

AN ICON AS A PRAYER, A POEM AS AN ICON:
THE PERSONAL DEVOTION OF A FOURTEENTH-CENTURY POETESS

by

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(Under the Direction of Asen Kirin)

ABSTRACT

The Serbian princess (*despotica*) Jelena Mrnjavčević (c. 1349-1404), later known as the nun Jefimija, was a noble woman whose great piety and artistic talents inspired the creation of a number of precious devotional objects. The focus of this thesis is a small enkolpion diptych, a pendant icon, 1367-71, that was originally presented to Jelena's son Uglješa Despotović on his christening day by the Metropolitan of Serres, Teodosije (c. 1366-after 1371). When Jelena's son died prematurely at the age of four, the mother composed a poem expressing her sorrow over the loss of her son. The poem was engraved on the back of the diptych. The diptych resides in the Hilandar monastery, Mount Athos, where Jelena's son is buried. The purpose of the present study is to discuss the iconographic program of the diptych and examine the meaning of this iconography and Jelena's literary composition in relation to the different contexts in which the Metropolitan and the Mrnjavčević family found themselves.

INDEX WORDS: Byzantine art, Diptych, Enkolpion, Hilandar, Icon, Jefimija, Medieval Serbia, Miniature woodcarving, Mrnjavčević, Panagiarion, Russian icons

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DEDICATION

To my father and mother

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER	
1 THE DIPTYCH OF DESPOTICA JELENA AND ITS ICONOGRAPHY	4
2 THE MEANING OF THE DIPTYCH.....	17
CONCLUSION.....	28
BIBLIOGRAPHY	67
APPENDIX.....	75
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THE DIPTYCH.....	75

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Enkolpion-diptych of Jelena Mrnjavčević, 1368-71, Hilandar, Mt. Athos.....	30
Figure 1a: Details of Enkolpion-diptych of Jelena Mrnjavčević, 1368-71.....	31
Figure 2: The curtain for the royal doors, 1399, Hilandar, Mt. Athos.....	32
Figure 3: Pall for Prince Lazar's coffin, 1402, Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Belgrade.....	33
Figure 4: The epitaphios of Jefimija (Evpraksija), 1405, Monastery of Putna, Romania	34
Figure 5: Diptych, 17 th c., State Historical and Cultural Museum of "the Moscow Kremlin".....	35
Figure 6: Rectangular Enkolpion, mid 17 th c., Vatopaidi, Mt. Athos.....	36
Figure 7: Diptych Enkolpion, c. 1670, Vatopaidi, Mt. Athos.....	37
Figure 8: Diptych Enkolpion, 1670-79, Vatopaidi, Mt. Athos	38
Figure 9: Diptych, 1 st half of 17 th c., Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Belgrade.....	39
Figure 10: Diptych, beginning of 18 th c., Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Belgrade...40	40
Figure 11: Triptych, 1736, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens	41
Figure 12: Diptych Enkolpion, late 17 th c., Vatopaidi, Mt. Athos.....	42
Figure 13: Relief icon with Saint George and Scenes from His Life, 11 th -12 th c., National Art Museum, Kiev	43
Figure 14: The Novo Brdo double-sided icon, 2 nd half of 14 th c., National Museum, Belgrade ...44	44
Figure 15: Diptych Enkolpion, 15 th c., Armory of the Moscow Kremlin.....	45
Figure 16: Diptych, middle of 15 th c., Moscow Kremlin State Museum.....	46

Figure 17: Panagia, 15 th c, Collection of the metropolitan of Zagreb.	47
Figure 18: The Enthroned Virgin with Prophets and Saints, 1080-1130, Monastery of St. Catherine, Mt. Sinai.....	48
Figure 19: Mother of God and Child Enthroned, with Prophets, late 12 th c., State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.....	49
Figure 20: Panagiarion of Alexios Komnenos Angelos, 2 nd half of 12 th c., location unknown.....	50
Figure 21: The Hospitality of Abraham, late 14 th c., Vatopaidi, Mt. Athos	51
Figure 22: The Hospitality of Abraham, 1 st half of 15 th c., State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.....	52
Figure 23: The Hospitality of Abraham, 15 th c., Byzantine Museum, Athens	53
Figure 24: Panagia: the Virgin with Christ and the Hospitality of Abraham, 15 th c., Museum of Applied Arts, Belgrade.....	54
Figure 25: The Tree of Jesse, 1327-35, Church of the Pantokrator, Dečani Monastery, Serbia ...	55
Figure 26-26a: The Virgin and Child, altar apse, St. George, 1191, Kurbinovo.....	56
Figure 27: John VI Kantakuzenus, <i>Theological Works</i> , 1375, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, (Ms. grec 1242, f. 123v)	57
Figure 28: “Alexei, Man of God” Icon with Frame, 17 th c., State Historical and Cultural Museum of “the Moscow Kremlin”	58
Figure 29: Shrine Lid of Czarevich Dmitrii, 1630, Armory of the Moscow Kremlin.....	59
Figure 30: Embroidered podea with Prince Mikhail of Chernigov, 2 nd half of 16 th c., State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.....	60
Figure 31: Panagia, 17 th c., State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg	61
Figure 32: The Nemanjić tree, 1327-35, Church of the Pantokrator, Dečani Monastery, Serbia..	62

Figure 33: Cameo with Christ Pantocrator, 10 th c., The George Ortiz Collection, Geneva.	63
Figure 34: Double-sided Oval Enkolpion, late 12 th -early 13 th c., Vatopaidi, Mt. Athos	64
Figure 35: Pendant Icon with the Anastasis, late 12 th c., State Historical and Cultural Museum of “the Moscow Kremlin”	65
Figure 36: Coffin Cloth for the Tomb of Metropolitan Peter, 1648-69, State Historical and Cultural Museum of “the Moscow Kremlin”	66

INTRODUCTION

The Serbian princess (*despotica*) Jelena Mrnjavčević (c. 1349-1404), later known as the nun Jefimija, was a noble woman whose great piety and artistic talents made possible the creation of a number of precious devotional objects. The princess not only commissioned but made creative contributions to the objects by adorning them with highly personal prayers and poems (figs. 1-4).¹ These devotional gifts reveal the complexity of Jelena's mind and the depth of her piety. They also point to the crucial time during which the late fourteenth-century Serbian state was losing its independence and the Orthodox faith was facing a threat from another religious force.

During the first half of the fourteenth century, the Serbian empire had prospered under the rule of Czar Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (d. 1355), a descendant of Stefan Nemanja (d. 1199) – the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty. Having conquered many Byzantine territories, Czar Dušan created a powerful, yet short-lived, Byzantino-Serbian empire.² When he died unexpectedly, the throne was left to his nineteen-year old son Stefan Uroš V (1336-71) who was unable to control his father's regional subordinates. The lords, ruling over several smaller regions within the

¹ For the discussion on Jefimija's embroideries – the curtain for the royal doors in the main church of Hilandar, the pall for Prince Lazar's coffin, and the epitaphios in the monastery of Putna in Romania – see Lazar Mirković, *Monahinja Jefimija* (Sremski Karlovci: Srpska manastirska štamparija, 1922), 18-29, 31-34. See also Dobrila Stojanović, *Umetnički vez u Srbiji od XIV do XIX veka* (Beograd: Muzej primenjene umetnosti, 1959), 13-4, 43-5; Pauline Johnstone, *The Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery* (London: Tiranti, 1967), 59, 112, 119-20. Jelena's pall with the *Laud to Prince Lazar* was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the exhibition "Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)," 23 March - 4 July, 2004. See Helen C. Evans, ed., *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*, exh. cat. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 320-1, fig. 193.

² See George Christos Soulis, *The Serbs and Byzantium During the Reign of Tsar Stephen Dušan (1331-1355) and His Successors* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Library and Collection, 1984), 81.

Serbian state, achieved greater independence, thereby weakening an empire that was already shaken by the advancement of the Turks into the Balkans.³

Jelena was married to one of these independent rulers – Uglješa Mrnjavčević, who came to power in 1365. Uglješa ruled as a despot from the city of Serres, in northern Greece, over the territory that included Mount Athos, which was at that time the most important monastic center in the Byzantine world. His brother, Vukašin Mrnjavčević, ruled as the co-emperor with Stefan Uroš V. The Mrnjavčević rule ended in September of 1371 when both brothers died in the Battle of Marica fighting against the Ottoman Turks.⁴ Jelena became a widow at the age of only twenty-two; she also lost her title and had to leave the court at Serres. It is around this time that Jelena took monastic vows accepting the name Jefimija.⁵

The focus of this thesis is a small enkolpion diptych (figs. 1-1a, 1367-71), dating to this transitional period in which the fortune of the Mrnjavčević family and that of Orthodox Serbia changed.⁶ The diptych was originally presented in 1367 to Jelena's son Uglješa Despotović on his christening day by the metropolitan of Serres, Teodosije (c. 1366-after 1371).⁷ When Jelena's son died prematurely at the age of four in the early months of 1371, the mother composed a poem expressing her sorrow over her loss. It is in the poem, engraved on the back of the diptych, that Jelena identifies the original donor of the diptych – the metropolitan Teodosije. When the boy was buried in the main church of the Hilandar monastery, Mount

³ See *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Alexander P. Kazhdan, et. al, eds., vols. 2 and 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1451-3, 1872.

⁴ Dimitrije Bogdanović, Vojislav J. Djurić, and Dejan Medaković, *Chilandar on the Holy Mountain*, trans. Madge Phillips-Tomašević (Belgrade: Jugoslovenska Revija, 1978), 116-20. On the Battle Marica, see Georgije Ostrogorski, *Serska oblast posle Dušanove smrti*, knjiga 9 (Beograd: Naučno delo, 1965), 127-46, esp. 141-4. The battle, initiated by Uglješa, was supposed to stop Turkish invasion into the Balkan peninsula. It was won by the Turks and ended Uglješa's rule in Serres, which was taken by a Byzantine despot – ultimately beginning the fall of all Balkan countries.

⁵ Bogdanović, *Chilandar*, 56, 120.

⁶ In 1997, the diptych was included in the historic exhibition that took place in Thessaloniki, the city that received the honorary title as the cultural capital of Europe for that year. See the exhibition's catalogue: *Treasures of Mount Athos*, exh. cat. (Thessaloniki: Ministry of Culture, 1997), 349-51, fig. 9.25.

⁷ See Appendix for the historiography of the Hilandar diptych.

Athos, the child's parents donated the diptych to Hilandar. This double icon, marking crucial moments in the life of Jelena, lends itself to several different interpretations because of its complex iconography and Jelena's later textual addition. The diptych's original context, its association with the metropolitan and the Mrnjavčević family, provides one set of multi-layered meanings, while Jelena's engraved poem on the back of the icon rearranges these themes and suggests an additional interpretation.

The diptych, on the one hand, conveys a powerful ideological message asserting the beliefs of the Orthodox faith in the midst of the struggle against the invasion of Islamic forces. On the other hand, this icon became an object of private devotion, expressing the personal concerns of a mourning mother. The purpose of the present study is to discuss the iconographic program of the diptych and examine the meaning of this iconography and Jelena's literary composition in relation to the different contexts in which the metropolitan and the Mrnjavčević family found themselves. Moreover, this study aims to draw the two distinct components of the diptych – iconographic and textual – together and to reveal the intricate manner in which they complement each other.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DIPTYCH OF DESPOTICA JELENA AND ITS ICONOGRAPHY

The small diptych, now in the Hilandar treasury, only 14.8 x 6.5 x 1.3 cm when open, abounds in richness of material and complexity of imagery. It consists of two wooden relief panels set in silver-gilted frames encrusted with pearls and semiprecious stones. Jelena's poem is engraved on the gilded plaques that form the diptych's back.

The two carved wooden panels display two different elaborate scenes arranged in a similar manner. In the upper half of the left panel, the enthroned Virgin holding the Christ Child is set within a medallion. The Virgin, in a three-quarter view, sits on a throne with a high curved back, and turns toward Christ. With her right hand, the Virgin points at Christ; this type of the Virgin, who gestures toward her Son, is known as the Hodegetria. The iconic image of the Virgin and Christ facing each other creates the main focal point. Smaller medallions, each featuring the bust of male saints, surround the central one on its left, right, and bottom. Both the facial features and the clothing of these haloed men appear uniform. While most of the saints have long beards, three saints appear to be either beardless or have short beards. All of the saints hold curved objects that represent unrolled scrolls. The saints, symmetrically arranged, turn toward the central vertical axis dominated by the Virgin and Christ.

