

The Isles of Great Silence Monastic Life on Lake Scutari under the Patronage of the Balšićs

Abstract: At the time Zeta was ruled by the local lords of the Balšić family, in the late fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth century, the islets in Lake Scutari (Skadarsko jezero) in Zeta were lively centres of monastic life. The paper looks at the forms of monastic life as suggested by the spatial organization and architecture of the monastic complexes founded by the Balšićs, and by the surviving written sources. The most important documentary source is the correspondence between Jelena Balšić and her spiritual father, Nikon, preserved in the manuscript known as *Gorički zbornik* (Gorica Collection). The letters show that Lake Scutari was a centre of monasticism touched by hesychast-inspired spirituality where both the eremitic and coenobitic ways of life were practised.

Keywords: Lake Scutari, monasteries, monasticism, Jelena Balšić, Nikon the Jerusalemite, Gorica Collection (*Gorički zbornik*)

The Balšić family's architectural legacy on Lake Scutari comprises three monastic complexes in the islets of Starčeva Gorica (also known as Starčevo), Beška (also known as Gorica or Brezovica) and Moračnik.¹ The oldest monastery, with the church dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin, was built in Starčeva Gorica in 1376–78 under Djuradj (George) I Balšić.² The monastic complex in Beška includes two churches: one, earlier,

¹ For the activity of the Balšićs as *ktetors* on Lake Scutari, see V. J. Djurić, "Balšići. Arhitektura", in *Istorija Crne Gore*, vol. II/2 (Titograd: Redakcija za istoriju Crne Gore, 1970), 413–439, and his "Srpski državni sabori u Peći i crkveno graditeljstvo", in *O knezu Lazaru*, eds. I. Božić & V. J. Djurić (Belgrade: Filozofski fakultet, 1975), 105–122; G. Radović, "Crkve i manastiri na Skadarskom jezeru", *Izgradnja* 56: 12 (2002), 409–414. The monasticism on Lake Scutari has not received much scholarly attention so far. For one of the few exceptions, see D. Popović, "Pustinjско monaštvo u doba Brankovića", in *Pad Srpske despotovine 1459. godine*, ed. M. Spremić (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2011), 123–124.

² For the dating of the monastery, see Lj. Stojanović, *Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi*, vol. I (Belgrade: 1902; fasc. ed. by Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Matica Srpska, National Library, 1982), no. 149, 48. For architectural analysis, see Dj. Bošković, "Izveštaj i kratke beleške sa putovanja", *Starinar* ser. III, vol. VI (1931), 159–161; V. Petković, *Pregled crkvenih spomenika kroz povescnicu srpskog naroda* (Belgrade: Naučna knjiga, 1950), 44–45; A. Deroko, *Monumentalna i dekorativna arhitektura u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji* (Belgrade: Naučna knjiga, 1953), 244; Djurić, "Balšići. Arhitektura", 418–422; P. Mijović, "Vječno na krajini", in *Virpazar, Bar, Ulcinj*, ed. N. Gažević (Cetinje–Belgrade: Obod,

dedicated to St George,³ the other, later, to the Annunciation.⁴ There is no dating evidence for the older church, but it may be assumed that its *kte-tor* was Djuradj II Stracimirović Balšić and that it was constructed sometime in the last two decades of the fourteenth century.⁵ The founder of the younger church was Jelena Balšić, daughter of Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (r. 1373–89) and wife of Djuradj II Stracimirović Balšić, and she intended it as her funerary church. The inscription carved on the lintel places its construction into the year 1439: ...СЪЗДА СЕ ХРАМЪ СЫ. ПРѢС(ВЕ)ТІЕ В(ОГОРОДН)ЦЕ. СЪ ТРЪДОМЪ И ВТКОУПОМЪ. БОГОЧЪСТИВОН Г(ОСПО)ГИ ЕЛЕ. ДЪЩЕРИ С(ВЕ)ТОПОНЬШАГО КНЕЗА ЛАЗАРА. А ПОДРОУЖІЕ Г(ОСПО)ДИ(НА) ГЮРГА СТРАЦИМИРОВИКА. ВЪ ЛѢТО. ̅. ̅. ̅. ̅. ̅. [...the church of the Most Holy Virgin built through the efforts and means of pious Lady Jela, daughter of the late Holy Prince Lazar and wife of Lord Djuradj Stracimirović in the year 1439].⁶ The monastery of Moračnik in the islet of the same name, with the church dedicated to the Virgin, was first referred to in a charter issued by Balša III Djurdjević in 1417, which gives grounds to assume that he had been its founder.⁷

1974), 40; S. Popović, *Krst u krugu: arhitektura manastira u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji* (Belgrade: Prosveta & Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika, 1994), 228–229; T. Pejović, *Manastiri na tlu Crne Gore* (Novi Sad–Cetinje: Pravoslavna reč, 1995), 120–124; Č. Marković & R. Vujičić, *Spomenici kulture Crne Gore* (Novi Sad: Presmedij; Cetinje: Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika culture, 1997), 121–122; S. Petković, *Kulturna baština Crne Gore* (Novi Sad: Pravoslavna reč, 2003), 167–168.

³ Bošković, “Izveštaj i kratke beleške”, 162–165; Petković, *Pregled crkvenih spomenika*, 24; Djurić, “Balšići. Arhitektura”, 422; Mijović, “Vječno na krajini”, 40–41; Pejović, *Manastiri na tlu Crne Gore*, 113–118; Marković & Vujičić, *Spomenici kulture*, 96–97; Popović, *Krst u krugu*, 228–229; Petković, *Kulturna baština*, 10.

⁴ Petković, *Pregled crkvenih spomenika*, 24; Bošković, *Izveštaj i kratke beleške*, 162–165; Djurić, “Balšići. Arhitektura”, 422; Mijović, “Vječno na krajini”, 40–41; Pejović, *Manastiri na tlu Crne Gore*, 113–118; Marković & Vujičić, *Spomenici kulture*, 96–97.

⁵ The earliest reference to the church of St George occurs in the last will and testament of Jelena Balšić of 1442, in the context of her bequest of a sum for its repair, cf. Lj. Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. I (Belgrade: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1929), 396; D. I. Sindik, “Testament Jelene Balšić” in *Nikon Jerusalimac. Vrijeme – ličnost – djelo*, ed. J. Čulibrk (Cetinje: Svetigora, 2004), 153–154.

⁶ G. Tomović, *Morfologija ćirilčnih natpisa na Balkanu* (Belgrade: Istorijski institut, 1974), 113; Stojanović, *Povelje i pisma*, vol. I, 395–396; Bošković, “Izveštaj i kratke beleške”, 161–162.

⁷ St. Novaković, *Zakonski spomenici srpskih država srednjeg veka*, V (Belgrade 1912), 757; Bošković, “Izveštaj i kratke beleške”, 162–165; Petković, *Pregled crkvenih spomenika*, 39–40; P. Mijović, *Umjetničko blago Crne Gore* (Belgrade: Jugoslovenska revija; Titograd: Pobjeda, 1980), 152; Č. Marković, “Manastir Moračnik” *Glasnik Narodnog muzeja Crne Gore* I (2004), 9–18; Pejović, *Manastiri na tlu Crne Gore*, 130; Popović, *Krst u krugu*, 229;

The Balšić dynasty ruled Zeta from 1360 to 1421 from Scutari (Alb. Skhoder, Serb. Skadar), and subsequently from Ulcinj in Lower Zeta.⁸ Their reign was marked by a rapid political rise. At the assembly of secular lords and church leaders summoned at Peć in 1375, Prince Lazar and Djuradj I Balšić emerged as the most powerful of local lords competing for power in the disintegrating Serbian Empire after the death of the last Nemanjić ruler, Emperor Stefan Uroš V, in 1371. One of the decisions of the assembly was to encourage monks from Mount Athos and other Orthodox centres to settle in the Morava Valley, the realm of Prince Lazar, and in Zeta. As a result, numerous monastic communities arose in these regions.⁹ The assembly decision becomes understandable in the light of the fact that the religious situation in Zeta had been marked by the presence of both Roman Catholic and Orthodox populations. The political position of Djuradj II Stracimirović and his son and heir Balša III was marked by the effort to preserve the integrity of their realm against the Venetians, the Ottomans and the Hungarians, who all struggled for control over the coastal areas whose strategic centre was Lake Scutari.¹⁰ Venetian expansion had begun in the late fourteenth century. More frequently than their predecessors, young Balša III and his mother, Jelena Balšić, acted before the Venetians as protectors of the jurisdictional powers of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its Metropolitanate of Zeta. Even after the widowed Jelena remarried the Grand Duke of Hum, Sandalj Hranić, and moved to Bosnia (1411), her son's political agenda for Zeta included its close alliance with the Despotate of Serbia and counted on the support of his uncle, Despot Stefan, in resisting Venetian pressure. Zeta and northern Albania were densely covered with Roman Catholic bishoprics,¹¹ but, according to an agreement reached

Marković & Vujičić, *Spomenici kulture Crne Gore*, 109–110; Petković, *Kulturna baština Crne Gore*, 87–88.

⁸ J. Jelčić, *Zeta i dinastija Balšića* (Podgorica: Matica crnogorska, 2010) = G. Gelcich, *La Zedda e la Dinastia dei Balšidi* (Spalato 1899); *Istorija Crne Gore* II/2, 1–120; *Istorija srpskog naroda*, vol. II, texts by D. Bogdanović and R. Mihaljčić (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1994); J. V. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans. A Critical Study from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

⁹ Djurić, “Srpski državni sabori”, 105–122.

¹⁰ For a detailed study on the ecclesiastical situation in fifteenth-century Zeta, see M. Spremić, “Crkvene prilike u Zeti u doba Nikona Jerusalimca”, in *Nikon Jerusalimac*, ed. J. Čulibrk, 73–108. See also I. Božić in *Istorija Crne Gore*, II/2, 86–99; J. Kalić, *Srbi u poznom srednjem veku* (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1994), 89–92.

