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# FRESCOES PAINTING OF GRAČANICA MONASTERY WORK OF A 14<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY MASTERPAINTERS OF THE PALAIOLOGAN RENAISSANCE

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## **Abstract**

This short essay is based on a separate analysis of iconographical and stylistic themes of frescoes from the church Holy Virgin-Gračanica. Frescoes were supposedly made by masters Michael and Eutychios, who painted a series of churches from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Northern Greece, Macedonian region and Serbia. They signatures and style can be found in the church of Saint George in Staro Nagoričino, Saint Prohor Pčinjski, church of Saint Niketas near Skopje, King's Church in Studenica, Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid, etc. The Serbian iconographic programs in the narthexes were a part of the elaboration and development of an ideological program that accompanied the foundation of an independent state by the Nemanjić dynasty at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In the series of Serbian monuments, without exceptions, iconographic program of Gračanica illustrates necropolis functionality (the Serbian sovereigns), that has to reflect in equal measure the cult of leader (Genealogical Tree) and to be didactic, moralizing and to become a preparation and a purification space before entering the nave. The martyrdom scenes of saints from Menologe (first appearance in Serbian wall-painting in the 14<sup>th</sup> century) painted on the supporting pillars of the arches in the pronaos and those of the large dome in the naos, illustrates not their death but their birth in Christ and the eternal contemplation of a mystical vision of the divinity.

*Keywords:* narthex, Michael Astrapas, Eutychios, iconography, Raska school

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## **1. Brief history of the Gračanica monastery**

The monument is considered a pinnacle of Serbian art, being the last great achievement of Tsar Milutin (Figure 1). King Milutin (1282-1321) and the high clergy of Serbia made efforts to bring together talented masters to whom they entrusted the task of building or renovating churches, covering the walls with frescoes, decorating them the iconostases of icons and to provide them with all the necessary artistically crafted objects. During the first years of the 14<sup>th</sup>

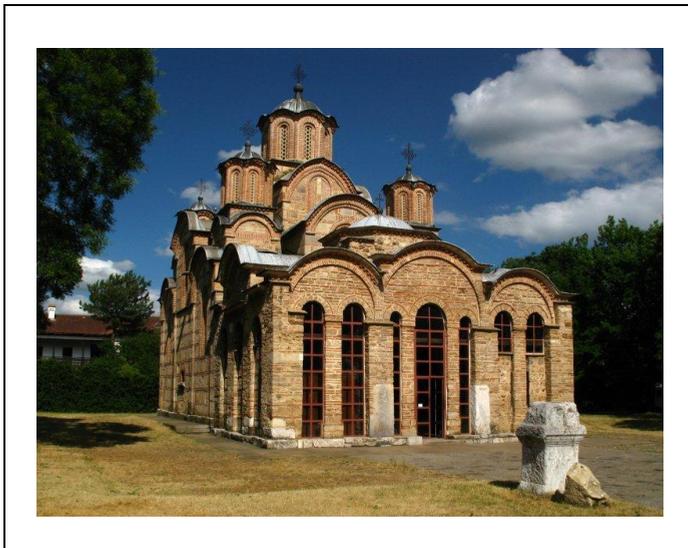
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century, artists followed the path of progress to reach the highly degree style of their time in Gračanica. The new church was built on the ruins of an older church of the Holy Virgin (replaced the old cathedral of Lipljan), which had also been built on the ruins of a three-nave basilica from the 6<sup>th</sup> century [1].

The architecture of the church and its rich painted decoration demonstrated the intention of the ktitor, the king of Serbia, to emphasize the importance of the episcopal see of Lipljan and his own power. Enlightened monks from Hilandar monastery who returned to the country if it was necessary, exercise the office of bishop or archbishop. This was the case of Sava III (1309-1316), who devoted himself to the construction of churches, and like Danilo II hegumen of Hilandar and Banjska who dedicated himself to the profession of writer, promoted later archbishop of Serbs. Another monk lesser known named Ignatie, who was bishop of Lipljan and later other scholars of the time greatly enriched the spiritual life of Serbia by intervening in the establishment of painted decoration programs. It was in their environment that King Milutin found competent advisors when he undertook the renovation or construction of a church, when he chose master masons and when he considered the appearance of the foundations to be built, intended for satisfy the needs of bishoprics and monasteries.

