

Sensory Encounters:
Decoding the Symbolism of St Nicholas Church in Ljuboten
*Senzorična srečanja:
dekodiranje simbolike cerkve Svetega Nikolaja v Ljubotenu*

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of embodied cognition and sensory encounters within St Nicholas Church in Ljuboten, built in 1337 near Skopje, North Macedonia. The study focuses on the church's ornamental brickwork, particularly the apse's decorations, arguing that these features transcend mere aesthetics to facilitate immersive spirituality. Central to the analysis is the monogram of Demetrius (Dmitar), a key element concealed within the west portal, which highlights the interplay between material culture and spiritual practice. By employing a multidisciplinary approach combining art historical analysis with cognitive science insights, this research examines how the church's physical and ornamental elements engage the senses, enriching the medieval religious experience. The decorative motifs of chess fields, zigzags, and cryptograms serve as cognitive metaphors bridging the sacred and sensory, contributing to a deeper understanding of religious devotion. This paper underscores the role of sensory encounters in medieval spirituality, positioning St. Nicholas Church within the broader Byzantine and Serbian medieval cultural context.

Keywords: Sensory Engagement, Symbolism, Medieval Church Architecture, Ljuboten.

Izvleček

Članek raziskuje presečišče utelešenega spoznavanja in čutnih doživetij v cerkvi svetega Nikolaja v Ljubotenu, zgrajeni leta 1337 v bližini Skopja v Severni Makedoniji. Raziskava se osredotoča na okrasno opeko cerkve, zlasti na okrasje apside, in poudarja, da ti elementi presegajo zgolj estetiko ter omogočajo poglobljeno duhovno izkušnjo. Osrednji del analize je monogram Demetrija (Dmitra), ključni motiv, skrit v zahodnem portalu, ki izpostavlja medsebojni vpliv materialne kulture in duhovne prakse. Z multidisciplinarnim pristopom, ki združuje umetnostnozgodovinsko analizo in spoznanja kognitivne znanosti, raziskava preučuje, kako fizični in okrasni elementi cerkve vključujejo čute ter bogatijo srednjeveško versko izkušnjo. Okrasni motivi šahovskih polj, cikcak linij in kriptogramov služijo kot kognitivne metafore, ki povezujejo sveto in čutno ter prispevajo k poglobljenemu razumevanju verske pobožnosti. Prispevek poudarja pomen čutnih izkušenj v srednjeveški duhovnosti in cerkev svetega Nikolaja umešča v širši bizantinski ter srbski srednjeveški kulturni kontekst.

Ključne besede: čutna izkušnja, simbolika, srednjeveška cerkvena arhitektura, Ljuboten

Introduction

St Nicholas Church in Ljuboten (figs. 1a, 1b), located in present-day North Macedonia, was constructed during the reign of King Stefan Dušan (r. 1331–1346 as King and 1346–1355 as Tsar). The ktetorial inscription dates the completion of the church between September 1, 1336, and Au-

gust 31, 1337 (Tatić 1927, 95; Đorđević 1995, 145; Korać 2003, 109; Radujko 2008, 101). The period marked significant developments in medieval Serbian architecture, with this church standing as a notable example of the era's artistic and structural advancements (Korać 2003, 13–14; Ćirić 2024, 257–273).



Figure 1a: St. Nicholas Church in Ljuboten, View toward the Apse (photo Jasmina S. Ćirić)

Medieval church architecture was not solely an expression of aesthetic or symbolic intent; it was designed to engage the worshipper's body and senses (Caseau 1999, 101–110; Nelson 2000, 143–168). The rhythmic arrangement of brick and stone, sculptural details on capitals, and decorative arches were all meant to guide the viewer's eye, stimulate contemplation, and evoke a deeper spiritual connection (Isar 2004, 215–242). The church's materiality – its texture, patterns, and spatial composition interact with the worshipper's sense of sight, touch, and movement, creating an embodied spiritual experience (James 2004, 522–537; Williamson 2013, 1–43; Debevec 2016; Ćirić 2022, 77–103). In this way, St Nicholas Church, as many of its contemporaries, served as a space where the physical and metaphysical realms intersected.

The architectural design of St Nicholas Church reveals a sophisticated approach to construction and decoration. The stone col-



Figure 2: St. Nicholas Church in Ljuboten, South Façade (photo Jasmina S. Ćirić)

umns, essential for supporting the church's upper structure, are crafted from well-hewn and polished monolithic pieces. The bases of these columns feature an elegant torus profile supported by corners adorned with curled leaf motifs. The capitals are intricately carved, with the northwest capital exhibiting alternating representations of a ram's head, an eagle's body, and downward-turned leaves alongside a central cross. These symbolic carvings invite both visual and tactile engagement, drawing worshipper's attention to its rich iconography and craftsmanship. The alternating forms create a visual rhythm that mirrors the cyclical nature of liturgical practices, engaging the mind and senses in spiritual reflection. This sculptural work aligns with the broader tradition of medieval Serbian art and draws parallels to the sculptural elements found in the Dečani Monastery (Petrov 1963, 259–263; Maksimović 1971, 113; Korać 2003, 112).



Figure 2: St. Nicholas Church in Ljuboten, South Façade (photo Jasmina S. Ćirić)

The church's brickwork demonstrates a methodical approach to decorative detailing. The façade features rhythmic layering of stone and brick, with stone layers comprising hewn ash-lars and brick layers arranged in a consistent pattern. The emphasis on mortar layers also creates a harmonious and geometric appearance, which serves an aesthetic function and contributes to worshippers' sensory experience. The brickwork on the southern façade, for example, features a chessboard pattern and diagonally placed bricks, drawing the viewer's eye in rhythmic, ordered directions (fig. 2).

This pattern not only enhances the visual complexity but also serves as a cognitive metaphor for Divine order and stability, inviting a deeper, sensory engagement that reinforces spiritual reflection (Korać 2003, 113–118; Ćirić 2024, 259).

