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J. KALIĆ, Information about Belgrade in Constantine VII Porphrogenitus • D. POPOVIĆ, On Two Lost Medieval Serbian Reliquaries • D. KOVAČEVIĆ KOJIC, Serbian Silver at the Venetian Mint • A. FOTIĆ, Coping with Extortion on a Local Level • L. HÖBELT, Balkan or Border Warfare? Glimpses from the Early Modern Period • P. M. KITROMILIDES, Spinozist Ideas in the Greek Enlightenment • M. KOVIĆ, Great Britain and the Consular Initiative of the Great Powers in Bosnia and Herzegovina • M. BJELAJAC, Humanitarian Catastrophe as a Pretext for the Austro-Hungarian Invasion of Serbia 1912–1913 • F. GUELTON, Avec le général Piarron de Mondésir: Un aller-retour de Brindisi à Valona • D. BAKIĆ, The Serbian Minister in London, Mateja Bošković, the Yugoslav Committee, and Serbia's Yugoslav Policy in the Great War • G-H. SOUTOU, The Paris Conference of 1919 • B. MILOSAVLJEVIĆ, Drafting the Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1920) • M. VASILJEVIĆ, Carrying Their Native Land and Their New Home in Their Hearts • S. G. MARKOVICH, The Grand Lodge of Yugoslavia between France and Britain (1919–1940) • V. G. PAVLOVIĆ, La longue marche de Tito vers le sommet du parti communiste • K. NIKOLIĆ, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the Resistance Movements in Yugoslavia, 1941 • Y. MOURÉLOS, Les origines de la guerre civile en Grèce • A. EDEMSKIY, Additional Evidence on the Final Break between Moscow and Tirana in 1960–1961 • Lj. DIMIĆ, Yugoslav Diplomacy and the 1967 Coup d'Etat in Greece • K. V. NIKIFOROV, The Distinctive Characteristics of Transformation in Eastern Europe • B. ŠIJAKOVIĆ, Riddle and Secret: Laza Kostić and Branko Miljković ❧

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On Two Lost Medieval Serbian Reliquaries The *Staurothekai* of King Stefan Uroš I and Queen Helen

Abstract: This essay discusses two lost medieval Serbian *staurothekai* known only from written sources. One, belonging to the Serbian King Stefan Uroš I, was described as a sumptuous item in the Hungarian spoils of war following their victory over the Serbian army in Mačva in 1268. The other *staurotheke*, with an extensive inscription, was Queen Helen's gift to the monastery of Sopoćani, a foundation of her husband Uroš I. Based on the available facts, it has been assumed that this reliquary came into the possession of a Serbian ruler of the House of Branković in the fifteenth century, eventually ending up in the Habsburg *geistliche Schatzkammer* and playing an important role in the *Pietas austriaca* programme. It is known from the surviving descriptions that the *staurothekai* had the shape of a two-armed cross, and were made of gold and lavishly adorned with precious stones. Apart from their substantial material worth, documented with precision, both *staurothekai* had a distinct sacral meaning and ideological function.

Keywords: the cult of the True Cross; *staurothekai*; Serbian King Stefan Uroš I; Queen Helen, consort of King Uroš I; Hungarian King Bela IV; the Habsburgs; *pietas austriaca*

In medieval Serbia, as elsewhere in the Christian world, the cult of the True Cross was widely popular and had multiple functions.¹ Its manifestations became particularly evocative under the rulers of the House of Nemanjić. Embracing the fundamental Byzantine understanding of the significance and role of the True Cross, the Nemanjić rulers saw it not only as a relic of the highest order possessing miraculous powers but also as a symbol of royal authority. From the state-building reign of Grand *Župan* Stefan Nemanja (1166–1196), whose

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¹ From the ample literature on the True Cross let me refer on this occasion to the still unavoidable study of A. Frolow, *La relique de la Vraie Croix. Recherches sur le développement d'un culte* (Paris: Institut français d'études byzantines, 1961) and, of more recent works, to *Byzance et les reliques du Christ*, eds. J. Durand and B. Flusin (Paris: Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2004) and H. A. Klein, *Byzanz, der Westen und das "wahre" Kreuz: Die Geschichte einer Reliquie und ihrer künstlerischen Fassung in Byzanz und im Abendland* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2004).

pectoral cross had the status of a holy weapon and a guardian of the realm, those ideas grew in strength and importance. Through the programmatic effort of Sava of Serbia, profoundly knowledgeable about Eastern Christian cults and their theological and political significance, the most distinguished Serbian monasteries and religious mainstays of the Nemanjić state – Hilandar, Studenica and Žiča – came into the possession of fragments of the True Cross. A particularly important fact is that the True Cross was the focus of the relic programme designed for Žiča, the cathedral and coronation church of the first Nemanjić kings. Its treasury, supplied with relics of the highest order originating from the Holy Land, was a factor which greatly contributed to the sacral legitimation of the young Serbian state.²

