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PRAYING FOR A FRANCISCAN IN AN ORTHODOX CHURCH: REMEMBERING THE MASTER BUILDER IN THE INSCRIPTION OF THE DEČANI MONASTERY

Abstract: This paper explores the memory of the master builder of the Dečani monastery as it was "performed" through the inscription of the south portal of the monastery's katholikon. Despite the confessional differences, Fra Vita, a Franciscan friar from Kotor, was allowed to place his name on the (Orthodox) church. Moreover, he was permitted to place it beside those of the royal founders, King Stefan Uroš III and his son Stefan Dušan. By focusing on the carved representation in the lunette of the south portal and through the devotional, confessional, and political contextualizations, this paper demonstrates the performative nature of the Dečani inscription and the nuanced complexity of the memory that it cherishes.

Keywords: construction of memory, prayer, confessional differences, Fra Vita, Dečani monastery

During the Middle Ages, remembrance and prayer had a close link, often existing as two sides of the same coin. Being worthy of remembrance meant being worthy of intercessory prayer, which consequently ensured help in the afterlife. This symbiosis triggered numerous creative ways for creating memory, which was always envisioned as a type of performance dependent on cooperation between the living and the dead (cf. Marinis 2017; Brooks 2002,

189–241; Papalexandrou 2010).[1] The prosperity and continuity of a community were rooted in honoring the appropriate deeds and preserving the complex network of bonds between its members, which could not be interrupted even by death (Geary 1994, 83–87, Brooks 2002, 452, 459). Moreover, a new bond that bore mutual benefits and appropriate obligations could be established between a stranger and an already deceased person. Care for personal wellbeing was never understood as an effort divorced from the involvement of others (Đorđević 2018; 2017). As a matter of fact, this would be highly undesirable, since being truly alone meant being abandoned and forgotten, placed out of reach of any help, something that was destined for those enclosed in hell (Papalexandrou 2010, 109–110), and that was manifested in this world in the guise of excommunication (Finucane 1981, 55–57). On the other hand, ascetic seclusion should not be confused with proper solitude because a hermit was always striving toward heavenly company; their admirable endeavors were even supposed to have a positive effect on the nearby communities, veiling the surroundings with protective sanctifying powers, as well as Christendom in general, since the prayers of a holy person were ideally offered as intercessory pleas for everyone (cf. Brown 2006).

The salvific character is an integral part of the memorial inscriptions embedded in sacred places or sacred objects. Nevertheless, it can easily be obscured by or considered secondary to some equally intriguing aspects, such as the fashioning of the presentation of identity, status, and power. The inscription above the south portal of the *katholikon* of the Dečani monastery (fig. 1) represents a perfect example:

> "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).

Its informative nature tends to overwhelm the modern reader with "facts", easily diverting attention from its original intentions. It is well known that it was Stefan Uroš III, known as Dečanski, who ordered for his mausoleum to be built, as described in his *vitae* and the monastery's chrysobull. Still, the strong emphasis on Stefan Dušan in the inscription leaves no doubt that the church was completed under his sole rule, proclaiming him as the equally rightful *ktetor* who is entitled to perpetual memory, i.e. intercessory prayers offered by the monks of Dečani monastery.[2] However, one truly extraordinary feature of

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2   On Dečani monastery, see Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005. For the description of the building of Dečani monastery in the *vitae*, see *Kralj Stefan Uroš Treći* 1989, 55–59; and Grigorije
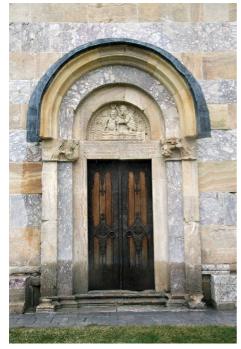
1. The Dečani monastery. (Photo: author)

this inscription is the name of the *protomaistor*, whose identity remains fully defined in accordance with medieval notions of self-presentation. It states his confessional affiliation, profession, and place of origin. It is quite clear from the text that, as a master mason, the Franciscan monk was entrusted with the task of building the church for the two Serbian kings. Furthermore, by referencing Kotor as the "city of kings", the assertion of Fra Vita's loyalty to the rulers is also subtly expressed. Finally, by recording the building period in addition to the year of completion, the employed (pious) labor is acknowledged as well.