¹¹ The bishoprics were seated in: Kotor (Cattaro), Budva (Budua), Ulcinj (Dulcigno), Skadar (Scutari), Drisht (Drivasto), Danje (Dagnum) and Lezsha (Alessio), cf. Spremić, “Crkvene prilike u Zeti,” 77.

in 1426 between Despot Djuradj Branković and Francesco Quirin, the Venetian Captain of Scutari, the Metropolitan of Zeta continued to exercise jurisdiction over all Serbian Orthodox churches on Lake Scutari, including those on Venetian soil.¹² By 1435, when Jelena Balšić, a widow once more, returned to Zeta, negotiations had been well underway on union between the Western and Eastern churches. Despot Djuradj Branković declined the invitation to attend the Council held in Florence in 1439.¹³ On the other hand, the Council was attended by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Cattaro, Contarini, who must have championed the union upon his return from Florence. Such a situation had its ramifications in Zeta, as evidenced by the fact that the Orthodox monastery of the Most Pure Virgin of Krajina (*Prečista Krajinska*), on the southwest shore of Lake Scutari, became the seat of a union-supporting archbishop instructed to gather the Orthodox in Zeta and northern Albania under the jurisdiction of the Pope, and was increasingly frequented by like-minded prelates of Greek or Albanian origin.¹⁴ Under such circumstances, the activity of Jelena Balšić, such as the renovation of the church of St George, the building of her funerary church in the islet of Beška and the effort to draw together a circle of Orthodox monks, the most distinguished of whom was the learned hesychast monk Nikon, resulted in the creation of a centre of monastic spirituality in Zeta.

The choice of the site for a monastery, taking into account its natural surroundings, was an important consideration in the spatial organization of the monastic complexes in the lake isles.¹⁵ In medieval Byzantine and Serbian sources, such as foundation charters, *typika* and hagiographies, the founders of monasteries frequently describe the natural setting they chose for their foundations or give reasons for their choice. Monastery site selec-

¹² G. Valentini, ed., *Acta Albaniae Veneta saeculorum XIV et XV*, Pars II, Tomus XII (1971), 286–291.

¹³ M. Spremić, “Srbi i florentinska unija 1439. godine”, *ZRVI* XXIV (1986), 413–421.

¹⁴ I. Božić, “Albanija i Arbanasi u XIII, XIV i XV veku”, *Glas SANU* CCCXXVIII, Od. ist. n. 3 (1983), 88.

¹⁵ On the natural surroundings of monastic settlements, see A. Bryer, “The Late Byzantine monastery in town and countryside”, in *The Church in Town and Countryside*, Studies in Church History 16, ed. D. Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), 219–241; N. Bakirtzis, “The creation of a sacred landscape in Byzantium: taming the wilderness of Mount Menoikeon”, in *Hierotopy. Studies in the Making of Sacred Spaces*, ed. A. Lidov (Moscow: Radunitsa, 2004), 97–99, and his “Hagios Ioannis Prodromos Monastery on mount Menoikeon: Byzantine monastic practice, sacred topography and architecture” (PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2006), 81–116; S. Popović, “Dividing the indivisible: the monastery space – secular and sacred”, *ZRVI* XLIV (2007), 62–63.

tion, often a result of divine providence, is a *topos* of medieval hagiography,¹⁶ including Serbian.¹⁷ Correspondence between Jelena Balšić and her spiritual guide, Nikon the Jerusalemite, contained in the manuscript known as the *Gorica Collection* (*Gorički zbornik*, 1441/2),¹⁸ provides information about two churches in the islet of Beška. In his reply to Jelena's third letter, Nikon describes the site of the church of the Annunciation, Jelena's foundation, and that of St George's in its immediate vicinity (86a): **ПАКЫ ЖЕ ВЪЗВѢЩАЕТЪ НАМЪ Х(РИСТО)ЛЮБИЕ ТВОЕ, ЯКО СЪЗДАНЫИ ТОВОЮ ХРАМЪ ЕПАНИОНЪ ОВИТЪЛН С(ВЕТА)ГО И ГЛАВНАГО ВЕЛИКО М(ОУЧЕ)НИКА ТРОПЕВФОРА ГЕВРГІА ВЪ МѢСТѢ РЕКОМЪМ ГОРИЦА** [Once more, you have shown us your love of Christ, like the temple you built next to the glorious community of the holy great-martyr and vanquisher George, in the place known as Gorica]. On the other hand, such locations for the foundations of the Balšićs ensured the necessary safety to the monastic communities. The lake islets formed a naturally sheltered spatial whole, which played a role in the architectural shaping of the monastic complexes. Namely, unlike the strongly fortified contemporary monasteries in the northern Serbian realm encompassing the basin of the (Velika) Morava River and therefore informally termed Moravian Serbia, the lake monasteries of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were simply enclosed by massive walls and had no more than one tower, which virtually never served a defensive purpose.¹⁹

¹⁶ A.-M. Talbot, "Founders' choices: monastery site selection in Byzantium", in *Founders and Refounders of Byzantine Monasteries*, ed. M. Mullett (Belfast Enetprises, 2007), 50–52; S. Mojsilović, "Prostorna struktura manastira srednjovekovne Srbije", *Saopštenja* 13 (1981), 127–146, and "Byzantine influences in the architecture of monastery sites and buildings in medieval Serbia", *XVI Internationaler Byzantinistenkongress, Akten II/4* (1982), 491–500; S. Popović, "Shaping a monastery settlement in the Late Byzantine Balkans", in *Shaping Community: The Art and Archaeology of Monasticism*, ed. S. McNally (BAR, 2001), 129–146, as well as her "Dividing the indivisible", 47–65, and "The Byzantine monastery: its spatial iconography and the questions of sacredness", in *Hierotopy: Studies in the Making of Sacred Space*, ed. A. Lidov (Moscow: Indrik, 2006), 170.

¹⁷ E.g., the Serbian archbishop Danilo (Daniel) II (ca 1270–1337), author of the *Lives of the Serbian Kings and Archbishops*, says the following of the Banjska monastery church of St Stephen (1313–17) in Kosovo, a foundation of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin: "You are a blessed and virtuous Christ-loving king, because you found a peaceful place for yourself and the memory of you will live on forever": Arhiepiskop Danilo II, *Životi kraljeva i arhiepiskopa srpskih* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1935), 114.

¹⁸ The manuscript is kept in the Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, under no. 446.

¹⁹ Popović, *Krst u krugu*, 228–229.

The monasteries in the area of Lake Scutari are popularly known as the Holy Mount of Zeta.²⁰ Their organization undoubtedly emulated the Holy Mount of Athos.²¹ Similar monastic communities arose in other parts of medieval Serbia: the Koriša area,²² the Mount of Lesnovo,²³ the environs of the monastery of Treskavac,²⁴ the gorges of the Crnica and the Mlava.²⁵ These communities were frequently quite complex, as they practised both the coenobitic and eremitic ways of life in appropriate architectural settings: monastic enclosures, churches, *kellia* and hermitages.²⁶

²⁰ Djurić, “Balšići. Arhitektura”, 422. See also the section titled *Krug Zetske Svete Gore* of the volume *Nikon Jerusalimac*, ed. J. Čulibrk, 33–151; V. Balj, “Ideje isihazma u prepisci Jelene Balšić i Nikona Jerusalimca”, in *Šćepan Polje i njegove svetinje kroz vijekove*, ed. G. Tomović (Berane: Svevidje, 2010), 133. For the holy mountains in Byzantium, see A-M. Talbot, “Holy Mountain”, in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. II (English Oxford University Press, 1991), 941, and her “Les saintes montagnes à Byzance”, in *Le sacre et son inscription dans l'espace à Byzance et en Occident. Etudes comparées*, ed. M. Kaplan (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2001); Panel papers VI.6, *Monastic Mountains and Deserts*, Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Vol. II, Abstracts of Panel papers (London 2006), 218–225; P. Soustal, ed. *Heilige Berge und Wüsten, Byzanz und sein Umfeld* (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009).

²¹ A. Bryer & M. Cunningham, eds. *Mount Athos and Byzantine Monasticism* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996); M. Živojinović, *Istorija Hilandara*, vol. I (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1998). On different types of monasticism on Mount Athos, see M. Živojinović, *Svetogorske kelije i pirgovi u srednjem veku* (Belgrade: Viyantološki institute SANU, 1972); D. Paphrisantu, *Atonsko monaštvo, počeci i organizacija* (Belgrade: Društvo prijatelja Svete Gore Atonske, 2004); M. Živojinović, “Aton – pojava opštežica i počeci osobenožica”, in *Sedma kazivanja o Svetoj Gori*, eds. M. Živojinović & Z. Rakić (Belgrade 2011), 31–52.

²² D. Popović, “The Cult of St Peter of Koriša: Stages of Development and Patterns”, *Balcanica XVIII* (1997), 181–212.

²³ S. Gabelić, “Nepoznati lokaliteti u okolini Lesnovskog manastira”, *ZLUMS* 20 (1984), 163–174, and *Manastir Lesnovo* (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 1998), 239–245.

²⁴ S. Smolčić Makuljević, “Sakralna topografija manastira Treskavca”, *Balcanica XXXV* (2004), 287–322, as well as her “Two models of sacred space in the Byzantine and medieval visual culture of the Balkans: the monasteries of Prohor Pčinja and Treskavac”, *JÖB* 59 (2009), 191–203, and “Sakralna topografija svetih gora: Sinaj–Aton–Treskavac”, in *Sedma kazivanja*, 183–236.

²⁵ S. Popović, “The last Hesychast safe havens in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century monasteries in the northern Balkans”, *ZRVI* 48 (2011), 217–257; T. Starodubcev, “The formation of a holy mount in Late Middle Ages: the case of the River Crnica Gorge”, in *Proceedings of the 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies*, vol. III, *Abstracts of Free Communications* (Sofia 2011), 93–94.