Particularly noteworthy are decorative arches on the eastern façade, which are embed-



Figure 3: St. Nicholas Church in Ljuboten, East Façade Details (photo Jasmina S. Ćirić)

ded into the walls with a two-step 'cutting' effect. The outer arch aligns with the façade plane, while the inner arch is recessed, creating a visually engaging depth (Korać 2003, 113–114). This layered arrangement simulates a passage, guiding the eye and body into the church's sacred interior. Manipulation of depth in these arches echoes the spiritual journey from the earthly to the Divine, emphasizing the sensory dimension of medieval religious architecture (fig. 3; Taft 1991, 33–34; Gerstel 1999; Ćirić 2016, 311).

The west façade holds significant historical and artistic importance due to its original painted decoration including a ktetorial portrait of Danica, the church's patron. While this portrait is no longer preserved, its existence was documented and researched in earlier studies (Radujko 2008, 104). This portrait emphasized Danica's role in the church's construction and highlighted her devotion to the architectural



Figure 4: St. Nicholas Church in Ljuboten, West Façade of the Church (photo Jasmina S. Ćirić)

project. Positioned near the west portal, it originally drew attention to the church's central decorative program, symbolizing the merger of individual piety with communal spiritual practice (Radujko 2000, 171–196).

A detailed architectural analysis of St Nicholas Church in Ljuboten reveals its sophisticated layout, structural innovations, and decorative elements. These features underscore this edifice's artistic and architectural significance and contribute to its sensory and spiritual impact. The chessboard patterns, layered arches, and intricate sculptures are not simply decorative – they engage worshippers in a multisensory experience, blending cognitive reflection with sensory immersion. In doing so, St Nicholas Church becomes the site of embodied spirituality, where physical space enhances worshippers' connection to the Divine.

Architectural Analysis of the West Façade of St Nicholas Church, Ljuboten

The west façade of St Nicholas Church in Ljuboten showcases a harmonious composition of architectural elements that complement the overall design of the building (fig. 4). Dominated by a large central arch and flanked by two smaller side arches, the façade is framed by decorative elements, including intricate brickwork patterns and stone moldings, which create visual interest and balance.

The primary west entrance to the church is situated within the central archway. This alignment reinforces the building's cruciform plan and accentuates the entrance as a focal point of spatial and symbolic importance.

Decorative pilasters are flanking side arches – engaged columns that project from the wall. These pilasters are adorned with elaborate brickwork patterns that complement the overall decorative scheme of the façade. Small windows above the side arches allow natural light to filter into the church, contributing to the internal atmosphere and enhancing the sensory experience of space.

Constructed from a combination of stone and brick, the southern façade mirrors the material composition of the western façade. The stonework features carefully cut and polished blocks, while the brickwork displays a variety of patterns and textures. This combination of materials creates a rich and visually appealing surface and engages the viewer's senses, reinforcing the tactile and visual experience of approaching the church.

In conclusion, the southern façade of St Nicholas Church is a well-designed architectural element that enhances the building's overall harmony and aesthetic appeal. The central placement of the entrance archway, decorative pilasters and arches, and intricate brickwork all contribute to the visual richness of the façade and reinforce the church's cruciform plan. The strategic positioning of the entrance emphasizes its role as a significant focal point and enhances the



Figure 5: Monogram of Dmitar, Carved on the Interior Side of the Architrave of the West Portal (photo Jasmina S. Ćirić)

sensory impact experienced by visitors as they enter the church.

Moreover, the placement of the main entrance within the central archway reflects the medieval Serbian architectural tradition, where the main entrance held symbolic significance. By situating the entrance prominently and centrally, ktetors could assert their authority and demonstrate their connection to Divine power. This positioning reinforced the church's cruciform plan and served as a powerful sensory stimulus, aligning the architectural design with the building's spiritual and symbolic aims.

Sensory Engagement and Embodied Cognition

The architectural and decorative elements of St Nicholas Church in Ljuboten exemplify a sophisticated medieval Serbian artistic tradition and also foster a multisensory experience that engages embodied cognition and deepens spiritual involvement. By exploring such elements through lenses of cognitive science, sensory studies, and religious studies, one gains insight into how the church's design shapes sensory and spiritual experiences.

Upon entering the sacred space of St Nicholas Church in Ljuboten, visitors are immediately drawn to the monogram of Dmitar (fig. 5),



Figure 6: Portraits of King Dušan, Queen Helen, and Their Son Uroš, North Wall of the Church (photo Jasmina S. Ćirić)

meticulously engraved on the lintel's inner side, aligned with an inscription mentioning the city of Zvečan.

This cross-like symbol is not merely decorative as it serves as a profound invocation: the name 'Dmitar' extends beyond mere identification to become a sensory prayer, with each syllable acting as a plea to the Divine and bridging the human and heavenly realms.¹ To utter or contemplate this name is to engage in a spiritual act, transforming the air into a vessel of sacred intercession.

Before entering the church, visitors first encounter spolia – relics from a bygone empire – positioned outside the portal. As they cross the threshold, their senses are enveloped by the di-

¹ It is likely that the lintel was originally a spolia, adapted to fit its current purpose, with the monogram of Dmitar in Ljuboten serving as a potent symbol of the power struggles within the Serbian nobility—those aligned with King Stefan Dečanski versus supporters of the young Dušan. The monogram, resembling the Greek letters ΔΜΤΡ (Δημητρίου), and its placement below the founder's inscription suggest different creation dates and methods: the monogram was carved in relief by removing the stone mass, while the inscription was incised. The paleographic differences and the distinct carving techniques indicate that these were not executed simultaneously or by the same hand. Similar monograms, such as those of St. Demetrius in Thessaloniki, offer comparative insights, appearing in low relief on ceramics or scratched through the slip coating of vessels, further connecting this symbol to the saint's cult in the region (Ćirić 2024, 264–265).

agonal alignment of DMITAR's monogram with the interior vista (Đorđević 1995, 5–10). From this vantage point, one can view a fresco of the young King Stefan Dušan at the northern wall (fig. 6) while the memory of the spolia lingers from the exterior. This alignment is intentional, not coincidental, inviting the senses to connect past and present, royalty and the eternal (Ćirić 2024, 263–266).