Inaugurated in the time of Stefan Nemanja and his son, Sava of Serbia, the cult of the True Cross continued to be fostered, with a new energy, by the next generation of Nemanjić dynasts. It appears from the documentary sources that the Serbian monarchs from King Stefan the First Crowned on as a rule possessed a relic of the True Cross and donated sumptuous *staurothekai* to distinguished monasteries. This close connection between the cult of the True Cross and the royal ideology of the Nemanjić has often been pointed to in scholarship. Reliquaries containing a piece of the holy wood were symbols of God's patronage and of the divine origin of royal authority, guarantees of victories as well as metaphors for royal prestige. An important aspect of these notions was the recognition of the Nemanjić rulers as New Constantines. Research has shown that the "Constantinian" programme was pursued consistently in Serbia through different messages and emphases, depending on the epoch and its needs.³ In the early period of statehood, Stefan Nemanja's pectoral cross was to be "a guardian and a fortress and a helper in battle", "a refuge and a rock ... as once to David and the ancient emperor Constantine".⁴ This idea was further developed, assuming various forms. It is known that the pattern of likening the ruler to the "holy and

² D. Popović, "Relikvije Časnog krsta u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji", in *Konstantin Veliki u vizantijskoj i srpskoj tradiciji*, ed. Lj. Maksimović (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2014), 99–101 (with sources and ample bibliography).

³ V. J. Djurić, *Le nouveau Constantin dans l'art serbe médiéval*, in *Lithoströton: Studien zur byzantinische Kunst und Geschichte. Festschrift für Marcell Restle*, eds. B. Borgkopp and T. Stephan (Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann, 2000), 55–65; S. Marjanović-Dušanić, *Vladarska ideologija Nemanjića: diplomatička studija* (Belgrade: SKZ & Clio, 1997, 287–302; S. Marjanović-Dušanić, "Novi Konstantin u srpskoj pisanoj tradiciji srednjeg veka", in *Konstantin Veliki u vizantijskoj i srpskoj tradiciji*, 81–98.

⁴ Stefan Prvovenčani, *Sabrani spisi*, ed. Lj. Juhas-Georgievaska (Belgrade: Prosveta & SKZ, 1988), 82–83; Domentijan, *Život Svetoga Save i Život Svetoga Simeona*, ed. R. Marinković (Belgrade: Prosveta & SKZ, 1988), 286–287.

great kings, the meek David and the famous Constantine”⁵ – the epitome of a war victor triumphant with God’s help – was given supreme expression in the reign of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (1282–1321), that is, in a time marked by Serbian victorious military campaigns and territorial expansion. The idea had been there a generation earlier though. Thus, in the reign of Stefan Uroš I, it was promoted by means of a Constantinian epithet describing the ruler as *equal to the apostles*, an ideologically charged imperial attribute associated with Constantine the Great, a champion of Christianity and defender of the true faith, and readily appropriated by the rulers of the lands within the Byzantine cultural orbit.⁶ The appeal that this idea had to the third generation of Nemanjić kings is evidenced not only by the documentary sources and literary patterns, i.e. the attributes attached to the reigning king, but also by the fact that King Uroš I, just like his dynastic ancestors, possessed a sumptuous *staurotheke* containing fragments of the True Cross.

All trace of King Uroš I’s *staurotheke* is long lost, and it is now known only from the sources. Information about it survives in the charter that King Bela IV of Hungary issued to Mihaly, son of his magnate Peter Chako, in 1269. It offers, among other things, details about the Serbo-Hungarian war fought in Mačva in 1268. The Serbian army suffered a sound defeat, and the Hungarians captured King Uroš I and his son-in-law, returning home with rich spoils, including a Serbian war flag which was put on display in front of the Hungarian royal palace as a war trophy.⁷ According to the charter, Mihaly handed over to Bela, Ban of Mačva and grandson of King Bela IV, the sumptuous *staurotheke* with fragments of the True Cross seized from King Uroš I’s son-in-law. It ended up in the possession of the Hungarian king, who granted considerable land to Mihaly in exchange for it. The charter contains a description of the *staurotheke* attested by the king’s daughter Anne and grandson Bela. Namely, upon receiving the cross, they found out that “it contains the Lord’s wood that is a palm and a half long and a palm wide, encased in ten marks of gold, and extraordinarily beautifully adorned with valuable gems and precious stones, its value being estimated at five thousand marks of gold, gems and precious stones” (*ipsam crucem videssent continere de ligno Domini longitudinem unius palme et dimide, latitudinem valere pal-*

⁵ Danilo Drugi, *Životi kraljeva i arhiepiskopa srpskih. Službe*, eds. G. Mak Danijel and D. Petrović (Belgrade: Prosveta & SKZ, 1988), 140.

⁶ S. Marjanović-Dušanić, “Povelje za limski manastir Sv. Apostola i srpski vladar kao retnik apostolima”, in ΠΕΡΙΒΟΛΟΣ, *Zbornik u čast Mirjane Živojinović*, vol. I, eds. B. Miljković and D. Dželebdžić (Belgrade: Vizantološki institut SANU & Zadužbina manastira Hilandara, 2015), 167–176.

