness’ to act promptly.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the painters’ names are closer to the idea of being amulets for the depicted saints.

The notion that names can carry power is attested in Byzantine sources. Naming a child after a chosen saint was a sort of ritual that established a bond between the two, invoking the holy person to become a new-born’s guardian in life.<sup>34</sup> Yet, the reason why anyone would dare to conceive his name as appropriate to ‘guard’ a saint might have also been based on ‘magical reasoning’. There were ancient ritual festivities of mocking a deity and subverting the cosmic order (Bakhtin, 1984: 6–7, 12, 16–17). For the Byzantines, the idea of harmonious order (*taxis*) was essential for the proper functioning of the whole empire, to the extent that characteristics of its opposite – *ataxia* – were sometimes associated with magic and even the possession of demons (Maguire and Maguire, 2007: 135). One can assume that the idea of turning established relations ‘upside down’ in a society where the idea of order is highly conceptualised was pregnant with power and possibilities. In other words, the act of ‘subverting’ the conventions and customs by bringing about the paradox must have seemed powerful in itself. Maybe the most striking image in Byzantine iconography that embodies this notion is the icon of the dead Christ. It was visualising ‘the King of Glory’ through ‘the ultimate humilia-

33 Warrior saints and archangels were often painted next to the entrances and tombs in order to protect against unwanted visitors and those with ill intentions, see Gerstel, 2001: 269–271; Gerstel, 2011: 139–140.

34 Simonida, the daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos, got her name after the Apostle Simon so that she may escape premature death, unlike some earlier children of the royal couple. The name was determined by lighting twelve candles in front of the twelve icons of the apostles. The last remaining flame was before the icon of Apostle Simon (Radić, 2000: 99).

tion' (Hetherington, 1990: 25), which was, in fact, a hierotopical depiction<sup>35</sup> of the two much venerated Constantinopolitan relics – the True Cross and the Shroud of Christ (Shalina, 2003). The New Testament also gave plenty of opportunities for the manifestation of paradoxes in Byzantine poetry and visual art. The Entry into Jerusalem, for example, was described both verbally and visually as Christ's triumphant procession, while the Saviour is 'enthroned' on an ass (Maguire, 1981: 68–74). Maybe the familiarity with the antithesis as a pictorial 'figure of speech' (Ibid, 53–83) would give the painters higher sensitivity to its power, both metaphorical and practical. Thus, by painting their names as amulets for saints, the painters were relying on an effective principle of inverting the expected relations in order to 'trigger' response from the holy warriors and archangels.

When it comes to the painted vessels that are also 'inscribed' with their signatures, one can genuinely assume that Anastasios Papadopoulos (2017: 107, 112) was correct in refusing to see the words as the expressions of the painters' piety. For how can an object in a narrative scene, and without an obvious connection of belonging to any saintly figure, secure protection? However, it is instructive to acknowledge the subjects of those particular scenes. In the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid, one can clearly deduce letters of the name of Michael Astrapas on a bowl containing pieces of bread in the composition of the Last Supper (pic. 4). At least in the early Byzantine period, there were objects like amphorae stamped with protective signs or inscriptions in order to protect wine from turning sour (Caseau, 2012: 115–116). Taking into account that the representation of the Last Supper indicates the founding of the Eucharist, the bowl with bread symbolically becomes a liturgical vessel holding the body of Christ. Moreover, being 'stamped' with letters of Michael Astrapas' name, the signature can be interpreted as a protective sign guarding its contents – the Saviour's body. Thus, the bond was not established between the painter and the object, but between the painter and Christ himself.

That this type of inversion was not absolutely unique to the three Byzantine painters in the Middle Ages is attested by the famous Wilton Diptych, which is a very telling example, even though it belongs to the visual culture of the late medieval West. The devotional object was painted at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century for King Richard II of England (1367–1400) (Camille, 1996: 166–167). The image on its left wing shows the monarch in prayer accompanied by his holy intercessors, while the right one displays the Virgin Mary with her child in her hands escorted by a company of angels (pic. 5). What is striking here is that the angels are wearing badges with the personal emblem of Richard II – the white hart. As John M. Bowers (2001: 95) has put it:

The purpose of livery badges of this sort was to impose a group identity upon a lord's affinity and to link its members together horizontally while focusing their joint loyalties upon the lord who retained them.