On the south wall of the chapel is written the king's testament, which includes the following words: "I saw the ruins and the fall of the temple of Holy Virgin of Gračanica in the episcopate of Lipjan, and I rebuilt it from the ground up and painted and decorated it both inside and outside" [2]. This inscription is a fragment from a charter from 1321, the last year of his long reign, King Milutin offering wealth to the monastery Gračanica, then the seat of the bishops of Lipljan. The narthex and the tower were added a few decades later.



**Figure 1.** Gračanica monastery - view from the north-west, 14<sup>th</sup> century.

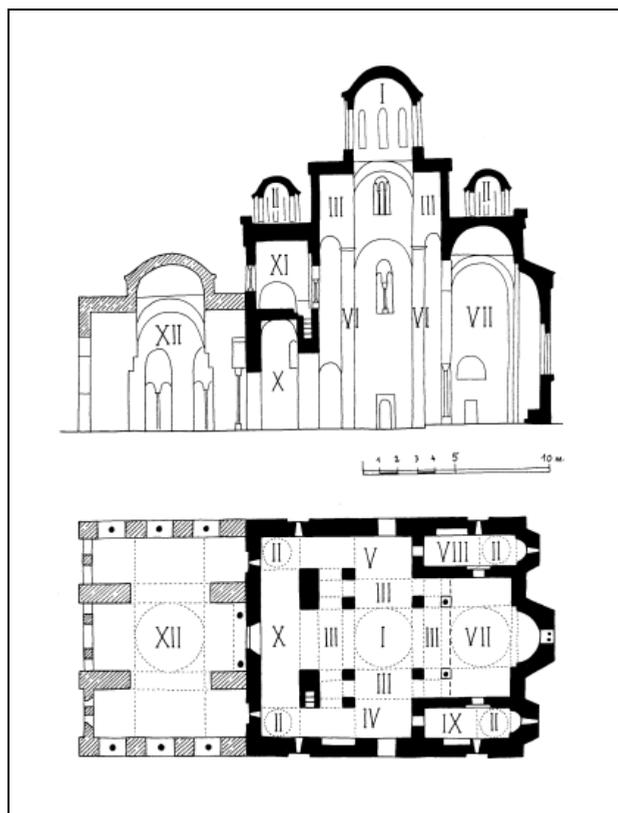
## **2. Church architecture**

The iconographic peculiarities of the new church's narthex of the Holy Virgin within the Gračanica monastery in Serbia require us to understand the causes that underlie them and which are due, for the most part, to the architecture of the edifices. Architecture is the support on which the painting rests, having a decisive role for the mural painting; the iconographic program depends on how the painter compositionally adapts the iconographic themes on the lines of the architecture. Another important aspect that I believe justifies the variable scenes in the pronaos iconography is the much greater freedom the painter has in this space, unlike the shrine and nave, where canonicity and restrictiveness are imposed by the liturgical requirements of these spaces.

Despite the common background stemming from the Orthodox ritual requirements and the use of Byzantine models, the architecture of Serbian churches is different, the ways of realization and artistic expression also being different, allowing the identification, for example, in Serbia of a real national school called the school from Raška (the capital of the old Serbian state).

The church has the plan of an inscribed Greek cross formed by the two levels of overlapping semi-cylindrical vaults; the inscribed Greek cross type is given only by the vaults of the first level, which structurally define the church. The cupola rests on four independent pilasters. Between the space of the two crosses, four smaller towers give a regular structure to the whole complex resembling a crown. Of the three apses, the eastern one is larger, giving the altar considerable width and external prominence. Between the central nave and the pronaos are the strong pilasters, the catholicon being at a higher level. The church was built of mixed material, of bricks and stone, and at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the exonarthex was added through two spans, which were later covered in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The plan of Gračanica (Figure 2) is similar to other Milutin foundations such as the church of Mother of God or Our Lady of Ljeviš (Bogorodica Ljeviška) in Prizren, Matejče, the church of Saint George in Staro Nagoričane but most similar to the church of Saints Apostles in Thessaloniki (beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century), the five-domed church being fashionable at that time [3]. Even though Thessaloniki's impact on architecture in various parts of Byzantine Macedonia and Thessaly was significant, it was overshadowed by the impact it had on neighbouring Serbia. Slobodan Čurčić, in his study regarding the role of Byzantine Thessaloniki in the church architecture of that period, states that "the most notable similarities of the Gračanica church with Thessalonian architecture are through its five domes" [4]. Thessaloniki became a veritable 'Architectural Mecca' of the Byzantine Empire becoming a second imperial home when Empress Irina moved her court here. During the period when it was the residence of the empress, other high-ranking characters such as Michael Glabas, Macarie Choumnos, Theodore Metochites, as well as the Serbian Tsar Milutin stayed here for a short time, attesting to the new important level to which Thessaloniki rose during that time.



