

ИЗКУСТВО И ИСТОРИЯ

ART AND HISTORY

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Арбанаси, галерия (1640-1649).
Снимка Т. Бачева

First Ecumenical Council, Nativity Church,
Arbanasi, gallery (1640-1649).
Photo credit T. Bacheva

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ИЗКУСТВОВЕДСКИ ЧЕТЕНИЯ

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ART READINGS

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ИЗКУСТВО И ИСТОРИЯ



ART AND HISTORY

ART READINGS
Thematic Peer-reviewed Annual in Art Studies, Volumes I-II
2024.I. *Old Art*

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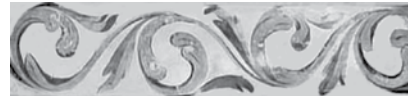
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Inventing History in the Late Ottoman Period: The Cult of the Holy Empress Helen (Ana Neda of Bulgaria), Sister of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani

Ivana Ženarju Rajović¹

Abstract: This paper explores the creation of the cult of the Holy Empress Helen, sister of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani, which was reflected in 19th-century church art in the Diocese of Raška and Prizren. Her cult emerged in the Dečani monastery owing to the efforts of the archimandrite Serafim Ristić and the books he published. The paper explores the examples of visual culture found so far that are linked to the cult of Saint Helen – reliquaries, icons, engravings and church murals.

Keywords: icons, reliquaries, engravings, church murals

The cult of St. Helen, sister of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani (Stefan Uroš III), emerged in the last century of Ottoman rule. The medieval cult of the Holy King was created upon his martyrdom and death and based on his incorporeal relics, believed to help the mentally ill, blind and barren². It was the most dominant cult in the Diocese of Raška and Prizren under Ottoman rule when the king was venerated as a protector of the Serbs. The creation of the cult of his sister Ana (Neda), with the monastic name of Helen, started in the 18th century. She was the daughter of Serbian king Stefan Uroš II Milutin and, most likely, his third wife, Princess Elizabeth of Hungary (Erzsébet

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² On the cult of the Holy King Stephen of Dečani see: *Marjanović-Dušanić 2007.*

Árpád)³. In medieval sources, she is called Ana or Neda; in recent decades, Bulgarian historiography began to refer to her as Ana-Neda⁴. Ana-Neda was the wife of Michael Asen III Shishman, Despot of Vidin, who became the Bulgarian emperor in 1323. Just one year later (1324), in order to establish his position with Byzantium, he divorced his wife and married Theodora, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Michael IX Palaiologos.

Ana-Neda left the Bulgarian capital with their sons. It is believed that this worsened the already tense relations between Bulgaria and Serbia⁵. In the Battle of Velbazhd in 1330, Stefan of Dečani defeated Michael Shishman, who lost his life. In agreement with the Bulgarian boyars, Stefan of Dečani installed his sister's eldest son Ivan as emperor and proclaimed her his regent. However, Ivan Stefan was considered a protégé of the Serbian king and therefore dethroned in the spring of 1331⁶. According to John Kantakouzenos, a contemporary of these events, the mother and son found refuge with their nephew Stefan Dušan, but it is not known where⁷. Some believe that they stayed in Serbia, but she felt unsafe, so she changed residences and went to Constantinople⁸. There is a high probability that they stayed first in Vidin, then in Niš and, in 1338, went to Dubrovnik⁹. Helen received financial help from the people of Dubrovnik and her Neapolitan relatives, and she also spent some time in Puglia (Apulia). She then returned to Dubrovnik, and from 1346, her name and title are no longer mentioned in the Dubrovnik documentation¹⁰. Whether she ended up in Dečani after that is difficult to say because, first of all, the year of her birth is unknown, with various dates proposed: that she was born in 1277 or 1293 at the earliest¹¹.