<sup>35</sup> Hierotopy, as a term, signifies the creation of sacred space as well as a related academic field, see Lidov, 2006.



It is as if the angels are in service of King Richard and are working in his best interest while attending the Virgin, almost as his ‘ambassadors’ in the heavenly garden.

Still, the reason why this ‘hermeneutical’ practice of inversion was employed by the three painters has not been unveiled yet. It might be that ‘thinking with’ the Wilton Diptych can help in finding the answer. Being a product of the late medieval court culture with the problematised notion of the expression of loyalty (cf. Perkinson, 2008), it connotes the idea of creating a bond between one offering the service and the liege lord who was obligated to provide protection. These mutual obligations are founded on the archetypal concept of gift exchange, which was actually present in all medieval societies, both East and West. In its basic form, it underlies that every gift requires a counter-gift. It is instructive to quote Patrick J. Geary’s (1994: 78) remark here:

Without suitable counter-gifts, the imbalance would become intolerable; for as anthropologists observe, a donor keeps eternal rights in the gift and hence in the recipient. Only by finding a suitable counter-gift could a recipient ‘revenge himself or herself’ on the giver (the Latin term *talio* can mean both counter-gift and vengeance).

In the case of the Wilton Diptych the bond of reciprocal obligations (exchange) is already established, and it is indicated by the angels wearing the personal emblem of their ‘lord’. They are actually shown as representatives of Richard II on a mission he entrusted them with. It is important to have in mind that ordinary angels in late medieval art can figure as symbolic visualisation of God’s will<sup>36</sup>, as well as the personification of the prayers of the faithful.<sup>37</sup> If we apply the latter notion onto the Wilton Diptych, the ‘subordinate’ angels do not seem so peculiar anymore. They become the representation of Richard II’s fervent prayers to the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, they become the sovereign’s gift offered to her, envisioned as courtly entourage tending ‘Our Lady’s’ needs. Thus, the object of private devotion of King Richard is a remarkable example of an extraordinary creative play designed to unfold before his contemplative gaze, enhancing the experience of prayer.

The signatures of the three Byzantine painters also do not lack in creativity. Moreover, the concept of gift exchange as a means of establishing a bond between two parties is crucial. If inversion, as a powerful tool, was employed to instigate the saint’s response, the nature of that response was determined by the very idea of gift-giving. Being conceptualised as an amulet, the painter’s name was offered as a gift for the saint to serve him like a prophylactic token, which in turn requires an appropriate counter-gift, i.e.,

36 The depictions of the Virgin of Mercy (*Madonna della Misericordia*) are a good example, for they show Christ’s mother protecting the faithful under her mantle from the angels’ arrows. Angels in this context are the executors of the stern will of God.

37 The winged figure feeding the dead as a consequence of the fervent prayers of the living is illuminated next to the text of *Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine* in one manuscript from the 14<sup>th</sup> century; see Camille, 1996: 169. Though it is a female figure, its visual similarity to the angels is intentional.

the protection of the painter. It should be taken into consideration that the inscriptions mentioning the painters discussed in the first section of this paper belong to specifically defined contexts. They can be roughly categorised as those that relied on the sacredness of places they were embedded in, then those which were read aloud during particular services on special occasions, and finally those which were formulated as pleas to the divine. Not belonging to any of the listed groups, the only way in which names painted on saints and (liturgical) vessels could acquire the 'sacred share' was by relying on the 'magical conception' examined here. Unlike the Wilton Diptych, the frescoed saints were not images intended for contemplation, so it was necessary to 'animate' the lasting relationship between them and the painters by imitating the practice that is potent by itself, instead of depending on the 'performance' from the outside.

