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An Examination of the Images of the Sun and the Moon in the Visoki Dečani Monastery in Kosovo

Dragana Van de moortel-Ilić

Abstract: This paper investigates the celestial-religious images in the Visoki Dečani monastery in Kosovo, particularly the tear-shaped paintings with human figures inside located on the left and right side of *The Crucifixion of Christ* fresco. The aim of this research is to put these images into a cultural and contemporary cosmological context. The images in the fresco that contain human figures have been the subject of controversy in the second part of the last century. A highly speculative popular view was put forward, that the images portrayed extra-terrestrials in UFOs. Yet these images have been mostly ignored in academic circles. In this research the images from *The Crucifixion* fresco were compared with similar frescoes from other Serbian medieval churches and with the philosophical thought of the time. The methodology used was, first, a personal visit and observation of the images, including photos taken by a professional photographer. A comparison of those findings was then made with what had been written about those images in the academic literature. The conclusion is that they present personifications of the Sun and the Moon which could be explained by the synergy of Hellenistic and Christian thought.

Introduction

The research is focused on the images of the Sun and the Moon in the fresco *The Crucifixion of Christ* and other celestial-religious images from the Serbian fourteenth-century Visoki Dečani monastery. Located just a few kilometres west of the village Dečani, in the western part of Kosovo, more specifically in the region called Metohija, the monastery is close to the borders of both Albania and Montenegro.

The images of the Sun and the Moon in *The Crucifixion* fresco, containing human figures that are illustrated in Fig. 2, have been the subject of controversy. A highly speculative popular view, supported by the author Erich von Däniken, was put forward, maintaining that the images portrayed extra-terrestrials in UFOs. In the academic world,

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however, scholars have for the most part neglected doing any research on this fresco. Yet, celestial-religious images at other Serbian monasteries and churches dating back to the same period have been analysed in the academic literature, in the writings of Branislav Todić and Milka Čanak-Medić, among others.

The aim of this research, therefore, is to put these celestial-religious images into a cultural and contemporary cosmological context by comparing them with other celestial images in Serbian churches, constructed and painted in the same period. Most celestial images used as references are found in the Bogorodica Ljeviška church, located in the town of Prizren, Kosovo, 60 km from the Visoki Dečani monastery, and the Lesново monastery, which is between the towns of Zletovo and Kratovo in FYRO Macedonia – 260 km from the Visoki Dečani monastery.

Methodology

With the objective of collecting primary source material, I conducted a site visit of the Visoki Dečani and Lesново monasteries, Bogorodica Ljeviška church and other churches in the neighbourhood. In order to take photographs of the interior and religious objects at the sites in Kosovo, which are under the patronage of the Serbian Orthodox church, permission from the church authorities was obtained. My husband, Koen Van de moortel, who is a professional photographer, took photographs of the fresco *The Crucifixion of Christ* and other celestial-religious images in the churches while I observed the exact locations of the images on the interior walls and searched for anything connected to medieval cosmology. The photos were taken with a Canon Eos 6D camera and composed in the High Dynamic Range (HDR) style in order to stress details in the highlights and shadows as well as the usual details from a standard exposure. I could then compare these photos with photos from previous studies of these frescoes, most of which was published in the late twentieth century. My first hand observations and on-site photographs constitute the primary source material for my research.

An assessment of the secondary data sources was realised by means of a literature review. Mirjana Gligorijević-Maksimović, Srđan Đurić, Branislav Todić and Milka Čanak-Medić are some of the scholars who investigated the images in medieval Serbian churches. However, they were not engaged with considering these images in a cultural or cosmological context, although Đurić investigated the form of the images and the background of the painters. The celestial images of the Lesново monastery

were explored in detail by Smiljka Gabelić, though also not completely in a cosmological context. This paper will make a link between observations from the field research and from the literature, and, subsequently, place the findings in the context of medieval cosmology.

