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Facultatea de Istorie • Centrul de Studii Clasice și Creștine

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## SIGLE ȘI ABREVIERI / SIGLE E ABBREVIAZIONI\*

<i>AARMSI</i>	<i>Academia Română. Memoriile secțiunii istorice</i> , București.
<i>AIIA-Iași</i> Bailly 2020	<i>Anuarul Institutului de Istorie și Arheologie</i> , Iași. M. A. Bailly, <i>Dictionnaire Grec-Français</i> , nouvelle édition revue et corrigée, dité Bailly 2020, Gérard Gréco, 2020.
<i>BHAC</i>	<i>Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium</i> , Bonn.
<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina</i> , Turnhout.
<i>CCSG</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca</i> , Turnhout.
<i>CI</i>	<i>Codex Iustinianus</i> .
<i>CSEL</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> , Wien.
<i>CTh</i>	<i>Codex Theodosianus</i> .
<i>Danubius</i>	<i>Danubius. Revista Muzeului de Istorie Galați</i> , Galați
<i>EAGLE</i>	<i>Electronic Archive for Greek and Latin Epigraphy</i> .
<i>EDR</i>	<i>Epigraphic Database Roma</i> ( <a href="http://www.edr-edr.it/default/index.php">http://www.edr-edr.it/default/index.php</a> ).
<i>EP</i>	<i>Epigraphy Packard Humanities Institute. Cornell University</i> .
<i>HGV</i>	<i>Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis der griechischen Papyrusurkunden Ägyptens</i> .
<i>Istros</i>	<i>Istros</i> , Muzeul Brăilei „Carol I”.
Lampe	<i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> , edited by G. W. H. Lampe, Oxford, 1961.
<i>LIMC</i>	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> , I-VIII, Zürich- München, 1981-1997.
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i> .
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Graeca</i> , Paris.
<i>Phaos</i>	<i>Phaos. Revista de estudos clássicos</i> , Campinas
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina</i> , Paris.
<i>PLRE I</i>	<i>The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i> , I, A. D. 260-395, by A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, J. Morris, Cambridge, 2006.
<i>Pontica</i>	<i>Pontica</i> , Muzeul de Istorie Națională și Arheologie, Constanța.
<i>RE</i>	<i>Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> (Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll), Stuttgart-München.
<i>RT</i>	<i>Revista Teologică</i> , Sibiu.

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\* Cu excepția celor din *L'Année Philologique* și *L'Année Épigraphique* / Escluse quelle segnalate da *L'Année Philologique* e *L'Année Épigraphique*.

<i>SC</i>	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i> , Lyon.
<i>SCIVA</i>	<i>Studii și cercetări de istorie veche și arheologie</i> , București.
<i>ThLL</i>	<i>Thesaurus linguae Latinae</i> .

## ABOUT FACE: A MEDUSAL SPOIL IN THE CHURCH OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN IN SMEDEREVO\*

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**Keywords:** *Medusa, spoil, Smederevo, fortress, Gorgona, transformation.*

**Abstract:** *Situated in the vicinity of the medieval fortress on the site of the old city cemetery in Smederevo, the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin represents the only preserved sacral monument from the medieval town of Smederevo. The fortress in Smederevo was built during the reign of Despot Djurađ Branković between 1428-1456, as part of the capital of medieval Serbia. There are no written records that speak of the construction, function or ktetor (founder) of the church. The church is of a small dimension, with a narthex, nave, two conches on its north and south sides, and a polygonal apse. The uneven stone and brick construction technique found on the facade suggests that its builders were interrupted or in a hurry. On the basis of stylistic characteristics, it can certainly be concluded that it belongs to Moravian architecture and was built in the first half of the fifteenth century. What is particularly startling on the church's west façade is a roman spoil embedded in the upper north part of the wall, next to the main entrance to the church. The spoil consists of an upper part of a roman stele with a gable featuring a representation of Medusa's head en face with two birds in the corners. With limited evidence concerning the founder of the church and its exact date this paper will try to elucidate one possible reason for embedding the spoil in the church wall in Smederevo. Also, it will discuss the purpose of Medusa in Early Christian and Medieval art. The question that will be asked is was it simply a decorative element, or do it retain its ancient symbolism and meaning.*