**Figure 2.** Longitudinal section and architectural plan, arrangement of the frescoes:  
I - the great dome, II - four small domes, III - Naos - space at the bottom of the cupola,  
IV - south side nave, V - north side nave, VI - pillars, VII sanctuary, VIII - proscomidy,  
IX - diaconicon, X - narthex, XI - tribune, XII - exonarthex.

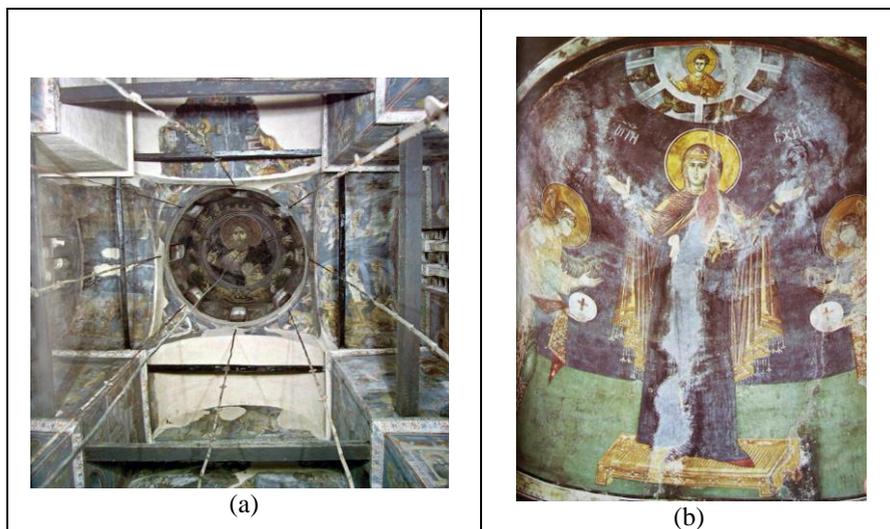
He rejects Millet's theory that reduces the role that Thessaloniki had especially in the 14<sup>th</sup> century when he replaced without reason the school of Thessaloniki with that of the Macedonian school, meaning by this also the Serbian school. Asking the question in this way, casts a false light on the problems of each school in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as it neglects not only the fundamental role that Thessaloniki had but also the importance of the Serbian school, making it only an unoriginal component of the Macedonian school.

The exonarthex was added later, at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, to protect the frescoes on the west facade, which was only painted in 1570 at the request of the Serbian patriarch Makarije (1557-1571).

### 3. The mural paintings of the church

The iconographic program of the narthex is broadly part of the Serbian tradition, similar to that of Sopočani, and later, after Gračanica, that of Dečani. Three different types of painting can be distinguished in the church. The oldest can be found in the nave, and two others in the narthex. The old frescoes were