3 Gjuzelev 2013: 618; Uzelac 2014: 32.

4 Archbishop Danilo II calls her Ana, as do the Angevin sources from the Naples archives, while the Dubrovnik sources address her as Dominika, whereas the Serbian commemoration books (*Pomeniks*) refer to her as Neda (Sunday). Wertner 1892: 583; Purković 1996: 51; Gjuzelev 2013: 618, n. 8; Uzelac 2014: 29-30; Georgieva 2017.

5 Andreev, Lalkov 1996: 250.

6 Gjuzelev 2013: 620.

7 Gjuzelev 2013: 621.

8 Wertner 1892: 584.

9 Gjuzelev 2013: 622-623.

10 Gjuzelev 2013: 624-626.

11 Mošin 1977: 139; Gjuzelev 2013: 618; Uzelac 2014: 39.

During the construction of Dečani, King Stefan designated a burial place for himself in the western part of the temple, traditionally intended for that purpose, with a marble sarcophagus above it. Next to it, there is another sarcophagus, made of the same material but more modestly decorated and smaller. According to tradition, it marks the burial place of the king's sister, who lived in Dečani as a nun after leaving Bulgaria¹². When she came to Dečani, she took the monastic name of Helen. The prevailing opinion among modern researchers is that this tomb was prepared for the king's second wife, Queen Maria Palaiologina, to whom he was married from 1324 to 1331¹³. However, she passed away and was buried in Skopje, where her tombstone is located¹⁴. Archaeological research was not carried out inside the church of Dečani, so there is no evidence to disprove the legend that the king's sister was buried there. Traces on this sarcophagus suggest that it was opened at some point and that someone tried to find the relics of the king's sister.

Creation of the cult

The creation of the cult of the king's sister started during Ottoman rule. It was local in nature, present in Dečani and its vicinity, as well as in its estates (metochia). The key person involved in the creation and development of her cult was the Hieromonk and Archimandrite Serafim Ristić, who was active at the monastery in the middle of the 19th century. The creation of the king's sister's cult in Dečani was rooted in the tradition that her relics had protected the church in 1692 from an attack by the Muslim hodja (Tatar-han), who wanted to convert the church into a mosque. An account of this event was first published in a travelogue by Miloš Milojević in 1877, thanks to Serafim Ristić¹⁵.

However, the first written evidence of her cult and the existence of her relics in Dečani are records from the mid-18th century. In 1753, Metropolitan Vikentije Stefanović of Belgrade venerated the "holy

¹² *Jurišić* 1852: 26.

¹³ *Popović* 1992: 105.

¹⁴ *Todić* 2005: 32, n. 82.

¹⁵ *Milojević* 1877: 15-17.



Fig. 1. Letter for collecting donations, treasury of monastery Dečani. Photo credit Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia, Belgrade

and miraculous relics of the Holy Emperor Stefan and his sister Saint Helen". After four years, the newly appointed metropolitan of Valjevo, Teodosije Popović, did the same¹⁶. If there had been no prior knowledge of the relics of St. Helen, it would not have been so decisively stated in the record of these visits that the metropolitans worshipped her relics. It was not until 1791 – almost a century after the miraculous event – that the saint's name appeared in the Tronoša Genealogy (Chronicles), considered her first mention and the reason for the creation of her cult¹⁷. This Genealogy was written by hieromonk Josif as a copy of various lost texts from

the 16th century. Here, the account of the life of King Milutin states that his son and a daughter, Helen, were laid to rest in Dečani¹⁸.

During the time when Hajji Danil and his successor and later bishop Zacharias, lived at and managed the monastery, the first well-known visual representations of St. Helen appeared. We assume that from their time, that is, from the very beginning of the 19th century, there is a letter for collecting donations decorated with figures of the holy brother and sister (Fig. 1). Although of very modest artistic value, it

16 Ristić 1864: 38; Stojanović 1903: 178 (No. 3052, 8116).

17 Todić 2005: 61.

18 Šafarik 1853: 17-18, 55.