Comments on the images from Visoki Dečani from non-academic sources

Aleksandar Paunović, an art student, was observing frescoes in Serbian medieval churches in 1964 when he spotted unusual paintings in the monastery Visoki Dečani. In the fresco *The Crucifixion*, he interpreted two objects on the right and the left side above Christ (Fig. 2) as ‘spaceships with a crew’ and, subsequently, the French magazine *Spoutnik* published images of them.¹ For a very short time these images were hugely popular and featured in many Internet presentations, television programs and books. One of the films posted on YouTube, featuring dramatic music in the background, claims that the person in the spaceship on the right is observing the other, that the jets are clearly visible, and comments on the presence of spectators (angels from the painting) who appeared ‘obviously terrified’.² This populist and speculative way of interpreting the paintings was further supported by the Swiss author Erich von Däniken, who became famous writing books about UFOs in ancient civilisations, such as *Chariots of the Gods*, *The Gods were Astronauts* and many others. He raised the popularity of the UFO theory associated with the images of the Visoki Dečani monastery, voicing the idea that this was one of the most obvious examples of an alien visit to Earth.³ On his website, the right image of the fresco is provided as an example of extra-terrestrial visitors, with the explanation ‘Curious wall painting from the Middle Ages’.⁴ Inspired by the findings of von Däniken, the History Channel US made a series of episodes about the ancient aliens, in which these images were also portrayed.⁵

¹ ‘Ancient aliens debunked – part 5’ at <https://illuminutti.com/ancient-aliens-debunked/ancient-aliens-debunked-part-5/> [accessed 10 Oct. 2014].

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yd76pX1MT0> [accessed 25 Oct. 2014].

³ ‘Da li se u manastiru Visoki Dečani nalaze dokazi u vanzemaljcima’, Vestinet 15 March 2015 at <http://www.vestinet.rs/pogledi/da-li-se-u-manastiru-visoki-decani-nalaze-dokazi-o-vanzemaljcima> [accessed 15 March 2015].

⁴ ‘Pictures’ at <http://www.daniken.com/e/index.html> [accessed 10 October 2014].

⁵ ‘Ancient Aliens’ at <http://www.history.com/shows/ancient-aliens> [accessed 25 Oct. 2015].

Even if the theory of the space visitors, as thought to be represented in these paintings, was not taken seriously, it inspired many journalists to use the images when referring to something else, for the most part anything of an extra-terrestrial nature. On the Serbian television Pink news broadcast of 7 December 2009, witnesses stated that they spotted unidentified flying objects in the sky above Novi Sad, resembling lights in the shape of triangles.⁶ The screen showed images of ‘the crew’ from the monastery Visoki Dečani while the narrator quoted Miroslav Kostić, the president of the UFO association, claiming that many people saw these lights, yet nobody saw the crew of these flying objects. However, public enthusiasm for the idea that those images represent visitors from space has not yet diminished or disappeared.

Academic work on cosmological elements in the religious images in fourteenth-century Serbian monasteries, with an emphasis on images in the monastery Visoki Dečani

Paintings of the monastery Visoki Dečani that are connected with celestial elements, especially the Sun and the Moon from the fresco *The Crucifixion of Christ*, are barely mentioned in academic literature, mentioned above. However, the images of astrological signs, the Sun, the Moon and the sky in the Lesnovo monastery, located in Serbia at the time of painting in the fourteenth century, have been described as parts of biblical texts by Gabelić.⁷ Most scholars agree that the personification of natural and cosmic phenomena in this time period was a common theme in frescoes. As Gligorijević–Maksimović, who observed classical elements in Serbian medieval churches, said, the personification of the Old and New Testaments, the Church, the Synagogue and Kosmos were very popular in the first half of the fourteenth century, but, towards the end of the century, their popularity waned.⁸ The form of ‘floating’ celestial luminaries, as seen in *The Crucifixion* fresco and on the ceiling of the exonarthex of Bogorodica Ljeviška, were, according to Srđan Đurić, ‘valid only in theophanic scenes, since, in the composition of the *Journey to Emmaus*, the

⁶ ‘Nacionalni dnevnik’, RTV Pink, 7 December 2009 (between 56” and 1’ 14” and between 1’ 39” and 2’ 03”) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RL4qcgw7TmA> [accessed 25 Oct. 2014].

⁷ Smiljka Gabelić, *Manastir Lesnovo* (Beograd: Stubovi kulture, 1998), pp. 183–85.

⁸ Mirjana Gligorijević–Maksimović, ‘Classical Elements in the Serbian Painting of the Fourteenth Century’, *Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta* 44 (2007): pp. 368–69.

sun was depicted in its usual circular shape, with the personification inscribed'.⁹ Igor Stojić, Milan S. Dimitrijević, Edi Bon and Vesna Mijatović considered that the teardrop shape of the paintings, which emphasised movement, could have been inspired by the appearance of Halley's comet in 1307.¹⁰ However, scholars were, for the most part, not engaged in placing these images into a cosmological context.