The relationship between DMITAR's monogram, his city of Zvečan, and the figure of Dušan within the church transcends a mere political statement; it represents a theological dialogue. DMITAR's name, inscribed on the lintel, becomes a conduit for Divine petition. As the name 'DMITAR' is voiced within this sacred space, it serves as a sensory ritual, merging the breath of the faithful with the light streaming through the portal (Chariton 1978, 101; Isar 2014, 27–44; Foltz 2019, 157). This light highlights Dušan's image and affirms faith in the Divinely chosen king (Ćirić 2024, 267).

In contrast, the ktetorial inscription, hidden within the portal and commissioned by DMITAR's mother Danica for her son's salvation, represents a more intimate gesture of faith. This quiet prayer, inscribed in stone but felt in spirit, contrasts with the more overt visual pledge; while taken together, these elements transform the act of pronouncing 'DMITAR' into a tactile and auditory connection between the Divine and the worldly.

The church creates a dynamic sensory environment through its architectural features, including finely detailed columns, elaborate brickwork, and symbolic portals. The intricate carvings on columns – featuring motifs of ram and eagle – and the carefully structured stone-and-brick façade patterns generate visual stimuli that captivate the attention of observers. The theory of embodied cognition suggests that sensory input significantly influences cognitive processes, which means that the church's sensory stimuli engage the observer's perception and thought processes, shaping their spiritual experience. The visual complexity of the patterns and

forms stimulates one's mind, fostering heightened awareness of the space and the Divine presence it aims to evoke.

Initially, the church's west façade featured the ktetorial portrait of Danica, the founder, holding an image of the church. Although this portrait is no longer preserved, historical sources and analyses confirm its existence and original position. Prominently placed on the south side of the west façade, the portrait emphasized Danica's part in the church's creation and played a crucial role in the sensory and symbolic experience of those entering the sacred space (Radujko 2008, 105). As visitors pass through west the portal, they experience a transformative moment – what can be described as the 'miracle of light' because natural light streams into the church, illuminating the Deesis fresco on the northern wall. This light established a visual connection between the ktetor, the sacred figures of the Deesis, and the portrayal of King Dušan, Queen Helen, and their son Uroš (Ćirić 2024, 260, note 7).

This interplay of light and architecture was designed to evoke profound spiritual and sensory experiences. The light symbolizing Divine grace, being transitioned from the earthly realm, represents the pious act of Danica to the Divine figures depicted in the Deesis. King Dušan's image, situated near the Deesis, highlights his role as a Divinely chosen ruler, reinforcing his importance within the church's design and iconography (Radojčić 1934, 57; Đurić 1974, 61; Rasolkoska-Nikolovska 2004, 229). The importance of his figure is further emphasized by the complex political history surrounding Dušan's rise to power, particularly his opposition to his father, King Stefan Uroš III Dečanski (Marjanović-Dušanić 2016, 61–78). The visual and sensory connection between the ktetor, King Dušan, and the Divine figures enhanced the perception of Dušan as the God-chosen ruler – a belief deeply embedded in the church's design (Ćirić 2024, 267–269).²

² It is important to note that the placement of King Dušan's portrait on the northern side across from the northwest column is by no means arbitrary, as it might seem at first

From a sensory studies perspective, the interaction between light and sacred imagery engages the visual cortex to deepen the observer's experience of the sacred (Pentcheva 2010, 141, 154, 184; Stejskal 2019, 55–66). The architectural manipulation of light and the symbolic placement of figures like Danica and Dušan create a multisensory environment where the Divine is both seen and felt. The rhythmic patterns of brickwork and arches engage the visual sense while creating a tactile quality, invoking 'haptic visuality,' where touch is simulated through sight (Betancourt 2016, 660–689). This tactile experience is further enhanced by the textured mortar layers, reflecting the visual rhythm of the space.

The auditory dimension of St Nicholas Church also plays a critical role in shaping its

glance (or as it might be mistakenly assumed to be the only possible location for the ktetor's portrait; Đorđević 1994, 146). For comparison, King Uroš II Milutin is also depicted as New Constantine on the northern side across from the northwest column in the Church of St George in Staro Nagoričino (Cvetković 2023, 667–692; for Staro Nagoričino cf. 679–680; fig. 7). Literature frequently mentions that this is not an easily noticeable position; however, this idea is not coincidental, particularly considering that by the late 13th and the beginning of 14th century, the concept of the ruler as defender of true faith emerged across from the column as symbol in architecture. The ruler's association with this column signifies his role as a pillar of support for the Church and its teachings. A nearly identical presentation was repeated in the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mount above Mateič. Emperor Dušan is depicted on a pilaster that slightly protrudes from the rest of the southern wall's surface (Dimitrova 2002, 185–186, and on the Holy warrior saint across the Emperor Dušan esp. page 197). He is shown directly across the southeast column, on which one of the holy warriors is depicted. It is important to mention that all three portraits are always shown close to the entrance structure. Only in the case of Ljuboten can we see that the relationship with the western entrance is the same as in Staro Nagoričino (the portrait is to the left of the portal, cf. Ćirić 2023, 122). Only in Ljuboten is the portrait on the northern side precisely aligned with the axis of the southern portal. When the doors were originally opened, the light passing through them would have directly illuminated the portrait of the king and queen with their son Uroš. The text addressing issues of the portraits in Mateič and the question of patronage, co-authored by Dr. Branislav Cvetković and myself, is being prepared for the monograph published by Trivent: *Women and Power in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Southeast and Central Europe (1300–1600)*, edited by Melina Rokai, Budapest 2025 (Ćirić and Cvetković forthcoming).

sensory and spiritual impact. The acoustics, particularly how sound reverberates off the stone walls and domes, amplify the auditory experience of religious rituals (Đorđević et al. 2019, 192–212). Cognitive science suggests that sound can evoke emotional or meditative states, facilitating deeper contemplation, especially in sacred spaces. Echoes of hymns and chants contribute to a heightened sense of the sacred, complementing the visual elements and deepening the spiritual atmosphere (Pentcheva 2017; Troelsgard 2018, 52–77).

