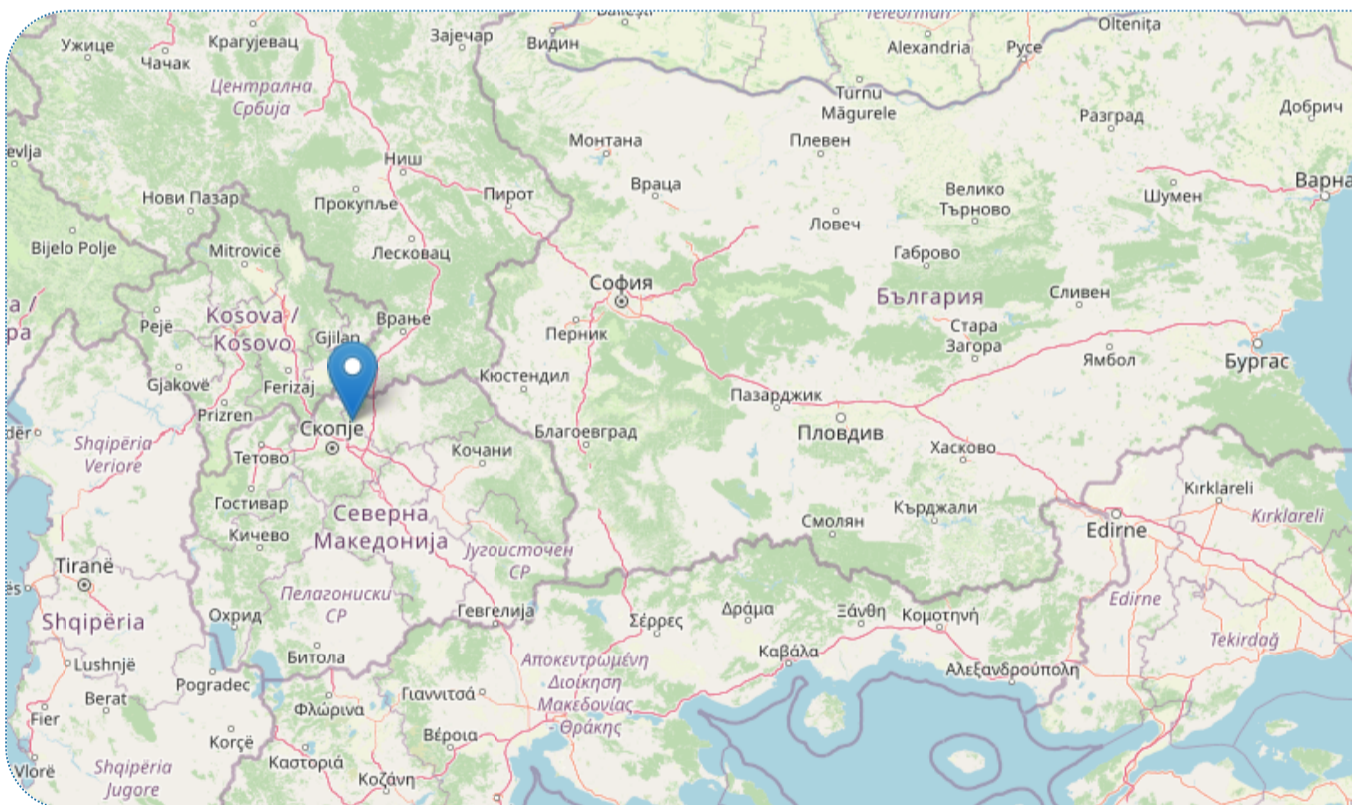


## The Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God, Mateič



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### Description

The monastery of Mateič is dedicated to the Dormition of the Mother of God. It is located in the village of Mateič, near Skopje and Kumanovo in Skopska Crna Gora. The ktetor of this monastery is empress Helena Nemanjić (1310–74) wife of the Serbian emperor Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (r. as king 1331–46, as emperor 1346–55) and mother of the emperor Stefan Uroš V (r. 1355–71). It is believed that the church was built on the site of an older building dating to the 11th century. In the life of emperor Uroš V, Patriarch Pajsije (1614–74) states that the construction of Mateič was started by emperor Dušan before the end of his reign, and that the construction was continued by his wife Helena and son Uroš after his death in 1355. This assumption was accepted by the older generation of researchers, so the construction and fresco painting of the church has been dated to the period after 1355. However, recent research has placed the construction and decoration of the monastery during the reign of

Dušan in the period between 1348 and 1352. Empress Helena was the ktetor of this church, which is confirmed by her donor portrait, but also by the mural program.

The *katholikon* has a cross-in-square plan with a dome on pillars rising above the central part of the naos. In the west is a narthex that is much smaller than in other royal foundations from the time of Nemanjić. The *prothesis* and the *diakonikon* serve as chapels and they have smaller domes. They are connected to the narthex by an ambulatory, which is a system of subsidiary spaces located on the north and south sides of the central nave of the naos. Four domes were erected over the *pastophorion* and the narthex. These four small domes, together with the central one, give the church a five-dome appearance from the exterior. This type of building has as its prototype the churches of the Holy Apostles and the monastery of Christ Pantokrator in Constantinople. The painted program includes a large number of cycles such as the Great Feasts, the Passion of Christ, Christ's Miracles, the Life of the Virgin, the Akathistos of the Virgin, the Church Councils, the Acts and the Martyrdom of the Apostles, legend of the king Abgar, the cycle dedicated to the Ecumenical councils, as well as the scenes from the lives of saints: John the Forerunner, Demetrios, and Elijah.