²⁶ D. Popović, “Pustinje i svete gore srednjovekovne Srbije. Pisani izvori, prostorni obrasci, graditeljska rešenja”, *ZRVI XLIV* (2007), 253–274; S. Popović, “The architectural transformation of *laura* in Middle and Late Byzantium”, in 26th Annual Byzan-

The building activity of the Balšićs and the organization of their foundations on Lake Scutari followed the monastic ideals established in Moravian Serbia and Mount Athos.²⁷ In terms of architecture, this inspiration is recognizable in the use of the Athonite trefoil (or triconch) plan for the foundations which were modest in size and continued the architectural tradition of Zeta in style. Stone was the main construction material, while the shapes of vaults, arches, windows and bell-towers followed the then prevailing Gothic style.²⁸ In addition to Starčeva Gorica, Beška and Moračnik, the monastery of the Most Pure Virgin of Krajina should also be noted, as they all taken together constitute the westernmost group of the Athonite-inspired trefoil churches.²⁹

The oldest monastic complex and the prototype of the Balšić trefoil churches is the monastery church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Starčeva Gorica, one of the three largest islands.³⁰ It is widely accepted that its construction followed the earliest use of the trefoil plan in Serbia, which did not begin until after the Assembly at Peć in 1375.³¹ An inscription made in a Prologue written between 1368 and 1379 (now in the State Library in Berlin, no. 29), says that the Prologue was written under Djuradj I Balšić: **Сн светы прологъ съпїнса съ оу Горици свѣтаго старца Макариѣа въ дны благочѣстываго господина Гоурга Бальшыка не мазде радїи, нь благословенїа радїи** [This holy prologue was written in the Gorica of the holy man Makarije in the days of our virtuous sire Djuradj Balšić, not for

tine Studies Conference, Abstracts of Papers, Harvard University (2000), 61–62, and her “*Koinobia* or *laurai*: a question of architectural transformation of the Late Byzantine monastery in the Balkans”, in *XX^e Congrès international des études byzantines*. III. *Communication libres*, Paris (2001), 339–340.

²⁷ Djurić, “Srpski državni sabori”, 105–122. The popularity of monastic and ascetic themes in the literary works created in Zeta also attests to contact between Zeta and Mount Athos, cf. D. Bogdanović, “Gorički zbornik”, in *Istorija Crne Gore*, vol. II/2, 372–380, as well as his *Istorija stare srpske književnosti* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruka, 1980), 222–225.

²⁸ Djurić, “Balšići. Arhitektura”, 414, and his “Srpski državni sabori”, 117–118 (with earlier literature on Athonite architecture).

²⁹ G. Babić-Djordjević & V. J. Djurić, “Polet umetnosti”, in *Istorija srpskog naroda*, vol. II (Belgrade 1994), 161, 163.

³⁰ See note 2 herein.

³¹ *Danilovi nastavljači. Danilov učenik. Drugi nastavljač Danilovog zbornika* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruka, 1989), 132–133; N. Radojčić, *Srpski državni sabori u srednjem veku* (Belgrade: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1940), 162–165; Djurić, “Srpski državni sabori”, 105–122.

the sake of reward but for the sake of good].³² The same inscription suggests that the island was named after the holy man or abba Makarije (Makarios), Starčeva Gorica literally meaning the “old man’s islet”. Popular tradition associates the founding of the monastery with this highly revered ascetic who supposedly lived on the island. Systematic archaeological investigations carried out in 1984/5 provide a clearer picture of the chronology and organization of the monastery.³³

The *katholikon* dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin, built on a trefoil plan, is quite small in size (6.5 m long by 3.5 m wide).³⁴ The dome rests on a circular drum, while the façades are utterly simple, exhibiting neither pilasters nor any architectural mouldings or sculpture. The interior space is divided by a system of niches. Topographic evidence suggests that the monastery was enclosed with a wall, except on the south side, which is bounded by a precipitous rock. The north side of the church abuts the rock face or, in other words, it did not occupy the centre of the enclosure. Appreciation for the Nemanjić foundations in terms of layout was achieved by setting the entrance to the enclosure south-west of the entrance to the church.³⁵ The complex comprised dormitories on the south-west side, a paved path from the landing-place to the monastery’s gate, and a flight of stairs between the gate and the church. A narthex with an open porch, surviving in traces, was subsequently added at the west end of the church. A chapel with an apse,³⁶ surviving to the height of roof cornice, was added at the south side, and a small oblong room abutting the rock was added on the north. Its purpose is not quite clear, but it has been assumed that it was there that Makarije pursued his ascetic path.³⁷ The room suffered damage as a result of a rock fall two years ago, which caused its roof system to col-

³² Lj. Stojanović, *Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi*, vol. I, 48, no. 149; the name Djuradj Balšić in the inscription refers to Djuradj I Balšić (r. 1373–78), given the use of the patronymic. Makarije must have died by the time the Prologue was written, given the epithet *holy* attached to his name, cf. I. Ruvarac, *Kamići – priloži za drugi Zetski dom* (Cetinje 1894), 478.

³³ Pejović, *Manastiri na tlu Crne Gore*, 120–122; Marković & Vujičić, *Spomenici kulture Crne Gore*, 121–122.

³⁴ Bošković, “Izveštaj i kratke beleške”, 159–161.

³⁵ Popović, *Krst u krugu*, 229.

³⁶ On the side chapels of Byzantine and Serbian churches, see G. Babić, *Les chapelles annexes des églises byzantines* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1969); S. Čurčić, “Architectural significance of subsidiary chapels in Middle Byzantine churches”, *JSAH* 36 (1977), 94–110; S. Popović, “Raspored kapela u vizantijskim manastirima”, *Saopštenja* 27/28 (1995/96), 23–37.

³⁷ Marković & Vujičić, *Spomenici kulture Crne Gore*, 121.

lapse.³⁸ A good reputation of the monastery of the Virgin as a manuscript copying centre lived into the sixteenth century, as evidenced by the fact that the famous Serbian printer Božidar Vuković was buried, according to his own wish, in the abovementioned south chapel (1539).³⁹ Unlike the other Bašić foundations, the church of the Dormition of the Virgin abutted a rock, which allows us to think of the possibility that the site had originally been a natural anchoritic abode. Even though there is no reliable evidence to support such an assumption, other examples of similar monastic communities seem to confirm that the possibility is worthy of being taken into account. Analysis of the spatial pattern of eremitic abodes located in the vicinity of churches shows that coenobitic communities usually grew out of informal gatherings of followers around the cave abode of a revered hermit.⁴⁰ The most prominent examples of this community formation pattern in the Balkans are the shrines of St Peter of Koriša⁴¹ and St John of Rila.⁴² In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, spatial association of the church building and a rock⁴³ is found in the case of the church of St Michael the Archangel in Berat, Albania (about 1300),⁴⁴ the Virgin Agiagaloussena in

³⁸ This was the situation I found in July 2012. I am much indebted to Fr. Gregory for his hospitality and for his information about the north room.

³⁹ *Istorija Crne Gore*, vol. II/2, 418–421.

⁴⁰ Popović, *Krst u krugu*, 102; D. Popović, “Monah pustinjak”, in *Privatni život u srpskim zemljama srednjeg veka*, eds. D. Popović & S. Marjanović Dušanić (Belgrade: Clio, 2004), 555.

⁴¹ Popović, “Cult of St Peter of Koriša”.

⁴² I. Dujčev, *The Saint from Rila and his Monastery* (Sofia 1947; repr. Centre for Slavo-Byzantine Studies Prof. I. Dujčev, 1990); see also the volume edited by S. Kuiuimdzhieva, *Kulturnoto nasledstvo na Rilskiiia manastir – Sustoianie i perspektivi na prouchavaneto, opazvaneto i restavriraneto mu* (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2011). For examples in Palestinian monasticism, see J. Patrich, *Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism. A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 1995); for Mount Athos, see R. Morris, “The Origins of Athos”, in Bryer & Cunningham, eds. *Mount Athos and Byzantine Monasticism*, 37–46.

⁴³ On the symbolic and functional aspects of this spatial pattern, with examples from the early and middle Byzantine periods, cf. S. Ćurčić, “Cave and Church. An Eastern Christian hierotopical synthesis”, in *Hierotopy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. A. Lidov (Moscow: Indrik, 2006), 216–236.

⁴⁴ G. Koch, ed. *Albanien. Kulturdenkmäler eines unbekanntes Landes aus 2200 Jahren* (Marburg 1985), 56–57; A. Meksi, “Tri kisha Byzantine të Beratit”, *Monumentet* (1972), 73–95. The former role and function of this rock is an insufficiently studied question, cf. Ćurčić, “Cave and Church”.

Chios (thirteenth or fourteenth century),⁴⁵ and the Virgin Perivleptos in Mistra (third quarter of the thirteenth century).⁴⁶ Proximity between the rock and the church in Starčeva Gorica may be looked at in the broader framework of Orthodox monastic architecture. The practice of constructing churches in the immediate vicinity of rocks, observable from the earliest examples in Palestinian monasticism until the late Byzantine period, is also documented by numerous examples in Serbia,⁴⁷ Macedonia,⁴⁸ Bulgaria⁴⁹ and Greece.⁵⁰

Monastic life in the islet of Starčeva Gorica unfolded in an epoch marked by hesychast influences. The arrival of Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek monks from Mount Athos and Bulgaria in the Morava Valley and Zeta

⁴⁵ Ch. Bouras, *Chios* (Athens: National Bank of Greece, 1974), 70.

⁴⁶ A. S. Louvi, "L'architecture et la sculpture de la Perivleptos de Mistra" (Thèse de doctorat de IIIe cycle, Université de Paris, Panthéon, Sorbonne, Paris 1980); Ćurčić, "Cave and Church", 224.

⁴⁷ The question of cave churches in medieval Serbia has been most thoroughly studied by D. Popović in a number of texts, e.g. "Pećinske crkve i isposnice u oblasti Polimlja – dosadašnji rezultati i pravci daljeg proučavanja", *Mileševski zapisi* 5 (2002), 47–60; "Pešterni spomenici u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji. Rezultati i pravci istraživanja", *Glasnik DKS* 26 (2002), 105–109; "Pustinje i svete gore srednjovekovne Srbije", *ZRVT XLIV* (2007), 253–274; (with M. Popović), "An Example of Anchoritic Monasticism in the Balkans: the Monastery Complex at Kaludra near Berane", in *Archeologia Abrahamica. Studies in archaeology and artistic tradition of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. L. Beliaev (Moscow: Indrik, 2009), 313–331; "Pustinijsko monaštvo u doba Brankovića", 117–134; "Dečanska pustinja u okvirima vizantijskog i srpskog eremitskog monaštva", in D. Popović et al., *Dečanska pustinja. Skitovi i kelije manastira Dečana* (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2011), 153–223.