Fig. 2. St. Helen, iconostasis of the chapel of St. Demetrios, Dečani.
Photo credit Marija Lakić

is an interesting document known as the Pandahus¹⁹. It depicts the Holy King holding a model of the church in his hand and his sister Helen in monastic robes holding a large icon of the Three-handed Mother of God (Tricherousa, Trojeručica). Between 1813 and 1818, two magnificent iconostases were created in the monastery church intended for the side chapels of Saint Nicholas and Saint Demetrios. Their production was entrusted to a father and son, Simeon and Aleksije Lazović, from Bijelo Polje. On the iconostasis of the chapel of St. Demetrios, painted in 1813 and 1814, there are several icons with images of Serbian saints, including St. Helen, signed as empress and shown in royal regalia with a cross and a scepter (Fig. 2)²⁰.

¹⁹ Šakota 1984: 424, picture 11.

²⁰ Stanić 1992: 250.

In 1850, Serafim Ristić printed the book *Prayers to Stefan of Dečani*, in which he copied the famous Hymn of Praise to Serbian saints (or General Sticheron of Serbian Saints / Opšta pohvalna stihira). This hymn was written in the middle of the 18th century by Jovan Georgijević, who had been tonsured at Dečani and, at the time of writing, served as the metropolitan of Caransebeș²¹. In his copy, Serafim made an important change, because he now included the king's sister, Helen, among the Serbian saints. Later, in 1861, the same hymn was printed in *Srbljak* by Metropolitan Mihailo Jovanović, again mentioning Saint Helen²². Poetry had an important role in the creation of the king's sister's cult. In 1853, a hieromonk from the Patriarchate of Peć, Antim Radojković, published the *Song of Praise* in which he listed the relics of saints located at the Studenica monastery, the Patriarchate of Peć and Dečani. Here he calls Helen, along with her purple royal dress (*bagrenica*), the right pillar of Dečani²³. Later, abbot Serafim Ristić did the same – in a poem he published in 1864, he wrote something like: “Oh, You, Neda, daughter of Milutin, in monastic life named Helen, You left behind Your purple royal robe and took the monastic one. You now rest in a marble tomb, where You are the right pillar of the monastery”²⁴.

In the same book, Ristić published a folk song about the construction of the Dečani church which emphasizes the relationship between sister and brother, where Stefan consults with Helen about building his endowment of pearls, silver and precious stones, and she warns him that the Turks will soon conquer the empire and take away all valuables from the endowments and that he should find good stone and use it to build a church that the Turks will be unable to destroy²⁵. This song has several variations that differ in the details and some verses, but the dominant motif is “the last time”, which heralded the Turkish invasion²⁶. The king's sister is portrayed as a prophetess who predicted the downfall of the Serbian empire and the arrival of the Turks and a wise adviser to the king, who respected her opin-

21 For more about this Hymn (Stihira), see: *Lukić* 2022: 115-122.

22 *Lukić* 2022: 120.

23 *Radojković* 1853: 10.

24 *Ristić* 1864: 65-66.

25 *Ristić* 1864: 70-71.

26 There is an interesting variant recorded by Jastrebov in 1886, in which Helen advises Stefan to go “to the German country” and bring stone from there to build the church. *Jastrebov* 1886: 240.



Fig. 3. Wooden box for the cross, treasury of monastery Dečani.
Photo I. Ženarju Rajović

ion²⁷. The poem is believed to have been written in Dečani, based on a folk song about the construction of the Ravanica monastery and a conversation between Prince Lazar and Princess Milica²⁸. It was first recorded by the Slavist Viktor Grigorovich in 1844 and then by Consul Alexander Giljferding in 1858, who heard it in Dečani. Actually, the song was transmitted from Dečani to the south towards Macedonia and to the west via Montenegro towards Bosnia²⁹.