## Significance

Helena Nemanjić is the first empress from the Nemanjić dynasty. Her role in governing the empire, as well as her role in shaping the visual culture of medieval Serbia, is extremely important. She sponsored the monks and monasteries on Mount Athos, and she also supported the Catholic monasteries in Dubrovnik. Tradition also attributes to the empress the erection of the Church of the Assumption of the Mother of God in Nerodimlje, near the village of Uroševac, where emperor Uroš was buried. However, her most important endowment is the Monastery of Mateič. The monastery was an expression of her private piety and her personal connection with the Mother of God, who served as her protector. Helena's endowment also had a political dimension, which, like her private piety, is reflected in the architecture of the *katholikon* and in the program of frescoes.

The painted image program of this monastery is quite complex. There are several scenes and cycles that rarely (or never) appear in churches from the time of the Nemanjić, such as the cycle of the Acts of the Apostles, the legend of King Abgar, as well as the Genealogical Tree of the Nemanjić, Komnenian, and Assen dynasties. The *prothesis* and the *diakonikon* are dedicated to the Mother of God and the Holy Archangel Michael, where their cycles are painted. The donor portrait is painted on the eastern part of the south wall next to the *diakonikon*. Empress Helena and Emperor Uroš are painted in full Byzantine imperial costume holding together a model of the church. Despite the fact that here mother and son are painted holding the model together, Helena was the main founder of the monastery. This is confirmed by her position within the composition. She is painted in the easternmost part of the south wall next to the altar. The Mother of God Hodegetria, the patroness of the church and to whom Helena offers a model of her endowment as a votive gift is painted in the lunette above the portal that leads from the naos to the *diakonikon*. Emperor Dušan is painted on the front part of the eastern pilaster of the south wall. Above the ktetor portrait are scenes from the Akathistos of the Virgin, which begins in the apse. These compositions speak of the Mother of God who defended Constantinople, but also of the Mother of God who is a chora, vessel of the uncontainable in whose womb Christ incarnated. This cycle also testifies to the fact that the Mother of God was Helena's personal intercessor and protector.

What sets Mateič's frescoes apart from other programs of churches and monasteries on the territory of the Roman Empire is visual representation of the legend of King Abgar. This is a story that details the creation of the Mandyllion. The Mandyllion had an apotropaic function, which means that it provided sacral protection to Helena, who was buried in the church, as well as to monks and others who came to the monastery.

The west wall of the nave displays a mini-cycle of the Dormition of the Virgin divided into five scenes. This cycle indicates the funerary context of the building and the role of the Mother of God as the intercessor of the human race. It is possible that Helena's tomb was in the southwest corner of the nave, which was a common place for the ktetor's tomb. If it was, the tomb certainly communicated with the scene of the Dormition, which promised Helena a place in the heavenly dwellings of the righteous through the intercession of the Mother of God.

The program of the narthex testifies most directly to Helena's ruling ideology. This is expressed through the representations of the Ecumenical Councils in the vault and in the Genealogical Tree on the west wall. North of the western portal, The Genealogical Tree of the Nemanjić, Komnenian, and Assen dynasties is painted. Rulers from the Assen and Komnenian dynasties are now painted for the first and only time within the Genealogical Tree of the Nemanjić dynasty. Empress Helena is painted on the very top of the Tree. This composition emphasizes her origins and genealogical connections with the Komnenian and the Assen.

The program of the monastery of Mateič has an encyclopedic character. Carefully selected cycles testify to the

sublimation of eschatological time starting from the Conception of the Mother of God and Christ's incarnation through Miracles, the Passion, Christ's post-resurrection appearances, and to the final Eschaton, which served as an integral part to Helena Nemanjić self-fashioning as the ktetor of the monastery. These scenes are incorporated in a special way into the conceptual program of the mural cycles, which represent the sublimation of time, all the events that took place and will take place in Mateič as the chosen place where Helena expects the Second Coming of Christ in her tomb.

### Further Reading

Dimitrova, Elizabeta. "Zidno slikarstvo crkve Svete Bogorodice u Mateiču" [The wall painting of the Church of the Holy Mother of God in Mateič]. PhD Dissertation, Belgrade: Faculty of Philosophy, 1997.

This unpublished doctoral thesis focuses on the painted program of the monastery. It offers a detailed description of the entire iconographic program.

Dimitrova, Elizabeta. *The Church of the Holy Mother of God at the Village of Matejche*. Skopje: DataPons, 2016.

This publication is one of the latest studies of the monastery of Mateič. The author briefly addresses the building's history, architecture, and paintings, and gives new information about the construction and painting of the monastery.

Tomin, Svetlana. *Mužastvene žene srpskog srednjeg veka* [The courageous women of the Serbian Middle Ages]. Novi Sad: Akademska knjiga, 2011.

This book focuses on the lives of the imperial women of Byzantium, medieval Serbian, and Bulgaria. One of them is empress Helena Nemanjić. The author writes about her life, patronage, and private piety.

Vojvodić, Dragan. "Od horizontalne ka vertikalnoj genealoškoj slici Nemanjića." *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 44 (2007): 295–312.

This essay is about the Genealogical Tree of the Nemanjić dynasty in churches from the period of the Nemanjić dynasty. The author gives a detailed description of the Genealogical Tree of the Nemanjić, Assen, and Komnenian dynasties from the monastery of Mateič.

Vinulović, Ljubica. "Žene ktitori i vizuelna kultura Balkana u srednjovekovno i rano moderno doba, od XI do XVI veka" [Women patrons and visual culture of the Balkans during Medieval and Early Modern period, from the 11th to the 16th centuries]. PhD Dissertation, Belgrade: Faculty of Philosophy, 2020.

This doctoral thesis offers new interpretations about the architecture and painted program of the monastery of Mateič. It also focuses on the life of empress Helena, as well as her patronage and private piety, which indicate that Helena was a ktetor of the monastery.

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