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**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Meduza, spolia, Smederevo, fortăreață, Gorgona, transformare.*

**Rezumat: Despre chip: o spolia meduză în Biserica Adormirii Maicii Domnului din Smederevo.** Situată în vecinătatea cetății medievale pe locul vechiului cimitir din Smederevo, Biserica Adormirea Maicii Domnului reprezintă singurul monument sacru conservat din orașul medieval Smederevo. Cetatea Smederevo a fost construită în timpul domniei despotului Djurađ Branković, între 1428-1456, ca parte a capitalei Serbiei medievale. Nu există date scrise care să vorbească despre construcția, funcția sau fondatorul bisericii. Biserica are o dimensiune mică, cu pronaos, naos, două concii pe laturile sale nordice și sudice și o absidă poligonală. Tehnica de construcție inegală, din piatră și cărămidă, găsită pe fațadă sugerează că constructorii săi au fost întrerupți sau au făcut-o în grabă. Pe baza caracteristicilor stilistice, se poate concluziona cu siguranță că aparține arhitecturii moraviene și a fost construit în prima jumătate a secolului al XV-lea. Ceea ce este deosebit de uimitor pe fațada de vest a bisericii este o spolia romană înglobată în partea de nord a zidului, lângă intrarea principală a bisericii. Spolia constă dintr-o parte superioară a unei stele romane cu un fronton cu o reprezentare a capului Meduzei în față, cu două păsări în colțuri. Cu dovezi limitate cu privire la fondatorul bisericii și data exactă a acesteia, această lucrare va încerca să elucideze un posibil motiv pentru înglobarea acelei spolia în zidul bisericii din Smederevo. De asemenea, va discuta motivul Meduzei în arta timpurie creștină și medievală. Întrebarea care va fi pusă este dacă aceasta este pur și simplu un element decorativ sau își păstrează simbolismul și semnificația antică.

Situated near the medieval fortress on the site of the old city cemetery in Smederevo, the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is the only preserved sacral monument from the medieval town (**Fig. 1**).<sup>1</sup> The fortress was built during the reign of Despot Đurađ Branković between 1428-1456, and functioned as the capital of medieval Serbia.<sup>2</sup> The Church of the Assumption of the Virgin was probably built on an ancient cult site.<sup>3</sup> There are no written records testifying to the construction, purpose or ktetor (founder) of the church.<sup>4</sup> It co-

<sup>1</sup> For the extensive bibliography of the church, see Milošević, 2006; Crnčević 2007, 63-91, 72.

<sup>2</sup> Spremić 1994, 122-134. Some parts of the fortress were constructed after the fall of the capital into Ottoman hands in 1459. On the fortress, and the phases of construction, see Popović 2007, 32-33; Popović 2011, 373-391.

<sup>3</sup> Cunjak-Cvetković 1997, 11. For more on the possible cult site see, Milošević 2006, 42-43.

<sup>4</sup> The earliest mention of the church is from the period of Ottoman rule, specifically that of Sultan Murat III (1574-1595), Crnčević 2007, 74-75. The most