⁴⁸ Gabelić, "Nepoznati lokaliteti", 163–174, and *Manastir Lesnovo*, 239–245; M. Radujko, "Dradnjanski manastirić Svetog Nikole (I. Nastanak i arhitektura)", *Zograf* 19 (1988), 49–61, and "Dradnjanski manastirić Svetog Nikole (II. Živopis)", *Zograf* 24 (1995), 25–37; Smolčić Makuljević, "Sakralna topografija manastira Treskavca", 287–322; G. A. Angeličev Žura, *Pešternite crkvi vo Obridsko-prespanskiot region (R. Makedonija, R. Albanija, R. Grcija)* (Struga 2004).

⁴⁹ L. Mavrodinova, *Ivanovskite skalni curkvi. Bulgarskiat prinos v svetovnoto kulturno nasledstvo* (Sofia 1989).

⁵⁰ D. Nicol, *Meteora. The Rock Monastery of Thessaly* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1963); N. Nikonanos, *Meteora: a complete guide to the monasteries and their history* (Athens: Athenon, 1987), and "The Mountain of Cells", in *Routes of Faith in the Medieval Mediterranean. History, Monuments, People, Pilgrimage, Perspectives*, ed. E. Hadjistryphonos (Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 2008), 290–295; E. Kollias, *Πάτμος* (Athens: Melissa, 1986); A. Külzer, "Das Ganos-Gebirge in Ostrakien (İşiklar Dagi)", in *Heilige Berge und Wüsten*, ed. P. Soustal, 41–52.

gave a strong impetus to eremitism.⁵¹ Patriarch Ephrem — the most distinguished spiritual authority of the period and a man of remarkable achievement in the ecclesio-political sphere, twice at the head of the Serbian Church (1375–78 and 1389–92), belonged to an ascetically-minded monastic elite himself.⁵² According to the most comprehensive source for his biography, the *Life of the Holy Patriarch Ephrem* penned by Bishop Mark, Ephrem spent most of his life in the *hesychasteria* of the monastery of Dečani, the Serbian Patriarchate of Peć and the Holy Archangels of Prizren.⁵³

Under the Lazarević and Branković dynasties, eremitic and kelliotic monasticism developed in craggy landscapes around natural caves and rocks.⁵⁴ The last hesychast abodes in the northern Balkans before the final Ottoman conquest were set up in the canyon of the Crnica and, further north, in the Mlava river gorge.⁵⁵ They were organized as *lavrai*, with a coenobitic monastery functioning as their administrative seat and individual *kellia* scattered in its immediate vicinity.⁵⁶

The other group of Balšić foundations is situated in the islet of Beška. The monastic complex includes two churches of different dates: St George's, presumably built in the last two decades of the fourteenth century by Djurađ II Stracimirović Balšić,⁵⁷ and the funerary church of Jelena Balšić, constructed in 1439 and dedicated to the Annunciation.⁵⁸ Having returned to Zeta after the death, in 1435, of her second husband, Duke Sandalj Hranić, Jelena Balšić set out to build her funerary church in the immediate vicinity of the foundation of her first husband, Djurađ II Stracimirović. She did not take monastic vows, but she spent her last years in Dračevica near Bar and on the islet, looking after the Serbian Orthodox monasteries in her realm

⁵¹ Jeromonah Amfilohije (Radović), "Sinaiti i njihov značaj u životu Srbije XIV i XV veka", in *Manastir Ravanica. Spomenica o šestoj stogodišnjici* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1981), 101–134; Djurić, "Srpski državni sabori", 106–107.

⁵² On Patriarch Ephrem as a historical figure and his saintly cult, see D. Popović, "Patrijarh Jefrem – jedan poznosrednjovekovni svetiteljski kult", *ZRVI* XLIII (2006), 111–125.

⁵³ Marko Pečki, "Žitije svetog patrijarha Jefrema", in *Šest pisaca XIV veka*, ed. D. Bogdanović (Belgrade: Prosveta & Srpska književna zadruga, 1986), 166–168.

⁵⁴ Popović, *Krst u krugu*, 101; Popović, "Pustinjsko monaštvo u doba Branković", 119 and *passim*.

⁵⁵ M. Brmbolić, "Mala Sveta Gora u klisuri reke Crnice", *Saopštenja XXX–XXXI*[1998–99] (2000), 99–112; Popović, "The last hesychast safe havens"; Starodubcev, "Formation of a Holy Mount", 93–94.

⁵⁶ Popović, "Last hesychast safe havens", 248, 252, 253.

⁵⁷ See notes 3 and 5 herein.

⁵⁸ See notes 4 and 6 herein.

and living her life very much like a nun. The remarkable political and cultural role she played in Zeta has been given much scholarly attention.⁵⁹

The layout of the complex follows a different pattern from the one in Starčeva Gorica. Unlike the church abutting the rock face in Starčeva Gorica, these two churches are free-standing structures. Archaeological excavations carried out in 1986 have shown that the monastery was enclosed with a stone wall and that it was not furnished with fortifications. It was accessed from the east by a paved causeway leading from the landing-place to the gate. The surviving structural remains include a stone building on an oblong plan north of the church of the Annunciation, which was observably constructed in phases.⁶⁰ The church of St George is a trefoil in plan, has a dome resting on protruding pilasters, and a circular drum common to all island churches of the period. The long and low church building is screened by a massive bell-gable in front of its west side. In the church, next to the south wall, is a tomb, presumably of the founder, Djuradj II Stracimirović Balšić. The Annunciation church differs from the rest of the group in plan: a longitudinal building with an eastern apse and no aisles, possibly as a result of a stylistic shift in the architecture of Zeta under the Crnojević dynasty. In the church, next to the south wall, is the tomb of the founder, Jelena Balšić.

⁵⁹ The most exhaustive bibliography on Jelena Balšić is provided by S. Tomin, "Bibliografija radova o Jeleni Balšić", *Književstvo* 1 (2011). On Jelena's banking activities in Dubrovnik and Kotor, and her court office that managed her finances, see Dj. Tošić, "Sandaljeva udovica Jelena Hranić", *ZRVTXLI* (2004), 423–440. See also Z. Gavrilović, "Women in Serbian politics, diplomacy and art", in *Byzantine Style, Religion and Civilization*, ed. E. Jeffreys (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 81–83. On the aristocratic women's patronage in Byzantium and Serbia, see *Female founders in Byzantium and beyond: an international colloquium*, Vienna 2008, eds. M. Mullet, M. Grünbart & L. Theis (forthcoming): http://www.univie.ac.at/femalefounders/abstracts_files, and therein especially A. Vukovitch, "The Epistles of Princess Jelena Balšić, an example of the role of the noblewomen as patrons in late medieval Zeta"; see also S. Tomin, "Ktitorke poznog srednjeg veka. Prilog poznavanju", *Letopis Matice srpske* 482/5 (Nov. 2008), 1121–1142; N. Gagova, "Knigite na yuzhnoslavjanskia vladatelski suprug i XIV i XV v. i sustavitel'skata kontseptsia na Bdinskia sbornik", *Vladeteli i knigi. Uchastieto na yuzhnoslavjanskia vladetel v proizvodstvoto i upotrebata na knigi prez srednovekovieto (IX–XV v.): retseptsiyata na vizantiyskia model* (Sofia: PAM, 2010), 182–204; A.-M. Talbot, "Building activity in Constantinople under Andronikos II: the role of women patrons in the construction and restoration of monasteries", in *Byzantine Constantinople: Monuments, Topography and Everyday life*, ed. N. Necipoglu (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 329–343; E. Koubena, "A survey of aristocratic women founders of monasteries in Constantinople between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries", in *Women and Byzantine Monasticism*, eds. J. Y. Perreault et al. (Athens: Canadian Archaeological Institute at Athens, 1991), 25–32.

⁶⁰ Popović, *Krst u krugu*, 229.

Chapels were added on the north and south sides. Burial pits have been archaeologically attested in the south chapel as well.⁶¹

The earliest reference to the monastic complex with the church dedicated to the Virgin in the island of Moračnik is found in the charter of Balša III Djurdjević issued in 1417, where his donation of a salt pan to the monastery suggests that he might have been its founder.⁶² Archaeological excavations carried out in 1984 make it possible to give a more reliable account of the original appearance of the complex and the date of its individual parts.⁶³ The monastery was enclosed with a wall, and a paved path led from the landing-place to the gate.⁶⁴ The church is an abbreviated trefoil in plan (7.5m by 4m) with two quite low apses at the sides. The architectural type, dedication and function point to the practice of Balša III's predecessors of the Balšić family. The church had a narthex and an open porch. A chapel with an apse was added on the south side of the church. South of the church was a refectory and north of it a cluster of cells. Between these two buildings was a four-level tower with a chapel on the top floor.⁶⁵

Apart from the surviving structural remains, an important source for creating a picture of the monastic life on Lake Scutari is the already mentioned *Gorica Collection*, which contains letters exchanged between Jelena Balšić and Nikon the Jerusalemite,⁶⁶ a manuscript created in 1442/3. Especially relevant to our topic are Jelena's thoughts on spiritual matters, her interest in monastic literature and in the organization of life in a monastery. The manuscript attests to an important local feature of late medieval spirituality, i.e. to the influence of learned refugee monks active in the area

⁶¹ Pejović, *Manastiri na tlu Crne Gore*, 116.

⁶² See note 7 herein. Balša accessed to power in 1403, which places the construction of the church into a period between 1404 and 1417.

⁶³ The archaeological investigation was carried out by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Montenegro. The excavation report was published by Marković, "Manastir Moračnik", 9–18.

⁶⁴ Pejović, *Manastiri na tlu Crne Gore*, 130; Popović, *Krst u krugu*, 229.

⁶⁵ Marković, "Manastir Moračnik", 13–16, also reports on a small one-room church, with walls preserved to roof cornice height, discovered at the highest point of the island. As there is no reference to it in the documentary sources, it may only be assumed that it was intended either for use by the monks when the monastery was at its peak or as a funerary church of a noble person. In terms of ground plan and building method, it finds its closest analogy in the funerary church of Jelena Balšić in Beška. The tower apparently formed part of a broader fortification system of Lake Scutari and its construction preceded the other structures of the monastic settlement.

