

Special Aspects of the Serbian Monuments of the Raska Architectural School of the 12th–Mid 14th Centuries

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Abstract—Multi-vector historical events and specific artistic features of the region provided foundation for the development of a unique style of the “Raska architectural school” in Serbia. The independent state in the era of the Nemanjic reached an unprecedented golden age. The originality of the architectural monument of Serbian art belonging to the Raska School of the 13th–15th centuries presents the mix of the Byzantine and Romanesque styles’ particularities. In the time of the Serbian state’s strengthening, builders in the region were creating the inimitable style, inspired by the closeness to the Romanesque West and the traditional ties with Byzantine.

Keywords—*Medieval architecture of Serbia; Raska school; style features*

I. INTRODUCTION

Serbia appeared in the Middle Ages on the ruins of the antique city of Arsy, named later Rasa [1]. For the city the region became known as Rascia, later turning into the bishop center. The conventional borderline of the territory with mixed-style monuments (bearing Romanesque and Byzantine features) is considered to be the River Drin. The expansion of the original style can be found in the central part of Serbia, on the coast of the Adriatic (Montenegro, Croatia). In this territory can be seen a clear religious and cultural direction: Catholic – Slovenia and Hungary, Orthodox – Bulgaria and Macedonia.

According to A. Voronova, unlike pictorial art, Medieval architecture in the provinces of its Empires did not have the internal cohesiveness that would ensure the style uniformity, for this reason salient features of the Romanesque and Byzantine styles here appeared in a weak form.

II. THE RASKA ARCHITECTURAL SCHOOL

The rise of the state coincides with the time of the dynasty of the Nemanjic. In the complicated balance pattern of that time the Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja (monastic name Symeon) had to conduct a well-reasoned policy with the leaders of Byzantine and the rulers of Rome. His meeting with the Byzantine Emperor Manuel Komnenos in Nis (1165–1168) had led to the recognition of Nemanja’s

supremacy over Rascia and the rapprochement with Byzantine.

However, that circumstance did not prevent him, together with the Hungarian King Bēa III from seizing in 1183 – 1196 of large territories extending from Byzantine south of Macedonia and south-west to the Adriatic, which let Nemanja both unite Serbia (Rascia) with Doclea (Zeta) and considerably raise his status in the Balkans.

Of great importance was the establishment in 1219 of the autocephalous Church by Nemanja’s younger son Savva (St. Savva the Serbian), which consolidated Serbia’s Orthodox direction. As prof. S. S. Averintsev rightly said, two internal forces had formed the principle of “Byzantinism” – the imperial power and the Christian faith. For the Byzantine culture, the concept of world being in space and time is associated with the idea of order that comes from the Absolute [2].

New monasteries began to appear on the remnants of earlier Christian churches’ footing. The two-tiered narthex, later determined as Romanesque or Byzantine, distinguished those monuments. This can be seen in the following monuments—the Church of the Ascension in Mileševa, the Basilica of the Annunciation in Gradac, and the Church of the Virgin in Studenica.

The dominant features of this or that style was determined by the ruler’s preferences, while masters were expected to comply with the customer’s demand, applying to the project their engineering skill acquired in regions wherefrom they had come to Serbia.

A church built in the self-sustained Serbian state was symbolizing its independency, for this reason such monasteries like Studenica and Zhicha were of the great importance for next following monuments.

The flourishing of the Serbian nationhood and establishment of the independent Serbian Church created a unique architectural identity of the “Raska school” (the term introduced by Gabriel Millet in 1919), immediately included into the leading trends of the European art.

In the opinion of G. Millet, L. Karaman and A. Deroko, the advent of the Raska architecture was due to the monumentalization of small single nave domed churches that were widespread in the 11th and 12th centuries in the south and middle coast. Moreover, the particular source should be sought in the Dalmatian Pre-Romanticism, which, in turn, was partially influenced by the Byzantine architecture.

Later in the late 13th-14th centuries, appeared the differences between the architecture of the southern part of Raska, long under Byzantine power, and the architecture of the lands north of the Danube, where the revived ancient cities located.