Religious studies emphasize the embodied nature of religious experience, suggesting that the sensory environment of sacred spaces is intentionally designed to engage both body and mind in devotion. The ktetorial portrait of Danica, combined with the strategic play of light and King Dušan's likeness, guides the observer's sensory focus toward the sacred. As it opens to allow light in, the portal symbolically bridges the earthly realm with the Divine, inviting the beholder into a spiritual journey within the church. Bearing in mind that the Theotokos with Christ was depicted on the west façade of Ljuboten, it is important to recall the Great Lenten Matins, during which the Theotokos is invoked as the 'Gate of Heaven,' opening the gates of mercy, symbolizing her role as the image of Incarnate Logos. The Great Lenten Matins has a distinctive conclusion, namely, after 'Trisagion' and 'Our Father,' instead of the usual troparion to the saint, the following is read: 'In the temple stood Your glory, I think I stand in heaven, O Theotokos, Gate of Heaven, open to us the gates of Your mercy.' Since she gave birth to Christ, the medallion, or paraphrase of Psalm 46, 'God is in the midst of her,' is inscribed on her bosom (Mercenier, Mercenier, and Paris, 1947, 132; Ćirić 2015, 353).

Hence, it is of great importance that the church's patroness is positioned right next to the west portal, with the intercession of Theotokos with Christ in the lunette (it is obviously intentional that Theotokos with Christ, rather than

the patron St Nicholas, is in the lunette, as it was argued by Radujko 2008, 104, drawing 2).³

- 3 Regarding the act of repentance and mercy at the doors, interestingly, several details are recorded in the life of St Paphnutius, bishop of Upper Thebaid, at the beginning of the 4th Century. Since this is the only preserved source of its kind related to the act of repentance at the doors of the church, we present it here, translated from German in entirety: 'St Paphnutius, who lived in perfect solitude in the renowned Scetis Desert, shone with the grace of holiness as a young monk, and although he was younger than the others, he was compared to the elders. Thus, it was decided that he should be counted among the elders. When this became known, envy, which once stirred the souls of his brothers against Joseph, flared up with its poisonous fire against him by one of the brethren from Scetis. He intended to tarnish his glory with some stain of shame. Waiting for the time when Paphnutius would leave his cell to attend the Sunday service in the Church, he secretly entered his cell and hid his book among the baskets usually woven there from palm twigs. Then he, too, went to the Church, pleased with his cunning. After the Sunday service ended, he publicly complained before the brethren and the holy Isidore, who was then the presbyter, that his book had disappeared from his cell. This accusation confused everyone. The accuser demanded that all the brethren be held in the Church and that a few chosen ones be sent to search all the cells. When three elders, appointed by the presbyter, searched the other cells, they came to Paphnutius' cell, where they found the book hidden among the palm baskets, where the envious brother had hidden it. They immediately took it, brought it into the Church, and laid it before everyone. Although, because of the purity of his conscience, Paphnutius was sure he had no part in the sin, he, as if guilty of theft, submitted himself to the judgment of the elders, declaring his readiness to accept whatever punishment they would impose and asking them to assign him a place of repentance. He said nothing in his defense because of his modest humility, fearing that he might also be condemned for lying in his effort to clear himself of the stain of theft with words. After the investigation and judgment were completed, he left the Church without despair, entrusting himself to the judgment of God alone. He began to repent, increasing his prayers with abundant tears, tripling his fasts, and displaying the greatest humility of spirit before everyone. After nearly two weeks had passed in this way, subjecting himself to all bodily and spiritual penance, he came early in the morning on Saturday and Sunday to the Church not to receive Holy Communion but to lie prostrate at the Church doors, humbly begging for forgiveness. However, unable to endure seeing him continue to humble himself and be humiliated by others, God, the witness and knower of all that is hidden, forced the Devil to reveal what the inventor of evil, the thief of his belongings and slanderer had done without any witnesses. Thus, the one who had been the advisor of the evil deed also became its betrayer. The unclean spirit then tormented the miserable brother so greatly and for so long that neither the prayers of the other saints who dwelled there nor the special grace of Isidore the Presbyter could drive out the fiercest tormentor, though by the Lord's mercy he had been granted power over them, as the possessed would be healed even before they were brought to his door. This was

Additionally, the smell of incense, commonly used in Orthodox liturgy, adds an olfactory dimension to the sensory environment. Cognitive science indicates that smell is a powerful trigger for memory and emotional response, suggesting scents within a church evoke strong associations with spiritual practice. This olfactory experience, combined with tactile, visual, and auditory stimuli, creates an integrated sensory experience that deepens the worshipper's connection to the sacred (Caseau 2007, 75–92; Hedrick and Ergin 2015, 333). The church thus becomes an immersive environment for spiritual transformation, where architecture, light, and sensory stimuli converge to evoke a deep connection to the Divine.

The Capital of the Northwest Column and the Sacred Illumination through the South Portal

The decorative elements of St Nicholas Church in Ljuboten not only possess aesthetic value but also embody profound theological significance. Central to this interplay is the capital at the northwest corner and the strategic use of light entering through the south portal, which together create a harmonious convergence of spiritual symbolism and sensory experience. This analysis explores how these elements—the capital and the light—work in concert to manifest Divine presence and reflect the theological and political landscape of the time.

Positioned directly in front of the portraits of King Dušan and Queen Helen, the capital at the northwest corner (fig. 7) reveals layers of theological meaning through its sculpted symbols: the cross (at its south side), the ram's head (at its southeast corner), the double-headed eagle (at its eastern corner, directed toward Queen Helen) and at the southeast corner is sculpted the King's scallop. Each of these symbols not only reflects a

because Christ the Lord had reserved that glory for Paphnutius so that the slanderer might be healed by the prayers of the one against whom he had plotted and received forgiveness for his sin at the doors.' (Winkelman 1985, 32–42).