On the right panel, in a strikingly similar manner, the central medallion of the Hospitality of Abraham is surrounded by twelve smaller ones that include male saints in busts. In the scene of the Hospitality of Abraham, three winged angels sit at the table on top of which stands a

chalice. Their right hands form the gesture of blessing. The two angels sitting on the sides of the table are rendered in profile while the middle angel is in frontal view with his head turning to his right. Behind the angels on the sides, only the heads of Abraham and Sarah are visible. The focal point, formed by the frontal angel and the chalice, is further reinforced by the surrounding figures facing this chalice. Most of the saints have beards, while the one below the central scene, in the middle right, is beardless. Two other saints, the one in the middle left and the other in the upper right, also appear to have short beards. The carving of the two saints in the upper left, however, is damaged and the figures cannot be discerned. On this panel, all of the saints hold objects that are not as curvilinear as the scrolls on the left wing; these forms may represent codexes.

Both large medallions feature an architectural motif – a podium or a screen – below the figures. The horizontal structure consists of a series of parallel vertical lines, each line connected with the next one by an arch. The same pattern appears in the chairs of the seated angels and in the four medallions directly flanking the main compositions. In addition to this architectural design, there are organic motifs in the spaces between the medallions. These forms, carved with crosswise lines, resemble broad and narrow leaves with stems. The roundels are incised with lines which further creates an overall organic unity between the interweaving patterns and the medallions themselves.

The style of carving is uniform in both panels. Parallel lines, which are at times straight and at other times curved, articulate both the modeling and clothing of figures. Furniture and vegetal motifs are decorated with zigzag or perpendicular lines. Because of their diminutive scale, the figures have large heads, simplified facial features with prominent eyes, and angular

bodies. Although the figures do not look identical, very little differentiation exists in their physiognomy and attributes.

Bejeweled silver-gilt frames encase the two carved panels. The wide rectangular frames consist of an narrower inner section, which is outlined with twisted wire and is decorated with a series of coiled wire hoops. The wider part of the frame is encrusted with pearls and semiprecious stones.⁸ There are eighteen octagonal blue and red stones in each frame; they alternate in color and are secured by raised mounts. Five pearls, pinned by nails, cluster between each stone. Pearls also decorate the corners of the frame, but some of them are lost. Twisted wire delineates the outer border of each frame.

The frames also feature two oval links that connect the wings of the diptych. The orientation of these links can be changed so that, when they are vertical, the diptych can be closed displaying only the engraved plaques. When closed, the diptych can be secured by means of a hook and ring system; two hooks, attached to the exterior of the right frame, one on the bottom and the other on the longer side, slide into the two small rings connected to the left frame. In addition, the diptych can be worn around the neck due to two rings affixed on the middle top of the icons' frames.

The frames encase the back of the diptych, reaching around just enough to hold the silver-gilt plaques engraved with Jelena's poem. The twenty-one lines of the poem are divided between the two plaques. The Old Slavonic inscription begins on the wing with the Hospitality of Abraham; this plaque ends with the eleventh line of the poem. On each wing, the inscription is preceded by the sign of the cross and ends with a fleur-de-lis ornament. Horizontal lines separate each row of text, and small parallel lines have been scraped into the spaces between

⁸ None of the sources identify precisely these semi-precious stones.

letters so that the letters stand out from the darker background. The poem as it exactly appears on the diptych, with all textual abbreviations and omissions, follows:

†маликикониньвеликъд
арьимоуципрѣстыѡбразъв
ладуниипрѣстикѡмѣтреихже
великъистѣмоуждаровам
ладомоуладенцоуоуглак
шидеспотовикукгоженнеѡ
скврѣньшасемладѣхѣтапрѣ
ставишевѣвѣуникѡби
телиѣложегробоупрѣ
дасеегожеизделашепрѣ
ѡципрѣстоупакниади.

†сподобижеѡкохѣсити
ѡпрѣѣстаѡмѣтнинменѡ
капанноуѡвѣсѣгдаѡисход
ѣдѣмокескрѣѣтикгож
ѣзрѣхънарождѣшихм
енинарожденномѡтменѡ
ладенцѣкгожежалостьнеп
рѣстанногоритьвѣсрдцим
оكمѡбѣуакмѣмѣрни
мѣповѣждакма.

The reading of the poem is:

†малик икони нь великъ д/арь имоуци и прѣс[вѣ]ты ѡбразъ в/л[а]д[ы]уни и
прѣ[ѣ]у[и]стик б[о]гом[а]т[е]ре ихже/великъ и с[вѣ]тъ моуждарова м/ладомоу
ладенцоу оуглак /ши деспотовику кгоже и неѡ/скврѣньша се младѣхѣта прѣ/ставише вѣ
вѣуник ѡби/тели тѣло же гробоу прѣ/да се егоже изделаше прѣ/ѡ[т]ѣ[и]ци
прѣстоупакниа ради.
†сподоби же вл[а]дыко х[ри]ст[е] и ти/ ѡ прѣу[и]ста б[о]гом[а]ти и мене ѡ/капанноуѡ
вѣсѣгда ѡ исход/ѣ д[о]у[ш]е моке скрѣѣти кгож/[е о]ѣзрѣхъ на рождѣших м/е и на
рожденном ѡт мене м/ладенцѣ кгоже жалость неп/рѣстанно горить вѣ ср[ъ]дци м/оكمѡ
ѡбѣуакмѣ м[а]т[е]рни/мѣ повѣждакма.⁹

In English translation, the poem reads as follows:

Small icons, but a magnificent gift, for they bear the Holy Image of Our Lord and that of the most Pure Mother of God. These the great and holy man presented to the infant Uglješa Despotović, who, in his innocence and tender years, [had his soul] taken into the eternal dwelling, and his body consigned to the grave, for the sins of our first forebears.

Grant, Lord Christ, and you, Most Pure Mother of God, to me, a miserable one, that I should always grieve the passing of my soul, as I did for those who have borne me, and for the infant whom I have borne, for whom my sorrow burns ceaselessly in my heart, [while I am] vanquished by the very nature of motherhood.¹⁰

⁹ Đorđe Trifunović, *Monahinja Jefimija: Književni Radovi* (Kruševac: Bagdala, 1983), 35-7, for the Old Slavonic original and modern Serbian version of the poem “Tuga za mladencem Uglješom.”

¹⁰ This version, by Dr. Asen Kirin and Stuart Lee Brown, is the altered translation of those provided in Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich, *Serbian Poetry from the Beginnings to the Present* (New Haven: Yale Russian and East European Publications, 1988), 22-3, and Celia Hawkesworth, *Voices in the Shadows: Women and Verbal Art in Serbia and Bosnia* (Budapest and New York: Ceupress, 2000), 81.

* * *

Several scholars, primarily Serbian, from the fields of literature, history, and art history have written about this exemplary fourteenth-century diptych in the treasury of the Hilandar monastery.¹¹ These authors discuss the patronage, dating, iconography, and artistic significance of the diptych.¹² They also consider the contemporary religious and political circumstances that shaped the course of Jelena's life and directly influenced her literary oeuvre.

Scholars generally praise the luxurious diptych, defining its importance in terms of it being an unusually early example of wooden relief icons that depicts a specific combination of imagery that became common in later centuries.¹³ The scholars further point out that the diptych is engraved with Jelena's poem, which is considered the first text by a known female Serbian author. They also remark that the poem, though short, is highly expressive and conveys a deep sense of intimacy because of Jelena's emotive confession of her maternal feelings.¹⁴

As Jelena tells in her poem, the metropolitan of Serres presented the diptych to Jelena's son on his christening day. While scholars do not doubt the accuracy of this statement, they have different opinions with regard to the diptych's original appearance. Đorđe Trifunović, for

¹¹ The earliest mention of the diptych can be found in Ničifor Dučić, "Razni zapisi," *Starine Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti* XXI (1889): 130-1. His study is followed by those of Ilarion Ruvarac, "Starinarski priloži," *Starinar* 4 (1892): 119-22, Ljubomir Stojanović, *Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi*, knjiga I (Beograd: Srpska Kraljevska Akademija, 1902), and Mirković, *Monahinja Jefimija*.

¹² See Bogdanović, *Chilandar* – the seminal book on the Hilandar monastery – for an overview of these issues, pp. 46-8, 54-6, 116.

¹³ Bojana Radojković, *Sitna plastika u staroj srpskoj umetnosti* (Beograd: Jugoslavija, 1977), 17-8, 32, 47. Her study is followed by Mirjana Čorović-Ljubinković, "Drvo," *Istorija primenjene umetnosti kod Srba*, vol. 1. (Beograd: Muzej primenjene umetnosti, 1977), 197-211.

¹⁴ Đorđe Sp. Radojičić, *Stari srpski književnici (XIV-XVII veka)* (Beograd: Jugoistok, 1942). 16-9, 79-87; Ibid., "O mladom mladencu Uglješi Despotoviću" and "Maloje prinošenje Jefimije monahinje," *Razvojni luk stare srpske književnosti* (Senta: Matica Srpska, 1962), 157-61 and 176-80, respectively; Ibid., "Stihovi u srebro urezani," *Tvorci i dela stare srpske književnosti* (Titograd: Grafički Zavod, 1963), 107-10; Milan Kašanin, *Srpska književnost u srednjem veku* (Beograd: Prosveta, 1975), 305-12; Mateja Matejić and Dragan Milivojević, *An Anthology of Medieval Serbian Literature in English* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1978), 94-9; Đorđe Trifunović, *Pisac i prevodilac inok Isaija* (Kruševac: Bagdala, 1980), 15, 19; Holton and Mihailovich, *Serbian Poetry*, 19-24; Sreten Petković, *Hilandar* (Beograd: Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture, 1989), 47; Hawkesworth, *Voices*, 76-85.

example, claims that the two wooden relief icons were initially attached at their backs, forming a double-sided pendant icon.¹⁵ In contrast, Gordana Babić suggests that the two icons were once entirely separate.¹⁶ Both these scholars surmise that it was Jelena who encased the two wooden icons with not only the engraved silver-gilt plaques but also with the bejeweled frames.¹⁷ In regard to the diptych's iconographic program, scholars have never completely agreed on the identification of figures surrounding the Hospitality of Abraham. While most authors believe that the figures represent apostles,¹⁸ some claim that they are prophets.¹⁹

Apart from this, Bojana Radojković stated that the present woodcarving is a seventeenth-century replacement of the original fourteenth-century one that could have deteriorated in the course of time.²⁰ Indeed, a great number of the surviving wooden diptychs and triptychs date to the seventeen and eighteen centuries (figs. 5-12); they display similarities in style with the Hilandar diptych, which is the reason for Radojković's claim.²¹ Nevertheless, to redate the diptych's wooden panels to the later century cannot be solely based on this visual resemblance.

¹⁵ Trifunović, *Monahinja Jefimija*, 17.

¹⁶ Gordana Babić, *Icons* (Munich: I.P. Verlagsgesellschaft, 1998), 78-9.

¹⁷ Ibid.; Trifunović, *Monahinja Jefimija*, 17; See also: Dobrivoje Mladenović, ed., *Monahinja Jefimija* (Beograd: Zlatousti, 2004), 10-2.

¹⁸ Mirković, "Ikonica sa zapisom monahinje Jefimije u Hilandaru," *Godišnjica Nikole Čupića* XLII (1933): 45-9; Pera J. Popović, "Dve srpske plaštanice iz XIV stoleća u Hilandaru," *Prilozi za književnost, jezik, istoriju i folklor* XIII, 1-2 (1933): 85-8; Svetozar Radojčić, "Umetnički spomenici manastira Hilandara," *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 3 (1952): 182-6; Babić, *Icons*, 78-9; and Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 17.

¹⁹ *Treasures of Mount Athos*, 350, and Dr. Ljubica Popovich of Vanderbilt University. I would like to thank here Dr. Popovich for her help and insights regarding the identification.

²⁰ Radojković, "The Treasury," In *Hilandar Monastery*, ed. Gojko Subotić (Belgrade: The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1998), 331-44, esp. 340. Radojković actually does not elaborate on or give any reasons for this statement.

²¹ The connection between the Hilandar diptych and later wood relief icons was previously introduced in Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 47, and *Treasures of Mount Athos*, 350-1. On the Kremlin diptych (fig. 5), see *Greek Documents and Manuscripts, Icons and Applied Art Objects from Moscow Depositories*, exh. cat. (Moscow: Indrik, 1995), 91, fig. 65. On the rectangular enkolpion (fig. 6), see Yota Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, et. al, *Enkolpia: The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi* (Mount Athos: The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi, 2001), 234-5, fig. 94. On the diptych enkolpion (fig. 7), see Anna Ballian, "Post-Byzantine and other small art works," *The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi. Tradition – History – Art*, vol. 2 (Mount Athos: Great and Holy Monastery of Vatopaidi, 1998), 500-34, esp. 511-2, figs. 454-5. On the diptych enkolpion (fig. 8), see Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, *Enkolpia*, 244-5, fig. 98. On the early 17th-c. diptych (fig. 9), see Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 33, fig. 30. On the early 18th-c. diptych (fig. 10), see Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 42, fig. 54. On the triptych (fig. 11), see: *A Mystery Great and Wondrous: Year of Salvation 2000*, exh. cat. (Athens: Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, 2002), 106-7, fig. 14. On the diptych enkolpion (fig. 12), see Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, *Enkolpia*, 258-9, fig. 105.