mes as no surprise that for many decades scholars debated the identity of the church's founder, often associating it with the mausoleum of the Branković ruling family, or as the location where the relics of St. Luke were first deposited after their *translatio* to Smederevo in 1453.<sup>5</sup> None of these assumptions, however, have been confirmed. At one point, according to some records, the church was part of the monastery.<sup>6</sup> During the 1982 excavation of the interior, numerous tombs were discovered, of which one was probably that of a more noble individual.<sup>7</sup> The tomb contained, apart from the skeleton of a male adult, fragments of what appeared to be ecclesiastical dress, a silver bottle for a holy myrrh, a bronze clasp and a silver button.<sup>8</sup> Based on excavation finds, Mlađan Cunjak concluded that the church probably was built by metropolitan Athanasie who died in 1453 as his burial place.<sup>9</sup> Radomir Milošević, however, disagreed with Cunjak's conclusion, doubting that the clothing and other items from the tomb belonged to the bishop and, thus, that there was no basis for thinking of the chapel as a burial place for bishop Athanasie, or even as his foundation.<sup>10</sup>

Without information on the founding of the church, one must rely on stylistic characteristics to determine its possible date of the construction. The church is of small dimension, with a narthex, nave,

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significant amount of information on the church comes from the period of Austrian rule, between 1717 and 1738, see Milošević 2006, 48-52.

<sup>5</sup> This event is recorded in two written sources, surviving in manuscripts dated a few decades after the event: The manuscript Slave 46, now in the National Library of France in Paris; and manuscript no. 165 from the Patriarchal Library in Belgrade. Subotin-Golubović 1998, 133-157; Subotin-Golubović 2002, 157-164; Crnčević 2007, 69. On the *translatio* of relics of St. Luke to Smederevo, see Popović 2006, 295-317.

<sup>6</sup> Crnčević 2007, 82-86.

<sup>7</sup> Archaeological work uncovered eight graves in the western bay and five in the nave. The tomb in question was discovered in the nave and marked as tomb no 13. Cunjak 1983, 36-38; Cunjak 1984, 249-257; Cunjak-Cvetković 1997, 37-54; Crnčević 2007, 77-82.

<sup>8</sup> Mlađan Cunjak has claimed that parts of the excavated clothes belonged to the *omophorion* and, therefore concluded that the buried individual was a bishop, Cunjak-Cvetković 1997, 40.

<sup>9</sup> Cunjak, 1984, 255, Cunjak-Cvetković 1997, 42-47, 85. According to Momčilo Spremić metropolitan Athanasie died on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1456, and not in 1453, Spremić 1994, 494.

<sup>10</sup> Milošević 2006, 82-83; Crnčević 2007, 81.

two conches on the north and south sides and a polygonal apse. The octagonal dome rests on four pilasters.<sup>11</sup> The façade is somewhat crudely built, with the lower portion being constructed of tufa block and brick. The upper part is more refined and constructed of regular stone blocks surrounded with bricks.<sup>12</sup> The heterogenous building technique of the church suggests that building was interrupted or was done hastily.<sup>13</sup> The building materials are the same as the ones used for the fortress and contains spoils. The floor in the altar and conches of the church is paved by bricks of which some have roman stamps of *leg(io) Fl. IV* and *leg(io) Cl. VII*. Possibly, the bricks and other spoils came from *Aureus Mons*, *Viminacium* or *Margum*.<sup>14</sup> Stylistic analysis indicates that it belongs to Moravian architecture. This is confirmed by the three-channel base of the church as well as the method used in the masonry construction. The only point upon which scholars unanimously agree is that, based on its architectural similarity to other buildings surviving from the period, the church was built in the first half of the fifteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

A notable element of the west façade is a piece of Roman spoil embedded in the upper northern part of the wall, next to the main entrance to the church (**Fig. 2**). The spoil consists of the upper portion of a Roman stele, whose gable preserves a representation of a Medusa head featuring two birds in each corner. Medusa is depicted as a young woman with lush hair framing her oval face. The strands of hair are executed with particular precision, likely depicting snakes. Unfortunately, the face is so damaged it is not clear if stylized snakes were

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<sup>11</sup> Tatić 1930, 55-62. On the church's architecture see also, Cunjak-Cvetković 1997, 25-36; Milošević 2006, 95-108.

<sup>12</sup> Mano-Zisi 1951, 153-173, 155.