Figure 7: Details of the Northwest Capital of the Column (photo Jasmina S. Ćirić)

tradition of the Nemanjić dynasty but also expresses broader aspirations of the Serbian state.

Prominently sculpted on the capital, the cross embodies the fundamental Christian tenets of Christ's sacrifice and Humanity's salvation. It is a constant reminder of the Divine mandate for the rulers it faces, reinforcing their role as defenders of the Faith. Its proximity to the portraits of King Dušan and Queen Helen

accentuates their rule as Divinely sanctioned,⁴ reflecting the Biblical notion that God appoints all rulers to shepherd their people in righteousness, as attested in passages such as Romans 13:1, which states: 'Let every soul be subject to the

⁴ King Dušan's official imagery evolved alongside his expanding authority. As his status shifted from a king to an emperor, depictions of him became more grandiose and ceremonious. This intentional visual development underscores the deep connection between power and its representation (Cvetković 2022, 184).

governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.⁷

The ram's head carved into the capital in Ljuboten is also symbolically rich and deeply rooted in biblical narrative, reflecting themes of sacrifice, redemption, and leadership. This imagery draws from the sacrificial story of Abraham and Isaac, as described in Genesis 22:13: 'Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So, Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son.' The narrative presents a ram as a substitutionary sacrifice, highlighting Divine providence and the theme of redemption through sacrifice.

King Dušan, who succeeded his father, King Stefan Dečanski, might be symbolically linked to this biblical narrative. The carving of the ram's head may allude to the complex dynamics between Dušan and his father. Just as the ram replaced Isaac as a sacrifice, the ram's presence could metaphorically reflect Dušan's role in supplanting his father's rule, drawing a parallel to the Old Testament substitution story. Dečanski's death and Dušan's subsequent rise to power might mirror the tension and transformation present in the Abrahamic sacrifice story (Marjanović-Dušanić 1997, 209).

Moreover, the ram's head being prominently positioned near Dušan's figure may reveal metropolitan artistic motifs that Dušan, who had spent part of his youth in Constantinople, would have encountered there. Such motifs often symbolize strength and leadership, aligning with Dušan's regal imagery and his efforts to establish legitimacy. The ram's symbolism thus intertwines with both the biblical narrative of Divine provision and the imperial ambitions of Dušan, reinforcing his role as a ruler shaped by both Divine and historical forces.

The shell, a symbol rich in religious and cultural connotations, adds a profound layer of meaning to the overall composition, particularly in its placement alongside the ram's head.

While the ram's head directly evokes the sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac, the shell introduces themes of Divine conception and spiritual rebirth (Jensen 2011, 203; Bogdanović 2017, 279). Its association with the Virgin Mary and the incarnation of the celestial Logos enhances the symbolism of this composition (Maguire 2011, 49).

The shell's origins can also be traced to ancient biblical texts and early Christian writings. In the Old Testament, specifically in Judges 6:36 and following, Gideon's fleece was used as a Divine sign. This motif later evolved into broader Marian symbolism through the *Physiologus*, a late 2nd-century text. There, the shell is seen as representing the two testaments of the Bible. Although this does not directly link the shell to the Virgin Mary's conception, it sets the stage for later theological interpretations.

Early Christian theologians such as Clement of Alexandria in 'Paidagogus' II, 63, 5 (Clement of Alexandria in Migne and Le Nourry 1857, 393) adopted the shell as a symbol of the heavenly Logos' incarnation. Here, the shell signifies the virginal conception of Christ.⁵

5 The idea that readily accessible scallop-shell fossil beds might have been used as pilgrimage souvenirs during the medieval period is intriguing. Historical records indicate that various fossils, such as belemnites (often referred to as thunderbolts, Devil's fingers, or St Peter's fingers), gryphea (known as the Devil's toenail), and crinoid stems (referred to as St Cuthbert's beads), were interpreted and valued both in antiquity and medieval times (Mayor 2000; Bassett 1982). It seems plausible that fossilized pecten shells, when readily available, could have been utilized as pilgrimage tokens, either genuinely or in a more symbolic context. Research from 1970 demonstrated that the amino acid content of Pecten shells decreases with the age of the fossil (Akiyama and Wyckoff 1970, 1097). Cf. Hall (2005). Therefore, exploring whether there is a correlation between known pilgrimage souvenirs and their geological origins might be fruitful. Specifically, could pilgrim scallops be identified as fossils, and if so, could they be traced back to their geological sources? In connection with royal iconography, this inquiry could reveal interesting insights. The scallop shell is a prominent symbol associated with pilgrimage and spiritual journeys, aligning with the concept of divine incarnation. This symbolism ties into the broader theme of sacred journeys and transformation, echoing the royal and divine imagery found in medieval art and architecture. Exploring the historical use of these shells in the context of pilgrimage and their representation in religious iconography might deepen our understanding of



Figure 8: Capitals of the Northwest and Southwest Columns, Church of the Virgin of the Black Mountain above the village of Mateič (Matejče Monastery; photo Jasmina S. Ćirić)

The shell's placement in conjunction with the ram's head, especially on the portal oriented towards the entrance of the church, resonates with its more profound theological implications. The portal itself, often associated with the Virgin Mary as the 'Door of Salvation,' echoes the significance of this symbolism. The Akathystos

their symbolic significance in medieval royal and ecclesiastical contexts.

hymn, a key text in Eastern Christian liturgy, includes the invocation: 'Rejoice, O Door through whom the Salvation came into the world,' highlighting the Virgin Mary's role as a gateway to Divine salvation (Klein 2006, 79–99; Bulgakov 2009, 69).