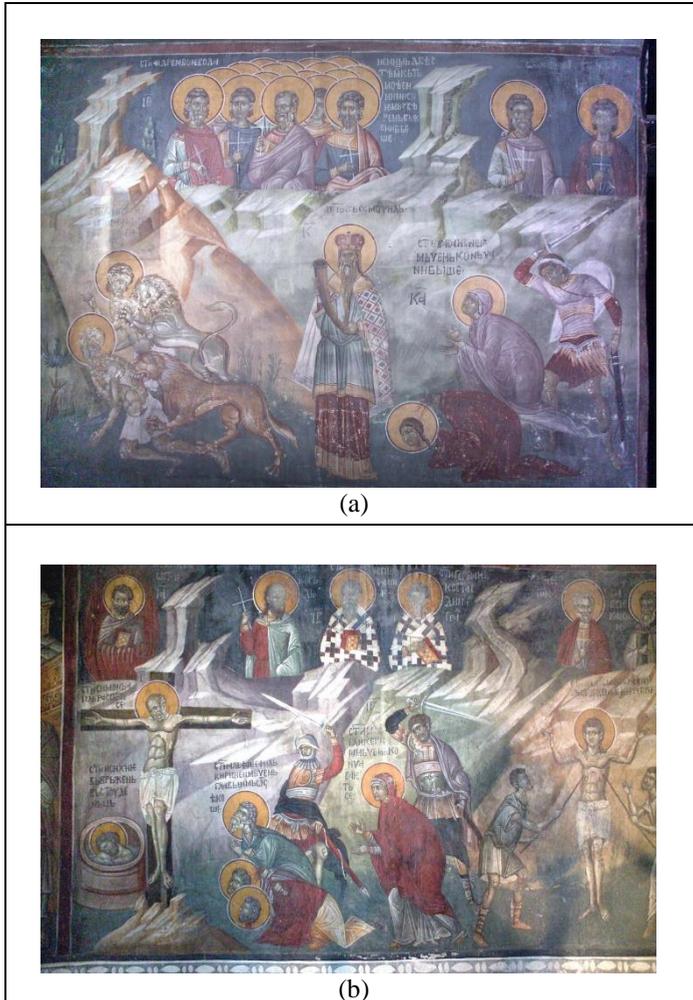
painted between the years 1321 and 1322 by the masters from Thessaloniki Michael and Eutyches and their apprentices [5]. Their frescoes are not only the most numerous in Gračanica but also the ones displaying the best qualities. The solid drawing permeated with academism, the large-scale and harmonious compositions and the balanced colouration disclose such skill and experience that, it seems, only Michael and Eutychos could have possessed in Serbia of those days [6]. The paintings are in a good state of preservation. The oldest compositions in the nave are those that present the earthly life of Christ and the Liturgical Calendar.



**Figure 3.** (a) Christ Pantocrator, main dome of the naos, 14<sup>th</sup> century; (b) Mother of God Platytera with archangels and Christ Emmanuel, eastern apse of the altar.

Almighty Christ is depicted at the top of the main dome, surveying the entire Universe, but he is surrounded by angels celebrating the *Divine Liturgy*, as in the composition represented below, in the naos. The prophets and evangelists interpret the vision of a new truth and the teaching brought by the Gospel and renewed by the liturgy. The figure of *Christ Emmanuel* (Figure 3a) is boldly isolated to be located at the top of the central apse and intended to translate the idea of the Creator and the *Divine Wisdom* which embraces all, while the Virgin in prayer, painted in the apsidal conch is represented with open arms (Figure 3b). Later, the learned theologians, advisors to King Marko, undertook to interpret *Divine Wisdom* in their turn; by using iconographically similar language to decorate the Marko monastery near Skoplje (1375/1376), they similarly placed the figure of *Christ Emmanuel* above that of the *Virgin Orante*. The complex theological thoughts on the Incarnation and sacrifice, on the Church as a reflection of the heavenly Jerusalem, on the *Holy Trinity*, can be followed on the frescoes decorating the sanctuary of Gračanica (Communion of the Apostles, led in both representations by Peter, Office of Bishops, Life of the Virgin who contributed to the Incarnation, Old Testament metaphors announcing the sacrifice of Christ and the role of the Virgin, allusions to the founding of the

church etc.), while in the naos we see the succession of cycles which by their magnitude surpass everything that had hitherto been created in Serbia (*Great Feasts, Work of Christ on earth, Passion, Miracles, Parables, Signs after the Resurrection of Christ, Dormition of the Virgin*).



**Figure 4.** Martyrdom scenes from Menologist (14<sup>th</sup> century): (a) 17-21 August, north wall of the nave; (b) 17-28 May, west wall of the nave.