⁶⁶ For a bibliography on Nikon, see B. Bojović, *L' idéologie monarchique dans les hagiographies dynastiques du Moyen Age serbe* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1995), 209–300; see also the volume *Nikon Jerusalimac*, ed. Čulibrk.

or even at the courts of local lords.⁶⁷ The text belongs to the question-and-answer genre⁶⁸ and has the form of an epistolary dialogue.⁶⁹ The manuscript consists of two letters of Jelena Balšić and three letters of her spiritual father. Thematically, the *Collection* may be described as an encyclopaedic compilation, a flourishing literary genre in late medieval Slavic and Byzantine environments. These miscellanies were intended for communal reading, which means that they served educative purposes. The choice of topics and the entire contents of the *Gorica Collection* give some idea of what were the concerns of a highborn woman,⁷⁰ while her inclination towards hesychast spirituality was the result of the influential role of her learned spiritual father, Nikon,⁷¹ whose letters contain references to biblical and patristic texts. The *Collection* makes use of quotations and paraphrases of hagiographic-historical, canonical, devotional, apocryphal, patristic, cosmological and geographical literature.⁷²

Letters of spiritual guidance were not too frequent in Byzantine tradition, as evidenced by only a few surviving examples of this form of communication between Byzantine aristocratic women and their spiritual

⁶⁷ S. Radojčić, "Ideja o savršenom gradu u državi kneza Lazara i despota Stefana Lazarevića", *Zograf* 32 (2008), 8.

⁶⁸ T. Subotin Golubović, "Pitanja i odgovori", in *Leksikon srpskog srednjeg veka*, eds. S. Ćirković & R. Mihajčić (Belgrade: Knowledge, 1999), 517. The Byzantine question-and-answer genre in an epistolary form was not unknown to Serbian literature. It was used by St Sava (Sabas) of Serbia in Chapter 58 of his *Nomocanon*, where he brought a translation of the letter of Niketas, Metropolitan of Heraklia, in reply to the questions posed by Bishop Constantine. The Archbishop of Ohrid replies to King Stefan Radoslav's fourteen liturgical and canonical questions. The Patriarch of Constantinople, Gennadios Scholarios, answers to the fifteen questions posed by Despot Djuradj Branković, cf. Dj. Trifunović, *Azbučnik srpskih srednjovekovnih književnih pojmova* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1990), 246.

⁶⁹ From the ample literature on epistolography, see e.g. T. V. Popov, "Vizantijskaia epistolografia", in *Vizantijskaia literature* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), 181–229; S. Tomin, "Epistolarna književnost i žene u srpskoj srednjovekovnoj kulturi", in *Žanrovi srpske književnosti*, vol. 2, eds. Z. Karanović & S. Radulović (Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet, 2005), 89–97; M. Mullett, *Letters, Literacy and Literature in Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

⁷⁰ On the literacy and education of Byzantine upper-class women in Palaiologan times, cf. Angeliki E. Laiou, "The role of women in Byzantine society", *JÖB* 31 (1981), 255–257; A.-M. Talbot, "Bluestocking Nuns: Intellectual Life in the Convents of Late Byzantine", *Women and Religious Life in Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 604–618.

⁷¹ Balj, "Ideje isihazma", 123–142; Jeromonah Jovan (Ćulibrk), "Nikon Jerusalimac i isihastičko predanje", in *Sveti Grigorije Palama u istoriji i sadašnjosti* (Srbinje 2001), 151–160.

⁷² Bogdanović, "Gorički zbornik", 372–380.

guides. In the ninth century, Theodor the Studite maintained correspondence with a wide circle of women, including empresses, aristocratic women and nuns, who sought his advice on spiritual and other matters.⁷³ Of the correspondence maintained from 1142 to 1151 between the sevastokratorissa Irene Komnene and her spiritual guide, the monk Iakovos, now only survive forty-three letters written by the monk.⁷⁴ The Serbian and Byzantine examples show a measure of similarity in contents and structure. Nikon's spiritual guidance as offered in the *Gorica Collection* concerns the practice of bowing before the icons, the church ritual (l. 77–85b), prayer, charity, sin (l. 42b), and fasting,⁷⁵ while Iakovos' advice to Irene mostly concerns her must reads.⁷⁶ In doctrinal terms, both cases are focused on the dogma of the Holy Trinity. The nature of the Holy Trinity in Iakovos' letters is explicated in his text *On Faith*,⁷⁷ while Nikon's *Profession of Faith* speaks of his own experience of the Holy Trinity through the mysteries of baptism and the Eucharist (271b – 272a).⁷⁸ Nikon's hesychast beliefs are confirmed

⁷³ *Theodori Studitae Epistulae*, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, vol. XXXI/1, ed. G. Fatouros (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991); A. P. Kazhdan & A.-M. Talbot, "Women and Iconoclasm", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 84/85 (1991/92), 396.

⁷⁴ The letters are available in *Iacobi Monachi Epistulae*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 68, eds. E. Jeffreys & M. Jeffreys (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009). Towards the end of her life, the sevastokratorissa Irene, widow of Manuel I Komnenos' elder brother Andronikos, was accused of being Manuel's political enemy and arrested, cf. E. M. Jeffreys & M. J. Jeffreys, "Who was the sevastokratorissa Eirene?", *Byzantion* 64 (1994), 40–68; V. Vasilevsky, "O sevastokratorisse Irine", *Zhurnal Ministerstva Narodnago Prosveshchenia* 285 (1983), 179–185; E. Jeffreys, "The sevastokratorissa Eirene as literary patroness: the monk Iakovos", *JÖB* 32/33 (1982), 63–71. The monk Iakovos is known for his literary work, which includes homilies to the Virgin, preserved in two manuscripts (Par. Gr. 1208 and Vat. Gr. 1162, PG 127, cols. 544–700).

⁷⁵ Nikon's reply with his advice on personal, moral and spiritual perfection was a compilation of quotations from the Scripture (1a – 10b, 10a), cf. Dj. Trifunović, "Dve poslanice Jelene Balšić i Nikonova 'Povest o jerusalimskim crkvama i svetim mestima'", *Književna istorija* 18 (1972), 291–293; N. Gagova, "Gorichkiyat Sbornik v konteksta na yuzhnoslavjanskite vladatelski sbornitsi ot 14 i 15 v.", in *Nikon Jerusalimac*, ed. Ćulibrk, 207–210.

⁷⁶ *Iacobi Monachi Epistulae* XXXVII.

⁷⁷ *Iacobi Monachi Epistulae*, XXXVIII.

⁷⁸ In the view of A. Jevtić, "Ispovedanje vere Nikona Jerusalimca", in *Nikon Jerusalimac*, ed. Ćulibrk, 256, Nikon's assertion of his belief in the Holy Trinity, without addressing the question of the begetting of the Son and the proceeding of the Holy Spirit, suggests a fear of Islam rather than of the Latins; J. Purić, "Trojična terminologija Ispovedanja vere Nikona Jerusalimca", in *Nikon Jerusalimac*, ed. Ćulibrk, 269–279.

by his affirmation of the faith in the Holy Trinity, the central theme of all hesychasts.

Epistolography was an important vehicle for inspiring a sense of shared values among the Constantinopolitan aristocratic class resurging after 1261. The culture of exchange, collection, publication and (public) reading of letters played an influential role in the self-representation of aristocratic intellectual circles in the Palaiologan age.⁷⁹ Undoubtedly one of the most remarkable among the scholarly women in the reign of Michael III and Andronikos II was Theodora Raoulaina (c. 1240–1300), a writer, collector and patron of art and learning.⁸⁰ About 1284, she founded the monastery of St Andrew in Krisei in Constantinople, with a scriptorium where some fifteen manuscripts were written and illuminated.⁸¹ That context can explain the fact that the focus of her correspondence with Gregory of Cyprus, Patriarch of Constantinople (1283–89), was the “education” of an aristocratic woman rather than spiritual instruction.⁸² Patriarch Gregory’s twenty-nine surviving letters provide his recommendations for reading classical writers.⁸³ From the fourteenth century date the letters exchanged between Irene Eulogia Choumnaina Palaiologina, daughter of Nikephoros Choumnos and wife of Despot John Palaiologos, and her anonymous spiritual guide.⁸⁴ After her husband’s death in 1307, she founded the convent of Christ Philanthropos in Constantinople, to which she retired as a

⁷⁹ A. Riehle, “Rhetorik, Ritual und Repräsentation. Zur Briefliteratur gebildeter Eliten im spätbyzantinischen Konstantinopel (1261–1328)”, in *Urbanitas und Asteiotes. Kulturelle Ausdrucksformen von Status, 10.–15. Jahrhundert*, eds. K. Beyer & M. Grünbart (forthcoming).

⁸⁰ D. M. Nicol, *The Byzantine Family Kantakouzenos ca. 1100–1460* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1968), no. 14, p. 16–18; A. Riehle, “Theodora Raulaina als Stifterin und Patronin”, in *Female Founders in Byzantium and Beyond*, 25–26.

⁸¹ On the group of manuscripts illuminated there under the patronage of Theodora Raoulaina, see R. S. Nelson & J. Lowden, “Palaeologina Group: Additional Manuscripts and New Questions”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991), 59–68.

⁸² C. N. Constantinides, *Higher Education in Byzantium in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre, 1982), 43–45.

⁸³ E. B. Fryde, *The Early Palaeologan Renaissance (1261 – c. 1360)* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 181.