Both the textural properties of the material – wood – and of the inflexible and generic handling of such a medium on a miniature scale do not allow for considerable change in style and manipulation of carving techniques; indeed, miniature woodcarvings display notable consistency in the way in which figures are carved throughout the centuries.²²

Although wood is a highly perishable material, wood relief icons from as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries do survive. The earliest wood icon is of St. George with the episodes from his life, while two others of the same subject date to the thirteenth century (fig. 13).²³ Another icon, depicting St. Kliment, survives from the early fourteenth-century.²⁴ A double-sided relief icon, found at Novo Brdo, dates to the second half of the fourteenth century (fig. 14).²⁵ In addition to these earlier wood-carved icons, two diptychs, though they date to the fifteenth century, must be considered here because they correspond not only to the medium of the Hilandar diptych but also to its overall appearance with two elaborately framed and connected relief icons (figs. 15-16).²⁶ The Hilandar diptych along with these two double-icons, one may suggest, exhibit woodcarving of the highest quality; the icons' richly ornamented

²² See publications on miniature carved icons in wood and other materials: Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, passim; Tatiana V. Nikolaeva, *Proizvedenia melkoi plastiki XIII-XVII vekov v sobranii Zagorskogo muzeia* (Zagorsk: Zagorskii gosudarstvennyi istoriko-khudozhestvennyi muzei-zapovednik, 1960), figs. 96-109.

²³ See Liudmyla Milayeva, "The Icon of Saint George, with Scenes from His Life, from the Town of Maripol," in *Perceptions of Byzantium and Its Neighbors (843-1261)*, ed. Olenka Z. Pevny (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), 102-17, fig. 1, with note 4; Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom, eds., *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843 – 1261* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 299-300, fig. 202; Alice Bank, *Byzantine Art in the Collection of Soviet Museums* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1977), 322, figs. 266-8; Myrtali Acheimastou-Potamianou, *Icons of the Byzantine Museum of Athens* (Athens: Ministry of Culture, 1998), 26-9, fig. 5.

²⁴ Reinhold Lange, *Die Byzantinische Reliefikone* (Recklinghausen: Aurel Bongers, 1964), 124-7, fig. 51; Mirjana Ćorović-Ljubinković, *Srednjevekovni duborez u istočnim oblastima Jugoslavije* (Beograd: Naučno delo, 1965), 37-41.

²⁵ Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 15-7, fig. 21; Ćorović-Ljubinković, "Drvo," *Istorija*, 197-211, esp. 200, figs. 5 and 5a; Gordana Tomić, "Beleške o dvema duboreznim ikonama," *Zbornik za likovne umetnosti* 5 (1969): 281-9, figs. 1-1b.

²⁶ On the diptych with the Crucifixion, see: *Treasures from the Kremlin*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 137, fig. 3, and *Kremlin Gold: 1000 Years of Russian Gems and Jewels*, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 60-1, fig. 16. On the diptych with the Virgin Enthroned, see Nikolaeva, *Plastic Art of Old Russia: Small Carvings and Castings 11th to 16th century* (Moscow: Soviety Khudozhnik, 1968), 47, figs. 75-6; *Zoloto Kremli: Ruskoe ioverlirnoe iskusstvo XII – XX vekov*, exh. cat. (Munich: Hirmer, 1989), cat. no. 14; *Der Kreml: Gottesruhm und Zarenpracht*, exh. cat. (Munich: Hirmer, 2004), 87, fig. 38.

frames further underscore their value. Another significant parallel is found in the fifteenth-century wooden panagia that features the Virgin surrounded by a series of medallions, each containing the image of a prophet (fig. 17).²⁷ Indeed, these various examples of icons with wood-carved images that either predate or correspond to the time of the Hilandar diptych do support the claim that the diptych's carving is very likely original.

* * *

There is no extant work of art in the medium from the end of the fourteenth century that displays the same iconography and overall appearance as the Hilandar diptych. Nevertheless, visual and thematic parallels, found in the art of this period and earlier, do exist. The examination of the diptych's iconography in relation to these comparable examples places the diptych firmly in the context of the late fourteenth-century Byzantine art.

The central image on the left wing, the Virgin enthroned holding the Christ Child, is a traditional iconographic type represented in various mediums from monumental painting to icon painting and miniature relief carving from the sixth century onward.²⁸ The addition of the prophets surrounding the Mother and Son occurred in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The new iconographic type was created in the context of theological debates concerning the

²⁷ *Trésors de l'art serbe médiéval (XIIe-XVIe siècle)*, exh. cat. (Paris: Association Française d'Action Artistique, 1983), 76, fig. 85.

²⁸ See Robin Cormack, "The Mother of God in Apse Mosaics," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, exh. cat., ed. Maria Vassilaki (Milan: Skira, 2000), 91-105, and the catalogue of the same book, *Mother of God*, 263, 267. This iconographic type is present in the sixth-century examples such as the altar apse of Basilica Euphrasiana, Parenzo (90, fig. 45), the encaustic icon from the St. Catherine's monastery at Mt. Sinai (263, pl. 1), and the ivory plaque from the Eastern Mediterranean (267, pl. 3).

Incarnation.²⁹ In this program, prophets either display inscribed scrolls or hold attributes that refer to their prophetic visions about Christ and the Virgin.³⁰ Most often the prophets included are: Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, other major prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and minor prophets such as Habakkuk, Zechariah, Jacob, and Gideon.³¹ Such compositions illustrate the opening verses of the Troparion known as “The Prophets from above worship Thee...” or “The Prophets have proclaimed Thee,” sung at the Virgin’s feast days.³² This iconographic program reinforced the doctrine of the Incarnation, stressed the Virgin’s instrumental role in it, and emphasized the continuity and unity between the Old and New Testaments – the continuity that supports the fulfillment of messianic prophecies.³³

The Virgin with Child surrounded by prophets was depicted in various mediums. One of the earliest known examples of such iconography are the mid-twelfth-century icon from Mt. Sinai (fig. 18) and the late twelfth-century icon from the Hermitage (fig. 19).³⁴ A panagiaron

²⁹ See Olga Etinhof, “The Image of the Church in the Iconography of ‘The Virgin with Prophets’ of the 11th – 12th Centuries,” in *Drevne-russkoe iskusstvo: isledovania i atribucii* (S. Peterburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1997), 37-53, esp. 45-6; Yuri Piatnitsky, “The Panagiaron of Alexios Komnenos Angelos and Middle Byzantine Painting,” in *Perceptions*, 40-55, esp. 46; and Michael D. Taylor, “A Historiated Tree of Jesse,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34-35 (1980-81): 125-76, esp. 145-6, who primarily discusses images of the prophets surrounding the figure of Christ and their significance in supporting the doctrine of the Incarnation.

³⁰ See George Galavaris, “Majestas Mariae in Late Greek and Russian Icons,” in *Icons and East Christian Works of Art*, ed. Michel van Rijn (Amsterdam: Michel van Rijn, 1980), 7-18, esp. 10; Euthymios Tsigaridas, “The Mother of God in Wall-Paintings,” *Mother of God*, 125-37, esp. 136.

³¹ Tsigaridas, “The Mother of God in Wall-Paintings,” *Mother of God*, 136.

³² Ibid.; Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 31-2; The Troparion includes: “Prophets (or prophets from above) proclaimed you (the Virgin Mary) beforehand as the vase, the mystic staff (whereupon the unfading flower blossomed), the tablets of the Law, the Arc, the lamp, golden censer and tabernacle, the dewey fleece (foreseen by Gideon), palace, ladder and throne of the King ...” Quoted in Galavaris, “Majestas Mariae,” 10.

³³ On the continuity between the Old and New Testaments see Taylor, “Tree of Jesse,” 144.

³⁴ Both icons are discussed in Etinhof, “Image of the Church,” *Drevne-russkoe iskusstvo*, 37-55, and in Piatnitsky, “Panagiaron of Alexios,” *Perceptions*, 46-7. On the Mt. Sinai icon see the Catalogue in *Mother of God*, 314-6, pl. 28 with further bibliography. On the Hermitage icon see Yuri Piatnitsky et al., eds. *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia: Orthodox Art from the Sixth to the Twentieth Century*, exh. cat. (London: The Saint Catherine Foundation, 2000), 110-2, fig. B90.

from the second half of the twelfth century portrays the same theme, with the Virgin here rendered in bust length format (fig. 20).³⁵

The subject of the diptych's right wing is the Hospitality of Abraham. The event, described in Genesis (18: 1-18), has been rendered in art since the fourth century.³⁶ According to the biblical account, God in the guise of three men appeared to Abraham in Mamre outside of his tent. When Abraham saw the three guests, he offered them food and drink. He ordered his wife Sarah to bake for the men while he had a young boy sacrifice a calf. While eating, the three men asked for Abraham's wife, informing him that Sarah will bear a son by the time of their next visit. Like Abraham who was at that time about one hundred years of age, Sarah was old and did not at first believe that she could bear a child, but the men questioning her asked whether anything was difficult for God. When the three men were leaving, the Lord said that a great and powerful nation would spring from Abraham.

From early on, the three men visiting by Abraham's tent have been referred to as three angels and have been recognized as a prefiguration of the Holy Trinity.³⁷ As early as the fourth century, the central angel has been identified with Christ, as a passage by Eusebius demonstrates. "The guests of Abraham as laid down in the Scripture, the two on either side, and in the middle the best and most honored. He would be the declared Lord himself, our Savior, whom the unknowing ones revere," writes Eusebius.³⁸ The angels on the left and right symbolize God the Father and the Holy Spirit respectively.³⁹

³⁵ See Piatnitsky, "Panagiarion of Alexios," *Perceptions*, 40-55, fig. 1. See also, Ioli Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, *Byzantine Icons in Steatite* (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1985), 206-8, fig. 132.

³⁶ See *Troica Andrea Rubleva: Antologia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1989), fig. 1, a fresco in a Roman catacomb.

³⁷ See *Conversation with God. Icons from the Byzantine Museum of Athens (9th-15th centuries)*, exh. cat. (Athens: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 1998), 133. The writings of Procopius from Gaza (*Patrologiae cursus completus, Series graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 161 vols. in 166 pts. (Paris, 1857-66), 87, 364 BC), Eusebius (PG 22, 384 AB), and Theodoretus (PG 80, 1777 C) attest to these identifications.

³⁸ *Conversation with God*, 133. The passage is also quoted in Greek.

³⁹ Viktor N. Lazarev, *Moscow School of Icon-Painting* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), 23.

The subject of the Hospitality of Abraham became particularly popular and thus widely painted from the second half of the fourteenth century into the fifteenth century.⁴⁰ Different mediums such as icons, illuminated manuscripts, and monumental paintings from the period depict this scene. Icons of the Hospitality of Abraham from the Vatopedi monastery (fig. 21), the Hermitage (fig. 22), and the Byzantine Museum, Athens, (fig. 23) demonstrate a pervasiveness of a stable iconography developed for this Old Testament subject.⁴¹

The image of the Hospitality of Abraham, just as the Virgin enthroned with the Christ Child on the left wing, visualizes a number of important themes. The story highlights the faithful service of patriarch Abraham to God and God's reward in return. Also, since the three angels visiting Abraham were understood as a prefiguration of the Holy Trinity, the subject reinforces the connection between the Old and New Testaments. Furthermore, it shows Christ's divinity.⁴² Lastly, the subject of the Hospitality of Abraham prefigures the Last Supper and the Eucharistic sacrifice – the redemptive sacrifice represented by the central angel blessing the chalice on the table.⁴³

The pairing of the Old Testament Trinity with the Virgin, as seen in the Hilandar diptych, was employed in panagia and panagiaria – liturgical vessels transformed into pectoral icons – dating to the fifteenth century.⁴⁴ These patens, consisting of two small disks hinged together,

⁴⁰ See Ντουλα Χαράλαμπος-Μουρίκη, “Η παράσταση της Φιλοξενίας του Ἀβραάμ σὲ μιὰ εἰκόνα τοῦ Βυζαντινοῦ Μουσείου,” *Δελτίον τῆς Χριστιανικῆς Ἀρχαιολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας* 3 (1962-63): 87-114.