Between folk beliefs and Christianity

In order to understand the background of the Serbian belief system in the fourteenth century, some attention needs to be given to Serbian folk beliefs. According to Nenad Janković, before embracing Christianity, the Serbian people believed that natural phenomena were connected with different gods; these resembled many other Indo-European pre-Christian beliefs.¹¹ They also believed that some people could speak a 'mute language' which was, as Branislav Rusić said, 'the power of expressing feelings and thoughts to members of animate and inanimate nature'.¹² According to Rusić, this talent belonged to 'saints, tsars or their sons, magnates, eminent and mysterious persons' and was considered powerful not only in the pre-Christian period and medieval Serbia but it even survives to the present day.¹³ Serbs started to Christianize from the ninth century onwards, accepting religious art from Byzantium. However, as Janković stated, they also stayed loyal to some parts of the old traditions. One example of this is not believing that the Sun and the Moon were gods by themselves, but rather that the Sun and Moon were aided by 'servants of the God' up to the sky and back on a daily basis, and that these servants also woke up all the stars at night.¹⁴

⁹ Srđan Đurić, 'The Representation of sun and moon at Dečani', *Dečani I vizantijska umetnost sredinom XIV veka* (Beograd: SANU XLIX, knjiga 13, 1989), p. 343.

¹⁰ Igor Stojić, Milan S. Dimitrijević, Edi Bon, and Vesna Mijatović, 'Possible Representations of Comets in Serbian Religious Medieval Art', *European Journal of Science and Theology* 12, no. 3 (2016): p. 181.

¹¹ Nenad Đ. Janković, *Astronomija u predanjima, običajima i umotvorinama Srba* (Beograd: SANU, 1951), p. 4.

¹² Branislav Rusić, 'The Mute Language in the Tradition and Oral Literature of the South Slavs', *The Journal of American Folklore* 69.273, *Slavic Folklore: A Symposium* (1956): p. 304.

¹³ Rusić, 'The Mute Language', pp. 305–7.

¹⁴ Janković, *Astronomija u predanjima, običajima i umotvorinama Srba*, p. 4.

From the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, Serbia expanded its ~~own~~ territory, resulting in a widespread cultural interchange. Monumental religious buildings started to be built and books were translated from Greek to the Old Church Slavonic language. However, there are opinions, such as those espoused by Ihor Ševčenko, that Orthodox Slavs in general ‘did not absorb much of the scientific and philosophical literature available in Byzantium’.¹⁵ Whether or not they understood the scientific and philosophical literature from Byzantium and Antiquity, they accepted Orthodox Christian spiritual values, which Atanasije Jevtić explained, was an ‘inseparable part of the Serbian national soul, as well as its lifeblood in the early stages in its history’.¹⁶ Some members of the Nemanjić dynasty, which ruled Serbia from the twelfth to the end of the fourteenth century, were not only devoted to Christian values, but left the mundane life and became monks and nuns.

The church of the Visoki Dečani monastery

According to Bratislav Pantelić, King Stefan Uroš III Nemanjić, who was also called Stefan Dečanski, chose a spot on the banks of the Bistrica River to build a temple that would impress all visitors. Together with the archbishop Danilo II, he prayed all night long and, in the morning, decided to dedicate the church to the Ascension of Christ.¹⁷ It seems that the construction of the monastery started in 1327 and was finished by 1331 or, more precisely, by August 1331, as Mirjana Šakota noted, adding that the interior without the wall paintings was completed before 1334.¹⁸ The main architect of the monastery was Fra Vita, a Franciscan monk from Kotor, who let his own name be carved outside the church, above the south portal, together with the names of the king and his son, as mentioned by Todić and Čanak-Medić.¹⁹ They also stated that the wall paintings were

¹⁵ Ihor Ševčenko, ‘Remarks on the Diffusion of Byzantine Scientific and Pseudo-Scientific Literature among the Orthodox Slavs’, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 59, no. 3 (1981): p. 325.

¹⁶ Bishop Maxim (Vasiljević) (ed.), *The Christian Heritage of Kosovo and Metohija, the Historical and Spiritual Heartland of the Serbian People* (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2015), p. 269.