In the context of the west façade, where figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary were prominently depicted, the shell serves as a visual and



Figure 9: Portrait of King Dušan and the Impact of Light, St. Nicholas Church in Ljuboten, North Wall (photo Jasmina S. Ćirić)

symbolic link. It reinforces the connection between the themes of sacrifice, Divine intervention, and the sacred entrance to salvation. The shell thus enhances the theological narrative of the portal, aligning with the broader Christian symbolism of Mary as the mediatrix of Divine grace and gateway to Christ. It is important to note that a similar iconographic solution was later repeated in the Church of the Virgin of the Black Mountain above the village of Mateič (Matejče Monastery). Interestingly, Vojislav Korać observed that 'In the interior, a striking three-arched passage (trivilon) connects the narthex with the nave. The two powerful, circular columns support cubic capitals adorned with stylized human and animal heads and curved leaves on the corners. While there are no direct parallels for these capitals, their treatment resembles those found in the St Archangel's Church in Prizren, dated to the 14th century' (Korać 2003, 217, fn.14).

Nevertheless, it could be said that the protomagister from Ljuboten or the architect from his workshop, was possibly engaged in Mateič as well, as indicated by the sculpting style of the mentioned motifs (fig. 8).

Specific positioning of motifs on the capitals suggests that both the entrance in Ljuboten (1336/37) and the Virgin's Church of the Black Mountain (before 1355) had a ceremonial function. Significant spaces or buildings (refectory, abbot's residence, courtyard, etc.) were probably located on this side of the church (Korać 2003, 217; cf. 242, figs. 24, 25).

The double-headed eagle, a symbol frequently associated with both the Nemanjić dynasty and the Byzantine Palaiologos dynasty, represents the unity of spiritual and temporal authority. Its presence in the capital underscores the Serbian rulers' aspiration to reflect the grandeur and legitimacy of the Byzantine Empire.

The double-headed eagle can be seen as a manifestation of heavenly kingship, symbolizing the dual authority of Christ the King, who reigns both on earth as in the Heavens and, as suggested by the biblical vision of Christ's universal dominion in Revelation 11:15: 'The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever' (Androudis 2015, 315–341; Çağaptay 2018, 309–338).

The strategic alignment of these symbols with the light entering through the south portal further enhances their theological impact. As light filters through the portal, it illuminates the capital and the portraits of King Dušan and Queen Helen, creating a visual and symbolic connection between earthly rulers and celestial authority. This interplay of light and symbolism reinforces the Divine sanction of Dušan's reign and the church's role as a conduit of spiritual illumination and legitimacy (fig. 9; Potamianos 2022, 151–172).⁶

The capital at the northeast corner of St Nicholas Church, with its sculpted symbols of the cross, ram, and double-headed eagle, embodies a rich tapestry of theological and political symbolism. Through their alignment and interaction with the sacred light from the south portal, these elements collectively affirm the heavenly endorsement of the rulers and the aspiration to mirror the Byzantine Empire's spiritual and temporal grandeur.

The Sacred Impact of Light through the South Portal

Although the south portal of St. Nicholas Church is now sealed with a brick-and-mortar wall, its original design played a crucial role in shaping the church's sacred and sensory experi-

ence.⁷ In Christian theology, light is a powerful symbol of Divine presence and enlightenment, and its interaction with architectural elements was integral to the church's design.

Historically, sunlight streaming through the south portal would have gradually illuminated the capital at the northeast corner, causing the carvings of the cross, the ram, and the eagle to shimmer with Divine radiance. This dynamic interplay between light and sculpture would have transformed these symbols from static images into living conveyors of spiritual meaning. The light filtering through the portal was perceived as a manifestation of God's presence, creating a visual link between heaven and earth.

With its sculpted symbols, the capital was strategically positioned to exploit this natural illumination. As sunlight fell on the capital, it accentuated its intricate details and cast shadows that highlighted the theological implications of the symbols. This interaction between light and stone mirrored the dual nature of existence, where the material world (stone) is illuminated by heavenly truth (light). The light's movement through the portal deepened the viewer's experi-

⁶ The literature on natural lighting in Byzantine churches is extensive. This article aims to provide a summary of this body of work and offer recommendations for further reading. Notably, Potamianos' doctoral dissertation (Potamianos 1996) is the key resource for understanding interplay between natural light and liturgy in Byzantine architecture.

⁷ The south portal of the Church of St. Nicholas has undergone considerable changes over time, particularly during modern restoration efforts. In a photograph published by architect Žarko M. Tatić, the portal, although visibly damaged, remained part of the original façade and was filled with stone ashlars. Tatić, who completed the first architectural drawings of the church, documented its deteriorated state (Tatić 1927, 99). The subsequent decision to close the portal with brick and mortar during later conservation efforts in 1928 raises concerns about the rationale behind sealing an entrance that played a crucial role in the church's architectural and symbolic framework. Regarding the period of restoration efforts at Ljuboten, only V. R. Petković provides information, noting that the works were undertaken in 1928 (Petković 1950, 178). This intervention altered the visual and spatial perception of the façade, and the distinction between the original and new materials remains evident. Such a decision warrants critique regarding the conservation approach, particularly when it comes to the preservation of historically significant features like the south portal, which had an integral role in the sacred and sensory experience of the church's space. The photographs, most likely taken by Jakov Pavelic, were published by Tatić and are part of the photothèque of the National Museum in Belgrade. These visual records provide crucial documentation of the church's ruinous state before the modern interventions.

ence, inviting contemplation of the Divine mysteries represented by the capital's imagery.

Although the south portal is today covered with brick and mortar, historical evidence and architectural studies suggest that the original design intended for sunlight to emphasize key features of the church, including the capital and the portraits of King Dušan and Queen Helen with their son Uroš. The rulers, bathed in the same celestial light that would have touched the capital, were positioned as intermediaries between God and the people, legitimizing their authority through religious iconography and natural light (Korać 2003, 112, 113).

Ljuboten Church's surfaces are brought to life by the interplay of light and shadow. The architectural elements are designed to capture and reflect light in ways that emphasize their ornate details and enhance the spiritual experience of those entering the church. The highland sun serves as a powerful tool, much like the luminous pigments in illuminated manuscripts, transforming the building's interior into a space where light and shadow contribute to its aesthetic and liturgical significance. Although these vistas are lost today, photographs taken at different times of the day provide glimpses of the original perspectives.