In this ideal world of divine order, based on the sacrifices of Christ and his numerous followers, glorified in the scenes of the *Menologist*, the faithful could find teaching and a way out of their doubts and uncertainties here below. The new particularity given by the architecture made that the martyrion scenes of *Menologist* (Figure 4) painted by masters Eutybios and Astrapas can be found in the pillars of the nave and a part on two small domes (south-west and north-west domes) and nave south wall (west and north sides). The saints and scenes of martyrdom from Menologist begin on the nave south-east pillar (1-5,

11, 22-27 September) and continue on the south-west pillar (14-17 September, 8-10 October) north-west pillar (18-21 September, 11-17 October) north-east pillar (6-9, 10, 12, 13, 28-30 September; 1-2 October and 3, 4, 6, 7 October are located on the western side on the nave south wall). On the south-west dome we see scenes from the March month calendar (1-8, 10-16, 18, 25, 26-28 March) and on the north-west are scenes from June and July month calendars (1-22, 24 June; 1-2, 5, 11-24 July). On the west side of the south nave wall are represented saint scenes of martyrdom from the April and May calendar months (18-24 April; 10-15, 26-31 May) and on the northern side are the rest of the scenes from May calendar (1-9, 17-23, 25, 26 May). Even if is not a complete Menologist we find scenes only from September, October, March, April, May, June, July and August (17-21 August) calendar the complexity and original composition it amplifies the dramatic death of the saints who gave they their lives for the faith in Christ and become a model for the future.

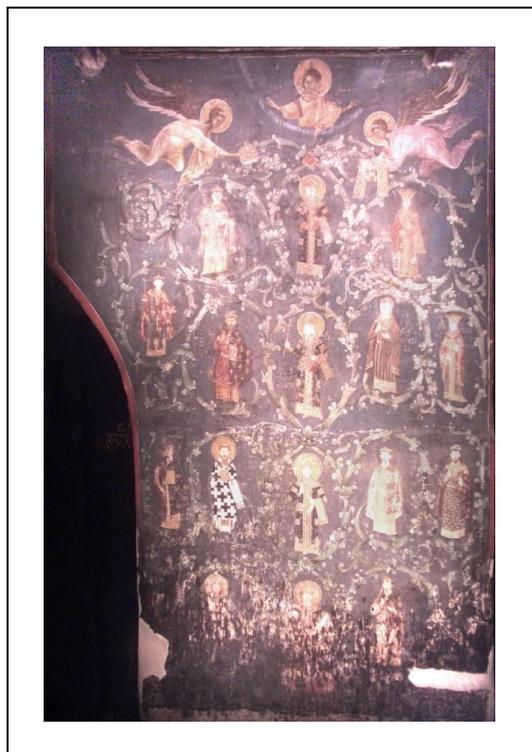
The most important paintings from Gračanica are the Great Feasts, the Passion and the Miracles of Christ. In the narthex are the portraits of the founders: Tsar Milutin and his wife Simonida, Queen Elena d'Anjou (mother of the king) as a nun and Tsar Milutin dressed as a monk (Figure 5).