However, even though this stone "document" offers plenitude of information, its true purpose was not to inform but to perform. While providing us with an unusual opportunity to examine creative commemorative potential from the position of the master builder alongside the donors, the neatly delivered facts seem to complicate our views on confessional issues—Fra Vita was a Catholic monk remembered on an Orthodox church. Would he perceive this as an opportunity to be prayed for by the Dečani monks? To understand the full memorial complexity of the inscription, it has to be reimagined in its original context.

Though there are a few surviving masons' names in late Byzantine church inscriptions (Ousterhout 1999, 56–57, 253–254), it would be more productive to concentrate on the painters' "signatures" because they come in greater variety while fulfilling the same salvific purpose. The names of painters are most often found in votive inscriptions associated with specific images, such as the one in the Studenica monastery below the Mandilion (Kalopissi-Verti 1994, 141), or in places thought to be charged with exceptional sacredness within the hierarchy

Camblak 1989, 65–67. English translation of the Dečani chrysobull is published in Grković 2004, 84–106.

of the church's space, such as the apse of a sanctuary (Kalopissi-Verti 1994, 139, 144, 149). Sometimes, the names are incorporated into simple invocations asking God to have mercy on the individual at the time of the Last Judgment (Kalopissi-Verti 1994, 142, 147). Other times, they are mere signatures on saints' garments or certain objects within the scenes depicting holy history (Kalopissi-Verti 1994, 139; Drpić 2013). Because of their position in the church or the manner in which they were "hidden" within the frescos, it is unlikely that they were meant to be read.[3] They were envisioned as "written voices", to use Nancy Ševčenko's term (2015), embedded in the sanctified space and animated by liturgical rites (cf. Gray 2011, 33–34). They were imitating the plea of the Good Thief crucified beside the Savior, who was, according to the gospel of Luke (23:42), promised the Heavenly Kingdom. "Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" is the exact petition that the names signed on the walls were trying to accomplish in different ways.[4] To put it simply, by having their names written somewhere in a sacred space, they were entrusted to God's memory. Particularly intriguing are the (votive) signatures hidden on the clothes or equipment of warrior saints and angels, i.e. personalities considered to be especially apt in regards to protecting mortal remains in this

2. The south portal of the *katholikon* of the Dečani monastery. (Photo: author)

world and guiding the soul to safety in the next (Gerstel 2011, 144). Still, the most effective way to achieve salvific help was by incorporating written words into oral performance, which means that the inscriptions placed in beholders' vicinity would be particularly desirable since they could be easily seen and read. There are a few surviving examples where certain painters were specially honored by having their names included in the dedicatory or some other type of prominently positioned inscriptions (Kalopissi-Verti 1994, 146–147, 150).

However, church *ktetors* were the ones who always had the privilege of having their inscriptions inserted in prominent places. They were determined to ensure that their *memory* was engaged in ritual performance and, consequently, read aloud (Papalexandrou 2007; Papalexandrou 2001;

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3   On the contrary opinion, see Drpić 2013.
4   Cf. the inscription in the Paleomonastero of the Hagioi Saranta (Kalopissi-Verti 1994, 142).