⁷ M. Dinić, “O ugarskom ropstvu kralja Uroša I”, *Istorijski časopis 1* (1948), 30–36; Dj. Bubalo, *Srpska zemlja i Pomorska u doba vladavine Nemanjića* (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2016), 196–198 (with relevant literature).

mam, formatam in auro decem marcarum, preciosis gemmis et lapidibus mirabiliter ordinatam, estimantes in valore quingentes marcas auri, lapidum et gemmarum).⁸

For all its succinctness, this description provides several noteworthy pieces of information. For a start, we can learn that the *staurotheke* of Uroš I had the shape of a cross. Although its exact type is not specified, it is reasonable to assume that it had the usual shape of a two-armed cross, of which more will be said below. From the information about its length (one and a half palms) and width (one palm), it follows that it was 34–35 cm long and about 23 cm wide.⁹ It seems pertinent to note that it was very similar in dimensions to the *staurotheke* with the name of Sava of Serbia now kept in Pienza (36 cm × 18.5 cm), a very rare example of an original medieval Serbian *staurotheke* and hence tremendously useful for comparative purposes.¹⁰ Very interesting is also the information about the estimated value of the reliquary expressed in marks. This unit of weight for gold and silver, sometimes also for platinum and pearls, was in use in most medieval European states, including Hungary.¹¹ In our case, the mark in question most likely was the so-called Hungarian mark, also known as the mark of King Bela IV, which was equal to 233.35 g of silver and was in use between 1146 and 1280. Expressed in the gold currency of the time, the value of the *staurotheke* of 500 marks would have been about 3,000 Florentine florins.¹²

The units of measurement and numerical values referred to in Bela IV's charter permit some, if cautious, assumptions to be made about the original appearance of the *staurotheke* of Uroš I. The considerable discrepancy between the value of the gold (10 marks) and the estimated total value of the reliquary

⁸ *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis*, Studio et opera Georgii Fejér, t. V, vol. 1 (Budae 1829), 25; this text was also published by St. Stanojević "Da li je kralj Uroš 1268. god. bio zarobljen od Madjara?", *Glas SKA* CLXIV, dr. raz. 84 (1935), 203, and Dinić, "O ugarskom ropstvu", 34.

⁹ *Palma* or *palmus*, meaning "palm" or "hand", was one of the basic units of length in the middle ages. For medieval Serbia see M. Vlajinac, *Rečnik naših starih mera u toku vekova*, vol. IV (Belgrade: SANU, 1974), 696–697; S. Ćirković, "Merenje i merenje u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji", *Rabotnici, vojnici, duhovnici. Društva srednjovekovnog Balkana* (Belgrade: Equilibrium, 1997), 143. In our case, it is the unit known as *palmus maior* or "greater span", which was equal to 12 digits or about 23 cm.

¹⁰ D. Popović, "A *staurotheke* of Serbian provenance in Pienza", *Zograf* 36 (2012), 157.

¹¹ Vlajinac, *Rečnik naših starih mera*, vol. II, 563–565.

¹² B. Hóman, *Magyar pénztörténet 1000–1325* (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1916), 102–104. The product of multiplying 500 Hungarian marks by 233.3533 g is equal to 116,676 kg of silver, which would have been worth about 53,521 Venetian grossi. The value of the *staurotheke* in gold currency can only be expressed in Florentine florins – the Venetian ducat was introduced only in 1284 – and it would have been about 2,937 florins. I express my gratitude to Vujadin Ivanišević, senior fellow of the Archaeological Institute in Belgrade, for information and wider clarifications on this topic.

(500 marks) suggests that most of its value lay in the holy wood and the sumptuous jewelled decoration. The statement about the cross being “extraordinarily beautifully adorned with valuable gems and precious stones” indeed suggests an unusually luxurious object. That it was both a highly revered relic and a worthy work of religious art may also be seen from the Hungarian king’s determination to do whatever it takes to make it his own. Since his attempt to buy the reliquary from Mihaly failed, he decided to grant him landed estates in exchange for it (*pro tali igitur preciosa re quamdam terram conditionalium suorum Erdewchukuna vocatum*).¹³ Finally, it may be assumed that the religious significance of the holy wood and the great material value of the *staurotheke* were not Bela IV’s only, though obviously very strong, motive. Just like the captured Serbian war flag (*signum triumphi vexillum*), the True Cross – the most convincing, Constantinian, sign of victory, which the Serbian king must have also hoped for when he had set out to war – symbolized the Hungarian victory over the defeated enemy.

* * *

That the cult of the True Cross had already taken root in Serbia by the time of King Uroš I can be seen from the fact that his consort, Queen Helen of Anjou, also owned a *staurotheke*. The appearance of this reliquary, believed to be either irretrievably lost or collecting dust someplace, is partially known from the documentary sources dating from the late eighteenth century. Since these documents are a vital source of information about the history of the *staurotheke* – about a later phase of its history, to be exact – and about the type and decoration of the reliquary, we shall first offer these known facts.

Contemporary sources are silent about the earliest, medieval, history of Queen Helen’s reliquary. Something is known about its later fate owing to Franjo Ksaver Pejačević, a prominent eighteenth-century Jesuit theologian and author of a voluminous *Historia Serviae*. The tendentious intent of Pejačević’s book – to prove the alleged centuries-long adherence of the Serbs to the Roman Catholic Church – set aside on this occasion, it is his merit that he used various sources to compile important information about the appearance of Queen Helen’s reliquary, about how it made its way to the Habsburg court and what use it had there. Thus, we can learn that the *staurotheke* contained fragments of the holy wood, had the form of a gold cross set with four precious stones and incised with a Cyrillic inscription in Serbian (...*Reginae istius Helenae monumentum, partem videlicet crucis Dominicae notabilem, auro gemmis quator ornato inclusam ... denique auro incisum esse aliquid caractere nostrate Cyrillico dudum inaudii* ...). He also makes a very interesting claim that the reliquary, wrapped up in silk, is laid by the newly-born Austrian princes after their baptism (*ex hac pro pio more do-*