⁴¹ Χαράλαμπος-Μουρίκη, “Η παράσταση της Φιλοξενίας,” 113. The author suggests that there exists a prototype for all these icons since they feature almost identical iconography. On the Vatopedi icon see: Katia Loverdou-Tsagarida, “Byzantine Small Art Works,” *The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi*, 458-99, esp. 493-6, fig. 439. On the Hermitage icon see Piatnitsky, *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia*, 168-9, fig. B142. On the Byzantine Museum icon see *Post-Byzantium: The Greek Renaissance 15th-18th Century Treasures from the Byzantine & Christian Museum, Athens*, exh. cat. (Athens: Byzantine and Christian Museum, 2002), 78-9, fig. 4, and *Conversation with God*, 133-5, fig. 22.

⁴² Iohannis Spatharakis, *The Portrait in Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), 135-6.

⁴³ See Χαράλαμπος-Μουρίκη, “Η παράσταση της Φιλοξενίας,” 87 ff.; Lazarev, *Moscow School*, 23; Todić, *Gračanica*, 143; Evans, *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 187.

⁴⁴ Panagia and panagiaria are used for carrying bread offered to the Virgin by monks during a meal and also given to laity after the Liturgy. See Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 10-11, 14-5, 30.

feature on their interior sides, the Virgin Orans on one disk and the Old Testament Trinity on the other (fig. 24).⁴⁵

As stated previously, scholars have not agreed on the identification of the figures around the Hospitality of Abraham. Most of the studies suggest that the male busts represent apostles while a few claim these to be prophets.⁴⁶ The available photographs of the diptych do not provide great detail and the inscriptions, if there are any, on the codexes and scrolls that the figures hold cannot be read; therefore, it is difficult to assert a particular identification. Nevertheless, it is important to note that a distinction has been made between the busts on the left and right by means of the different shape of the objects that they hold. This iconographic feature does not help in identifying the figures since scrolls and codexes are not exclusively associated with prophets or with apostles.⁴⁷ Two later Russian panagia also show that the Old Testament Trinity can be surrounded by either prophets or apostles.⁴⁸

If the iconographic program on the right wing features apostles, the overall theme draws attention to Christ's disciples and their service to Him.⁴⁹ The image further creates symbolic unity between the Old and New Testaments, as does the program on the left wing. If the saints on the right represent prophets, the iconographic subject underscores their prophetic visions about the coming of Christ. Furthermore, since the central angel is identified with Christ, continuity between the Old and New Testaments is still propagated, yet in a more subtle way due to the depicted scene of the Hospitality of Abraham.

⁴⁵ Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 31, fig. 23. See also *Trésors de l'art serbe*, 76; Dušan Milovanović, *Umetnička obrada nepleminatih metala na tlu Srbije od pozne antike do 1690 godine* (Beograd: Muzej primenjene umetnosti, 1986), 149, fig. 383. For other examples see: Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, fig. 22; Nikolaeva, *Proizvedenja*, figs. 96-8, 100, 102.

⁴⁶ See footnotes 18 and 19.

⁴⁷ See the Sinai icon (fig. 18). For example, Sts. Peter and Paul, depicted in the top right register, carry scrolls.

⁴⁸ *Troica*, figs. 49 and 54.

⁴⁹ Taylor, "Tree of Jesse," 157.

Another important aspect of the diptych's iconographic program is the way in which the central and surrounding images are organized. The figures rendered in a series of interconnected medallions that are formed by vine tendrils invoke the image of the Tree of Jesse.⁵⁰ The standard image of the Tree of Jesse includes the figures of Christ and the Virgin, surrounded by Christ's ancestors, Old Testament kings, prophets, scene of the Annunciation, and Jesse – the father of David – from whom vine tendrils or branches spring and encircle the figures (fig. 25).⁵¹ The iconography of the Tree of Jesse was developed in the thirteenth century in response to the heretic movements rejecting the doctrine of the Incarnation.⁵² Based on St. Matthew's genealogy of Christ (1: 1-17) and Isaiah's prophecy about the Virgin (11: 1-5), the image of the Tree of Jesse stresses the continuity between the Old and New Testaments and asserts the authenticity of the Incarnation.⁵³ The Tree of Jesse, therefore, visualizes major Christian beliefs: the Incarnation, the fulfillment of the prophecies about the coming of Christ, and the Virgin's role in the salvation of mankind.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Ibid., 125; Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 28; Galavaris, "Majestas Mariae," 10.

⁵¹ See Taylor, "Tree of Jesse," 125-6, for a detailed description of the standard image of the Tree of Jesse.

⁵² Ibid., 143-6.

⁵³ Ibid., 125, 143-5.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 143-5, 165-7.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MEANING OF THE DIPTYCH

This chapter will analyze the evolving meaning of the diptych's iconographic program with regard to the succession of contexts in which the diptych was engaged. Each of these contexts, starting with the metropolitan Teodosije's giving of the diptych to Jelena's son on his christening day and ending with Jelena commemorating the death of her only child with the poem that was engraved on the diptych, contribute to the way in which the diptych's iconographic and literary components can be interpreted. This series of specific events in which the patrons found themselves define the religious and ideological significance and symbolism of the diptych.

Although nothing is known about the diptych prior to its presentation by metropolitan Teodosije to the newborn child in 1367, the diptych's emblematic iconography and the notion that it is a pendant relate to the icons termed *enkolpia* and specifically *panagiaria* often worn by dignitaries of the Church.⁵⁵ These pectoral icons fulfilled several purposes, from signaling one's ecclesiastical rank to being used privately for personal devotion by church officials.⁵⁶

The central image on the left panel of the Virgin enthroned holding the Christ Child visually summarizes major Christian doctrines. The throne on which the Virgin sits itself constitutes an important visual and symbolic motif. It is an emblem of the Mother of God who

⁵⁵ The catalogue entry on Jelena's diptych in *Treasures of Mount Athos*, 349, describes the double-icon as *enkolpion-diptych*. On *enkolpia* and *panagiaria*, see *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vols. 1 and 3, 700, 1569; Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, *Enkolpia*, 15, 24; Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 10.

⁵⁶ Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, *Enkolpia*, 24.

represents the earthly throne on which Christ, associated with the heavenly throne of God the Father, sits.⁵⁷ The entire image with the throne occupied by the Virgin and Christ embodies the theme of the Incarnation: Christ, beside being divine, was also human and was born of the Virgin.⁵⁸ The image further stresses the dual roles of the Virgin: both her instrumental part in the miracle of the Incarnation, and her intercessory powers in mankind's salvation.⁵⁹ Most significantly, this iconography directly relates to the Liturgy and the Eucharist because such scene was customarily painted in the semi-dome of altar apses where the Eucharistic sacrifice takes place (figs. 26-26a).⁶⁰ Ultimately, the image functions as a symbol of the Church itself, whose purpose is validated by these doctrines.

The Virgin with Christ is paired with the image of the Hospitality of Abraham on the diptych's right panel. Orthodox representations of the Hospitality of Abraham, with the three angels prefiguring the New Testament Trinity, were commonly painted in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁶¹ The reasons for the subject's popularity are found in the major events of that time. The entire Orthodox world was being threatened by another religious force – Islam – which recognized the Old Testament, but rejected the divine nature of Christ.⁶² The image of the Hospitality of Abraham was used by Orthodox theologians to defend Christ's divinity, which they believe was manifested in the Old Testament. This Orthodox idea of pointing out a prefiguration of the Holy Trinity in the Old Testament was meant to prove that central Muslim

⁵⁷ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 291 with notes 127-8.

⁵⁸ See Cormack, "The Mother of God in the Mosaics of Hagia Sophia at Constantinople," in *Mother of God*, 107-23, esp. 111.

⁵⁹ See Cormack, "The Mother of God in Apse Mosaics," *Mother of God*, 91-105, esp. 92, 95.

⁶⁰ Cormack, "The Mother of God in Apse Mosaics," *Mother of God*, 91-105. On figs. 26-26a, see Lydie Hadermann-Misguich, *Kurbino: Les fresques de Saint-Georges et la peinture Byzantine du XIIe siècle* (Bruxelles: Byzantion, 1975), 53 ff., pl. A and fig. 5.

⁶¹ See Chapter One.

⁶² See Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 135-6. While the conflict between Orthodox Christians and Muslims began in the seventh century, the Byzantine Empire and the Balkan countries could not resist the Ottoman invasion at the end of the fourteenth century. Constantinople finally fell in 1453, while the two crucial losses for the Serbian state, first at the Battle of Marica in 1371 and then at the Kosovo field in 1389, initiated the eventual fall of Serbia in 1459.

beliefs were indeed incorrect. A late fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript containing the famous work of Emperor John VI Cantacuzenus, *Apology against Islam*, features a depiction of the Old Testament Trinity (fig. 27), and very significantly begins with the statement: “Great is the God of Christians.”⁶³ The *Apology against Islam*, dated only a few years after the diptych of the metropolitan of Serres, underscores the religious and ideological significance of the Hospitality of Abraham in the context of the late fourteenth century.

The busts of saintly figures surrounding the images of the Hospitality of Abraham and the Virgin holding the Christ Child further demonstrate how the entire iconographic program of the diptych appropriately relates to a bishop of the church. While figures on the left panel holding scrolls represent prophets, those on the right wing can be either identified as prophets or as apostles. Both types represent paragons of service to God. Apostles more specifically serve as the models that bishops and priests emulated by continuing their teachings and service to the Church.⁶⁴ Because the diptych’s imagery visually summarizes not only the source and nature of the spiritual authority invested in a bishop, but also symbolically represents major Christian beliefs and the Church itself, it is appropriate to think that the metropolitan Teodosije himself either commissioned or prominently wore the diptych on his chest before giving it to Jelena’s son.

When the metropolitan presented the diptych to the newly-born child on his christening day, the diptych became a material equivalent of the symbolic gesture of blessing bestowed by the bishop on the newborn prince and his family. The presence of the metropolitan Teodosije at the baptism and his gift on that occasion indicate not only the closeness between him and the Mrnjavčević family, but also the union of religious and secular authority in the town of Serres.

⁶³ Ibid., fig. 87. See also Evans, *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 286-7, fig. 171.

⁶⁴ Father Thomas Hopko, “The Holy Orders,” in *The Orthodox Faith: Worship*, vol. 2 (Syosset: The Orthodox Church in America), 46-50.

The event also provided an occasion for the bishop to indirectly assert spiritual supremacy of the Church over the despot who, unlike the emperor, could not claim such superiority over the Church.⁶⁵ The diptych's iconography, no longer solely a visual emblem of the Orthodox beliefs and the office of priesthood, must also be interpreted in light of this celebratory event, an event that brought together this ecclesiastical leader and the family whose infant son was to succeed his ruling father.

The image most closely related to this second context is the medallion on the diptych's left panel: the Virgin enthroned holding the Christ Child. The theme of mother and son rendered in close embrace directly corresponds to Jelena and her young child. In addition, the royal representation of the Virgin seated on a throne is thematically appropriate for the aristocratic Mrnjavčević family and especially for Jelena who had familial connections with the Nemanjić dynasty.⁶⁶

The image on the right panel of the Hospitality of Abraham also gains further significance when interpreted in relation to the newly-born child. The passage describes both Abraham's attentive service to God and the miraculous event in which Abraham and Sarah receive a blessing from God: that blessing is, specifically, the promise of having a child. This aspect of Abraham and Sarah's story relates to Uglješa and Jelena Mrnjavčević whose lives reflected piety and active support of the Church, and whose newborn son could be understood as the blessing of God.

A look at later examples of the Hospitality of Abraham or the Old Testament Trinity further demonstrates that this subject was used in varied contexts but, consistently, it engaged the theme of invoking God for His blessing and protection. Russian measured or christening icons,

⁶⁵ On the Byzantine political ideology, see Gilbert Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁶⁶ Radojičić, *Stari srpski književnici*, 81-2. Jelena's father Vojihna was a cousin of Czar Dušan.

for example, which commemorate the baptism of royal children, feature representations of the Old Testament Trinity along with the image of a specific patron saint.⁶⁷ A christening icon from the seventeenth century (fig. 28), which belonged to Czarevich Alexei (1629-76), the son of Czar Mikhail Fyodorovich (1596-1645) and his successor, contextually and iconographically relates to the diptych of Uglješa Despotović.⁶⁸ Both of these icons celebrate the birth of an heir to the throne and, by incorporating the image of the Old Testament Trinity, they evoke that episode in the life of the righteous Abraham when God promised him a son. As will be discussed later, this iconographic subject also appears in a funerary context: specifically, adorning the covers of royal tombs (figs. 29-30).⁶⁹

A seventeenth-century Russian panagia further explains the significance of the theme of the Hospitality of Abraham in an icon celebrating the birth of a son (fig. 31).⁷⁰ The panagia features an iconographic program almost identical to that of the diptych, with the Virgin and Christ on one side paired with the Old Testament Trinity on the other. Although the circumstances of this panagia's commission and use are unknown, an inscription surrounding the images suggests that it belonged to the notable family whose coat of arms is depicted on it. Moreover, the inscription is in the form of prayer or blessing in which the Holy Trinity is addressed and asked to reward a family with a "long life and more sons."⁷¹ This example, just like the measured icons and the Hilandar diptych itself, demonstrates the customary depiction of the subject of the Hospitality of Abraham in icons commemorating an important family and the

⁶⁷ These icons are called measured because their length corresponds to the height of the child.