Rhoby 2011). This, too, could be achieved in a variety of ways, most often by setting commemorative texts in liminal spaces pregnant with power, like the church portals (Papalexandrou 2007, 166). However, to understand why the south portal in Dečani was chosen, one has to consider the inscription together with the relief of the Baptism of Christ carved in the lunette above (fig. 2). This fruitful symbiosis of text and image was laden with possibilities. The relief was personally connected to King Stefan Dečanski, who was crowned on the feast of Theophany in 1322 (Maglovski 1989, 202). Of no less importance is the fact that he was crowned together with his son, young King Stefan Dušan, on the same day (Marjanović-Dušanić 2007, 259, 261–263). Thus, the carved representation was intertwined with the royal memory of both rulers, encompassing their mutual bond, as stressed by the inscription. As it becomes clear from a closer reading of King's recounting of the event in Dečani chrysobull (Grković 2004, 86, 88), the Feast of Theophany as coronation day enabled Stefan Dečanski to symbolically identify himself with Christ, while the Serbian Church, through the "hand" of archbishop Nikodim, became John the Baptist performing the rite (of baptism/coronation). This was ideologically and politically convenient, for it emphasized his legitimacy in turbulent times (Marjanović-Dušanić 2007, 261–263; cf. Kalavrezou 1997, 72–79). Moreover, it is interesting to note that the same image, the relief of Christ's baptism in Dečani, would serve Stefan Dušan in the years after 1330, as it validated his royal rights and stressed blessed continuity from father to son. Despite the true political reality of Dušan's ascension to the Serbian throne as the sole ruler and his problematic relationship with his father during those years, the coronation memory that was epitomized in the relief, which celebrates the Theophany feast, belonged to him as well as to Stefan Dečanski. Nevertheless, this does not explain the choice of the south portal instead of the west one.

The Baptism of Christ in the lunette has received comprehensive iconographical analysis and was connected to the service performed in the south half of the narthex, i.e. the Great Blessing of Waters, officiated on the eve of Theophany (Maglovski 1989, 202–203). However, instead of understanding images placed on the outer walls of sacred buildings as the defining symbolic signs of what is happening inside, it would be more appropriate to perceive them as icons that actively participate in the rite. If one looks at the relief (fig. 3), it is easily noticeable how heretical it might seem at first glance. Christ is immersed to his waist in the River Jordan, rendered as if he were standing in an open sarcophagus, which was customary for resurrecting figures. Taking into account that since late antiquity and patristic literature baptism was interpreted as a type of symbolic resurrection, this compositional arrangement cunningly intertwined ideas of death, salvation and redemption. But the problematic part is the too-familiar gesture of John the Baptist. By holding Christ's arm with the left hand, it seems as though the Forerunner is resurrecting Christ by pulling him out of his tomb. Naturally, it is beyond any doubt that such an inappropriate

3. Relief of Baptism of Christ in the south lunette. (Photo: author)

image would be immediately dismissed by Danilo II, a very learned archbishop who was in charge of overseeing the construction of the church.[5] What was the purpose of that gesture, then? To echo the question posed by W. J. T. Mitchell (1996)—*what does this picture really want?*—seems quite appropriate, for it gives an image a chance to "speak" more eloquently by engaging its viewer in a dialog. While this is obviously the scene of the Baptism of Christ, it remains unclear why it had to be rendered so unconventionally. Was this supposed to express a particular feature of Christ's and St. John's relationship? Barbara Baert (2012) has convincingly discussed the deliberate blending aspects in late medieval devotion in the West between Christ and John the Baptist, as his Forerunner, and the creativity which sprouted from it in the visual culture. Though such comprehensive analysis remains to be written for the medieval East, similar tendencies of anticipating Christ through the representations of the last prophet, or his disembodied head, to be precise, have been discerned (Carr 2007). Nevertheless, playing with any such notion in a composition defined as it is in Dečani would have crossed into heresy, and, therefore, it has to be dismissed as improbable. On the other hand, if one takes a closer look at the relief and the figures it represents, it becomes obvious that the flowing water and the dynamic figure of St. John, captured in the performance, make Christ seem passive in comparison. It is almost as if the very action (baptism, i.e. rite) is stressed as the central point of this visual "retelling" of the story. Thus, the connection to the Great Blessing of Water appears to be very convincing, for the scene in the lunette would enhance the importance of the service. Monks performing the rite could easily identify themselves with St. John, for they were

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5   On the role of Danilo II in building of Dečani monastery, see Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 266–269.

symbolically recreating the same event. But the problem persists—how could the outside image, being placed above the portal, affect something that was happening inside the church?