¹⁷ Bratislav Pantelić, *The Architecture of Dečani and the Role of Archbishop Danilo II* (Weisbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2002), p. 22.

¹⁸ Mirjana Šakota, *Dečanska Riznica* (Beograd: Prosveta, 1984), p. 48.

¹⁹ Branislav Todić and Milka Čanak-Medić, *Manastir Dečani* (Beograd: Muzej u Prištini (displaced), Mnemosyne, 2013), pp. 208–9.

completed by the summer of 1348, after the crowning of Dušan, the son of Stefan Dečanski, as the Emperor of the Serbs and Greeks in 1346.²⁰

According to the information booklet about the monastery written by the monks of Visoki Dečani in 2009, the church managed to largely preserve the original look of the fourteenth century, even though many valuable artefacts have been stolen over time.²¹ Šakota stated that the most valuable pieces were books and crosses decorated with gold and gemstones, rich carpets and clothes that the king Stefan Dečanski and subsequent rulers and aristocrats had bestowed as gifts. Many other valuable golden items were stolen, even the huge church bell, which was stolen by the Bulgarian army during the First World War.²² The primary source material about those gifts comes from original Charters (Golden bulls or Chrysobulls) written by the King Stefan Dečanski personally, and which are now available in modern Serbian and English translations.²³

I observed that the frescoes in the central part of the church – in the nave and the altar – are mostly well preserved, but in the narthex there are sections of the walls with damaged frescoes. The gold that covered the floor and some other parts of the church was stolen and only a few remnants of it are left.²⁴ My first impression was like stepping inside a fairy tale. The more than 3000 very colourful frescoes, literally covering every part of the walls, domes and arches, for me had an enchanting effect.

The central part of the church, or the nave, is particularly impressive. With the central dome reaching up to 29 metres, the church is quite imposing. On the floor, under the central dome, there is a twelve-point ornament or a rosette which, according to Todić and Čanak-Medić, symbolises cosmic cycles, the God of light and Christ as the Sun.²⁵ I argue that this rosette might represent twelve months, mirroring the movement of the Sun in one year. This ornament used to be covered by gold in the fourteenth century, but now there are just traces of gold remaining. The coffin containing the relics of the king Stefan Dečanski is located on the

²⁰ Todić and Čanak-Medić, *Manastir Dečani*, p. 326.

²¹ Monks of the monastery Visoki Dečani, *Manastir Visoki Dečani* (Beograd: Manastir Visoki Dečani, 2009), p. 29.

²² Šakota, *Dečanska riznica*, pp. 47–48.

²³ Milica Grković, *Prva Hrisovulja Manastira Dečani-The First Charter of the Dečani Monastery* (Beograd: Centar za očuvanje nasleđa Kosova i Metohije–MNEMOSYNE, 2004), p. 88.

²⁴ Information from the monks of the Monastery, during our visit on 20th and 21st February 2015.

²⁵ Todić and Čanak-Medić, *Manastir Dečani*, p. 246.

right side of the rosette. This is where believers would crawl, hoping for a miracle.

Frescoes with the Sun and the Moon in the Visoki Dečani monastery

The fresco *The Crucifixion of Christ* is situated high up in the central dome, in the north arch (see Figs. 1 and 2). From the vantage point of a visitor observing this fresco from the ground, its details are difficult to see due to the fact that it is positioned so very high up. However, it is from the vantage point of the king's throne that his fresco could be best observed, which may indicate that the fresco was painted for the king's eyes. The other fresco that was examined in this research study is presented in detail in Fig. 3. Its location is marked by the number 2 on the map in Fig. 1. This fresco is situated in the central part of the west bay of the nave, where it is easier to view from the ground. The plan of the church was taken from the Kosovonet website.²⁶

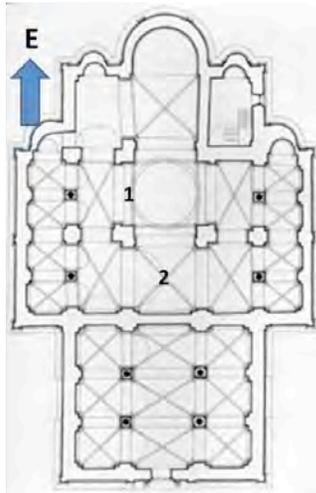


Fig. 1. The plan of the church. 1. The Crucifixion of Christ. 2. The central part of the West Bay of the nave. Image: Kosovonet.