Moreover, the original light's passage through the south portal could be seen as a metaphor for Divine guidance, casting a path for the faithful and symbolically anointing the rulers with God's grace. This spiritual illumination aligns with theological doctrines that emphasize the transcendent nature of celestial authority and its reflection through the Church and its rulers. The interplay of light and sacred art underscored the church's design as a profound tool for worship and spiritual reflection, reinforcing the connection between the earthly and the heavenly (Potamianos 2018, 117; Potamianos 2021, 284–302).

Conclusion

The multisensory experience within St Nicholas Church in Ljuboten is deeply intertwined with

its architectural features and environmental setting. The church's location enhances its spiritual and sensory impact, as it is situated within the sacred landscape of the Holy Mount of Skoplje (Skopska Crna Gora). This prominent positioning within a revered natural setting amplifies the sacred atmosphere and contributes significantly to the worship experience. The natural environment of the Holy Mount further enhances this experience, integrating the church's sensory elements with its sacred setting (Cosgrove and Della Dora 2009; Della Dora 2016, 147–177).⁸ The

8 It is important to note that the issue of sacred topography in Skopje, Kumanovo, and the surrounding areas has not been thoroughly addressed in historiography. The fact that endowments were established in a relatively small space speaks to the repetitive nature of creating sacred spaces on mountains. To recall, mountains, hills, and highlands—traditionally associated with topoi from the Holy Scriptures—are often chosen as sites for constructing Christian monasteries and churches. The significance of mountains in Orthodoxy is multifaceted. Their mention in the Holy Scriptures is historical and metaphorical, and numerous monasteries are located on these elevations. Additionally, mountains often appear in iconographic depictions. Mountains serve as attributes in the names of God and play a pivotal role in Christian theology. The mountain is where the Lord delivered His sermon, where He went to pray, where He was transfigured before His disciples, where He was crucified, and from which He ascended into Heaven. In the Holy Scriptures, mountains are also mentioned in a figurative sense. Ultimately, they are seen as the place of eschatological significance, symbolizing the final and future Jerusalem, the Heavenly Kingdom. In the Book of Ezekiel, it is stated that the Garden of God, the holy mountain of God, Eden, was located on a mountain (Ezekiel 28:13–16) and that the 'trees of Eden' were situated on Lebanon (Ezekiel 31:16). This has led some to localize Eden on Mount Lebanon. Lebanon is a mountain range in the country of Lebanon, with its highest peak, Qurnat as Sawda, at 3,088 meters above sea level. In the Book of Genesis, God and the mountain are mentioned in a common context. Abraham identifies Mount Moriah as God's Mountain and ascends it because 'the Lord will provide' there. 'And Abraham called that place: The Lord will provide. So it is said to this day: On the mount of the Lord, it shall be provided' (Genesis 22:14). In the Book of Exodus, the mountain in the wilderness, Horeb (Sinai), is referred to as the mountain of God (Exodus 3:1; 4:27; 18:5), where God is located (Exodus 19:3). 'And the Lord said to Aaron: Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. So he went and met him on the mountain of God, and kissed him' (Exodus 4:27). These geographical structures serve as models for conceptualizing space within theological discourse, as can be observed in the depiction of the mountainous surroundings of Mount Sinai in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 19–34). Just as Eden is described as on a mountain, in the Old Testament, the future house of the Lord is also located on a mountain. The prophets Isaiah and Micah provide

church's location within the sacred landscape of the Holy Mount of Skoplje adds a profound dimension to this multisensory experience. The natural setting not only enhances the visual and tactile aspects of the church but also reinforces its spiritual significance, offering a deeper connection to the Divine.

In St Nicholas Church, the interplay between light and the sacred environment is critical in devotional practice and performative piety. Light entering through the south portal was more than a physical phenomenon; it was seen as a manifestation of Divine presence that united the viewers with theological messages. The fresco of King Dušan, positioned alongside holy figures, created a narrative linking the earth-

ly ruler to the celestial realm. This visual alignment allowed visitors to perceive King Dušan as a transitional figure, bridging the celestial with the earthly and drawing worshippers into the spiritual communion with the holy figures and patrons. Visitors and worshippers in Ljuboten are drawn into a mystical experience, joining with the donor, noblewoman Danica, and the sacred imagery in an atemporal spiritual relationship.

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Summary

The article provides a detailed analysis of the sensory and symbolic dimensions of St. Nicholas Church in Ljuboten, focusing on its architectural and artistic elements to uncover the profound theological and political messages embedded within its design. Situated within the sacred landscape of the Holy Mountain of Skoplje, the church's architecture is intricately linked to its natural environment, enhancing its spiritual and sensory impact. Central to the discussion is the interaction between light and sacred imagery within the church. The manipulation of light in relation to the church's architecture is not merely an aesthetic choice but a deliberate design element intended to deepen the observer's experience of the divine. The interplay between light and symbolic figures, such as King Dušan's and Queen Helen's portraits, creates a multisensory environment where the divine is both seen and felt. This engagement is further enhanced by the tactile quality of the brickwork and arches, which invoke a 'haptic visuality,' where touch is simulated through sight.

The auditory dimension also plays a crucial role. The church's acoustics, with sound reverberating off the stone walls and domes, amplify the experience of religious rituals, contributing to a heightened sense of the sacred. The echoes of hymns and chants facilitate deeper contemplation and enhance the spiritual atmosphere. The analysis delves into the religious and historical sym-

descriptions of the topographical characteristics of the space where the future house of the Lord will be situated, as a place 'on the mountain above all mountains and hills' (Isaiah 2:2-3; Micah 4:1-2). Similar: 'In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains and exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem' (Isaiah 2:2-3).²⁸ This narrative reinforces the theological symbolism of mountains as places of divine encounters and sanctity, embodying the concept of "God-protected spaces" that resonate deeply in Christian art and architecture. Monasteries and churches on mountains echo the scriptural associations with sacred summits, creating a dialogue between topography, spirituality, and the sacred history of salvation. For a more detailed interpretation of mountains and sacred spaces in the Christian tradition, see: Lidov (2009, 8-10). For the idea of creating sacred spaces in Ohrid, see: Ćirić (2017, 319-329).