⁶⁸ See *Treasures of the Czars from the State Museums of the Moscow Kremlin*, exh. cat. (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1995), 76; *Czars: 400 Years of Imperial Grandeur*, exh. cat. (Memphis: Wonders, 2002), 72.

⁶⁹ On the Shrine lid, see *Kremlin Gold*, 77, pl. 28; *Treasures of the Czars*, 19. On the Embroidered podesa, see *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia*, 281-2, fig. R34.

⁷⁰ *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia*, 286, fig. R40b.

⁷¹ Ibid. The full inscription is: "Bless the Lord's body [the family] the name of Wiszniewecki Korbut from Yagiel Michael with Thekla. His wife. With Joseph. Ignatius's son. God grant you long life and more sons."

birth of a son. The Hilandar diptych therefore appears to be a precursor of this later tradition of Russian christening icons and panagias featuring the image of the Hospitality of Abraham.

Another feature of the diptych's iconography that relates specifically to the Mrnjavčević family is the organization of figures in the form of the Tree of Jesse. This image, developed in order to illustrate that Christ's lineage originates from the patriarchs of the Old Testament, acquired additional significance when the royal Nemanjić dynasty's own family tree began to be rendered in a comparable manner (fig. 32).⁷² Introducing royal figures in this already symbolic formal organization underscored the status of the ruling family and drew parallels between Jesse, the ancestors of Christ and the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty and his descendants.⁷³ The modification, therefore, introduced a secular aspect to the overall theme and suggested that the power of the ruling family stemmed from the ultimate source of spiritual authority.

In my view, it is possible that the royal associations of the modified Tree of Jesse in medieval Serbia motivated the organization of the diptych's iconography, yet this cannot be established with certainty. Nevertheless, it is important to note that at the time when the diptych was presented to the newly-born prince and heir to the throne, whose father ruled over an important Serbian territory, representations of the royal Serbian dynasty in the form of the Tree of Jesse were well established. When presented with the diptych, the Mrnjavčević family would likely have understood these thematic implications because of their own ruling status and their direct connection with the Nemanjić dynasty.

Presenting the diptych to the newborn child on his christening day both transformed the original purpose of the enkolpion and placed a new emphasis on its iconography. No longer a pendant icon meant to reinforce the ecclesiastical power of its wearer, the diptych came to

⁷² Taylor, "Tree of Jesse," 163-5. A list of churches with the altered image of the Tree of Jesse is included.

⁷³ Ibid., 164-5.

represent a formal blessing bestowed upon the child and his family by the metropolitan.

Interpreting the diptych's iconography in this context demonstrates that the images of the Virgin with Christ, the Hospitality of Abraham, and even the implicit Tree of Jesse, resonate harmoniously with an event celebrating the birth of an heir.

In 1371, Uglješa Despotović, the only child of Uglješa and Jelena died prematurely at the age of four. With her son's death, Jelena composed a mourning poem that was engraved on the plaques covering the icons' backs. Jelena's formal mourning exemplified the expected behavior, and even the duty, of a woman facing a terrible loss. Moreover, her written lament reflected the medieval tradition of women transforming their grief into a literary text – in this special case, a poem incorporated into the diptych.⁷⁴

In the first part of the poem, Jelena describes the diptych itself. She remarks that the icons, though small, are precious since they bear the images of Christ and the Virgin, and were given to her son by the “great and holy” metropolitan. She further writes that her son's body joined the grave of his mortal ancestors. In the second half of the poem, Jelena addresses Christ and the Virgin. She prays to the Son and Mother, expressing the hope that she will take care of her soul until the time of her own death. At the end, Jelena admits that she is overcome by her maternal sorrow.

Jelena's mention of only two figures, the Lord and the Holy Virgin, leaves out the Old Testament Trinity represented as the Hospitality of Abraham. This apparent incongruity between Jelena's engraved words and the carved images may seem problematic. Nevertheless, the central angel in the image of the Hospitality of Abraham is understood to be Christ Himself. Jelena's poem-prayer, just like all the prayers, addresses Christ and pleads to the most powerful

⁷⁴ Jelena composed another lamenting poem dedicated to Prince Lazar who was killed at the Battle of Kosovo. Prince Lazar's wife, Milica, also expressed her mourning for her killed husband in poetic form. See Hawkesworth, *Voices*, 74-5, 83-4.

intercessor for mankind – the Virgin.⁷⁵ It is therefore not surprising that Jelena limits her reference to the most important figures rendered on the icons.

Furthermore, the purpose of Jelena's poem is not to provide an authentic identification of the diptych's iconography. Her text, beside comprising of the personal prayer, contains elements of ekphrasis – the highly formulated literary genre of describing works of art. As shown in the studies of Henry Maguire, Liz James, and Ruth Webb, the writer of ekphrasis does not aim to accurately describe a particular image but to engage emotionally and spiritually the viewer or reader by focusing on one iconographic aspect of the work of art.⁷⁶

Moreover, the diptych, with the poem engraved on its back, is associated with an old Byzantine tradition. There are numerous examples of icons whose images of saints or elaborate iconographic programs are accompanied with inscribed texts. The inscriptions vary from personal prayers, as in the tenth-century cameo (fig. 33) and the eighteenth-century triptych (fig. 11), to formal statements that the owner or the maker of an icon (figs. 7-8).⁷⁷ The inscribed text may also refer to the healing properties of a pendant icon as in the late twelfth-century enkolpion with Christ in Glory (fig. 34), or it may describe in detail the content of a reliquary icon (fig. 35).⁷⁸ The words inscribed on the back of these icons always represent an integral component of

⁷⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 3, 1713.

⁷⁶ See Henry Maguire, "Truth and Convention in Byzantine Descriptions of Works of Art," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 28 (1974): 113-40; Liz James and Ruth Webb, "'To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places': Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 14 (1991): 1-17. See also Robert S. Nelson, "To Say and To See: Ekphrasis and Vision in Byzantium," in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143-68.

⁷⁷ The cameo has the inscription: "Lord, help your servant John." See Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, 175, fig. 127. The triptych's inscription is: "Holy Trinity, save me the suppliant, 1736." See *Post-Byzantium: The Greek Renaissance*, 170-1. The diptych with the floral frame features an inscription: "This enkolpion belongs to me, Loukas, priest monk...." See Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, *Enkolpia*, 238-41. The rectangular diptych has the inscription: "... Master Craftsman Zotos 167. April 17." See Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, *Enkolpia*, 244-5.

⁷⁸ The enkolpion features an inscription: "You who carry the Logos purely, I carry on the breast for health of body." See Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, *Enkolpia*, 74-5, fig. 22. The reliquary icon has the inscription: "Tunic, Mantle, Towel, Garment of the Word; Shroud, Blood, Crown of Thorns...." See Ihor Ševčenko, "Perceptions of Byzantium," in *Perceptions*, 2-21, esp. 5-6, fig. 5. See also Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, 166-7, fig. 115.

the iconography and overall meaning, just as it is true with the Hilandar diptych.

With the addition of Jelena's lament, the diptych becomes a commemorative icon whose iconography gains new significance when understood in this new funerary context. The iconic image of the Virgin and Christ, representative of the doctrine of the Incarnation and also evocative of warm motherly love for a son, now invokes the Virgin's role as the intercessor for the mankind. The young mother, on behalf of her son, supplicates another mother, the Virgin, who in return prays to her Son.

The Hospitality of Abraham, or the Old Testament Trinity, also acquires a meaning that differs from its original interpretation. Here, a comparison can be drawn between Abraham who was ready to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22), and Jelena's confession that she can only grieve the death of her son. Furthermore, as the Hospitality of Abraham is often depicted on coffin coverings containing the image of a deceased person, the subject conveys another meaning relevant to this particular context. Jelena's diptych, now commemorating the death of her child, finds direct parallels in the sarcophagus cover of Czarevich Dmitrii and the coffin cloths of Prince Mikhail and Metropolitan Peter, all of which include images of the Old Testament Trinity (figs. 29, 30, 36).⁷⁹ These later examples further relate to the diptych because they commemorate deaths of prominent royal or ecclesiastical men; most significantly, one of these men, Czarevich Dmitrii, was, like Uglješa Despotović, an heir to the throne.

The presence of the Old Testament Trinity in these funerary images may refer to the biblical parable of the rich man and of Lazarus in Abraham's bosom (Luke 16: 19-31). When righteous Lazarus died, the angels took him to Abraham in Heaven. Abraham is indeed included in the iconography of the Last Judgment, where, enthroned in Paradise, the patriarch holds

⁷⁹ On the coffin cloth of Metropolitan Peter, see *Treasures of the Czars*, 158; and *Czars: 400 Years*, 61.

righteous souls depicted as children.⁸⁰ The image of the Old Testament Trinity in the diptych takes on a crucial meaning when one considers the parable of Lazarus in Abraham's bosom and its claim that only righteous souls go to Heaven. Perhaps Jelena herself had in mind this passage from St. Luke's Gospel when she wrote in the poem that her son, "in his innocence, and tender years, [has his soul] taken into the eternal family."

In the same year when Uglješa Despotović died, his father presented the altered diptych to the Hilandar monastery where both the child and Jelena's father were buried.⁸¹ Jelena's mourning poem, materialized eternally on the diptych's silver-gilt plaques, therefore represents a prayer that is perpetually repeated at the child's grave. The poem suggests the mother's presence at her son's burial place, even though she could never visit the monastery in person. The diptych furthermore becomes an expression of Jelena's personal devotion since her lamenting words are engraved on its back.

It is important to note here that both the child and Jelena's father Vojihna were buried in the main church of the monastery – a privilege granted only to prominent donors who were also of royal blood.⁸² The Hilandar monastery thus became the resting place for the members of the Mrnjavčević princely family whose ancestors linked them directly with the original patrons of Hilandar: the founders of the Nemanjić dynasty. The burial of the child in Hilandar represents an event that further symbolically asserts the status and authority of the Mrnjavčevićs.

⁸⁰ For an example see Paul A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, vols. 1 and 3 (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1966), 208, plates 368-9, 394-6. The image of Lazarus in Abraham's bosom is depicted in the funerary chapel – parecclesion – of the church.

⁸¹ In April of 1371, Despot Jovan Uglješa went to Hilandar, and while visiting the graves of both his son and his father-in-law, he also made a supplication to the Virgin before the impending Battle at Marica in which he was killed in September of the same year. See Radojičić, *Stari srpski književnici*, 85. Until the nineteenth century, the diptych was kept in the altar area of the main church in which the child was buried. The diptych is now in the monastery's treasury. See Popović, "Dve srpske plaštanice," *Prilozi*, 87-8.

⁸² See Bogdanović, *Chilandar*, 118; Ivan M. Djordjević, "Mural Painting: 1322-1430/1," in *Hilandar*, 243-8, esp. 248.

Additional royal associations between the Mrnjavčević and Nemanjić families were introduced by Jelena in the inscribed text itself. While the poem on each engraved plaque begins with the cross, the bottom lines on each panel end with a fleur-de-lis. Symbol of the French house of Anjou, the fleur-de-lis in medieval Serbia was representative of Queen Jelena (d. 1314), who came from the Anjou family and married King Stefan Uroš I Nemanjić (r. 1243-76).⁸³ Queen Jelena was a very popular and respected woman among her contemporaries. Well-educated and highly active in religious, political, and literary spheres, Queen Jelena ruled for thirty years. Later in life, the queen became a nun and was proclaimed a saint by the Orthodox Church three years after her death. By including fleur-de-lis on the back of the diptych, Jelena Mrnjavčević brought to mind Queen Jelena whose virtues and talents she certainly hoped to emulate.