¹³ *Codex Diplomaticus Hungariae*, 25; Stanojević “Da li je kralj Uroš”, 202–203.

mus augustae augustae particulam decerpi, obvolutamque serico, principibus recens natis post baptismi solemniam appendi). Worthy of particular note is his account of how the *staurotheke* arrived in the Austrian capital. He claims – without specifying his sources – that the reliquary, which Queen Helen had donated to the Monastery of Sopoćani, a foundation of her husband, King Uroš I, came into the possession of Despot Djuradj Branković. After the first fall of the Serbian Despotate to the Ottomans in 1439, the despot took his valuable possessions to Hungary, and left them there when he set out to look for allies against the invaders (*Ad Austriacos pervenisse ex Hungaria reor: Hungariae vero sacris clenodiis a Georgio Despota illatam anno 1439; quo regno ejectus, apud Hungaros exul, auxilia adversus Amuratis tyrannidem conquirebat*).¹⁴ If Pejačević's story is founded on reality – which is a possibility that should not be ruled out given the political and military situation in the region at the time – it seems logical to assume that Queen Helen's *staurotheke* first came into the possession of the Branković family, and then ended up in the Hungarian royal treasury. In that case, it must have come to the Habsburg court in the first half of the sixteenth century or, more precisely, before the conquest of Buda in 1541, when Ferdinand I of Habsburg had the treasury transferred to Vienna.

Be that as it may, another Pejačević's merit is that he published the inscription engraved on Queen Helen's *staurotheke*. Remaining our main source for the subsequently lost Serbian reliquary, his 1797 account is also chronologically the last first-hand testimony that the reliquary was in use at the Habsburg court. Pejačević's account was referred to by later collectors and students of Serbian antiquities, who also published the inscription and thus saved it from oblivion. The inscription reads:

*This holy cross was made by Queen Helen for the Holy Trinity [church] at Sopoćani. [There are] in it five pieces of the holy wood, all intact, and four stones [on it]. Two thousand perpers were given for the wood, and a third thousand for the stones and gold. May he who alienates or takes the cross forcibly from the Holy Trinity be killed by God and the True Cross. May he who chips off a piece from the holy wood be damned by God and killed by the True Cross.*¹⁵

The information about the type and decoration of Queen Helen's reliquary is supplemented from another and chronologically the earliest eighteenth-

¹⁴ F. X. Pejacsevich, *Historia Serviae seu Colloquia XIII. de statu regni et religionis Serviae ab exordio ad finem, sive a saeculo VII. ad XV.* (Colocae 1797), 327.

¹⁵ The inscription has been published by several scholars: P. J. Šafarik, *Serbische Lesekörner oder historische-kritische Beleuchtung der serbischen Mundart* (Pest: C. A. Hartleben, 1833), 70, LXVII; Fr. Miklosich, *Monumenta serbica spectantia historiam Serviae, Bosnae, Ragusii* (Vienna: G. Braumüller, 1858), 70, LXVII; Lj. Stojanović, *Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi*, vol. I (Belgrade: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1902), 19–20, no. 45; Frolow, *La relique de la Vraie Croix*, 443.

century source: the inventory list of the items in the ecclesiastical collection of the Habsburg Imperial treasury (*Inventar der geistliche Schatzkammer*) of 23 February 1758. The object under no. 5 (Reg. no. 12624) is described as an “ancient” double-armed cross which contains a very large piece of the holy wood; the cross is entirely of gold, set on a flat silver-gilt foot, adorned with four uncut sapphires, and bears an “ancient” inscription in Greek (*Ein detto doppeltes ganz goldenes uralter creuz, in welchem sich etwelche sehr grosse particul von heiligen creuz befunden; stehet auf einem glat silbervergolden fues und ist zugleich mit 4 ungeschnittenen saphir gezieret, die inscription, welche uralt und in griechischer sprache*). A *Nota Bene* added at the end of the description states that the holy wood had been chipped away several times before 13 June 1758, when Her Majesty the Empress (Maria Theresa) set the holy wood and its casing aside for her own use (*Von diesen particul seind zu verschiedenen mahlen einige stücke herausgenommen worden. Den 13. junii 1758 aber haben ihro maj. de kaiserin diesen particul gänzlich samt der fassung zu allerhöchst deroselben disposition zu sich genohmen*).¹⁶

When the information from the *geistliche Schatzkammer* inventory records is compared with the information provided by the inscription on the *staurotheke*, the likelihood of this being our reliquary becomes quite high. Such identification is corroborated by the claim of Franjo Ksaver Pejačević that Queen Helen’s reliquary was among the items kept in the Imperial treasury. The only discrepant detail is that the inscription was in Greek. It can, however, be explained by the widespread practice of classifying inscriptions on “ancient” objects of Eastern-Christian origin as Greek as a result of ignorance of Slavic languages. The Croat Pejačević could not possibly have made such a mistake – he is explicit that it is a Cyrillic inscription in Serbian – but it was quite conceivable for a mid-eighteenth-century Austrian official responsible for making the inventory of the Imperial treasury.¹⁷