⁸⁴ Parts of the correspondence are available in V. Laurant, “La direction spirituelle à Byzance. La correspondance d’Irène-Eulogie Choumnaina Paléologine avec son second directeur”, *REB* 14 (1956), 48–86. It can be found in its entirety in *A Woman’s Quest for Spiritual Guidance: The Correspondence of Princess Irene Eulogia Choumnaina*, ed. A. Constantinides Hero (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1986).

nun until her death in 1355.⁸⁵ This correspondence reflects the spiritual and intellectual ferment which spurred dissension between humanist and Palamite circles and touched the Byzantine aristocracy in the mid-fourteenth century. Even though the assumption that Eulogia's spiritual advisor was a hesychast should be taken with caution,⁸⁶ the letters express high esteem for the spiritual authorities such as Theoleptos of Philadelphia and Athanasios I, Patriarch of Constantinople,⁸⁷ whose writings bore relevance to the hesychast teaching of Gregory Palamas.⁸⁸

The *Gorica Collection* shows that the late-medieval Serbian aristocracy draw on Byzantine literary traditions in its intellectual and spiritual pursuits. That the patronage of literary work was cultivated among South-Slavic aristocratic women as well, is shown by *Bdinski Sbornik* (Collection) written in 1360 for Anna, wife of the Bulgarian tsar of Vidin, John Stratsimir.⁸⁹ The compilation revolves around monastic themes: lives of female

⁸⁵ A.-M. Talbot, "Philanthropos: *Typikon* of Irene Choumnaina Palaiologina for the Convent of Christ Philanthropos in Constantinople", in *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents. A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders' Typika and Testaments*, III, eds. J. Thomas et al. (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2000), no. 47, 1383–1388; A. Hero, "Irene-Eulogia Choumnaina Palaiologina, Abbess of the Convent of Philanthropos Soter in Constantinople", *Byzantinische Forschungen* IX (1985), 119–146; V. Laurent, "Une princesse byzantine au cloître: Irène-Eulogie Choumnos Paléologine, fondatrice du couvent de femmes του Φιλανθρώπου Σωτήρος", *Echos d'Orient* XXIX (1930), 29–60; R. Janin, "Les Monastères du Christ Philanthrope à Constantinople", *Revue des Etudes byzantines* IV (1946), 135–162; idem, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin. Première partie, Le siège de Constantinople et le Patriarcat œcuménique. Tome III, Les églises et les monastères*, 2nd ed. (Paris 1969), 527–529.

⁸⁶ The anonymous advisor states his love of solitude and quietness (ἡσυχία) more than once, but J. Meyendorff, in his "Introduction" to *A Woman's Quest for Spiritual Guidance*, 18, suggests that it does not necessarily imply a hesychast monk, but may also imply a life outside the usual monastic community.

⁸⁷ The young monk who acted as Eulogia's spiritual guide also authored a few compositions in honour of Patriarch Athanasios I, the copies of which were kept in Xerolophos, the monastery founded by Athanasios I and an important hesychast centre in Constantinople. On Theoleptos, see A. Constantinides Hero, *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia* (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1994); R. E. Sinkewicz, *Theoleptos of Philadelphia. The Monastic Discourses. A Critical Edition, Translation and Study*, ser. Studies and Texts CXI (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 1992); S. Salaville, "Un directeur spirituel à Byzance au début du XIV^e siècle: Théolepte de Philadelphie. Homélie sur Noël et la vie religieuse", in *Mélanges Joseph de Ghellinck*, Museum Lessianum. Section historique XIV, vol. II (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1951), 877–887.

⁸⁸ Meyendorff, "Introduction", 18–19.

⁸⁹ *Bdinski Sbornik, Ghent Slavonic Ms 408, A.D. 1360*, facsimile edition with a presentation by I. Dujčev (London: Variorum Reprints, 1972).

saints, excerpts from the *Miterikon* and accounts of the holy places in Jerusalem.⁹⁰ It is believed therefore to have been intended for novices or to a female monastery which enjoyed Anna's patronage.⁹¹ A similar miscellany commissioned by an aristocratic woman is the *Theotokarion* (State Historical Museum, Moscow, no. 3484) compiled in 1425 for the wife of Lješ Crnojević, Mara. It contains sermons for the feasts of the Virgin and the miracles of the Virgin,⁹² and is believed to have been intended for the monastery of the Dormition of the Virgin in the isle of Kom, a foundation of the Crnojević family.

Although the *Gorica Collection* still awaits a comprehensive critical edition, it has been the object of many studies looking at it from literary, philological, historical and theological perspectives.⁹³ The questions posed

⁹⁰ M. Petrova, "A picture of female religious experience: Late-Byzantine anthologies of women saints", in *Kobieta w kulturze sredniowiecznej Europy* (Poznan 1995), 195–200; eadem, "The Bđinski Sbornik: a case study". *Otium. Časopis za povijest svakodnevnice* 4/1-2 (1996), 1–11; N. Georgieva-Gagova, "Sustavitelskata kontseptsia na Bđinski Sbornik, vprost za obrazovanite vladetelski supругi i tehните knigi", in *Medievistika i kulturna antropologija. Sbornik v chest na 40-godišmana tvorcheska deynost na prof. Donka Petkanova* (Sofia 1988), 258–281.

⁹¹ Gagova, "Gorichkiyat Sbornik", 218.

⁹² K. Ivanova, "Sbornik na Mara Leševa – neizvesten pametnik na srbskama knižnina ot XV vek", in *Slovensko srednjovekovno nasledje. Zbornik posvećen profesoru Djordju Trifunoviću*, eds. Z. Vitić et al. (Belgrade 2001), 211–229.

⁹³ For the studies of literary perspectives see N. Radojičić, "Dve istovetne prepiske iz XV veka, jedna srpska i jedna vizantijska", *Glasnik SANIV*, 1 (Belgrade 1952), 177–178; Dj. Sp. Radojičić, "O smernoj Jeleni i njenom Otpisaniju bogoljubnom", *Delo* 4 (Belgrade 1958), 590–594, as well as his "Tri Vizantinca kao stari srpski književnici", *Tvorci i dela stare srpske književnosti* (Titograd: Grafički zavod, 1963), 247–250; Bogdanović, "Gorički zbornik", 372–380; Trifunović, "Dve poslanice", 289–326; S. Tomin, "Otpisanije bogoljubno Jelene Balšić. Prilog shvatanju autorskog načela u srednjovekovnoj književnosti", in *Naučni sastanak slavista u Vukove dane*, vol. 30/2 (Belgrade 2002), 73–82; Gagova, "Gorichkiyat Sbornik", 205–214; T. Jovanović, "Putovanje u Svetu zemlju u srpskoj književnosti od XIII do kraja XVIII veka", in *Sveta zemlja u srpskoj književnosti od XIII do kraja XVIII veka*, ed. T. Jovanović (Belgrade 2007), 14. For philological studies see D. Bogdanović, "Inventar rukopisa manastira Savina", in D. Medaković, *Manastir Savina. Velika crkva, riznica, rukopisi* (Belgrade 1978), 89–96; M. Grković, "Poslanice Jelene Balšić", *Naučni sastanak slavista u Vukove dane* 23/2 (Belgrade 1995), 195–200; N. Sindik, "Kodikologija Goričkog zbornika", in *Nikon Jerusalimac*, ed. J. Čulibrk, 185–200; N. Dragin, "O povesti Nikona Jerusalimca u Goričkom zborniku", *Zbornik Matice srpske za filologiju i lingvistiku* 44 (2001), 137–143. For the historical studies see S. Ćirković, "Metrološki odlomak Goričkog zbornika", *ZRVI XVI* (1975), 183–189; N. Radošević, "Kozmografski i geografski odlomci Goričkog zbornika", *ZRVI XX* (1981), 171–184; M. Ikonomu, "Gorički zbornik – poreklo, sadržaj o kosmogoniji", *Cyrrillomethodianum V* (Thessaloniki 1981), 187–196; Spremić, "Crkvene prilike u Zeti", 73–110; B. Bojović,

by Jelena Balšić and Nikon's answers address the issue of the organization of monastic life as well. Already in the second section titled *God-Loving Reply* (14a – 48b), Jelena speaks about her wavering between living a charitable life in the world on the one hand and a life in the monastery on the other. She asks her spiritual father to tell her something about both the communal and the solitary ways of life, in the light of the ongoing debate on spiritual matters in which some argue that Basil the Great praised coenobitism, as opposed to those who suggest that he advocated a life in solitude and silence (17a).⁹⁴ In the third and longest section, Nikon makes mention⁹⁵ of Jelena's funerary church in the island of Gorica (85b): **А оно еже гл(агол) еши мнѣ тако тако изволисе бо(г)оу и намъ създати м(оли)твенныи храмъ въ каменниже и гробъ, нъ въ мѣсто анком безмльвнокъ сим же и въ в тоцѣ... тако въ земли діоклитстѣни тамо, въ езерѣ, рьсавском соу острови мнози. Мѣста ключима скѣтѣномъ пѣстынк. паче жеи монастыри велици зданныи же в т прѣждь [You say that you desired to build a house of worship in stone, for God and for us, and a grave in a quiet place on the island ... in the land of Dioclea, on Rosava Lake, there are many islands, places which happen [to be] sketic deserts, moreover, great monasteries, erected long ago]. As we can see, apart from the information about the location of the church,⁹⁶ Nikon describes lake islands as places of sketic deserts. The next page contains the already quoted reference to Jelena's church and the church of St George, followed by the Old Testament episode about Moses delivering the Jewish people from bondage and their joy in the desert (86a): **Слыши и вънемли отвѣтъ. Исранатѣне егда прѣсташе вт рабость егѹпськихъ и въселише се въ поустыню [The Jews ceased being Egyptian slaves and rejoiced in the desert]. Further down on the same page (86b), Nikon describes the desert as the abode and place of temptation of the prophet Elijah, Job and St John the Baptist: **илїа же прѣж(д)е и іо(а)ннь семоу послѣдоваше законѣ. И във оубо въ кармили бѣ(з)мльвіа прохож(д)******

“Nikon le Hiéorosolymitian, Le Recueil de Gorica”, *L'idéologie monarchique dans les hagiobiographies dynastiques du moyen age Serbe* (Rome 1995), 209–220. For the studies of theological perspectives see E. Economou, “Some observations on the Hesychast Diaspora in the fifteenth century”, *Studi sull' Oriente Cristiano 2/2* (Rome 1998), 103–110; M. Lazić, *Isihazam srpske knjige* (Niš 1999), 138–141, 215–217, 223–225; Jevtić, “Ispovedanje vere Nikona Jerusalimca”, 255–268; Purić, “Trojična terminologija”, 269–278; A. Radović, “Hristolikost i bogorodičnost čovjeka i čovjekovo stanje poslije smrti prema Nikonu Jerusalimcu”, in *Nikon Jerusalimac*, ed. Ćulibrk, 279–292; Balj, “Ideje isihazma”, 123–142.

⁹⁴ Trifunović, “Dve poslanice”, 291; Balj, “Ideje isihazma”, 137.

⁹⁵ Gagova, “Gorichkiyat Sbornik”, 210, briefly refers to Nikon's portrayal of the island of Gorica as a desert.

⁹⁶ Nikon makes mentions four times of Jelena's church, cf. Gagova, “Gorichkiyat Sbornik”, 210.