²⁶ 'The Art of Decani Monastery', Visoki Dečani Monastery at <http://www.kosovo.net/edecani2b.html> [accessed 28 Feb. 2015].

The top part of Fig. 2 depicts *The Crucifixion* fresco, with the enlarged images of the controversial figures below.²⁷ In *The Crucifixion* fresco, these images are on the left and the right sides above Christ, as tear-shaped forms with people inside. The person on the left side is wearing a cloak around his body and across his left shoulder. This wrap looks like a himation or an ancient Greek cloak and according to Đurić this is the representation of the Sun.²⁸ On the right side, according to Đurić, a painting of the Moon is portrayed.²⁹ The person inside this painting is wearing a cloak wrapped around the hips. There are two eight-pointed stars on the painting of the Moon, one in front of the figure and one behind it. The figures are looking at each other, or possibly at angels flying above the Christ. The rays on those paintings could represent the movement from the left side to the right side, since the sharpest point of the tear-shaped form of the Sun is on the left side, and the sharpest point of the Moon is on the right side. The Sun has six rays and the Moon only three.

The other fresco that was examined is located in the central dome of the west bay (see Fig.1, number 2). These paintings, according to Đurić, represent the Sun, the Moon and the Sky, carried by archangels with Christ in the middle.³⁰ This part of the dome is illustrated in Fig. 3, with enlarged images of the personified Sun (right) and Moon (left).³¹ Between these two paintings, the *Christ in the Mandorla* fresco is situated, carried by two archangels.

²⁷http://www.srpskoblag.org/Archives/Decani/exhibits/Frescoes/Dome/ThirdLevel-2/CX4K1777_1.html [accessed 23 March 2015];
<http://www.srpskoblag.org/Archives/Decani/exhibits/Frescoes/Dome/ThirdLevel-2/CX4K1722.html> [accessed 23 March 2015];
<http://www.srpskoblag.org/Archives/Decani/exhibits/Frescoes/Dome/ThirdLevel-2/CX4K1675.html> [accessed 23 March 2015].

²⁸ Đurić, 'The Representation of sun and moon at Dečani', p. 345.

²⁹ Đurić, 'The Representation of sun and moon at Dečani', p. 341.

³⁰ Đurić, 'The Representation of sun and moon at Dečani', p. 343.

³¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Decani.Manastir/photos/> [accessed 15 Nov. 2014].



Fig. 2. Above: *The Crucifixion of Christ* fresco. Below: enlarged images of the personifications of the Sun (left) and the Moon (right). Images: Blago.



Fig. 3. Above: The paintings of the Sun and the Moon in the central dome of the West bay with *The Christ in the Mandorla*. Below: enlarged personifications of the Moon (left) and the Sun (right). Image: FB Visoki Dečani.

The personifications of the Sun and the Moon in both paintings are portrayed as angels wearing fine garments, which is in sharp contrast to the representations of the Sun and the Moon in *The Crucifixion* fresco, where

the figures neither have clothes nor wings, merely a himation around the body. The personification of the Sun is depicted as a winged king, clothed with aristocratic golden garments. In the image of the personification of the Moon, a girl with wings and shabbier clothes is portrayed. Both angels in these paintings are inside a circle with a single ray in front of their bodies. The painting of the girl as the personification of the Moon is contained inside the crescent-shaped Moon. In the middle of the fresco of the Moon, two archangels carry something that looks like a canvas with a painting of many small circles and two larger discs, with winged figures inside, partly hidden behind the clouds. Đurić explained that this canvas was the scroll of heaven, as the part of the scene of the Last Judgement, and that the discs with winged figures were personifications of the Sun and the Moon.³²

Personification of the Sun and the Moon in other Serbian medieval churches and medieval cosmology

The objective for visiting two other churches – specifically the church of the Lesnovo monastery and the Bogorodica Ljeviška church – was to observe celestial elements and Hellenistic motifs in the frescoes. Most details of Hellenistic motifs were found in the exonarthex of Bogorodica Ljeviška church. On the ceiling there are remnants of paintings that appear to have once been very beautiful; however, now they are quite badly damaged. In the remnants, numerous personifications of natural phenomena are depicted. According to Draga Panić and Gordana Babić, the centre of the painting showing Christ inside the Sun was a representation of the Last Judgment.³³ At the top of these images, two angels are holding up the sky, which is presented as a banner on either side of Christ, as explained by Gligorijević-Maksimović.³⁴ Moreover, she claimed that the personification of the Sun and the Moon are located on the sides of the sky.³⁵ I observed that the personification of the Moon is located on the right side of Christ, and the personification of the Sun is on the left. Both images are in tear-shaped forms with rays, like the images from the Visoki Dečani monastery. I recognized these personifications by comparing them with the drawn images from Panić and Babić. Without these references, it would be highly difficult to recognize them.