So, with all known information collated, the appearance of Queen Helen’s *staurotheke* may be reconstructed in the following way: it had the shape of a two-armed cross and it was made of gold and decorated with four sapphires, uncut at that, as was common in medieval goldsmithing. The reliquary bore a relatively extensive inscription, but its exact place was not specified. Judging by the known Serbian analogies – the *staurotheke* with the name of Sava of Serbia from

¹⁶ H. Zimmermann, ed., “Inventare Akten und Regesten aus der Schatzkammer des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses”, *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhaus* 16/II (1895), VII and XXVIII; v. <http://jbsak.uni-hd.de>

¹⁷ This identification has also been accepted by Dr Franz Kirchweyer, curator of the Kaiserliche Schatzkammer and Kunstakammer Vienna. I express my great gratitude to my Austrian colleague for exploring information about Queen Helen’s *staurotheke*, i.e. for confirming that all reference to it ceased after Empress Maria Theresa took it for her private use in 1758. To the best of his knowledge, the *staurotheke* at present is not in any of the collections of the Schatzkammer or the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

Pienza and the *staurotheke* of the church of Sts Peter and Paul at Ras – it might have been inscribed on the handle.¹⁸ Other unknowns include the technique, morphology and possible calligraphic solutions of the inscription, all of which taken together constitute an important component of the visual “rhetoric of enshrinement”.¹⁹ The statement from the inventory records that the *staurotheke* had a silver-gilt foot should be interpreted with much caution. Namely, the foot most likely was a later addition which enabled the new Habsburg owners to put the cross on display in a vertical position. Judging by the known examples, medieval Serbian *staurothekai* were not fixed onto a stand in order to be kept or put on display, but rather they had handles at the lower end of the cross shaft by which they were held when lifted up during various rites.

The inscription contains some other interesting details. It should first be noted that it belongs to the usual category of donor inscriptions, in this case informing about a gift of Queen Helen to the *katholikon* of the monastery of Sopoćani, her husband’s foundation and funerary church. By making this expensive gift, Queen Helen followed the Nemanjić royalty’s established practice of donating fragments of the True Cross to distinguished monasteries. Strikingly, however, the inscription does not contain the donor’s usual plea for good health, salvation or forgiveness of sins which, in the context of donor inscriptions and epigrams, expressed their expectation of a spiritual reward from the heavenly powers for the material gift made.²⁰ On the other hand, another commonplace of donor inscriptions was not omitted: the concluding sanction, i.e. a curse to whoever dares alienate the relic or take it forcibly from the monastery. A similar sanction concludes the inscription on a somewhat later *staurotheke* of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin and the Bishop of Raška, Gregory II.²¹

Yet another interesting fact about Queen Helen’s inscription is that it states the exact cost of the *staurotheke*. It is quite telling that of the total amount of 3,000 *perpers*, 2,000 were paid for the holy wood and twice as less, or 1,000, for the gold and precious stones, i.e. for the reliquary. The high amount paid for the relic itself can undoubtedly be accounted for by its size, i.e. by the fact that

¹⁸ Popović, “Relikvije Časnog krsta”, figs. 3, 4 and 5; D. Popović, “The *staurotheke* of the church of Sts Peter and Paul in Ras. A contribution to research”, *Zograf* 42 (2018), 73–87.

¹⁹ On the subject see H. Klein, “Materiality and the Sacred. Byzantine Reliquaries and the Rhetoric of Enshrinement”, in *Saints and Sacred Matter: the Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, eds. C. Hahn and H. A. Klein (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 2016), 231–252; I. Drpić, *Epigram, Art and Devotion in Later Byzantium* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 186–243 and *passim*.

²⁰ On gift giving and returning see T. Kambourova, “Ktitor: le sens du don des panneaux votifs dans le monde byzantine”, *Byzantion* 78 (2008) 261–287; Drpić, *Epigram*, 276–295 (with sources and bibliography).

²¹ Popović, “The *staurotheke* of the church of Sts Peter and Paul in Ras, 74, fig. 5.

it consisted of as many as five pieces of the holy wood. Making an estimation of the real value of the *staurotheke*, including the relic, would require a separate study based on both Byzantine and Serbian contemporary sources, but even a rough estimate suggests it was an exceptionally expensive object.²² For the sake of comparison, in roughly the same period, the price of a sheep in Byzantium was one *hyperpyron*, of a battle horse 79–90, of a male slave 22, and of a female slave 28–30 *hyperpyra*. As for the objects made from precious metals, let us mention a pair of earrings adorned with pearls and precious stones which cost 48 *hyperpyra*.²³

The fact that Queen Helen's *staurotheke* held five fragments of the holy wood is worthy of special emphasis. Research based on the written sources and surviving reliquaries has shown that the *staurothekai* containing several holy wood fragments were a rarity in Byzantium and, therefore, particularly highly valued. Perhaps the best-known example is a reliquary originally from the Constantinopolitan Church of the Virgin of the Pharos and since the thirteenth century housed in the French royal treasury.²⁴ There is also good reason to assume that the so-called *staurotheke* of the Empress Maria from St Mark's in Venice, a replica of another highly-valued Byzantine reliquary, also contained more than one holy wood fragment.²⁵ The state of preservation of the holy wood fragments after the arrival of Queen Helen's *staurotheke* in the Habsburg treasury cannot be known with certainty. The claim made in the inventory records – that pieces had been chipped off several times until the Empress Maria Theresa took the relic for her private use – may imply that the holy wood had been spared from substantial fragmentation.