Establishment of kin relations between the Serbian and Byzantine rulers and the annexation of Byzantine lands to Serbia had changed the political direction of the Serbian state. In literature, the new stylistic tendency was called the "Serbo-Byzantine style". In contrast to the southern lands, the western component started to dominate in the monuments of the Raska architectural school.

III. PECULIARITIES OF ARCHITECTURAL MONUMENTS (THE CHURCH OF ST. GEORGE IN DJURDJEVI STUPOVI MONASTERY (SAINT GEORGE PILLARS), STUDENICA

With the adoption of Christianity, the Serbian land revealed the unique monuments of icon painting and architecture, contributing to world culture. Ruling of the Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja was marked by the active process of building of temples and monasteries. That ruler's name is linked with the tradition of taking monasticism at the ebb of life and with burial of the founders of temples or monasteries in them – 'zadushbinas', in which the names of those who erected these temples were commemorated.

The Church of St. George in Djurdjevi Stupovi monastery presents one of such original buildings of the Raska architecture – the unique sacral work representing the Romanesque Byzantine construction not only in Serbia but in the Balkans as well.

The 'zadushbina' of the Grand Prince is located on the top of a prominent elevation dominating over Novi Pazar. This single nave temple with the triapsal altar, side nave, lateral vestibules and narthex presents one of the oldest monumental Serbian objects. Its harmoniously balanced symbiosis of Romanesque and Byzantine architecture represents the special architectural style of the Raska school. Its entry tower, after additional construction of apses in the east side in the 12th century, was turned into a chapel that King Dragutin designed for his tomb.

In 1183-1196, the Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja began construction of the monastery on the right bank of the River Studenica (later its katholikon became a model for sepulchers of all next rulers). The basilica was erected in 1183-1196 on the occasion of vital victories—during this time Nemanja jointly with Hungarian King Bel Bđa III reconquered from Byzantine a large town of Nis and all towns up to Sophia.

Amidst small slopes there stands the church – the dedication to the Virgin Evergetida (Benefactress), combining the features of the Western and Byzantine cultures. Rectangular, elongated in length and divided into several naves, the building of the white marble church harmoniously fits into the green landscape of the area and turns the territory into organic whole.

The chapel – the family vault – reflects the Grand Prince Nemanja's greatest respect of to the Constantinople tradition. The triadic space of the altar allows celebrating the Liturgy according to the Orthodox canons; in western trave near southern wall there is a tomb with sarcophagus, denoting the grave site. The western trave against side arches is topped by slightly refracted dome.

The Byzantine traits: the visual appeal, luxury, gold and marble, the radiance and colorfulness of the basilica – a rectangular, elongated building, divided into three to five longitudinal naves in the eastern part, ends with a semicircular projection of the apse.

Windows in the dome square trave are placed in the lower register, while in the attics three mullioned windows—by analogy with other Byzantine temples: the middle one with half-round top and the side windows topped by quadrant—are continuing the line of the engaged arch. The exterior cover of the domes on squinch arches is 12-faced, inside undulated with 12 windows [3]. (The most ample description of this object is presented by A.A. Voronova). The dome is strongly accentuated through a wide and high footing. Meantime, there are signs that the Byzantine dome, with its dumb arches on the facets and the arched colonnade, had been preserved with an even finish and the roofing shaped like cone, which, when restored, were replaced with a wavy roofing more specific to the Byzantine architecture.

On the western wall there is a monumental carved portal with high relief in the tympanum – the enthroned Most Holy Theotokos with Christ Child and worshipping archangels.

The footing of the portal columns features lion sculptures and the column caps – the lion and the griffin. They present the earliest round sculpture in the medieval Serbian art. Other column caps and pilasters are of classic structure and treatment with the scenes of battle between animals and aerial creatures.