## Conclusion

The attitude toward the saints, their icons and relics during the Middle Ages was very complex indeed. Moreover, there is not a single attitude; we are rather dealing with a multitude of ways in which medieval people were able to define their relationship with the saints and express devotion toward them. The possible sense of blasphemy should be put aside when one encounters unusual instances of religious practices in the sources, whether written or visual, and it is more fitting to approach them with openness restrained only by the context. A particularly telling example is the ritual humiliation of saints in the West from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century – a rite enacted when holy protectors were not fulfilling their part of the 'deal'. On those occasions, the relics and images were mistreated by being placed on the ground while covered with thorns, incapable to receive proper veneration (Geary, 1994: 95–115). On the other hand, especially in the late medieval period, the relationship could be defined through the passionate devotion of love, sometimes even eroticised (Camille, 2002; Newman, 2002). Therefore, the seemingly daring undertaking of the three Byzantine painters to envision their names as amulets for saints should not be regarded as unthinkable, nor the eastern Christian piety as unfamiliar with 'alternative' ways of devotion (cf. Marinis, 2014).

Though this practice is unique to them alone, it should be ascribed to their personal creativity. The intention to accomplish one's own desire or need can bring about creative 'unorthodox' means, yet they have to relate in some manner to the norms of the context in which they are established. Richard P. H. Greenfield (1995) has shown that magic, though officially condemned, was practiced by many in late Byzantine society, including even monks. Moreover, magic was not predominantly perceived as sinister, but practical. The practicality of 'magical thinking' must have been the primary reason why the three painters turned toward it in their desire to acquire the 'sacred share' of their own work.<sup>38</sup>

38 It is possible that John Theorianos was inspired by Michael Astrapas and Eutykhios because his signature is frescoed in Ohrid – the same town where those two brothers, or father and son, had left their names approximately fifty years earlier, see Papadopoulos, 2017: 110.

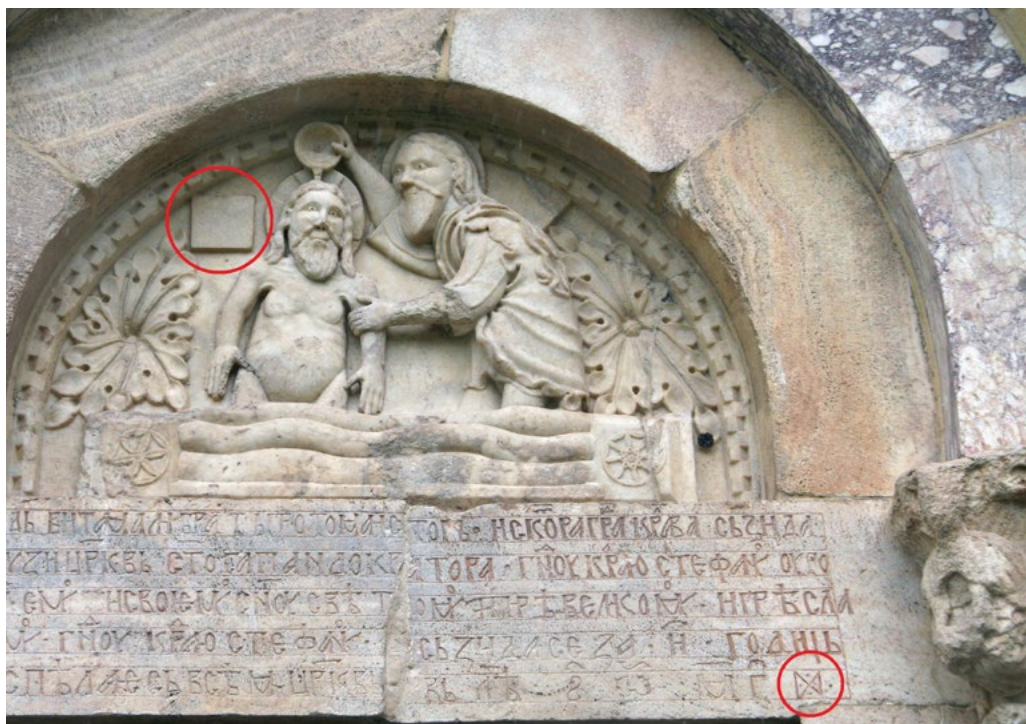
Illustrations:



*Pic. 1. Warrior saints from the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)*



*Pic. 2. Warrior saints from the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)*



Pic. 3. The south portal of the katholikon of the Dečani Monastery (Photo: the author)



*Pic. 4. The scene of the Last Supper from the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (Photo: the author)*



*Pic. 5. The Wilton Diptych (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)*

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