There were actually two Great Blessings of Water—one on the eve of Theophany, which was taking place in the narthex; the other was performed in the morning by a spring or a river (Kandić 1998–1999, 61–64; Mirković 1983, 151–157). With general acceptance of provisions taken from the Typikon of Jerusalem in the beginning of the 14th century, where it was prescribed for the procession to go to the River Jordan in order to perform the service (the true place of Christ's baptism), the second Great Blessing was introduced in medieval Serbia (Kandić 1998–1999, 64). This rite provided every monastery with an opportunity to ritualistically transform its surroundings into the Holy Land (cf. Erdeljan 2014; Erdeljan 2017). Through the annual ritual of cleansing the waters in the Dečani monastery, the local Bistrica River became the Jordan River—living water sanctified by Christ's baptism and endowed with protective, healing and even purifying powers (Kandić 1998–1999, 61, 63; Mirković 1983, 151–157). In the monastery's chrysobull, Stefan Dečanski carefully underlined the sacrality of the space of his endowment and its predestination, telling that it was chosen and blessed by his forbearer St Sava, and that, after so many years, it was revealed to him specifically in order to build a sanctuary there (Grković 2004, 88; Marjanović-Dušanić 2007, 279–280). Additionally, in the King's *Vita* written by Gregory Tsamblak, the author described the monastery's landscape as deliberately employing verbal imagery that resembled the Garden of Eden (Grigorije Camblak 1989, 65–66; Marjanović-Dušanić 2007, 280–281). Therefore, the second Great Blessing of Water was one of hierotopic devices employed in the construction of Dečani's identity as the New Jerusalem. After the service was done, the returning procession would go back to the monastery's *katholikon*, back into the reaffirmed heavenly abode, encountering on the way the representation on the south portal. Taking into account that the Theophany is a feast celebrated on January 6, the brightly colored sculpture in the south lunette, with its emphasis on natural forms such as leaves, flowers and water, must have been in striking contrast to the surrounding winter landscape. By seeing Christ in his tomb as though he were rising from it, surrounded by vegetation motifs, and by identifying themselves with the figure of John the Baptist, members of the procession were directed to perceive the service they were performing in connection with the ideas of regeneration, rebirth, and purification, ultimately connected to resurrection, redemption, and salvation. Contrasted to the winter reality of January 6, the depicted "effects" of Christ's baptism made the participants of this ritual aware of the power the service they were performing possessed, which enhanced their involvement. Therefore, the choice of placing the inscription beneath such an image can be observed not only as understandable but also as reasonable. Moreover, it seems that the complex visual orchestration of the south portal was induced precisely to make

sure that the inscription below the south lunette was incorporated into the service. Though there are no surviving written sources that could provide the exact information, it could be assumed that after the procession was back from the river, people would stop before entering the church and gather in front of the south portal while someone would read the inscription aloud. Inscriptions were meant to be read aloud, and finding the right opportunity to include them in some kind of ritual performance was the most preferable way of ensuring their oral utterances (cf. Papalexandrou 2007; Papalexandrou 2001). One can even detect "traces of orality" in the "panegyrical" tone of the Dečani inscription, especially in praise of King Stefan Dušan, who was the sole ruler at the time of *katholikon's* completion and would politically benefit from its oral utterances.[6] Nevertheless, the spiritual benefit must have been the primary goal of intertwining one's memory with the rite of cleansing. Pronouncing personal names in connection with the service of the Great Blessing on the feast of Theophany was a reminder to the monastic community to include them in their salvific prayers on that special occasion because monks, as already mentioned, were obligated to cherish the memory of their donors in order to secure the monastery's wellbeing. But how should the inclusion of Fra Vita's name be understood?