As is known, the presence of fantastic elements is representative of the "animal" style (N. Kondakov). The famous scholar assumed that it is in the Romanesque art where the barbaric elements were concluded—a combination of Christian views and art forms with the pagan legendary of Medieval European tribes. It is the researcher's opinion that the Romanesque style was defined by the "monstrosity", being indicative of anxious mood of a man facing unexplainable forces of nature. Since the adaptation of Christianity, a man had been looking at nature with horror and this horror translated into horrific visions that fill bas-reliefs of the Roman portals. This style expressed man's dependence from the external forces of nature [4].

Interestingly, St. Nicholas (Velimirovich) is writing about the animals 'symbolism otherwise. He gathers,

according to prophets, the seen man, the lion, the bull or the eagle are symbolizing four cardinal virtues—prudence, courage, justice and temperance. “The man” is the wisdom, “the lion” – the courage, “the bull” symbolizes justice because those animals had been always sacrificed in order to make satisfaction for sins against truth. “The Eagle in flight” means the temperance because it outreaches heavenly heights where everywhere is the sanctity of spirit. According to St. Nicholas, the four symbolic beings are personifying different spiritual Powers [5].

The portal of the southern nave with sun dial in the tympanum is the most sculpturally decorated. The consoles in the footing of the blind arcades are decorated with different scriptural details (heads of people and animals, plant and ornamental motifs). At the same time, the northern portal is quite plain—friezes of the blind arcades on the pediment of the eastern facade and three apses coupled with triforium give it a pronounced Roman appearance. This technique—the combination of stones different in color and hue—can be found in the stone plastic of other Western European monuments of the time.

The window in the northern wall of the quadrangle depicts the images of the dove, the eagle, the lion and eight-leaved roses. The iconostasis of Studenica had not survived, and most likely it was made according to the Byzantine pattern.

The monastery of Studenica with the Church of the Virgin reflects the upswing of the Raska architecture in Serbia when churches themselves—*zadushbinas* of the Nemanjic—represented the model for next following churches.

As noted by A. A. Voronov, there is a consensus of scholars’ opinion that the construction of the temple was started by the masters from the West, who had created the bulk volume in the Romanesque style and was completed by the builders from the Byzantine regions, who built the typical Byzantine dome. Presumably, the builders from the West and the East worked together.

It should be recalled that architecture of the Raska school was close to the monuments of the Dalmatian coast. Since the Serbian state included a substantial part of the eastern coast of the Adriatic, the creative cooperation of Serbian and Dalmatian builders seems logical.

It was the Studenica church that became the model for the future church in the Dečani monastery (1327–1336). It continued the traditions of the Raska architectural school. Externally the building looks like a three-nave basilica with domed central space. Instead, however, it has five naves and its interior space is dissected by pillars and multifaceted columns.

There is a similarity between the portals of Studenica and the churches of St. Ambrose of Milan, St. Michael and St. Peter in Ciel d’Oro in Pavia and other Apulian monuments, characteristically distinguished by the archivolt on the portal columns, and their disjointedness is characteristic of the Lombardic portals. Possibly, from Apulia these forms

had been transferred to Dalmacija and Zeta Maritime, turning into the major stylistic attributes of the Romanesque style.

There is another version, however, that in Studenica worked masters from Hungary [6].

Meantime, the Studenica architecture also demonstrates a great deal of Byzantine features. The new character of the Studenica’s internal space is the quadrangle’s greater lightness, which later was established as a rule for Serbian churches. All these features suggest that the Church of the Virgin in Studenica was erected by masters from Dubrovnik, Maritime and other Roman regions under Byzantine influence.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the Serbian history it all began with Rascia— the territory between the Lakes Ohrid and Prespa down south and the River Vardar – in the north, which became the center of the Medieval Serbia’s Orthodoxy. The Serbian state also comprised a considerable part of the Adriatic east coast, that region’s culture was tied to Rome. Builders of the Raska architectural school, the golden age of which falls on the rule of the Nemanjic dynasty, had developed in the spiritual architecture a unique unified style, bridging the gap between the particularities of the Byzantine and Western Romanesque architecture. Thus, the multi-vector natural historical developments and the artistic distinctions provided that basis whereon the unique style of the “Raska school” emerged.

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