Also, in 1864, in the same book called *Dečanski spomenici*, Serafim Ristić published the *Commemoration Book of Dečani* (Dečanski pomenik) from 1487, whose list of rulers and other dignitaries includes, among others: "(Lord, remember) King Michael of Bulgaria, Neda the princess, Helen the nun, and his son Alexander the king and the young king Shishman"³⁰. However, we cannot be sure whether such a document

²⁷ *Bovan* 1989: 445.

²⁸ *Novaković* 1878: 109.

²⁹ *Bovan* 1989: 437-438, 442.

³⁰ *Ristić* 1864: 20.

indeed existed and whether this was really written in it. Another *pomenik* from 1595, which Serafim published in the same book, only mentions “the nun-queen Jelena”, probably referring to Helen of Anjou³¹. At the same time, Serafim Ristić started working on launching the idea of the eremitic asceticism of the Holy King and his sister. Travelers visiting the monastery, including the famous British travelers Irby and Mackenzie, visited the Belaya caves overlooking the monastery, where they were shown Helen’s skete (hermitage) with a rose bush³². Based on the descriptions they published, today we know that they saw the so-called skete of St. George³³. Also, during their stay in Dečani, Irby and Mackenzie witnessed a woman placing her baby by the side of Helen’s marble tomb, seeking her miraculous help³⁴.

Leontije Ninković, another abbot of Dečani, who came to the monastery in 1919 and spent some time there alone, tried to save the cult of the holy king’s sister from oblivion. Thanks to the library of works about Dečani published by his predecessors, Ninković formed his understanding of monastic traditions and continued to foster literary production at the monastery³⁵. He published several books using and, at times, bending historical facts to glorify Dečani, its founder and his sister. He created his own interpretation of the Battle of Velbazhd, which had to do with the relationship between brother and sister³⁶. In a poem about the construction of Dečani, Ninković recounted a dream in which St. Sava advised Stefan and, among other things, told him to leave a place in his endowment for Helen to be buried there “so that it would not be unusual for him to be alone”³⁷. Abbot Leontije also mentioned Helen’s skete, describing it as demolished³⁸. In his verses, he wrote that the king formed hermitages for himself and his sister, where they stayed during the construction of Dečani³⁹.

31 *Rakić Mladenović* 2021: 70, 205.

32 *Mackenzie, Irby* 1877: 79-80.

33 *Todić* 2011: 16.

34 *Mackenzie, Irby* 1877: 75-76.

35 *Todić* 2011: 19.

36 *Ninković* 1929: 5.

37 *Ninković* 1923: 7-8; *Ninković* 1931: 13-48.

38 *Ninković* 1927: 26. He cleaned up the remains of that skete, a little structure leaning against a rock, about an hour and a half’s walk from the monastery. *Petković, Bošković* 1941: 114.

39 *Ninković* 1923: 18; *Ninković* 1931: 32.



Fig. 4. Wooden box for collecting donations, treasury of monastery Dečani. Photo I. Ženarju Rajović

Visual representations of St. Helen

As seen, the earliest images of St. Helen appeared at the Dečani monastery, first in the alms-collecting letter and later on the iconostasis in the church. As the cult of Empress Helen rested on the cult of her brother Stefan of Dečani, she was almost always shown together with her brother or at least in his immediate vicinity. Also, she is always signed as an empress.

In the Dečani monastery, the image of St. Helen also appears on three wooden boxes. On one box, intended for keeping the cross, the brother and sister are painted together with the Holy Trinity, on the inside of the lid (Fig. 3). This shallow box is assumed to have been painted by Simeon Lazović, but it was more likely made in the second half of the 19th century⁴⁰. The second box was intended either for relics or, more likely, for collecting donations (Fig. 4). The brother and sister

⁴⁰ Šakota 1984: 299.



Fig. 5. Wooden box for the cross, treasury of monastery Dečani. Photo I. Ženarju Rajović

are shown among various saints. St. Helen is depicted on the inner side of the lid, below an image of the Virgin. Her face is damaged as it was venerated by kissing. It is presumed that it was painted by Aleksije Lazović, but he may have only repainted it, like some other icons and artifacts at the monastery⁴¹. The third box is the work of an unknown author and is intended for keeping the cross. Only the inside of the lid is painted (Fig. 5). There is a representation of St. Stefan and St. Empress Helen standing in a landscape, while an angel in flight crowns them with wreaths of martyrdom. It seems to have been painted at the end of the 19th century.