³² Đurić, 'The Representation of sun and moon at Dečani', p. 343.

³³ Draga Panić and Gordana Babić, *Bogorodica Ljeviška* (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1975), p. 49.

³⁴ Gligorijević-Maksimović, 'Antički elementi', p. 208.

³⁵ Gligorijević-Maksimović, 'Antički elementi', p. 208.

Furthermore, Panić and Babić explained that many ideas portrayed in this church originate from the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato and Orphic poems and that these concepts were subsequently integrated with Christian motifs in many medieval Serbian orthodox churches.³⁶ Indeed, I observed that, in Bogorodica Ljeviška church, despite the detrimental state of its interior, frescoes of the Greek philosophers Plato and Plutarch as well as of Sybille can be seen, which could confirm the theory of the synthesis of ancient philosophy with the vision of Christianity at the time of painting.

The most impressive painting containing cosmological elements in the Lesnovo monastery is the Zodiac, as shown in Fig. 4. On the left side of Fig. 4 there are enlarged images of the personifications of the Moon (above left) and the Sun (below left).³⁷



Fig. 4. Right: the zodiac in the South dome of the narthex of the Lesnovo monastery. Left: personification of the Moon (above) and the Sun (below). Image: The Astrologer's Community.

I observed that the head of Christ, which is in the centre of the South dome, is oriented to the centre of the narthex. The signs of the Zodiac are located on the vertical part of the dome, on the East side, partly visible

³⁶ Panić and Babić, *Bogorodica Ljeviška*, p. 71.

³⁷ The image is downloaded from the website of the forum of the Astrologer's Community, with the theme 'The Zodiac in churches, cathedrals, in Christianity' at <http://www.astrologyweekly.com/forum/showthread.php?t=71513> [accessed 29 March 2015].

from the entrance door. Next to every sign or celestial object are words written in the Old Church Slavonic language. These words are difficult to read looking at them with the naked eye inside the church, but the images are clearly visible. Gabelić provided explanations of those words, connecting them with Biblical texts and names of planets and astrological signs, which I could understand and recognize looking at the image from Fig. 4, which is enlarged in the book written by Gabelić.³⁸ In the first horizontal row, under Christ with angels, there is a naked winged figure, sitting on a bipod beast and carrying the Sun in its hands. Above its head is written ‘the Sun’, and above the image of the Moon, portrayed with a winged figure inside, is written ‘the Moon’. On the right side of the personified Sun there are zodiac signs and personified planets. I argue that the whole fresco with its astrological motifs conveys the message that man could reach God via planets with souls. However, as Gabelić claimed, they might have been painted in order to illustrate the cosmological character of Christ.³⁹ Above the head of Christ and the circle of angels words can be seen, translated by Gabelić as Psalm 148:1. She wrote that the Psalm continues further, above the astrological signs and other frescoes on the south wall, and ends with Psalm 148:10.⁴⁰ Psalm 148:1–3 reads as follows:

- 1 Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
- 2 Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his hosts!
- 3 Praise him, sun and moon,
praise him, all you shining stars!⁴¹

On the top right side, together with most of the astrological signs, a point with five circles around it is located, containing words written in the Old Church Slavonic language from Psalm 148:3: ‘Praise him, sun and moon’; Gabelić identifies this image as the Solar system.⁴² The frescoes with cosmological elements in the mentioned Serbian medieval churches are, on

³⁸ Gabelić, *Manastir Lesnovo*, pp. 183–85.

³⁹ Gabelić, *Manastir Lesnovo*, p. 184.

⁴⁰ Gabelić, *Manastir Lesnovo*, pp. 184–85.

⁴¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+148&version=ESV> [accessed 15 May 2015].