The practice of relic fragmentation – a long-standing practice of the Christian church – had a particular meaning in this case because the cult of the True Cross was an essential ingredient of the religiosity of Habsburg dynasts. In addition to Eucharistic piety, the veneration of the Virgin and particular saints, the *fiducia in Crucem Christi* lay at the core of *pietas austriaca*. This concept of

²² According to what is known, one *perper*, which was the unit of account, was equal to 12 silver dinars in the Serbian lands in the late 13th century. Therefore, the amount of 3,000 *perpers* would have been equal to about 36,000 silver dinars. For this subject see V. Ivanišević, *Novčarstvo srednjovekovne Srbije* (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 2001), 36–42.

²³ C. Morrisson and J.-C. Cheynet, "Prices and Wages in the Byzantine World", in *The Economic History of Byzantium: From Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, ed. A. E. Laiou (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002), 854–857, T. 15.

²⁴ J. D[urand], "Le reliquaire byzantin de la Vraie Croix", in *Le trésor de la Sainte-Chapelle* (Paris: Reunion des Musées Nationaux, 2001), no. 17, 63–64.

²⁵ K. Krause, "The *Staurotheke* of the Empress Maria in Venice: a Renaissance replica of a lost Byzantine Cross reliquary in the Treasury of St. Mark's", in *Die kulturhistorische Bedeutung byzantinischer Epigramme*, eds. W. Hörander and A. Rhoby (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008), 41–42.

piety, considered to be one of the most important virtues of a ruler, was at the heart of the distinctive Habsburg ideology of a chosen people and its salvific mission in the Christian world. The Habsburgs drew its main principles from the medieval heritage, including chronicles and popular legends. The starting point and symbolic focus of these beliefs was the coronation of their forefather, Rudolf I (1273), at which the cross had been assigned the role of a sign of victory as well as of a symbol of royal authority. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Habsburgs embraced and further developed the idea of *imitatio Christi*, notably in the reign of Ferdinand II (1578–1637), when the cult of the True Cross, infused with complex symbolism, became an important instrument of dynastic propaganda. At its centre was the idea of the Habsburgs – *domus austriaca* – as being chosen and preordained by God to pursue their universal mission for both state and church. The cult was given a tremendous impetus by a miracle that took place in Vienna in 1668, when a piece of the True Cross emerged intact from the great fire that broke out in the imperial palace. As a result of this miraculous event, which inspired the institution of the Order of the Starry Cross, the veneration of the relic gained popularity beyond the imperial family, taking root among the high aristocracy.²⁶

The cult of the True Cross continued to be devotedly fostered within the *Pietas austriaca* programme by the eighteenth-century Habsburg rulers, experiencing a particular surge in the reign of Maria Theresa (1717–1780). Apart from the inherited belief in God's help and protection ensured for the dynasty by the True Cross, this illustrious empress, also known for her radical Roman-Catholic religiosity, considered the relic to be an efficacious weapon against all manner of infidels and heretics. Invoking the legacy of Ferdinand II, she took an illustrious dynastic relic – the cross from which, legend has it, the emperor had heard the message: *non te deseram* – to Bratislava (1741), ordering that it be put on display in the Reichstag. Upon its return to Vienna, the cross was enshrined in a luxurious case in the renovated imperial chapel at the Hofburg, and from 1748 was presented for kissing on Sundays and religious festivals. Maria Theresa encouraged the veneration of the True Cross by means other than just such ritual practices. Making use of the traditional likening of Christian rulers to Sts Constantine and Helena, she commissioned paintings and statues portraying

²⁶ A. Coreth, *Pietas Austriaca. Österreichische Frömmigkeit im Barock* (Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik 1982); M. E. Elisabeth, "Emperors, Kingdoms, Territories: Multiple Version of Pietas Austriaca", *Catholic Historical Review* 97/2 (2001), 276–304; W. Telesco, "The Pietas Austriaca. A Political Myth? On the Instrumentalisation of Piety towards the Cross at the Viennese Court in the Seventeenth Century", in *The Habsburgs and Their Courts in Europe, 1400–1700. Between Cosmopolitanism and Regionalism*, eds. H. Karner, I. Ciulisová and B. J. García García (Palatium, e-Publication 1, 2014), 159–180 (with relevant literature). I express my gratitude to Professor Vladimir Simić for introducing me to the relevant literature on the topic.

her as St Helena, and the portraits showing her together with her husband, Francis Stephen, evoked the Early Christian imperial pair.²⁷

This context provides clues to the prominent role of Queen Helen's "ancient" and incontestably authentic *staurotheke* in the Habsburg family rituals such as its having being laid at the side of the newly-born princes after their baptism. We do not know how Maria Theresa used the *staurotheke* once she took it from the Imperial treasury in 1758, thereby preventing its further fragmentation, nor do we have any information about its later fate. It may be pertinent to note at this point that yet another True Cross fragment of Serbian provenance came to the Habsburg court in the late seventeenth century. It was the relic enshrined in the already mentioned *staurotheke* of King Stefan Milutin and the Bishop of Raška, Gregory II. This reliquary, which had arrived in Dubrovnik (Ragusa) after the Ottoman conquest of Serbia in 1459, was obviously highly respected. According to a Ragusan chronicler, the Dominican Serafin Crijević (1686–1759), a friar stole the holy wood fragment in 1697 and presented it as a gift to the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I's envoy to Ragusa, Baron Saponaro. The latter, in turn, presented it as a gift to Empress Wilhelmina Amalia, consort of Emperor Joseph I (1678–1711), who "encased it in gold", i.e. had a sumptuous reliquary made for it. She also requested and obtained from the Ragusan Dominican monastery the "certificate" of the relic's authenticity.²⁸ In hindsight, then, the distinctive Habsburg piety and the strong, programmatically fostered cult of the True Cross seem to be the main reason that two medieval Serbian relics of manifold importance have been rescued from oblivion.