In 1849, the king's relics were transferred to a new gilded wood-carved and painted reliquary, made by the woodcarver Dimitar Stanišev and the painter Anastas Konstantinov⁴². The reliquary was placed in front of the iconostasis, to the left of the royal doors. At the same time, another reliquary was made, richly decorated with wood carvings, but it was never colored and painted. At one point, there

⁴¹ Šakota 1984: 299.

⁴² Šakota 1984: 288–289; Kornačkov 1986: 155.



Fig. 6. St. Hellen and the Holy King Stefan, Church of Saint Nicholas in Prizren. Photo credit Centre for protection of Heritage of Kosovo and Metohija – Mnemosyne

were suggestions that it was made for the relics of Saint Helen, which were never removed from the sarcophagus⁴³. The idea seems to have come from Leontije Ninković, the abbot of Dečani, who recorded it in a monastery inventory he compiled⁴⁴. Nevertheless, the lid of the king's richly decorated reliquary features 31 circular medallions with painted busts of Serbian rulers and church dignitaries, including a portrait of his sister Helen⁴⁵.

After the examples from Dečani, Saint Helen appears in some wall paintings in the Diocese of Raška and Prizren. They were painted together in the Church of Saint Nicholas in Prizren (**Fig. 6**). The brother and sister have a model of the Dečani church between them.

43 This reliquary was placed opposite the one of the Holy King, to the right of the royal doors, but it held the gilded cross of Stefan of Dečani with a particle of the Sacred Tree.

44 *Šakota* 1984: 298. Gedeon Jurišić and Serafim Ristić do not mention that the reliquary was intended for the Holy King's sister but only that it contained a cross made of the True Cross wood brought from Jerusalem by Saint Sava, which the Holy King had gilded (*Jurišić* 1852: 33; *Ristić* 1864: 59-60). In his report about Dečani, the painter Milan Milovanović noted that the reliquary held the relics of the king's sister and that a cross was in the church, next to the grave that the king had prepared for himself (*Milovanović* 1909: 252).

45 *Ženarju Rajović* 2022: 500-501, fig. 5, 502.



Fig. 7. St. Hellen and the Holy King Stefan, Church of Saint Stephen in Velika Hoča. Photo I. Ženarju Rajović

Above the church, in the segment of the sky, an angel carries wreaths of martyrdom in its outstretched hands. While the holy king wears royal regalia, his sister is shown in more modest clothes.

Side by side, the holy brother and sister were painted in the church of St. Stephen in Velika Hoča, by the *zographos* Josif from Lazaropolje in 1864⁴⁶ (Fig. 7). He painted this saintly couple on the southern wall, along with other Serbian saints. Both are in royal robes, with ermine cloaks and crowns on their heads. Saint Hellen was also painted in 1869 in the Church of the Presentation of the Virgin in Belo Polje near Peć⁴⁷. Unknown artists depicted her on the eastern side of the western pillar, representing her in simple clothes with a crown on her head. She was painted alone, but there is a portrait of the Holy King nearby.

⁴⁶ Ženarju Rajović 2016: 88.

⁴⁷ Ženarju Rajović 2019: 19, fig. 5, 29



Fig. 8. St. Hellen and the Holy King Stefan, Monastery of St. John near Gornji Matejevac. Photo J. Marković

The same year, the figures of the Holy King and his sister were also painted in the Monastery of St. John near Gornji Matejevac, in the Diocese of Niš⁴⁸ (Fig. 8). There, Empress Helen and King Stefan are painted on the east wall of the narthex, next to the entrance to the church, as a counterpart to Saint Emperor Constantine and Empress Helen. Between them is a model of the Dečani church. A few years later, in 1872, they were painted together in the Church of the Ascension of Christ in the village of Gornji Matejevac (Fig. 9). Here, Empress Helen, with a cross in her hand, is painted between Prince Lazar and the Holy King on the north wall of the nave. There is also an interesting but damaged icon in the Museum of Church Antiquities of the Eparchy of Niš⁴⁹ (Fig. 10). Its upper part shows the Coronation of the Virgin, while below are Saint King Stefan and Saint Empress Helen with a model of the church between them.