With Jelena's poem of lament, the obverse and reverse of the diptych engage in a dynamic relationship rich with symbolic meanings. Jelena's mourning prayer addresses Christ and the Virgin, both depicted on the diptych's front. The image of the Old Testament Trinity and the organization of the iconography in the form of the Tree of Jesse also find verbal counterparts in Jelena's poem, where she writes about her son in Heaven and mentions her ancestors. Examined together, the iconographic and literary components of the diptych reveal the overall significance of the diptych.

⁸³ On fleur-de-lis, see William M. Hinkle, *The Fleurs de Lis of the Kings of France 1285-1488* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 1-7. On Queen Jelena see: Danilo Pečki, "Žitije kraljice Jelene" in *Stare srpske biografije*, ed. Dimitrije Bogdanović (Beograd: Prosveta, 1968), 179-201; Hawkesworth, *Voices*, 67-71; Evans, *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 86-7.

CONCLUSION

By examining the diptych's iconography in the three different contexts – beginning with the metropolitan owning or commissioning the diptych, then proceeding to the diptych's presentation to the newborn prince, and ending with the diptych commemorating the deceased child – an evolution of various meanings is revealed. When it belonged to the metropolitan, the diptych's iconography related to the Orthodox doctrines and his apostolic mission. When the metropolitan presented the diptych to the infant, the diptych symbolized a material blessing bestowed on the child and his family by the ecclesiastical leader. Themes such as God blessing and protecting the child and the unity between spiritual and secular authority permeate the iconography in this new context. Lastly, when the child died, Jelena's poem altered the diptych's iconographic significance. The poem transformed the diptych into a commemorative and exclusively personal icon, and introduced new themes relating to an individual's concerns for eternal salvation.

Because of the different contexts in which the Hilandar diptych was employed, its iconography does not allow for a single interpretation. The themes embedded in the double icon's iconography shift according to the situation and person associated with it. Furthermore, the overall significance of the diptych does not remain constant; it changes and does so in a very short period of time, over the course of only four years. When considering how these different contexts influence the interpretation of the diptych's visual and literary program, one must

acknowledge that this work of art represents not a stagnant formulaic statement but rather a dynamic and complex set of ideas.



Fig. 1
Enkolpion-diptych of Jelena Mrnjavčević, 1367-71, silver, wood, pearls, semiprecious stones,
14.8x6.5x1.3 cm

Source: *Treasures of Mount Athos*, 349, fig. 9.25



Fig. 1a
Details of Enkolpion-diptych of Jelena Mrnjavčević, 1367-71



Fig. 2
 The curtain for the royal doors, 1399, gold and silver thread, velvet, 144x118 cm
 Source: Mladenović, *Monahinja Jefimija*.



Fig. 3

Pall for Prince Lazar's coffin, 1402, silk, velvet, silver thread, gold wire, 69x49 cm

Source: Evans, *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 320, fig. 193.



Fig. 4

The epitaphios of Jefimija (Evpraksija), 1405, silk, gold and silver threads, 170x111 cm

Source: Johnstone, *Byzantine Tradition*, fig. 97.



Fig. 5

Diptych, The State Historical and Cultural Museum of "The Moscow Kremlin," 17th c., wood, silver, filigree, enamel, gild, 7x5.5x1.8 cm

Source: *Greek documents and manuscripts*, 91, fig. 65.



Fig. 6
Rectangular Enkolpion, mid 17th c., wood, silver, gilt silver, niello, 8.6x5.7x1.4 cm
Source: Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, *Enkolpia*, 235, fig. 94.



Fig. 7

Diptych Enkolpion, c. 1670, wood, silver gilt, filigree, niello, enamels, 10.5x7.6x1.5 cm

Source: Ballian, "Post-Byzantine," *The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi*, 511, figs. 454-5.



Fig. 8

Diptych Enkolpion, 1670-79, wood, silver gilt, niello, 7.9x5.7x1.8 cm

Source: Ballian, "Post-Byzantine," *The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi*, 510, figs. 452-3.



Fig. 9
Diptych, 1st half of 17th c., wood, 6.5x5 cm
Source: Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, fig. 30.



Fig. 10

Diptych, beginning of 18th c., wood, 8.3x5.7 cm

Source: Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, fig. 54.



Fig. 11

Triptych, 1736, wood, gilt silver, enamel, 8x10.3x1.7 cm

Source: *Post-Byzantium: The Greek Renaissance*, 171, fig. 38.



Fig. 12

Diptych Enkolpion, late 17th c., wood, silver gilt, filigree, enamels, 5.1x5.4x1.5 cm

Source: Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, *Enkolpia*, 259, fig. 105.



Fig. 13
 Relief icon with Saint George and Scenes from His Life, 11th-12th c., wood, egg tempera over
 gesso, gilt, 106.8x74.5 cm
 Source: Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, 299, fig. 202.



Fig. 14

The Novo Brdo double-sided icon, 2nd half of 14th c., wood, 3.7x2.9 cm

Source: Ćorović-Ljubinković, "Drvo," *Istorija*, figs. 5 and 5a.



Fig. 15
 Diptych Enkolpion, 15th c., wood, gold, silver, filigree, 7x8.8 cm
 Source: *Kremlin Gold*, 60-1, fig. 16.

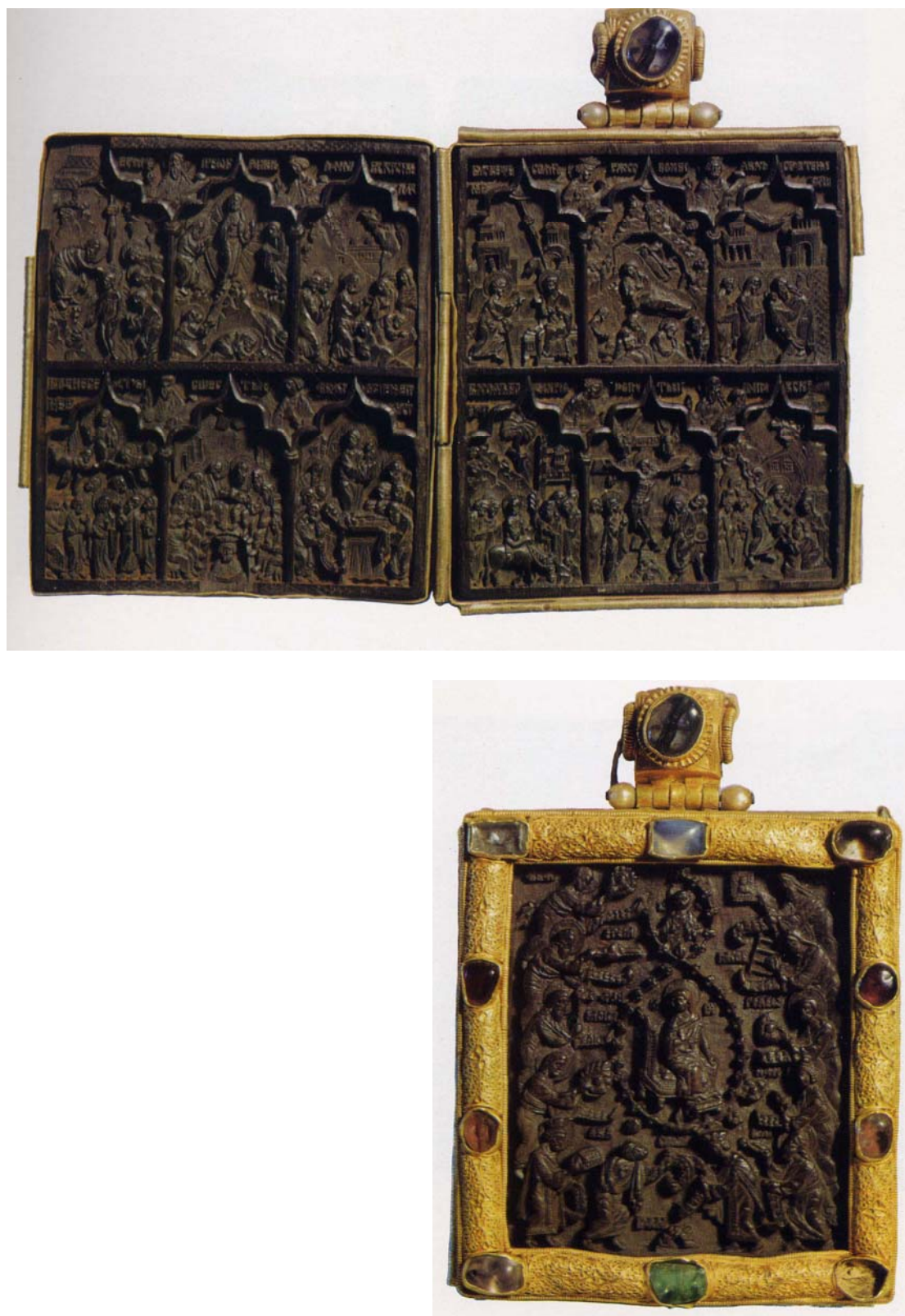


Fig. 16
 Diptych, middle of 15th c., wood, gold, silver, precious stones, filigree, 13.7x9.2 cm
 Source: Nikolaeva, *Plastic Art*, 47, figs. 75-6



Fig. 17
Panagia, 15th c., wood, silver, diam. 16 cm
Source: *Trésors de l'art serbe*, 36, fig. 85.



Fig. 18
 The Enthroned Virgin surrounded by Prophets and Saints, 1080-1130, tempera on wood, 48.5 x 41.2 cm
 Source: Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, 373, fig. 244.



Fig. 19
 Mother of God and Child Enthroned, surrounded by Prophets, late 12th c., wood, tempera,
 48x36.8x3.1 cm
 Source: *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia*, 111, fig. B90.



Fig. 20

Panagiaron of Alexios Komnenos Angelos, 2nd half of 12th c., steatite, diam. 9 cm, height 1 cm

Source : Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, *Steatite*, fig. 132.



Fig. 21

The Hospitality of Abraham, late 14th c., wood, silver, 117x92 cm

Source: Loverdou-Tsigarida, "Byzantine small art works," *The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi*, 495, fig. 439.



Fig. 22

The Hospitality of Abraham, 1st half of 15th c., woos, canvas, tempera, 36.1x54.2 cm

Source: *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia*, 169, fig. B142.



Fig. 23

The Hospitality of Abraham, 15th c., 97x72 cm

Source: Acheimastou-Potamianou, *Icons of the Byzantine Museum*, 119, fig. 32.



Fig. 24

Panagia: the Virgin with Christ and the Hospitality of Abraham, 15th c., bronze, 6x5.5 cm

Source: Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, fig. 23.



Fig. 25

The Tree of Jesse, Church of the Pantokrator, Dečani Monastery, 1327-35

Source: Taylor, "Tree of Jesse," fig. 13.



Figs. 26-26a

The Virgin and Child in the semi-dome of the altar apse, St. George, Kurbinovo, 1191
 Source: Hadermann-Misguich, *Kurbinovo*, pl. A and fig. 5.



Fig. 27

John VI Kantakouzenos, *Theological Works*, 1375, painting on parchment, 33.5x24 cm

Source: Durand, *Byzantine Art*, 179.



Fig. 28
“Alexei, Man of God” Icon with Frame, 17th c., wood, silk, tempera, silver, precious stones, pearls, 48.3x14.5 cm. Source: *Czars: 400 Years*, 72.



Fig. 29

Shrine Lid of Czarevich Dmitrii, 1630, gold, silver, precious stones, pearls, 157x60x4 cm

Source: *Kremlin Gold*, 77, pl. 28.



Fig. 30

Embroidered podela with Prince Mikhail of Chernigov, 2nd half of 16th c., silk, metal threads, 41x30 cm

Source: *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia*, 282, fig. R34.



Fig. 31
Panagia, 17th c., ivory, silver, enamel, diam. 7.5 cm
Source: *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia*, 286, fig. R40b.



Fig. 32

The Nemanjić dynastic tree, Church of the Pantokrator, Dečani Monastery, 1327-35

Source: Ćurčić, "Religious Settings," in Evans, *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 75, fig. 3.21.



Fig. 33

Cameo with Christ Pantocrator, 10th c., bloodstone, 4.6x3.9 cm

Source: Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, 175, fig. 127.



Fig. 34

Double-sided Oval Enkolpion, late 12th-early 13th c., green jasper intaglio, enamel, 4.1x3x0.5 cm
 Source: Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos, *Enkolpia*, 74-5, fig. 22.



Fig. 35

Pendant Icon with the Anastasis, late 12th c., gold, enamel, silver, niello, 9.5x8.5 cm

Source: Evans and Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, 167, fig. 115.