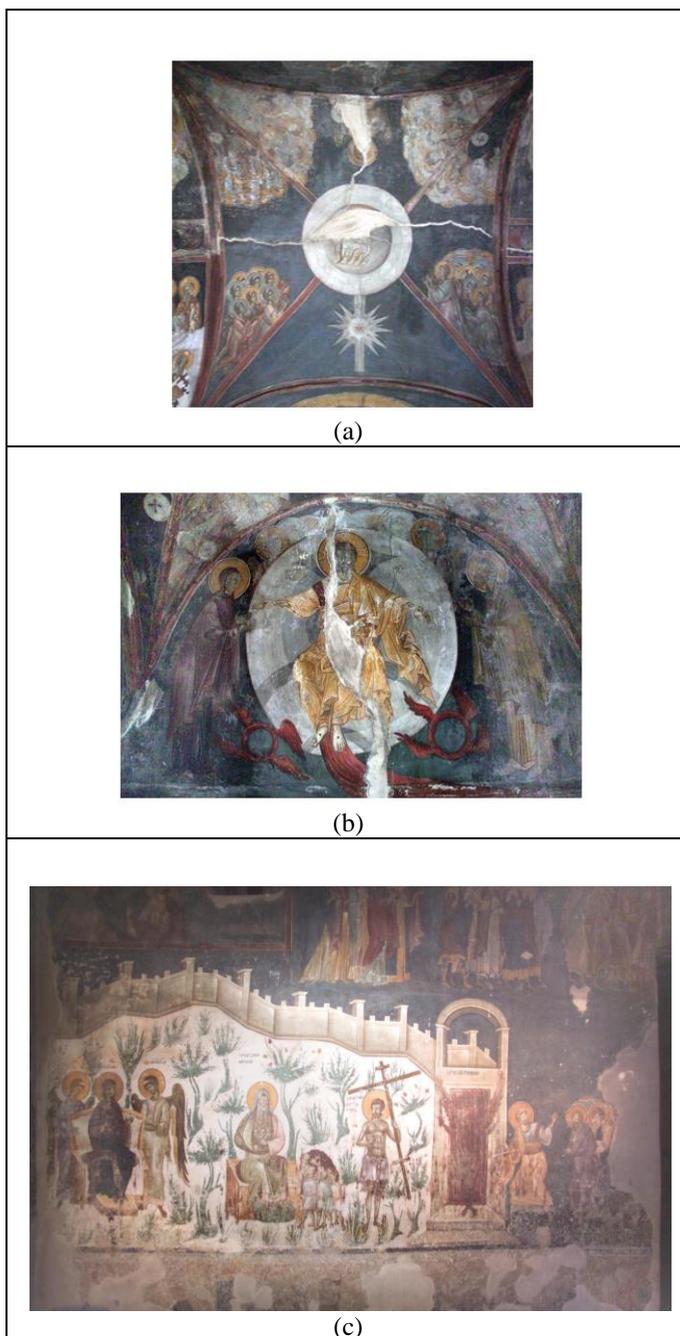
**Figure 5.** Queen Elena d'Anjou (mother of the king) as a nun and Tsar Milutin dressed as a monk, east wall of narthex, 14<sup>th</sup> century.

In such a dense and meticulous deployment of theological erudition, based on the texts of the Gospel, on the biblical 'types', the verses of liturgical poetry and the sermons of the fathers of the Church, the accent was placed on the figure of Stephen the First Martyr, in his capacity as protector of the Nemanja dynasty, on that of the apostle Andrew, the legendary founder of the Constantinopolitan

Church, on Saints Constantine and Helen, ideal models of all Christian sovereigns and on Saints Peter and Paul, as chief of the apostles, while among the fathers of the Church an important place was given to Saint Eustathius of Salonika, particularly venerated in Serbia since the time of King Milutin. In this ideal world where divine order reigns, the Serbian sovereign took the role of direct envoy of God, by being represented according to the formula which had been created for the portraits of the Byzantine emperors: angel flying from heaven and bringing to King Milutin the attribute of royalty, a crown that quite resembles the stemmata of the Byzantine emperor [7]. The young Queen Simonida is represented in the same way, ensuring for her aged husband the position at the top of the hierarchy of sovereigns in the Christian universe. The high reputation of the Serbian king in the world of the time and his real power, confirmed in the armed struggle against the Byzantines, strengthened the awareness of the prestige of the Nemanja family, so much so that it was for the first time Gračanica that it was painted like the *Tree of Jesse*. Of particular importance, and for the first time painted in the pronaos, on the right side of the East wall, there is the scene of the *Genealogical Tree of the Nemanjić dynasty* (Figure 6); it starts with Štefan Nemanja and ends with Milutin. The ancestors of the Nemanids are compared to those of Christ, the sovereign of Serbia showing that he governed according to the laws of the master of the Universe.