48 That St. Helen was painted somewhere in Matejevac was mentioned by: *Pavlović* 1965: 190.

49 *Dorđević et al.* 2022: 146-147.



Fig. 9. St. Hellen and the Holy King Stefan, Church of the Ascension of Christ in the village of Gornji Matejevac. Photo J. Marković

Representations of the saintly couple, the Holy King and his sister Helen, also appear in modern prints. We know of the variants from 1849 and the 1860s, which are associated with Serafim Ristić, as well as the one from 1895, created by the efforts of Bishop Sava Barać. According to some sources, in 1849, a copper engraving was published in Belgrade thanks to the hieromonk Seraphim Ristić and some citizens of Priština, and there was one such print in the Church of St. Nicholas in Ovče Polje, in North Macedonia⁵⁰. Almost two decades later, Serafim Ristić, now an archimandrite, paid for prints of the engraving with the same iconography to be made, featuring the figures of a sister and brother and a model of the church between them, and an angel above, framed by scenes from the king's life⁵¹. One of those prints was kept at the Banja monastery near Priboj. Two are allegedly in the collection of

50 Vukanović 1986: 57.

51 Šakota 1984: 313.

the Old Serbian Church in Sarajevo⁵². We have only the examples from 1895, commissioned by bishop Sava Barać. A longer explanatory note reports that the print was made in 1895 on the feast day of the Holy King, November 11th, and commissioned by Bishop Sava, a teacher and the rector of the Prizren Seminary and archimandrite of the Dečani monastery. We know that one such engraving was kept at the Holy Trinity Monastery near Pljevlja in Montenegro⁵³. During field research across the borders of the former Diocese of Raška and Prizren, one such example was found in the Church of the Virgin in the Pejčići village near Prizren and one in the Nikoljac Monastery near Bijelo Polje in Montenegro.



Fig. 10. Coronation of the Virgin with while below are Holy King Stefan and St. Helen. Photo credit Museum of Church Antiquities of the Eparchy of Niš

The idea of the cult of Saint Helen, sister of the Serbian Holy King Stefan of Dečani, started to appear in the middle of the 18th century, flourished in the middle of the 19th century, and apparently disappeared by the middle of the 20th century. However, the Serbian Church commemorates her on June 3rd, the feast day of Saint Emperor Constantine and Empress Helen.

52 Todić 2011: 17, n. 33.

53 Petković 1974: 110, n. 446.

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Inventing History in the Late Ottoman Period: The Phenomenon of the Holy Empress Helen (Ana Neda of Bulgaria), Sister of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani



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The cult of St. Helen, sister of the Holy King Stefan of Dečani, emerged in the last century of Ottoman rule thanks to the archimandrite of Dečani Serafim Ristić. Helen (Jelena) is the monastic name of Ana (Ana-Neda), wife of the Bulgarian emperor Michael Asen III Shishman. According to tradition, when her husband divorced her, she went to her brother's endowment, the Dečani monastery, where she became a nun and was eventually buried. Her name appears in records from the late 18th century, in all books published by monks from Dečani, as well as in folk poetry. Besides, her representations, usually together with her brother, appear in the religious art of the 19th century. First of all, her images appeared at Dečani – on three wooden boxes, the iconostasis in the church and her brother's wooden reliquary. Later, she was painted in the churches in Velika Hoča, Prizren, Belo Polje near Peć, Matejevac near Niš, and on some icons and engravings.