даше по(д)виго себе присваде. вже въ поустыни пр(ѣ)бывае... [Elijah, and John before him, abided by the law. And Job, too, dwelling in the desert, went to quiet places to pursue ascetic labours].

Nikon calls the lake islets a desert and likens them to Old and New Testament examples.⁹⁷ The complex notion of the desert, central to Eastern Christian monasticism, as a rule refers to places intended for supreme forms of asceticism.⁹⁸ The use of biblical metaphors suggests that the author felt it important to underscore that the practices were in fact the imitation of Scriptural models. Central biblical figures, such as Moses, the prophet Elijah and John the Baptist, pursued an ascetic life in the desert, and it was in the desert that Christ experienced his first temptation by the devil.⁹⁹ In medieval Serbian texts, the word *desert* had a range of meanings.¹⁰⁰ In the *Gorica Collection*, given the hesychast nature of the sources that Nikon drew from,¹⁰¹ the term *desert* was used to denote the habitat of a hermit, the place of his ascetic labours.

Our most important source for the issue of the organization of monastic life — *The Rules of Sketic Life* — is Nikon's third letter (177a – 257b).¹⁰²

⁹⁷ On the use of biblical quotations in describing *holy mountains*, see D. Popović, “Pustinje i svete gore srednjovekovne Srbije”, 263; Gagova, “Gorichkiyat Sbornik”, 211–212.

⁹⁸ On the notion of the *desert*, see *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 1, s. v. “Desert”, by J. A. T. (hompson) & A. C. (utler), 613. On the Early Christian notion of the *desert* documented in Byzantine written sources, see C. Rapp, “Desert, City and Countryside in the Early Christian Imagination”, *Church History and Religious Culture* 86:1/4 (2006), 93–112. On the terminology of eremitic monasticism, see Popović, “Dečanska pustinja u okvirima vizantijskog i srpskog eremitskog monaštva”, 163–223. See also her “Desert as Heavenly Jerusalem: the imagery of sacred space”, in *Making New Jerusalems. The Translation of Sacred Spaces in Christian Culture*, ed. A. M. Lidov (Moscow 2009), 35–37; “Pustinje i svete gore srednjovekovne Srbije”, 253–274; “Pustinožiteljstvo Svetog Save srpskog”, *Liceum* 7, Kult svetih na Balkanu II (2002), 61–79; as well as N. Gagova & I. Špadijer, “Dve varijante anahoretskog tipa u južnoslovenskoj hagiografiji (Teodosijevo Žitije svetog Petra Koriškog i Jevtimijevo Žitije svetog Jovana Rilskog)”, in *Slovensko srednjovekovno nasledje*, 159–175.

⁹⁹ Popović, “Desert as Heavenly Jerusalem”, 151; A. Guillaumont, “La conception du désert chez les moines d’Égypte”, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien (Bérgrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1979)*, 67–87.

¹⁰⁰ Popović, “Dečanska pustinja”, 163–166, and “Pustinje i svete gore”, 258.

¹⁰¹ E.g. John Climacus, Simeon the New Theologian, Gregory Sinaites, Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, cf. Trifunović, “Dve poslanice”, 256.

¹⁰² The text is titled: Прѣданиа оуставиимъ иже кромѣ монастырскаго оустава живоуцихъ сирѣчь скытнѣмъ, правило всѣдъневно иже мы прѣхуемъ отъ штыць нашихъ иже и зде да изложимъ произволѣющимъ, D. Bogdanović, *Katalog ćirilskih rukopisa manastira Hilandara* (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti & Narodna biblioteka Srbije, 1978), 124.

Nikon laid down the *typikon* for the “church and *kellion*” of the Annunciation monastery at Jelena’s order,¹⁰³ prescribing the rules of daily prayer for the *kellion* and the rules for the Great, Apostles’ and Dormition fasts.¹⁰⁴ The *typikon* also contains sayings of the Fathers and instructions for the spiritual struggle against evil thoughts.¹⁰⁵ It also prescribes that a hesychast monk must not have any possession other than his own *rasa*. As Nina Gagova rightfully observes, the *Gorica Collection* is unique among the manuscripts commissioned by South-Slavic rulers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in that it lays down the rule for a funerary church and its *kellia*. In the above-cited account of Jelena’s church, Nikon speaks of other lake islands as places where monastic life observes the sketic rules of fasting and silence (85b, 86a): *We have heard, and indeed now we can see with our own eyes, that there, in the land of Dioclea, on Rosava Lake, there are many islands, places which happen [to be] sketic deserts, moreover, great monasteries, erected long ago. And you say that the life of the monks in them is praiseworthy and that they live in love, filled with the peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and in fasting, and in great silence; and celebrating God’s mercy, with their mind set on the autocrat and king through the words of God; and therefore without loving any of earthly things, true piety is in those who have known the truth.*¹⁰⁶ In his answer to Jelena’s question about the coenobitic and eremitic ways of life, Nikon, ten pages later, changes the addressee and says: **ВЫ ЖЕ, О(Т)ЦИ И БР(А)ТІА** [you, fathers and brethren], which, unless it is an orthographic error, suggests that Jelena was surrounded by a monastic community. Nikon’s words: **ОВИТѢЛИ С(ВЕТА)ГО И ГЛАВНАГО ВЕЛИКО М(ОУ)ЧЕ(НИКА) ТРОПЕШФОРА ГЕВРГІА** [the community of the holy and glorious great-martyr vanquisher George], attest to the presence of a monastic community around the church of St George (86a). Briefly, Nikon’s letters seem to suggest that Jelena required a sketic *typikon* in order for the already established small monastic communities on Lake Scutari to be able to operate under a single set of rules.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Bogdanović, “Gorički zbornik”, 372–380; Trifunović, “Dve poslanice”, 294–295; Gagova, “Gorickiyat Sbornik”, 214–215.

¹⁰⁴ The *Typikon* prescribes that half the Psalter should be read in one night and day, which is half the amount prescribed by the *Typikon* for the Karyes Kellion or the *Typikon* for Observing the Psalter, both laid down by St Sava, cf. L. Mirković, “Skitski ustavi Sv. Save”, *Brastvo* 28 (1934), 63–67.

¹⁰⁵ Trifunović, “Dve poslanice”, 294.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted from the translation from Old Slavonic into modern Serbian by hieromonk Jovan (Čulibrk), “Uloga duhovnog očinstva u vaspitanju po Nikonu Jerusalimcu” (BA thesis, Duhovna akademija Sv. Vasilija Ostroškog, 2003), 29.

¹⁰⁷ Fifteenth-century sketic *typika* have survived in Russia, where they were brought by Nil Sorskii, founder of anchoritic monasticism in Russia, cf. E. V. Romanenko, *Nil*

The lack of documentary sources makes it difficult to keep further track of the monastic life in the isles of Lake Scutari, but the monasteries' economic history may be partly reconstructed from Ottoman imperial tax registers (defters).¹⁰⁸ According to the earliest Ottoman imperial tax register, of 1485, the monastery in Starčeva Gorica was a taxpaying entity.¹⁰⁹ According to the one of 1570/1,¹¹⁰ the vineyards and crop fields owned by the monastery "since the days of old" were now recorded as monastic property.¹¹¹ The surviving sources suggest that the monastery in Starčeva Gorica stood out as the wealthiest of all in the sanjak of Scutari.¹¹² A Cattaran, and Venetian aristocrat, Mariano Bolizza (Marin Bolica), in his account of the sanjak of Scutari written in 1614, described Starčeva Gorica as one of the active monasteries in the lake islets.¹¹³ According to the Russian ethnographer and historian Pavel Rovinsky (1831–1916), in the early twentieth century it was unknown when exactly the church in Starčeva Gorica fell into disuse.¹¹⁴ The monasteries of St George (Beška) and of the Virgin (Moračnik) occur together in the Ottoman defters of 1570/1 and 1582.¹¹⁵ The defters show that

Sorskii i tradicii russkogo monashestva (Moscow: Pamyatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2003), as well as her "Nil Sorskii i tradicii russkogo monashestva – Nilo-Sorskii skit kak unikal'noe yavlenie monastyrskoi kul'tury Rusi XV–XVII vv", *Istoricheski vestnik* 3–4 (1999), 89–152.

¹⁰⁸ O. Zirojević, *Posedi manastira u Skadarskom sandžaku* (Novi Pazar: DamaD, 1997), 63–65.

¹⁰⁹ S. Pulaha, *Defter-i mufasssal Liva-i Iskenderiyye sene 890*, vol. II (Tirana 1974), 5.

¹¹⁰ The defter of 1570/1 was created at the time the Ottoman central authority confiscated all church and monastic real property in the Balkans, and then resold it to the original owners. For more detail about the process and reasons for it, see A. Fotić, "Konfiskacija i prodaja manastira (crkava) u doba Selima II (problem crkvenih vakufa)", *Balcanica XXVII* (1996), 45–77.

¹¹¹ The monastic land holdings are listed in O. Zirojević, *Posedi manastira*, 63–64: in the village of Srbska, two fields; in the village of Grle (Grlje), one field; in the village of Berislavci, twelve fields and a half of one more field; in the village of Goričani, two fields and the area of land called Radunov laž; in the village of Gostilje, three fields; in the village of Kadrun, four vineyards and ten *dönüms* of fields; in the village of Krnica, two vineyards and the area of land [known as] Čiptač; and in the village of Mesa, two vineyards.

¹¹² Zirojević, *Posedi manastira*, 64.

¹¹³ M. Bolica, "Opis sandžakata skadarskog iz 1614. godine", *Starine XII* (Zagreb 1880), quoted in P. Rovinski, *Crna Gora u prošlosti i sadašnjosti*, vol. I (Cetinje: Izdavački centar & Centralna narodna biblioteka; Sr. Karlovci/Novi Sad: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, 1993), 579.

¹¹⁴ Rovinski, *Crna Gora*, vol. IV, 443.