* * *

Even though the *staurothekai* discussed in this essay cannot be classified together, they do share a few common features. Instead of a conclusion, we shall take a brief look at them. It should first be noted that both reliquaries were royal donations, which confirms the conclusion about the popularity of the cult of the True Cross with the Nemanjić royalty and their practice of possessing and donating sumptuous *staurothekai*. In our case, this fact is particularly telling because the

²⁷ Coreth, *Pietas Austriaca*, 41–42; K. Schmal, *Die Pietas Maria Theresias im Spannungsfeld von Barock und Aufklärung. Religiöse Praxis und Sendungsbewußtsein gegenüber Familie, Untertanen und Dynastie* (Frankfurt am Mein etc.: Peter Lang, 2001).

²⁸ This information was shortly outlined also by I. K. Sakcinski, "Izvjestje o putovanju kroz Dalmaciju u Napulj i Rim s osobitim obzirom na slavensku književnost, umjetnost i starine", *Arhiv za povjesnicu jugoslavensku* VI (1857), 335–336; V. B. Lupis, "O kasnobizantskim zlatarskim likovnim utjecajima u Dubrovniku", *Starohrvatska prosvjeta* III/34 (2007), 359–340 (with sources, literature and a drawing of the reliquary done by Serafin Crijević as an illustration for the text – fig. 21); see also Popović, "The *staurotheke* of the church of Sts Peter and Paul in Ras, 78.

donors were a powerful royal couple. Because of the scarcity of available sources, however, we hardly know anything about the motives and details of their acts of donation. Given that some information about King Uroš I's *staurotheke* has only survived due to the fact that it was captured in a war, we do not know where it was kept and what uses it might have had. As for the *staurotheke* of Uroš I's wife, it is known to have been donated to the Sopoćani monastery church, but Helen's motivation for donating it to her husband's foundation rather than to her own, the monastery of Gradac, remains an open question. The question is all the more difficult to answer because of the very complex and insufficiently elucidated relationship between the two foundations with respect both to the chronology of construction and to their intended use.²⁹

The available sources are much more generous with information about the shape and decoration of the two *staurothekai*. As has been shown, they had the usual shape of a double-armed cross, as expressly stated in the case of Queen Helen's one. Important in itself, the information that we have is even more important for broader considerations of the typology and decoration of the medieval Serbian Cross reliquaries. Even though the surviving reliquaries are small in number, especially in comparison to their original number, we can draw some fairly reliable conclusions about their appearance and form. It is certain that the Serbs adopted two basic Byzantine types of *staurotheke* – in the forms of a double-armed cross and of a panel-icon.³⁰ To the latter belonged the thirteenth-century *staurothekai* of King Stefan Vladislav, now known only from the sources,³¹ as well as some later reliquaries, such as the one from the monastery of Vatopedi

²⁹ B. Todić, "Sopoćani i Gradac. Uzajamnost funerarnih programa dve crkve", *Zograf* 31 (2006–2007), 59–77.

³⁰ A. Frolow, *Les reliquaires de la Vraie Croix* (Paris: Institut français d'études byzantines, 1965), 93–115; Klein, *Byzanz, der Westen und das "wahre" Kreuz*, 100–101 and passim.

³¹ It is known, e.g., that the safety deposit box of Župan Desa and his mother Beloslava – King Stefan Vladislav's son and wife – inventoried in 1282, included two icon reliquaries with fragments of the True Cross. One was described as *Ycona una cum cruce et cum ligno Domini*, the other, which held several relics, as *Ycona una coperta in qua erat lignum Domini, et cum reliquiis et cum perlis*, G. Čremošnik, "Kancelarijski i notarski spisi 1278–1301", *Zbornik za istoriju, jezik i književnost srpskog naroda SKA*, ser. III, vol. 1 (1932), 53–55. We also know of the *staurotheke* in the form of a panel that King Vladislav donated to the monastery of St Paul on Mt Athos. It had a lid decorated with scenes of the Crucifixion and the Christ Enthroned surrounded with images of saints, as well as with a portrait of the royal donor shown in proskynesis accompanied by an inscription, Arhimandrit Leonid, "Sloveno-srpska knjižnica na sv. Gori Atonskoj", *Glasnik SUD* 44 (1877), 279–280, n. 1; D. Vojvodić, "Obavijen zemaljskom slikom. O predstavama vizantijskih i srpskih srednjovekovnih vladara u proskinezi", *Crkvene studije* 4 (2007), 383.

which tradition attributes to Prince Lazar (Hrebeljanović).³² In some cases, reliquaries could be a combination of the two types, as illustrated particularly well by the reliquary of the Musić brothers, today also at Vatopedi.³³ Among the prestigious examples of *staurothekai* in the shape of a double-armed cross are certainly the reliquary with the name of Sava of Serbia kept in Pienza, Italy – refurbished in the last third of the fourteenth century – and the *staurotheke* of King Milutin and Bishop Gregory II of Raška, which underwent a thorough renovation in Ragusa in the first half of the sixteenth century.³⁴ Although now lost and only known from written sources, the *staurothekai* of King Uroš I and Queen Helen are a precious testimony to the popularity of this reliquary type in medieval Serbia.