Fig. 36

Coffin Cloth for the Tomb of Metropolitan Peter, 1648-69, damask, velvet, gold and silver thread, silk thread, precious stones, 220x92 cm

Source: *Czars: 400 Years*, 61.

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APPENDIX

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THE DIPTYCH

One of the earliest, if not the first,¹ mentioning of the Hilandar diptych can be found in the study on various inscriptions related to the Hilandar monastery by Archimandrite Nićifor Dučić written in 1889.² Primarily concerned with the poem, Dučić remarks that it is engraved on the back of an old, small, and undated icon. He further states that on the basis of the language and paleographical characteristics of the inscriptions, the diptych can be dated to the end of the fourteenth century. The text of the poem was printed in its original language, i.e. the Serbian version of Old Slavonic. Dučić notes that he received this copy of the poem along with some other writings from Hilandar in 1883 from Metropolitan Mihailo.³

In 1892, a more in-depth discussion of the diptych was published.⁴ The author, Ilarion Ruvarac, is the first to identify that the mother of Uglješa Despotović, the child mentioned in the poem, composed the engraved poem. Ruvarac notes further that the poetess, later known as the nun Jefimija, was the daughter of ćesar (caesar) Vojihna, ruler of Drama, and the wife of Despot Uglješa Mrnjavčević. The author also claims that the poem must have been written after 1366, the year of Jelena's father's death, and before 1371, the year when her husband was killed in the

¹ Lazar Mirković, *Monahinja Jefimija* (Sremski Karlovci: Srpska manastirska štamparija, 1922), 7. Mirković states that this is the first study of the diptych.

² "Razni zapisi," *Starine Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti* XXI (1889): 130-1.

³ Ibid., 130, note 2.

⁴ Ilarion Ruvarac, "Starinarski prilošci," *Starinar* 4 (1892): 119-22.

Battle of Marica,⁵ because the first event is referred to in the poem while the second one is not. Ruvarac therefore concludes that Jelena's son died sometime in between these two years. Ruvarac also notes that both Jelena's son and father are buried in the monastery's church, while the diptych is kept in its altar. The author identifies "the great and holy man" who presented the icon to the child upon his christening as the Metropolitan of Serres, Teodosije.

In the 1902 compilation of old Serbian writings assembled by Ljubomir Stojanović, Jelena's poem was again reprinted in its original language.⁶ Stojanović dates the poem to 1366-1371, relying on the study of Ruvarac. In 1922, the book *Monahinja Jefimija* by Lazar Mirković offered an extensive study on the life and work of nun Jefimija, including a discussion on the Hilandar diptych so closely associated with her.⁷ Mirković refers to the studies of Dučić and Ruvarac, while primarily relying on the latter's conclusions. Besides writing about Jelena's father and husband, and all the important events that happened during her life, Mirković discusses at length other works authored by Jefimija.⁸

In this book, as in previous studies, the poem receives more attention than the diptych's iconography. The author concludes that the poem, even though short, provides insight into Jelena's life before the death of her husband and into her emotional state upon losing her son.⁹

⁵ On the Battle Marica, see Georgije Ostrogorski, *Serska oblast posle Dušanove smrti*, knjiga 9 (Beograd: Naučno delo, 1965), 127-46, esp. 141-4. The battle, initiated by Uglješa who was joined in the attack by his brother Vukašin, then the king of Serbia, was supposed to stop Turkish invasion into the Balkan peninsula. It was won by the Turks and ended Uglješa's rule in Serres, which was taken by a Byzantine despot – ultimately beginning the fall of all Balkan countries.

⁶ *Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi*, knjiga I (Beograd: Srpska Kraljevska Akademija, 1902), 45-6.

⁷ See footnote 1, esp. pages 7-9.

⁸ For the discussion on Jefimija's embroideries – the curtain for the royal doors in the main church of Hilandar, the pall for Prince Lazar's coffin, and the epitaphios in the monastery of Putna in Romania – see pages 18-29, 31-34. The curtain, dating to 1399, features another of Jelena's texts, this one inspired by prayers read at the holy communion. The pall for Prince Lazar, 1402, is entirely embroidered with Jelena's dedicatory laud to the recently killed prince. The epitaphios, from 1405, has an inscription with Jelena's second monastic name – Evpraksija. See also Dobrila Stojanović, *Umetnički vez u Srbiji od XIV do XIX veka* (Beograd: Muzej primenjene umetnosti, 1959), 13-4, 43-5. Stojanović suggests that one person could not have embroidered all these textiles; Pauline Johnstone, *The Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery* (London: Tiranti, 1967), 59, 112, 119-20.

⁹ Mirković, *Monahinja Jefimija*, 7-8.

He only briefly discusses the iconography of the icon, saying simply that the icon features images of the Savior Christ and the Holy Mother of God while not acknowledging any other figures.¹⁰

In 1933, Mirković published a short essay on the diptych, including an illustration of the double icon for the first time.¹¹ He analyzes the diptych's iconography in greater detail, stating that it features a woodcarving of the Virgin enthroned, holding the Christ-Child, in a large medallion, and prophets holding scrolls in twelve smaller medallions formed by vine tendrils. On the other woodcarved panel, apostles surround the Hospitality of Abraham. Mirković also comments on the diptych's frame of pearls and large stones remarking that it is the work of a distinguished goldsmith. The author suggests that the diptych is a very important example of medieval art because of the content of the poem and the unique woodcarving, which would become popular only in later centuries. In the same year, the architect Pera J. Popović wrote a brief report on the Hilandar diptych restating all of the points that Mirković made previously.¹² Popović notes that the diptych was removed from the altar and put into the monastery's treasury.

An essay by Dušan Janković from 1936 was published in English and even though it does not discuss the diptych, it includes a translation of one of Jelena's texts, "Laud to Prince Lazar."¹³ Janković's study is especially interesting because it does not center on the personal or familial aspects of Jelena's work, but rather points out Jelena's textual references to general historic events. Her writings are analyzed in the light of contemporary conflicts with the

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹¹ "Ikonica sa zapisom monahinje Jefimije u Hilandaru," *Godišnjica Nikole Čupića* XLII (1933): 45-9.

¹² "Dve srpske plaštanice iz XIV stoleća u Hilandaru," *Prilozi za književnost, jezik, istoriju i folklor* XIII, 1-2 (1933): 85-8. On the diptych, see 87-8.

¹³ *The Nun Euphemia*, trans. H.M. Stansfield Popovic. (Belgrade: Yugoslav Association of University Women, 1936). Note that the pages of this booklet are not numbered.

Ottoman Turks. The poetess' lament for the threatened Serbian state and Orthodox faith represents the thematic focus of Janković's discussion.

In his book from 1942 entitled *Stari srpski književnici (XIV-XVII veka)*, (*Old Serbian writers (XIV-XVII centuries)*), Đorđe Sp. Radojčić discusses Jelena's literary works and prominent life.¹⁴ Radojčić devotes his chapter "Monahinja Jefimija" not only to Jelena's family and literary compositions but also to historical events and important figures ruling before and after Jelena's husband took control over the territory of Serres.¹⁵ With regard to the Hilandar diptych, the author primarily reviews the general history of the icon: its original presentation to Jelena's son by the Metropolitan of Serres, and its transfer, probably by her husband, to the Hilandar monastery after Jelena composed the poem. In April of 1371, Despot Jovan Uglješa went to Hilandar where he saw the graves of both his son and his father-in-law. He also made a supplication to the Virgin before the impending Battle at Marica in which he was killed. Radojčić underscores the fact that Jelena, unfortunately, was never able to visit the resting place of her son since women are not allowed on Mount Athos. He further states that Jelena's sorrow over losing her son brought forth her literary talent and that when she composed her poem-prayer, Serbian literature acquired its first poetess. Radojčić concludes his study by saying that Jelena was also a famous embroideress and an outstanding woman.

A more in depth consideration of the diptych's iconography is found in the article by Svetozar Radojčić from 1955.¹⁶ The essay is a result of a 1952 expedition undertaken to the Hilandar monastery to examine the state of already studied and newly discovered objects in the monastery. Radojčić begins his essay with the summary of previous missions to Hilandar and

¹⁴ *Stari srpski književnici (XIV-XVII veka)* (Beograd: Jugoistok, 1942).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16-9, and 79-87.

¹⁶ "Umetnički spomenici manastira Hilandara," *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 3 (1952): 163-94 with illustrations 1-60.

then proceeds to discuss specific objects from the monastery's collection. The author organizes the examined material into the following sections: "miniatures, ornaments, and initials," "icons," "frescoes," "precious objects from the treasury and objects of applied arts," and "stone sculpture." Jelena's diptych belongs to the group titled "precious objects from the treasury and objects of applied arts."¹⁷ Radojčić repeats the same iconographic analysis of the diptych as provided by Mirković in 1933. Interestingly, Radojčić sets apart Jelena's diptych from other miniature woodcarvings. Unfortunately, he does not identify these other woodcarvings nor does he provide an illustration of the diptych itself.

Dorđe Sp. Radojčić dedicated several of his studies to Jelena. Most of the information from his 1942 study, the author reiterates in the two essays from 1962.¹⁸ In addition, the author focuses on the explanation of some expressions in Jelena's poem. For example, he states that the word "mladenac" ("infant") means a child who is up to four years old, therefore concluding that Jelena's son died having reached only four years of age.¹⁹ In another essay entitled "Stihovi u srebro urezani" ("Verses engraved on silver"), Radojčić briefly writes about Jelena's poem and the diptych commenting that old texts are often found inscribed on various materials and objects, from stones to metals and textiles.²⁰

A book from 1975, *Srpska književnost u srednjem veku (Serbian Literature in the Middle Ages)*, also includes a section on Jelena's poetic oeuvre.²¹ The author, Milan Kašanin, discusses the literary world at the end of the fourteenth century, at the time of the famous Kosovo Battle of

¹⁷ Ibid., 182-6, esp. 184.

¹⁸ Radojčić, *Stari srpski književnici*. The two essays are: "O mladm mladencu Uglješi Despotoviću" ("About the infant Uglješa Despotović") and "Maloje prinošenije Jefimije monahinje" ("A small donation of the nun Jefimija") in *Razvojni luk stare srpske književnosti (Course of Development of Old Serbian Literature)* (Senta: Matica Srpska, 1962), 157-61 and 176-80, respectively.

¹⁹ Radojčić, "O mladm mladencu," *Razvojni luk*, 158.

²⁰ In *Tvorci i dela stare srpske književnosti (Authors and Texts of Old Serbian Literature)* (Titograd: Grafički Zavod, 1963), 107-10.

²¹ Milan Kašanin, (Beograd: Prosveta, 1975), 305-12.

1389 in which Serbian and Ottoman forces collided. As Kašanin notes, these texts from the end of the fourteenth century, including those of Jelena, despite their brevity, are numerous and highly expressive. The texts reflect a general atmosphere of the time that he defines as religious and patriotic. Mythical and national motifs replace intellectual and individual ones and the tone is tragic and overtly emotional. The central theme of these texts is the Kosovo Battle and its protagonist – Prince Lazar.²²

Jelena's poem on the back of the small diptych belongs to the era before the Kosovo battle and is, therefore, written in a different mode. The poem, Kašanin notes, represents a personal prayer addressing specific feelings but not abstract thoughts. The theme of the poem is not about the mystical love for God or a saint, but about Jelena's earthly rapport with her lost son. The young mother confesses that despite her faith, her pain is so strong that she cannot stop lamenting the death of her son. Writing in the first person and openly talking about her suffering and woes, Jelena conveys a deep sense of intimacy. Kašanin remarks that this is the first time in old Serbian literature that a woman candidly writes about herself and her maternal feelings.

If most of the previously discussed studies considered exclusively the inscribed back of the diptych and its literary significance, the book by Bojana Radojković from 1977 highlights the stylistic and iconographic features of the Hilandar diptych.²³ Radojković's study proves to be of great value since its focus is the tradition of miniature carvings in medieval Serbia. Radojković reviews the history of objects carved in different materials such as wood, stone, bone, or metal, and discusses the various objects that were carved such as crosses, icons, enkolpia, and panagia.

²² Ibid. On the Kosovo Battle, see chapter "Kosovska bitka" by Rade Mihaljčić in *Istorija srpskog naroda*, vol. 2 (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruha, 1982), 36-46, esp. 43-6. Prince Lazar, married to Milica who came from the Nemanjić dynasty, ruled Serbia from 1371 until his death at the Kosovo Battle. The Battle of Kosovo represents a crucial historical event in the Balkan conflicts between Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Turks. Despite the death of sultan Murat at Kosovo, the battle marks the beginning of Ottoman rule on the peninsula that continued for the next five hundred years.