¹¹⁵ Zirojević, *Posedi manastira*, 20 and 48–49.

both monasteries regained full ownership of their former possessions,¹¹⁶ and that they owned vineyards and land in the same villages.¹¹⁷ As has been said above, Bolizza described both monasteries as active in 1614.¹¹⁸

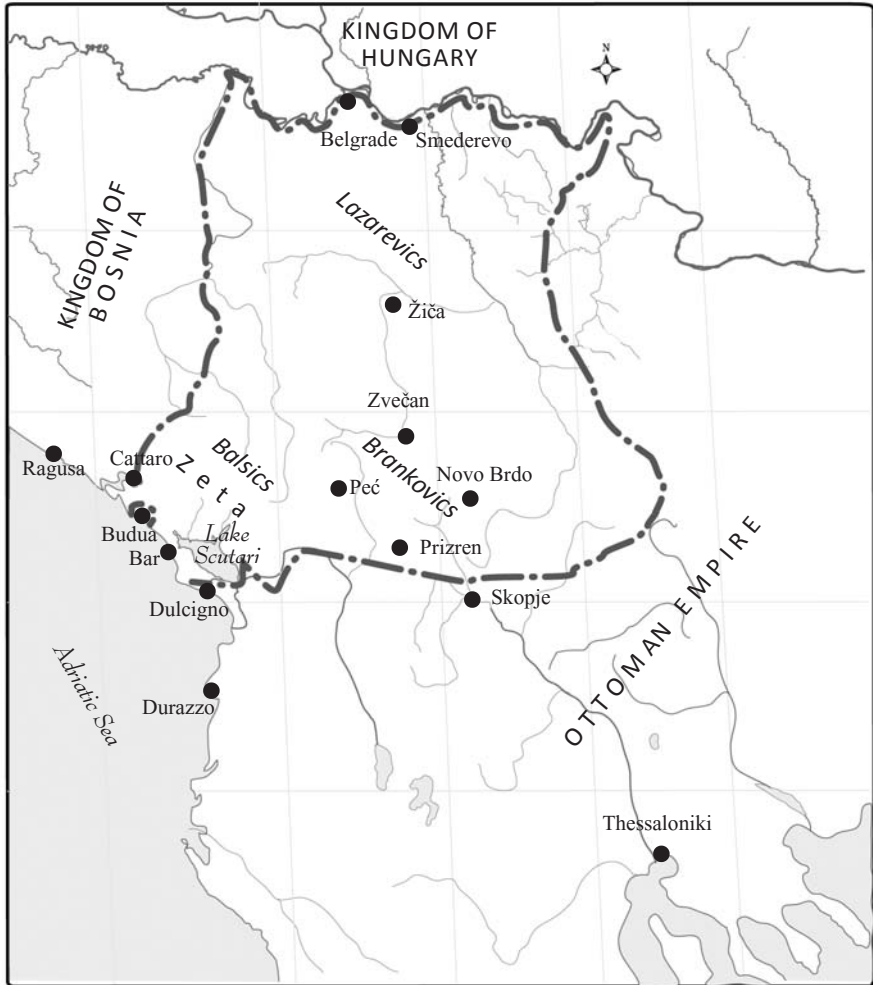
Conclusions suggested by this research concern several aspects of the monastic life of the island communities on Lake Scutari. What we have been able to learn of the organization of monastic life from the material and written sources is that there were in the islands both *sketae* and smaller coenobitic communities and, very likely, recluses as well. Given that the monastic foundations of the Balšićs observed hesychast practices, it seems reasonable to assume that small monastic communities of the type could have been formed outside the monastic enclosures as well. Therefore, archaeological field surveys in the area of Lake Scutari appear to be the logical next step in researching this topic. Apart from providing an insight into the monastic lifestyles pursued by the island communities, the sources also permit a glimpse into their spiritual life. Remarkably important to this topic is the Gorica Collection, a literary work created in response to the spiritual needs of Jelena Balšić and the community in whose midst she spent a part of her life. The content and purpose of the manuscript shows that, in the spiritual climate of the period, strongly marked by hesychast beliefs and values, the island monasteries on Lake Scutari in Zeta were worthy protagonists of Serbian culture and spirituality. In the area of the activity of the Balšićs as monastic founders and patrons, the greatest credit should be ascribed to Jelena Balšić. A founder and renovator of two churches in the island of Beška, and patron and sponsor of the *Gorica Collection*, she may be considered a relevant representative of late medieval court culture.

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¹¹⁶ According to the defter of 1485, the monastery of St George owned three houses, and that of the Virgin (Moračnik), only one, cf. Pulaha, *Defter-i Mufassal* 890, 5; Zirojević, *Posedi manastira*, 20.

¹¹⁷ Beška and Moračnik had land holdings in the villages of Kadrun (Skadar area), Bes (Krajina), Gostilje (Žabljak), Bobovište (Krajina). For a detailed list of their estates, see Zirojević, *Posedi manastira*, 21 and 49.

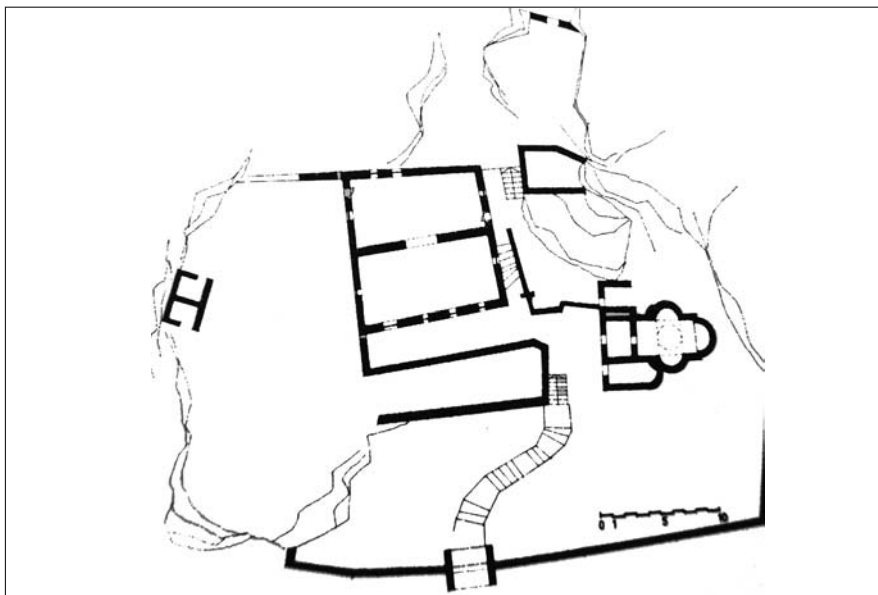
¹¹⁸ Rovinski, *Crna Gora*, vol. I, 579.



Despotate of Serbia in 1423



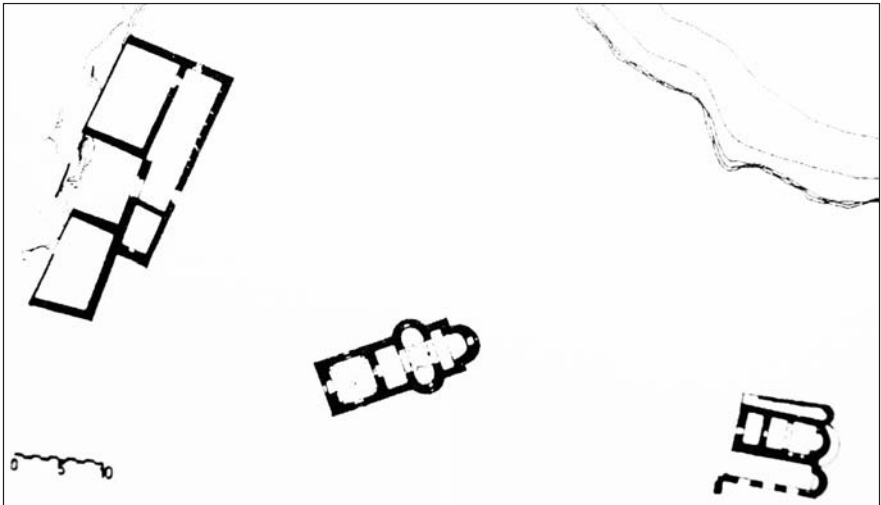
Lake Scutari. Monastery in Starčeva Gorica with the church of the Dormition of the Virgin (1376-78)



Lake Scutari. Monastery in Starčeva Gorica: ground plan



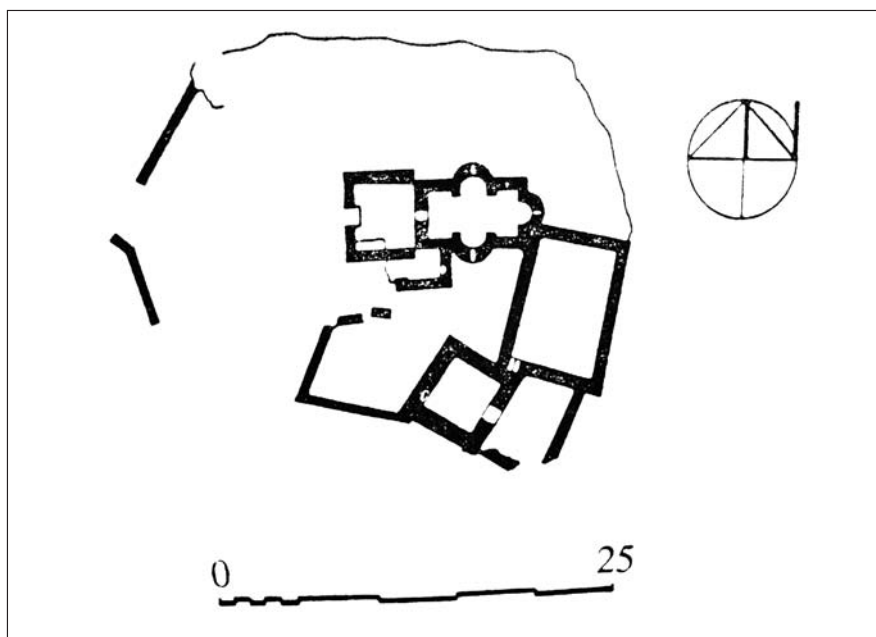
Lake Scutari. Monastic complex in Beška: churches of St George (last two decades of the fourteenth century) and of the Annunciation (1439)



Lake Scutari. Monastic complex in Beška: ground plan



Lake Scutari. Monastery in Moračnik with the church dedicated to the Virgin (fifteenth century)



Lake Scutari. Monastery in Moračnik: ground plan

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