⁴² <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+148> [accessed 15 May 2015].

the one hand, connected with the Christian cosmology, praising the God, as written above. On the other hand, one can consider that the influence of the Hellenistic cosmology can be observed in these frescoes. John Meyendorff writes, ‘unlike their Latin contemporaries, who “discovered” Greek philosophy... the Byzantines had never forgotten Plato or Aristotle, who represent their own Greek cultural past and were always accessible to them in the original Greek texts’.⁴³ However, according to Meyendorff, metaphysical and religious truths were, especially in the monastic circles, solely connected with the Christian revelation and Plato and the Neoplatonists were looked at with suspicion.⁴⁴ Orthodox theologian Thomas Hopko explained that some Greek philosophers were considered to be ‘enlightened by God’ and this was why their teaching was considered to be a valuable part of the roots of the Orthodox doctrine.⁴⁵ The bishop of Thessaloniki from the fourteenth century, Gregory Palamas, who was in his youth educated in Aristotelian philosophy, wrote that ‘the mind of demons, created by God, possesses by nature its faculty of reason’ but ‘the intellect of pagan philosophers is likewise a divine gift’ which could be used for its ‘therapeutic values even in substances obtained from the flesh of serpents’.⁴⁶ The painter of the Bogorodica Ljeviška church and many other Serbian medieval churches was Astrapa, whose origin was Greek, more specifically, according to Đurić, he was Thessalonican, like Palamas.⁴⁷ Astrapa belonged to the Macedonian school of painters, which reflected the theological and philosophical thought of that time. Nevertheless, the fact that in several Serbian medieval churches the paintings of the philosopher Plato and other Greek philosophers are to be found indicates the possibility that their teaching might have been respected and somehow integrated in the Orthodox exegesis in this period.

The cosmology of Plato and Aristotle permeated the universe with the divine and the soul. Plato wrote that the God created ‘the soul in origin and excellence prior to and older than the body... to whom the body was to be subject’.⁴⁸ Furthermore, according to Plato, the soul ‘began a divine

⁴³ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff, trans. Nicholas Gendle (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 10.

⁴⁴ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, pp. 10–11.

⁴⁵ Thomas Hopko, *Dogmatische theologie: een inleiding*, trans. Patrick Pauwels (Gent: Orthodox vormingcentrum ‘Heilige Johannes de Theoloog’, 2003), p. 2.

⁴⁶ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, pp. 27–28.

⁴⁷ Đurić, ‘The Representation of Sun and Moon at Dečani’, p. 344.

⁴⁸ Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (1959) at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html> [accessed 10 Nov. 2013], 34A-35A.

beginning of never ceasing and rational life enduring throughout all time⁴, or, in other words, became immortal.⁴⁹ Within the soul, God formed the corporeal universe, then days and nights and months, and finally the Sun, the Moon and five planets which moved in their orbits around the Earth, according to Plato, who went on to say that above them was the universe with the number of the stars which was equal with the numbers of souls.⁵⁰ Plato also wrote that after death the soul ascends to the stars via the planetary spheres.⁵¹ Aristotle mostly agreed with this model but put much more accent on the movement of the Sun, the Moon and the planets. Discussing the words of Alcmaeon, Aristotle wrote that the soul ‘is immortal because it resembles “the immortals,” and that this immortality belongs to it in virtue of its ceaseless movement; for all the “things divine,” moon, sun, the planets, and the whole heavens, are in perpetual movement’ while the prime mover is God.⁵² As mentioned above, the images of the Sun and the Moon are in most of the published work on these frescoes presented with rays, which could indicate their movement and could also resonate with the Aristotelian model of the universe.

From my observation of the images, Gabelić’s explanation that all the astrological images from the fresco in Lesnovo (see Fig. 4) represent the cosmological character of Christ, can be considered partly correct. The words from Psalm 148 are indeed written in and around this fresco, yet the astrological signs, planets and winged figures are not mentioned in this Psalm. It leads to the conclusion that the cosmology of Plato and Aristotle could offer an extended explanation as to why the images of planets and signs were painted in this fresco.

‘Space shuttles’ of Plato and Serbian folklore

In the course of my research at various Serbian medieval churches I observed many different representations of the Sun: some had numerous rays, others were personified with angels, kings, or special figures painted inside. Representations of the Moon, however, were less frequent, and every fresco with the personified Moon also included the Sun. Furthermore, all personified images of the Sun and the Moon, which are

⁴⁹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 36D–36E.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Timaeus*, 41E–42A.