Even though this phenomenon never became customary, there are actually a few surviving examples where painters' and masons' names were included in prominently positioned inscriptions. This act should be perceived as an expression of honoring the painter or mason, as doing so would have been impossible without the permission of *ktetors*. In the Georgian church in Tsalenjikha, the painter Manuel Eugenikos was honored with the inscription on the west pier of the dome, where he directly asks the reader to pray for him (Kalopissi-Verti 1994, 146–147). Perhaps the most intriguing example is the dedicatory inscription found on the church of Christ the Saviour at Veria. Among the lines, one can read the self-flattering words of painter George Kallierges, who proclaimed himself to be "the best painter in all Thessaly". Sophia Kalopissi-Verti (1994, 146) has interpreted this as "the intention of the donor's widow to honor her late husband with a work of exceptional quality, executed by the most skilful painter in the country". Yet, it doesn't explain why these words were delivered in the first person as though they were uttered by the painter himself, evoking an impression of vanity. This becomes particularly apparent when Kallierges' "voice" is compared to the votive inscription of the painter in the church of St Demetrios in the Patriarchal monastery at Peć, which below the image of the Virgin in the apse states: "God's is the gift, by the hand of John" (Đurić, Ćirković and Korać 1990, 205). It seems as though the painter is humbly dismissing his true role in painting of the frescoes. However,

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6   A public reading of the inscription would indicate political continuity and stability, present-ing Stefan Dušan as the heir who is continuing the pious deeds of his father through the patronage of the same endowment.

instead of contrasting these two statements as vanity vs. modesty, they can be observed as expressions of similar tendencies. Painter John was in fact proudly acknowledging God's presence (and interference) in his process of creation, which is somewhat similar in nature to the well-known medieval expression of being "a servant of God"—something that an individual in public self-presentation was most certainly taking pride in.[7] On the other hand, declaring oneself to be the best painter in the region should be perceived, to put it simply, as an ability to "channel" God in full potential—a particular grace that must have been the outcome of the painter's virtuous nature acknowledged by God. Therefore, such a seemingly vain statement paradoxically manifested Kallierges as virtuous and, therefore, worthy of intercessory prayer. The inscription in the exonarthex of the Virgin Ljeviška at Prizren, founded by King Milutin, is another example of devout creativity in acquiring salvific help and "creating memory". It mentions the names of both the master builder and the master painter. Interestingly enough, they are incorporated in the context of almsgiving to the poor and the strangers: the inscription tells its reader that, during the building of the church, the King provided the mason Nikolaos and the painter Astrapas with food and drink, and *now*, when the church is completed, the same should be done for the strangers and the poor (Panić and Babić 1975, 22–27). Hence, King Milutin expressed himself as a pious ruler whose good deeds would help him gain salvation. Moreover, by honoring the master mason and master painter through the mention of their names, he provided them with the opportunity to be prayed for by everyone who found their work worthy of prayer. Every recognized devout deed manifested the individual behind its fulfillment as worthy of intercessory prayer—painting holy personages and building holy places can certainly be included in this context. It should also be noted that this inscription resembles passages characteristic of the monastic *typika*, possibly even copied from the very *typikon* given to the Virgin Ljeviška, which were frequently read aloud, some even once a month (Morris 1984, 126, n.78). It is quite plausible that the "audibility" of the *typika* was appropriated by the inscription and that it was read publicly every time before the almsgiving started, next to the entrance into the exonarthex where it was frescoed. The duty of those receiving the almsgiving was to pray for their benefactor, and the inscription provided them with the necessary information (i.e. King Milutin's name). Furthermore, it also enabled them to learn the names of those whose labor was utilized in building and frescoing the church.[8] Hence, the names of the master builder and master painter were part of the living memory in the Virgin Ljeviška.

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7   It is comparable to proclaiming oneself as the servant of the Emperor, which may also imply a position of prestige. More importantly, such loyalty placed a person under the sovereign's protection.