Owing to the economical but informative enough descriptions, our *staurothekai* are also a precious document for the ways in which such religious objects of the highest order were decorated. As we have seen, both reliquaries were made of gold and lavishly bejewelled, which classifies them among the most luxurious works of *ars sacra*. In this respect, the Serbian rulers followed common practice in the Christian world, especially as regards the decoration of *staurothekai*.³⁵ In addition to the layered spiritual meaning of the luxurious materials used – a metaphor for the uncreated light and the walls of the Heavenly City – the Cross reliquaries fashioned in this way had yet another meaning. The sumptuous cross-shaped reliquaries, whose origin can be traced as far back as the Early Christian *crux gemmata*, were also symbols of royal authority and triumph, evoking the hallowed model – the victorious sign that had appeared to the first Christian emperor and champion of the “true faith”, Constantine the Great.³⁶

³² B. Todić, “Τρείς σερβικές λειψανοθήκες στη Μονή του Βατοπεδίου”. In *The Monastery of Vatopedi: History and Art / Ιερά Μονή του Βατοπεδίου. Ιστορία και τέχνη*, 249–252 (Athens: Ethniko idryma ereynon, 1999).

³³ Frolow, *La relique da la Vrai Croix*, 571–572; Todić, “Τρείς σερβικές λειψανοθήκες”, 246–249.

³⁴ “Relikvije Časnog krsta”, *passim*; Popović, “A *staurotheke* of Serbian provenance in Pienza”, 157–170; Popović, “The *staurotheke* of the church of Sts Peter and Paul in Ras”, 74–78.

³⁵ Frolow, *Les reliquaires de la Vraie Croix*, *passim*; Klein, *Byzanz, der Westen und das “wahre” Kreuz*, *passim*; for general references on the decoration and “rhetoric” of the reliquaries see n. 18; for Serbian examples see n. 33.

³⁶ H. A. Klein, “Constantine, Helena and the Cult of the True Cross in Constantinople”, in *Byzance et les reliques du Christ*, eds. J. Durand and B. Flusin (Paris: Association des amis du Centre d’histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2004), 31–59; H. A. Klein, “Sacred Relics and Imperial Ceremonies at the Great Palace of Constantinople”, *BYZAS* 5, *Visualisierungen von Herrschaft. Frühmittelalterliche Residenzen, Gestalt und Zeremoniell* (2004), 79–99; C. Hahn, *Strange Beauty. Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400 – circa 1204* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 2015), 73–102.

Apart from possessing these general characteristics, the *staurothekai* of King Uroš I and Queen Helen illustrate some distinctive practices associated with the cult of relics in the late medieval period. It above all involves the idea, increasingly current, especially after 1204 when the relic trade became common, of relics as having not only sacral value but also quantifiable material worth.³⁷ Although documented in a small number of sources, this idea was current in medieval Serbia, too.³⁸ It is frequently reflected in donor inscriptions on reliquaries in their emphasis on the “reciprocal” nature of the act of donation: in exchange for their expensive gift, donors expected an appropriate spiritual reward – forgiveness of sins and salvation of the soul.³⁹ Our *staurothekai* offer some interesting information in this respect. As we have seen, the worth of the materials used for crafting the reliquary of King Uroš I – gold, precious stones and gems – was estimated at 500 marks and, as an attempt to purchase it failed, the *staurotheke* was exchanged for valuable landed estates. The “commercial” value of Queen Helen’s reliquary – amounting to the large sum of 3,000 *perpers* – was emphasized even more explicitly given that it was stated in the donor inscription itself.

And yet, it seems that it would be quite wrong to think that this “commercial” aspect of relics challenged the belief in their sacredness and miraculous powers – both among the contemporaries and among subsequent generations. The full significance of King Uroš I’s *staurotheke* and the reason why the Hungarian king was determined to get it was certainly not just its expensiveness and craftsmanship but also the fact that, as a valuable war trophy, it was a compelling symbol of Hungarian victory over the Serbian adversary. On the other hand, the fate of Queen Helen’s *staurotheke* – one of the oldest and most valued items in the Habsburg treasury – compellingly shows that the belief in the power of the True Cross among European nations survived unweakened deep into the modern period.

³⁷ H. A. Klein, “Eastern Objects and Western Desires: Relics and Reliquaries between Byzantium and the West”, *DOP* 58 (2004), 283–314 (with sources and literature).

³⁸ A rare and interesting piece of information about the price of a relic concerns the relics of St Luke; according to the sources, the buyer, Despot Djurađ Branković, negotiated the price down from 30,000 to 15,000 ducats, see D. Popović, “Mošti svetog Luke – srpska epizoda”, *Pod okriljem svetosti. Kult svetih vladara i relikvija u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji* (Belgrade: Balkanološki institut SANU, 2006), 301–302 (with sources and literature).

³⁹ See n. 19 above.

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