**Figure 6.** Genealogical Tree of the Nemanjić dynasty, east wall of the narthex, 14<sup>th</sup> century.



**Figure 7.** (a) Hand of God holding the souls of the righteous, narthex vault, 14<sup>th</sup> century; (b) Christ the Judge, detail from Last Judgement composition, upper register of the narthex west wall, 14<sup>th</sup> century; (c) Mother of God on the throne with archangels, Abraham's bosom, The thief on the cross, Cherub with flaming sword and Saint Peter with the keys of Heaven, details from Last Judgement composition, lower register of the narthex west wall, 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The two wide pilasters of the inner narthex are joined in the middle by an arch that in this way separates the nave from the narthex, the nave being entered through this arch from the centre and through the sides. The central arcade replaces the traditional portal carved in stone through which one entered the nave at Sopočani and later at Dečani. Unlike Dečani, the narthex has only one lower central vault in a broken arch, also divided into four registers. On this vault, the Seven Ecumenical Councils no longer appear, as was traditional, but the *Hand of God* holding the souls of the righteous (Figure 7a) from the *Last Judgment*, a composition that continues halfway from the two arches that join the eastern pilaster to the wall south and ends on the south wall. In the four registers of the vault are four choirs of angels.

The largest space of the narthex is dedicated to the composition of the *Last Judgment* (Figure 7b) which occupies the entire west wall and continues with a scene even on the north wall. In the upper register of the west wall is the scene with Christ the Judge (Figure 7b) at the second coming. He is surrounded by an aureole of light. To the left and to the right, he is surrounded by the Mother of God and Saint John the Baptist but also by Saints Apostles as judges (behind them there are groups of angels). Behind the Christ's is a group of angels. From the Savior's feet starts the river of fire or Gehenna as it is called by the people, which continues on the right side of the south wall, punishing the sinners. Below the scene with Christ at the second coming, appears the scene with the angels preparing the Throne of Judgment. On the left side appear hierarchically positioned: hierarchs, prophets, righteous men, righteous women, etc. Then, images from the Heavenly Heaven appear Abraham's bosom, the Righteous Robber, Saint Peter the Apostle with the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven (Figure 7c), etc. On the right side of the south wall appears on a larger surface the composition of extraordinary beauty - the Sea offering back her dead, then it continues with the image of the river of fire and the punishment of the sinners with terrible torments.

The *Last Judgment* warns them from the moment they enter the naos, because it inevitably arrives for all those who have lived, but at the same time it gives hope through faith in the resurrection. The atrocity of the tortures of the hanged, the impaled, the condemned thrown into the dark abysses, into the river of fire haunted the memory of the inhabitants of the Mediterranean regions. Archaic beliefs in Gehenna, inherited from pagan antiquity, persisted until the end of the Middle Ages, but in the Balkan monuments, they were dominated by the optimism of the teaching of Byzantine Christianity.

In the narthex, there are also later paintings, from the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century as the Baptism of Christ which is part of the Akathist Hymn and the Seven Ecumenical Councils. Two main ideas dominate the iconographic program of the narthex - the Virgin Mary, probably due to the patron saint of the church which is dedicated to the Holy Virgin, and the Procession of Serbian Patriarchs from Saint Sava to Patriarch Makarije Sokolović. Another historical composition that covers the south-

eastern part of the narthex is the Death of the Metropolitan of Gračanica - Dionysus.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Through the Gračanica frescoes, the achievements of Milutin's period are expressed to the highest degree in academic style born from the creative synthesis of Byzantine-Serbian art. The masters Michael Astrapas and Eutykhios demonstrate once again the taking over, interpretation and perpetuation of the authentic Byzantine heritage. Their art reveals the long and complex path of development of the two artists, full of changes and intentions to keep up with the current trends in the art of Constantinople and Thessaloniki. The encyclopaedic character of the paintings and the abundance of scenes and figures derive from the narrative talent of the artists, from the extraordinary ability to adapt to the original spatial solution (generated by architecture) both traditional iconographic themes also by introducing and creating new episodes adjacent to them. Even a few centuries after their creation, the wall paintings exerted a great influence on the artists who would decorate the future monuments of medieval Serbia. The Menologist in the pronaos from Gračanica, both through the original compositional solutions, but also through the spontaneity of the details, certainly provided a model for the painters of the Cretan school, who would take some of the plastic solutions and use them in the theme of the Menologists with which they would later decorate the pronaos the Athonite churches (Dionysiou, Stavronikita, Dochiaru) and those from Meteora (Roussanou, Great Meteora, etc.).

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