8   On regulating almsgiving in Byzantine monasteries, see Dimitropoulou 2010, 164–165.

4. Detail of the inscription of the south portal. (Photo: author)

Drawing upon the discussed examples, it is clear that Fra Vita was given the opportunity to be remembered in the Dečani monastery and, consequently, secure his spiritual benefit in the afterlife, despite the fact that the straightforward supplication to the reader is absent from the text for obvious reasons—donors must not be overshadowed. Nonetheless, he left one additional trace of his presence in the inscription. In the last line, after the text is finished, there is a carved square divided by two diagonals and marked with four dots (fig. 4). It has been debated whether this was a construction symbol, upon which all *katholikon*'s measurements and proportions were based, or the symbol of Fra Vita's guild (Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 208–209). Still, it is not impossible that the square actually fulfilled both of those roles simultaneously. However, the question arises: were the beholders able to recognize it as an additional expression of master mason's identity? Perhaps citizens of Kotor could identify it as such, but it is highly unlikely that others were able to do the same. If it is truly the sign of Fra Vita's guild, then its role is more akin to graffiti—personal votive inscriptions or depictions—than a publicly recognizable symbol connected to someone's identity.[9] It would be a kind of "visual prayer", referencing the diagonally positioned blank square in the relief. Janko Maglovski (1989, 201–202) has rightfully argued that, instead of being an unfinished carving surface, this empty square next to Christ's head must have been originally planned as such. He interpreted it as "tabula rasa", the erased list of sins redeemed through the act of baptism and, in the context of the relief's image of "entombed Christ", redeemed by Christ's death. Therefore, the square "inscribed" with Fra Vita's

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9   The primary purpose of the votive graffiti was to be recognized by God and not necessarily read by the faithful. In this, they are comparable to the already discussed hidden painters' signatures.

identity was "imitating" or striving toward the simple ideal form, almost implying a concept that is very dear to Franciscan devotion—*imitatio Christi* (cf. Neff 1999, 82–87). On the other hand, if contrasted to the blank surface of the relief's square (empty of any sin), the markedly filled space of Fra Vita's sign (occupied with two lines and four dots) functioned almost as a visual translation of the words particularly characteristic for the votive inscriptions: "remember me, your *sinful* servant". Thus, any public recognition of the square's meaning was unnecessary; its votive function, as was often the case with votive inscriptions and depictions, was only dependent on its relation to the divine, i.e. recognition by God.

However, unlike any other discussed example, the inscription in Dečani cherishes the memory of a Catholic devout; moreover, one belonging to the Franciscan order. Were Fra Vita's skills praised to the extent of transcending confessional differences? In his hagiographical works, when describing churches built by Queen Jelena and King Milutin, Archbishop Danilo II paid special attention to their beauty as a matter of particular importance (Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 268). Was he the one who recognized the (exceptional) quality of Fra Vita's work and helped him gain permission to include his name in the inscription as a reward or part of his payment? Or was this initiated by the donor(s)? Perhaps this decision was made by King Stefan Dečanski at the very beginning of the construction of the church. Nevertheless, even if this is true, the decision had to be reapproved by his son, the second donor, because the *katholikon* was completed under his sole reign. The emphasis placed on Stefan Dušan in the inscription attests to his prominent role in the completion of the building. On the other hand, the unprecedented example of the inclusion of one Franciscan friar in an Orthodox church might be considered as a kind of expression of a particularly favorable political position toward the Latin Church. Nonetheless, even if this was the case during the rule of King Stefan Dečanski,[10] the same political attitude also had to persist during the period of King Stefan Dušan's reign in order for Fra Vita's name to be included in the inscription. However, this was not the case, at least not as part of the official state policy.[11] Due to the lack of any written source that could resolve these issues, perhaps it would be more productive to approach the problem in a different way. Instead of asking why Fra Vita was granted the opportunity to be remembered in the Dečani inscription, one might ask: why would he want to be remembered there? Why would a member of the Catholic monastic order want to be prayed for in an Orthodox monastery by the Orthodox congregation in an Orthodox service?

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10   In 1323, King Stefan Dečanski was discussing Church union along with the potential marriage between him and the daughter of Philip I of Taranto, see Marjanović-Dušanić 2007, 259–261. I am grateful to Professor Ivan Stevović for bringing this matter to my attention.