Protopresbyter Radoslav Grujić, while serving as the director of the Museum of Southern Serbia in Skopje, was the only scholar to write extensively about the concept of Skopje as a sacred space. Citing sources such as Procopius of Caesarea, Grujić argued that Skopje was once a metropolitan city with many churches. He also highlights the Komnenian dynasty (1084-1185 AD), a period conducive to constructing monasteries throughout the Byzantine Empire. During this time, Byzantine society—from emperors to peasants—was gripped by extraordinary religious fervor, bordering on mania. As a result, churches and monasteries proliferated across the empire. Grujić also identifies this area as the domain of the Monastery of St. George and mentions citations from the writings of St. Isaiah the Elder, who wrote about the churches near Skopje. It is believed that St. Isaiah may have translated Dionysius the Areopagite and described how the churches appeared to him as akin to paradise, a garden, or a flowerbed (Grujić 1935, 34, 68, 160).

bolism of various architectural elements, including the capital at the northeast corner of the church. This capital features sculpted symbols such as the cross, ram's head, and double-headed eagle. Each symbol reflects theological and political aspirations. The cross represents Christ's sacrifice and the divine mandate of rulers, while the ram's head, linked to the sacrificial story of Abraham and Isaac, also connects to the ambitions of King Dušan. The double-headed eagle signifies the unity of spiritual and temporal authority, echoing the grandeur of the Byzantine Empire and the divine kingship of Christ. Although now sealed, the south portal of the church initially allowed sunlight to filter through and illuminate these symbols. This interaction of light with the carvings transformed them into living conveyors of spiritual meaning, creating a visual link between heaven and earth. The light's passage through the portal was perceived as a manifestation of God's presence, enhancing the theological impact of the church's design.

Furthermore, the presence of the shell motif, associated with the Virgin Mary and divine conception, adds another layer of meaning. The shell symbolizes spiritual rebirth and aligns with Marian themes of salvation. Its placement, in conjunction with the ram's head, reinforces the connection between themes of sacrifice and divine grace. The article concludes by emphasizing the integral role of the church's location and design in shaping the worship experience. The multisensory environment created by the interplay of light, sound, and symbolism facilitates a deep spiritual connection for visitors. The church's architectural features and natural setting create a profound tool for worship and reflection, drawing worshippers into a mystical experience that bridges the earthly and divine realms.

Povzetek

Članek podrobno analizira čutne in simbolne razsežnosti cerkve svetega Nikolaja v Ljubotenu, pri čemer se osredotoča na njene arhitekturne in umetniške elemente z namenom razkrivanja globokih teoloških ter političnih sporočil, vgrajenih v njeno zasnovo. Arhitektura cerkve, ki se nahaja v sveti pokrajini Svete gore pri Skopju, je tesno povezana z naravnim okoljem, kar povečuje njen duhovni in čutni učinek. Osrednja tema razprave je interakcija med svetlobo in svetimi podobami v cerkvi. Upravljanje svetlobe v povezavi z arhitekturo cerkve ni

zgolj estetska izbira, temveč premišljen oblikovalski element, namenjen poglobljanju opazovalčevega doživljanja božanskega. Medsebojni vpliv svetlobe in simbolnih likov, kot sta portreta kralja Dušana in kraljice Helene, ustvarja veččutno okolje, v katerem je božansko vidno in občuteno. To izkušnjo še okrepi otipljivost opeke in obokov, ki vzbuja »haptično vizualnost«, pri kateri je dotik simuliran z vidom. Pomembno vlogo ima tudi slušna razsežnost. Akustika cerkve, kjer se zvok odbija od kamnitih zidov in kupol, okrepi doživljanje verskih obredov in prispeva h globljemu občutku svetosti. Odmevi hvalnic in spevov omogočajo globljo kontemplacijo ter krepijo duhovno vzdušje. Analiza se podrobno ukvarja z versko in zgodovinsko simboliko različnih arhitekturnih elementov, med drugim s kapitelom na severovzhodnem vogalu cerkve. Ta kapitel vsebuje izklesane simbole, kot so križ, ovnova glava in dvoglavi orel. Vsak simbol odraža teološke in politične pomene. Križ predstavlja Kristusovo žrtvovanje in božji mandat vladarjev, ovnova glava, povezana z žrtveno zgodbo o Abrahamu in Izaku, pa je povezana tudi z ambicijami kralja Dušana. Dvoglavi orel označuje enotnost duhovne in posvetne oblasti, kar odraža veličino bizantinskega cesarstva in Kristusovo božansko kraljevanje. Čeprav je južni portal cerkve zdaj zapečaten, je prvotno omogočal prodiranje sončne svetlobe, ki je osvetljevala te simbole. Ta interakcija svetlobe z rezbarijami jih je spremenila v žive prenašalce duhovnega pomena in ustvarila vizualno povezavo med nebom ter zemljo. Prehajanje svetlobe skozi portal so dojemali kot manifestacijo Božje navzočnosti, kar je okrepilo teološki učinek zasnove cerkve.

Poleg tega prisotnost motiva školjke, ki je povezan z Devico Marijo in božjim spočetjem, dodaja še eno raven pomena. Školjka simbolizira duhovni preporod in se ujema z Marijinimi motivi odrešenja. Njena umestitev v povezavi z ovnovo glavo krepí povezavo med temami žrtvovanja in Božje milosti.

Članek se zaključi s poudarkom na ključni vlogi lokacije in zasnove cerkve pri oblikovanju izkušnje bogoslužja. Veččutno okolje, ki ga ustvarja preplet svetlobe, zvoka in simbolike, obiskovalcem omogoča globoko duhovno povezanost. Arhitekturne značilnosti cerkve in njeno naravno okolje ustvarjajo močno orodje za bogoslužje ter razmislek in vernike pritegnejo k mistični izkušnji, ki povezuje zemeljsko in božansko kraljestvo.

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