²³ *Sitna plastika u staroj srpskoj umetnosti* (Beograd: Jugoslavija, 1977). Also translated in French as *Les objets sculptés d'art mineur ancienne*.

The author explains the intricate iconography that each of these individual objects features.²⁴

Her book includes numerous images yet the Hilandar diptych, even though described by the author as one of the most beautiful examples of medieval wooden icons, is not illustrated.²⁵

Radojković repeats the general historical information, provided by Radojčić's work from 1962, regarding patronage, dating, and ownership of the diptych. She notes that the stylistic characteristics of the figures represented – large bodies with small heads – support the dating of this icon to 1366-1371 because those features were dominant at this time in painting and wood-carvings.²⁶ The specific combination of imagery seen in the diptych – the Virgin with prophets – refers to the hymn “The Prophets from above” or “The Prophets have proclaimed thee” and to the themes of the Resurrection and the Virgin's supplication to Christ.²⁷ Radojković further states that the diptych's reliefs demonstrate contemporary tastes for intricate and precise carvings. Radojković compares the diptych with a double-sided icon dating to the second half of the fourteenth century found at Novo Brdo, which although lacking detailed workmanship features a similar intertwining motif.²⁸ In addition, Radojković remarks that the diptych stylistically corresponds to the achievements of Byzantine carvings, which are nevertheless neither identified nor illustrated.²⁹

Throughout her study, Radojković asserts the diptych's importance by pointing out that this is one of the oldest relief carvings that features this particular iconographic program: the Virgin with prophets and the Holy Trinity with apostles. This iconography is present in later

²⁴ Ibid., 5-6, 10.

²⁵ Ibid., 17.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 32.

²⁸ Ibid., 15-7, fig. 21; See also Mirjana Ćorović-Ljubinković, “Drvo,” in *Istorija primenjene umetnosti kod Srba*, vol. 1 (Beograd: Muzej primenjene umetnosti, 1977), 197-211, esp. 200, figs. 5 and 5a; Gordana Tomić, “Beleške o dvema duboreznim ikonicama,” *Zbornik za likovne umetnosti* 5 (1969): 281-9, figs. 1-1b.

²⁹ Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 18.

icons and panagia such as Russian ones from the second half of the fifteenth century and Serbian ones from the seventeenth century and onward.³⁰

Another scholar who studied medieval woodcarvings was Mirjana Ćorović-Ljubinković. Her 1972 essay entitled “Drvo” (“Works of art in wood”) was published in *Istorija primenjene umetnosti kod Srba (History of Applied Arts in Serbia)* in 1977.³¹ Ćorović-Ljubinković begins her essay by remarking that working with wood has been a common practice throughout the ages in various cultures. Nevertheless, since wood is a cheap and perishable material, it is the least taken care of and very few wooden objects survive from the past. In the Balkans, for example, it is very difficult to trace the development of woodcarving due to the lack of material evidence. Ćorović-Ljubinković singles out the Hilandar diptych as the only known example of miniature woodcarving with religious iconography that certainly belongs to the medieval period. She further notes that due to poor photographs of the icon and limited available information, it is impossible to comment on the quality of carving, yet the diptych is clearly a luxury object. Ćorović-Ljubinković also discusses several recently discovered pectoral carved double-sided icons from the end of the fourteenth century, including the double-sided icon from Novo Brdo. She suggests that these finds reflect an active miniature relief carving tradition in medieval Serbia corresponding to and echoing the flourishing of this medium in Byzantium at the time.³²

Returning to the studies dealing primarily with Jelena’s poem, *An Anthology of Medieval Serbian Literature in English*, from 1978, provides an English translation of all of Jelena’s texts.³³ From the same year, the seminal book on the Hilandar monastery co-authored by

³⁰ Ibid., 17-8, 32, 47.

³¹ See footnote 28.

³² Both Ćorović-Ljubinković and Radojković, *Sitna plastika*, 15-7, claim that these other icons, besides the Novo Brdo one, are all carved from wood but it is clear, even from illustrations, that the material used is some type of stone, steatite perhaps. In Ćorović-Ljubinković, see figs. 6, 6a, 7, and 7a.

³³ Mateja Matejić and Dragan Milivojević, (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1978), 94-9.

Dimitrije Bogdanović, Vojislav J. Djurić, and Dejan Medaković, also includes a discussion of the diptych along with one good quality illustration of it.³⁴ The authors remark that Jelena demonstrated her enduring devotion to Hilandar by presenting at different periods in her life the diptych and the curtain for the imperial doors.

Đorđe Trifunović is the next scholar to write about the diptych, but again only with regard to Jelena's poem. His 1980 book *Pisac i prevodilac inok Isaija (Writer and translator – anachoret Isaija)* is dedicated to a monk from Hilandar – Isaija (14th century), who upon the request of the Metropolitan of Serres, Teodosije, translated *The Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.³⁵ Trifunović's work features passages on Jelena and her husband where he observes that the atmosphere in Serres was culturally lively when Jovan Uglješa came to rule and that ecclesiastical leaders, including Metropolitan Teodosije, supported the translation of books from Greek into Serbian Old Slavonic.³⁶ While the official language in Serres was Greek, Serbian was spoken as well.³⁷ It was within this cultural milieu, rich with literary creations, that Jelena began writing.

In 1983, Trifunović published a study exclusively devoted to the nun Jefimija and her literary works.³⁸ This extensive study is helpful since Jelena's texts are reprinted in three versions: in Old Slavonic, in the original language but reprinted in the modern Serbian alphabet, and lastly in a modern Serbian translation.³⁹ In addition, Trifunović lists previous bibliographic entries for each text. He writes about contemporaries of Jelena like elder Isaija, Grigorije

³⁴ *Chilandar on the Holy Mountain*, trans. Madge Phillips-Tomašević (Belgrade: Jugoslovenska Revija, 1978), 55-6.

³⁵ Đorđe Trifunović, *Pisac i prevodilac inok Isaija*, (Kruševac: Bagdala, 1980).

³⁶ Ibid., esp 19. Trifunović also includes monk Isaija's introduction to his translation in which the monk comments on the Battle of Marica and refers to the death of Jelena's husband. See pages 79-86, "Zapis inoka Isaije" ("Writing of anachoret Isaija"). English translation of Isaija's introduction available in Matejić and Milivojević, *Anthology*, 159-61.

³⁷ Trifunović, *Isaija*, 15 and 19.

³⁸ *Monahinja Jefimija: Književni Radovi* (Kruševac: Bagdala, 1983).

³⁹ Ibid., 55-60.

Camblak (c. 1364-1419/20), and Konstantin the Philosopher (c. 1390-after 1433), all prominent literary figures, whose comments about Jelena, even though brief, shed further light on the character of this noble woman.⁴⁰

With regard to the diptych, Trifunović suggests that the two wooden relief icons might have been originally attached at their backs, forming a double-sided miniature icon. Furthermore, the author claims that it was Jelena who provided the luxurious frame of pearls and precious stones, along with the gilded plates featuring the engraved poem.⁴¹ When the icons were assembled and ornamented, Trifunović explains, Jelena's husband presented the diptych to the monastery of Hilandar. The author remarks that all of Jelena's writings are inscribed on some kind of luxury material, metal or textile, a medieval practice that culminated with her works. The diptych, in Trifunović's opinion, with its elaborate iconography and frame, as well as Jelena's personal poem, displays a complete aesthetic unity amid these different mediums.⁴²

Jelena's literary work is also included in the 1988 book *Serbian Poetry from the Beginnings to the Present*.⁴³ The authors offer a slightly different translation of Jelena's poem from that given in Matejić and Milivojević. The authors stress again that this is the first poem known by a female Serbian author. A year later, in a study dedicated to the monastery of Hilandar, Jelena's moving poem and the diptych's woodcarving are also praised.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ On Camblak and Konstantin, see: *Stare srpske biografije XV i XVII veka: Camblak, Konstantin, Pajsije*, knjiga 2, trans. Lazar Mirković (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1936). Also in English: Matejić and Milivojević, *Anthology*, 134-44, 167-8. See also Grigorije Camblak, *Slovo o prenosu moštiju svete Petke iz Trnova u Vidin i Srbiju (A Word about the transfer of the body of St. Petka from Trnovo to Vidin and Serbia)*, trans. Đorđe Trifunović (Požarevac: Braničevo, 1972); Konstantin Filozof, "Život despota Stefana Lazarevića" ("The Life of despot Stefan Lazarević"), in *Stare srpske biografije*, 41-126. Camblak and Konstantin Filozof, when writing about Jelena, already as the nun Jefimija, describe her as exceptionally wise, brave, and pious.

⁴¹ *Monahinja Jefimija*, 17.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 5 and 18.

⁴³ Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich, (New Haven: Yale Russian and East European Publications, 1988), 19-24.

⁴⁴ Sreten Petković, *Hilandar* (Beograd: Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture, 1989), 47, fig. 56.

In 1997, a historic exhibition took place in Thessaloniki, the city that received the honorary title as the cultural capital of Europe for that year. Hidden from the public eye for centuries, precious objects from the monasteries on Mount Athos were finally displayed in the exhibition “Treasures of Mount Athos.” The diptych from the Hilandar monastery was also shown and the exhibition’s catalogue features a detailed catalogue entry on it.⁴⁵ Here, the diptych is described as the “Enkolpion-diptych of Queen Helen” – referring to it as an enkolpion because it could be worn around the neck.

The entry includes a careful formal description with a new identification of the iconography. Figures surrounding the Virgin and Christ Child on the left side are again identified as prophets holding open scrolls; but it is suggested that the figures on the other side, framing the Hospitality of Abraham, represent prophets instead of apostles. It is further noted that this iconographic program became common in seventeenth-century enkolpia-panagiaria, also worn as pectoral icons.

In her 1998 book *Icons*, Gordana Babić maintains the claim of studies done before the *Treasures of Mount Athos* that the figures surrounding the Hospitality of Abraham are indeed the apostles.⁴⁶ The author, like Trifunović in *Monahinja Jefimija*, states that even though the diptych was given by the Metropolitan to Jelena’s son it was she who provided the precious frame. Unlike Trifunović, who suggested that the two relief icons might have been originally attached at their backs, Babić proposes that they were once separate entities.

Beside these propositions, another issue, introduced by Radojković in the same year, questions the originality of the diptych’s relief carvings.⁴⁷ Radojković claims that the present

⁴⁵ *Treasures of Mount Athos*, exh. cat. (Thessaloniki: Ministry of Culture, 1997), 349-51, fig. 9.25.

⁴⁶ Gordana Babić, *Icons* (Munich: I.P. Verlagsgesellschaft, 1998), 78-9.

⁴⁷ See chapter “The Treasury” by Radojković in *Hilandar Monastery*, ed. Gojko Subotić (Belgrade: The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1998), 331-44, esp. 340.

woodcarving is a seventeenth-century replacement of a fourteenth-century one that deteriorated over the course of time, while the revetment is original. In her 1977 book, Radojković did not address any of these issues.

In 2000, Celia Hawkesworth offered a feminist view on Serbian female writers, including Jelena Mrnjavčević, in her book *Voices in the Shadows: Women and Verbal Art in Serbia and Bosnia*.⁴⁸ In the section entitled “Women’s Voices in the Middle Ages,” Hawkesworth writes about prominent noblewomen who composed works of literature.⁴⁹ Hawkesworth draws extensively on the essays by Mirković and Kašanin. A section on Jelena’s education is an unacknowledged close translation of Kašanin.⁵⁰ Here it is noted that Jelena had been afforded all of the available requisites of a good education; she learned to read and write both Serbian and Greek, and mastered embroidery. Due to her status, she partook in the activities of Serbian and Byzantine nobility and interacted with church leaders. Hawkesworth concludes her essay by remarking that Jelena’s personal texts allow readers to appreciate the working of one woman’s mind.

In 2004, a publication integrating a number of previous studies on Jelena appeared.⁵¹ Even the book’s title, *Monahinja Jefimija*, directly recalls those older essays.⁵² The book is dedicated to the life and work of Jelena. In regard to the diptych, nothing new is introduced. Here again, it is also suggested that Jelena provided the diptych with the expensive frame. The diptych is once more described as one of the most beautiful Serbian medieval wooden icons.

⁴⁸ Celia Hawkesworth, (Budapest and New York: Ceupress, 2000).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 63-88. On Jelena, see 76-85.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 77, and Kašanin, *Srpska književnost*, 306.

⁵¹ Dobrivoje Mladenović, ed., *Monahinja Jefimija* (Beograd: Zlatousti, 2004). On the diptych, see 10-2.

⁵² The studies, all with the same title, borrowed from are Mirković, 1922, Janković, 1936, and Trifunović, 1983.