11   This is pointed out, for example, in Cvetković 2010, 254; Jović 2015, 174. However, this matter will be discussed in a different way in this paper.

Relations between the Christian East and West in the later Middle Ages (from the 13th to the 15th century) were incredibly complex. Instead of reducing them to simple hostility, a more nuanced look is needed. It has been noted that, even in times of great animosity and warfare, certain ideas, practices and visual forms were able to "pass the fence" between the „enemies". What is striking is the creativity in reinterpreting them in the new cultural/confessional contexts: instead of violating the already existing tradition and set of beliefs, they were endorsing them (Ivison 2000; Gerstel 2000; Carr 1995). Especially telling is the study by Eric Ivison (2000) on burying Byzantine clergymen with chalices. He argues that this funerary custom was not practiced before the 13th century, when it was adopted from the Latin clerics. Moreover, he says: "It seems likely that funerary chalices offered priests a logical extension to the practice of burying the holy bread with clergy" (Ivison 2000, 179). Hence, it was in accordance with the already existing custom. Going back to the main issues of this paper, one should wonder how potent for his own benefit Fra Vita considered the Dečani inscription to be.

He was a Franciscan monk, and the role that Franciscans played in the East as the advocates of the Church union has been acknowledged in a number of studies (Derbes and Neff 2004, 448–461; Živković 2010, 73–74). Furthermore, mendicant orders were great disseminators of the doctrine of purgatory (Le Goff 1984, 297–298). It is beyond any doubt that Fra Vita was concerned with securing help that would shorten the time he had to endure cleansing pains in the afterlife. His Franciscan pro-union sentiment must have made his lasting memory in the Dečani monastery seem especially effective in that regard. However, even beyond those unionistic tendencies, one easily forgets the existence of a shared religious sentiment that both Christians in the East and West had for the same objects, buildings and places that were considered to be endowed with sanctity. Numerous votive gifts passing both ways, as well as complex pilgrim's routes, attest to the fluidity of confessional boundaries. Even certain religious warnings or prohibitions, which plainly incite hostility toward the Catholic or Orthodox population in particular regions, can sometimes, depending on the context and circumstances, be interpreted as the result of growing fear among church leaders of increased interaction and cohabitation between members of the two confessions (Ivison 2010, 183; Tsougarakis 2016).

Throughout its existence, the Nemanid state included areas, especially in the Littoral, that were multi-confessional and predominantly Catholic. Unlike on mainland Greece, the sense of "occupation" by foreign invaders of different confession had never been experienced in the Nemanid state. Therefore, sporadic instances of religious intolerance can hardly be equated with some examples present in other regions of the Balkans.[12] Even the impression of

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12   On the multi-confessional and multilingual society of medieval Serbia, see Erdeljan 2016. On the sense of "occupation" under the Latin rule on mainland Greece, see Kalopissi-Verti 1996.

harsher politics toward the Catholics during Stefan Dušan's reign should be examined with greater caution. This notion is primarily based on the regulations delivered in Dušan's Code.[13] However, to base such assumptions on a highly ideological document is to overlook the bigger picture. Dušan's Code played an important role in establishing the imperial ideology of the new Serbian Empire, elevating the status of Stefan Dušan to that of a law-giving emperor.[14] While the provisions against the members of the Latin Church genuinely existed, it is highly unlikely that they were enforced in places where the Catholic population was predominant, if they were enacted anywhere at all. The town of Kotor, for example, had its own local legislation during the Nemanid rule (Živković 2010, 22); there are also instances which suggest that the conquered Byzantine territories did not undergo any important administrative changes (Šarkić 2005; Kalopissi-Verti 1996). The acknowledged inconsistency in naming the faithful of the Latin Church, or Catholicism itself (see Ferjančić and Ćirković 2005, 319), in harsh terms in Dušan's Code must have been purposeful, with particular goals in mind. It actually gave the opportunity to present the Serbian emperor as the "guardian of Orthodoxy" – an important feature of Byzantine imperial ideology developed during the Komnenian dynasty (Pentcheva 2000). The same model was already appropriated by the founders of the Nemanid state in the fight against Bogomils (Erdeljan 2011). Thus, it could be said that the Catholics were used as heretics due to the general lack of any other serious threat to the "Orthodoxy", a notion that was necessary for constructing the ideological image of a good Christian emperor.