⁵¹ Platon, *Država*, trans. Albin Vilnar and Branko Pavlović (Beograd: Beogradski izdavačko-grafički zavod, 1976), 616A–617B.

⁵² Aristotle, *On the Soul*, trans. J. A. Smith, book 1, part 2 (2006) at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.mb.txt> [accessed 20 March 2017], 405B.

portrayed in Fig. 5, are located in the central, most important, part of the church. In Fig. 5, on the left side, personifications of the Sun are illustrated – the top image is from *The Crucifixion* fresco, the image in the middle is from the west dome of the central nave in Visoki Dečani, and the bottom one is from the Lesnovo monastery. On the right side images of the personified Moon are depicted, in the same order.



Fig. 5. Left: images of the personified Sun, right: images of the personified Moon; top: from *The Crucifixion* fresco and in the middle from the West dome of the central nave in Visoki Dečani; bottom: from the Lesnovo monastery. Images: top: Blago; middle: FB Visoki Dečani; bottom: The Astrologer’s Community.

To the modern eye, all these images look quite aerodynamic and have one or more rays. They seem to be in motion, and, indeed, as some authors of popular texts have observed, they bear a resemblance to ‘space shuttles’. In paintings of the personified Sun and Moon in Serbian churches of the same time period, similar tear-shaped forms are to be seen, as in the South vault of the exonarthex at Bogorodica Ljeviška. The similarity of these images raises the question as to whether the painters of these images might have been inspired by an unusual cosmic phenomenon, such as the appearance of Halley’s comet, as mentioned above, whose form might be attributed to the personified Sun and Moon.

Furthermore, it is noticeable that the central part of the church of Visoki Dečani contains the most images of the personified heavenly bodies. Those of *The Crucifixion* fresco are the clearest and most aerodynamic in shape. It is evident that special attention was given to Plato and other Greek philosophers in numerous Serbian medieval churches. This evokes the notion that the central part of the church, which is full of cosmological symbols referring to the ascent and descent of the soul, might be the consequence of the synergy of the medieval and the Platonic view of the immortality of the soul.

I argue that the images of the Sun and the Moon with human figures inside from *The Crucifixion* fresco might have looked familiar to Serbs in the fourteenth century because they reminded them of their pagan gods, as noted above, or they could recognize the ‘servants of the Sun and the Moon’ in those paintings, with whom they could communicate in the ‘mute language’ – especially the King, who could observe them directly from his own throne.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to put celestial-religious images of the Visoki Dečani monastery into a cultural and contemporary cosmological context by comparing them with other celestial images in Serbian churches constructed and painted in the same period. Most of the celestial images used as references were found in the Bogorodica Ljeviška church and in the Lesnovo monastery during my visit in February 2015.

The methodology I used was a site visit of the Visoki Dečani and Lesnovo monasteries, Bogorodica Ljeviška and other churches in the neighbourhood in order to collect the primary source materials though a personal observation of frescoes with cosmological elements. In order to take photographs of the interior a professional photographer was engaged

and the photos were also used as the primary source material. An assessment of the secondary data sources was realised by comparing the observations from the field research with texts and images from the literature. As part of the literature review, academic writings from the last century were used, as well as writings of Plato and Aristotle and texts from the Bible. Subsequently, I placed the findings in the context of the medieval cosmology.

In the central part of the church of Visoki Dečani I found numerous frescoes with a personified Sun and Moon that contain elements similar to those in Lesnovo and Bogorodica Ljeviška, such as framed images with a figure inside, some of them with rays which indicate motion. The conclusion is that details from the personified Sun and Moon in *The Crucifixion* fresco, such as the aerodynamic forms and the appearance of figures, were not specific to Visoki Dečani only.

Therefore, one can argue that the paintings of the aerodynamic frescoes in the central part of the church of Visoki Dečani might be the result of the synergy of the medieval Christian and Hellenistic views of the creation of the universe by God and the immortality of the soul. While the Bible presents the universe as the creation of God, in order to praise him, Plato and Aristotle write about the ensouled cosmos, which includes ensouled planets, the Sun and the Moon, stating that the way to the God is via the planetary spheres. Furthermore, it can be asserted that the figures in the aerodynamic frames in *The Crucifixion* fresco represent souls of the Sun and the Moon, which resonate both – Christian and Hellenistic – views of the cosmos.

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