In conclusion, a few additional points should be summarized. King Stefan Dečanski truly discussed a potential Church union with the papal delegation. However, these negotiations lasted only a year, and in 1324, all plans were abandoned (Marjanović-Dušanić 2007, 259–261, 266). The inscription, on the other hand, tells its reader that the church was built in eight years and was completed in 1334/1335, which means that its construction began after the plans for the union had been dismissed. One might also suppose that building preparations and arrangements would also take some time before the actual construction started and that they might have coincided with the yearlong negotiations regarding the union. What if it was during this very period that the inclusion of Fra Vita's name was agreed upon as an expression of those political affiliations? Then, if this was true, why were those arrangements not abandoned the moment the union was rejected? One should remember that the inscription was rendered years later, most likely during the sole reign of Stefan Dušan. This implies that the name of the Franciscan monk could not have been laden with those concrete political implications. On the other hand, to consider it the official (royal) expression or guarantee of "religious tolerance" toward the

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13   See regulations 6–10 in Marković 1986, 58.
14   On Stefan Dušan as a law-giving emperor, see Marjanović-Dušanić 1997, 93; Ferjančić and Ćirković 2005, 227–228.

Catholics in the Nemanid state, there had to be strong enough turmoil that could have inspired such an act; however, this was not the case. Even when the Serbian Kingdom was elevated to the status of Empire, the religious climate of cohabitation between the two confessions was only seemingly disturbed (cf. Ferjančić and Ćirković 2005, 318–321). Besides, the inscription had already existed for more than a decade at that time. Hence, such a favorable climate between the Orthodox and Catholic populations in medieval Serbia should be seen as the main factor that enabled the possibility of including the name of a Franciscan on an Orthodox church instead of a political message as the main implication of the inscription. It seems that the answer is quite simple, really: Fra Vita was especially honored because of the recognition of his skills and work, which must have been regarded as very high indeed. It is not impossible that he himself initiated the discussion about including his name in the inscription as a part of his fee. Intertwining his name with the royal memory, Fra Vita secured lasting prayer for his soul that would help him reduce the time he was due to spend in purgatory. Though purgatory was not accepted by the theologians of the Christian East, the redeeming power of a prayer was acknowledged, so his desire can't have been perceived as unusual. While the need for intercessory prayers was essentially the same, differences in understanding the afterlife journey would only depend on the religious background of the faithful (cf. Đorđević 2018)—without upsetting anyone, except perhaps present-day scholars.

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Jakov Đorđević

Molitva za franjevca u jednoj pravoslavnoj crkvi: Sećanje na protomajstora u natpisu manastira Dečana

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad posvećen je istraživanju oblikovanja sećanja na glavnog graditelja katolikona manastira Dečana, čije ime je sačuvano u sklopu natpisa južnog portala. Bez obzira na konfesionalne razlike, fra Viti, franjevacu iz Kotora, bilo je dozvoljeno da zabeleži svoje ime na (pravoslavnoj) crkvi. Štaviše, dopušteno mu je da to učini odmah uz imena ktitora, kralja Stefana Uroša III i njegovog sina Stefana Dušana. Putem sagledavanja natpisa u kontekstu pobožnih praksi, konfesionalnih razlika i političkih zbivanja, kao i analizom predstave u luneti južnog portala, rad ima za cilj da pokaže njegov performativni karakter u službi očuvanja memorije.

Ključne reči: oblikovanje sećanja, molitva, konfesionalne razlike, fra Vita, manastir Dečani