<sup>13</sup> Pavlović 1980, 124.

<sup>14</sup> Pavlović 1980, 125.

<sup>15</sup> Based on its architectural structure, Miloje Vasić dates the construction of the church between 1410-1426. Rest on the church's architectural features and similarities with the church in Pavlovac, Žarko Tatić dated it to the first half of the fifteenth century when the capital of Serbia was transferred to Smederevo, Tatić 1930, 30, 55. Leontije Pavlović proposed a date between 1430-1456, before the death of despot Đurađ, Pavlović 1980, 124. Radomir Milošević concluded that it is impossible based on its stylistic characteristics to determine the exact date of the construction but, viewing it in comparison with the churches of the late fourteenth and the early fifteenth century, assumes that it belongs to the time of Despot Đurađ Branković, Milošević 2006, 48-52.

once tied in a Herculean knot around her neck, as was often the case (**Fig. 3**).<sup>16</sup> With limited evidence as to the founder of the church and its exact date, this paper will try to elucidate one possible reason for embedding the Medusan spoil in the church wall in Smederevo. We will also discuss the broader role of Medusa in Early Christian and Medieval art. The key question will be: Was this work included as pure decoration, or did it retain its ancient symbolism and meaning?

While a full survey of Medusal imagery and its role throughout the ancient period is beyond the scope of this paper, it is necessary to first present a short overview to provide a better understanding of its significance. Medusas or Gorgone (Γοργώ, Γοργών, Γοργόνη; *Gorgo*, *Gorgon*, *Gorgona*) were frightening monsters, often mentioned in sources and portrayed in archaic and classical art.<sup>17</sup> The head of Medusa (*gorgonéion*) has become one of the most significant ancient symbols. In monumental architecture, since the archaic period, the terrifying power of Medusa's head was frequently placed on the gables and acroteria of temples.<sup>18</sup> It also had a defensive function on sacred buildings in Etruscan art, where it also often appeared on gables, and subsequently in Roman art, where it adorned temples and tombs.<sup>19</sup>

Medusa did not have a strict iconographic formula but was most often depicted with a frontal, grotesque face with large, bulging eyes and a protruding tongue.<sup>20</sup> The frightening image of a Medusa head, with its serpentine hair and an archaic-era grimace, turned into an idealized representation of a woman during the fifth century BC. This was the emergence of the so-called "beautiful gorgoneion" type, which

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<sup>16</sup> For other representations of Medusa from *Viminacium* see, Pilipović 2011, 598; Milovanović, Anđelković-Grašar 2017, 395-423; Nikolić 2018, 253-255.

<sup>17</sup> From the very extensive literature on Gorgons, only the most important biographical references will be listed here: Furtwängler, *Gorgones*, in *Roscher* I, c. 1695 ss.; Ziegler, *Gorgo*, in *RE* VII, 1912, c. 630-1655; Krauskopf, in *LIMC* IV, s.v. *Gorgones*, 107-145; Paoletti, in *LIMC* IV, s.v. *Gorgones Romanae* 1988, 345-362; Mack 2002, 571-604; Foster 2003, 181-190; Garber, Vickers 2003.

<sup>18</sup> One of the oldest examples of the Gorgon adorning the gable of a temple is found in the temple dedicated to Artemis on Corfu (600-580 g. BC), Trivelone 2008, 211.

<sup>19</sup> One of the rare examples where the head of Medusa decorates a Roman gable is on the tomb of Governor *Sextius Florentinus*, in the time of Hadrian, in Petra, today in Jordan, Trivelone 2008, 211.

<sup>20</sup> Giuliano 1960, 983.



featured two tails of serpents tied beneath its beard.<sup>21</sup> This new, humanized type of Medusa can only be associated with archaic representations based on the serpents framing the face. Wings emerging from her hair also become a new iconographic detail. Medusa was usually depicted in ancient Roman as a beautiful woman, shown in three-quarter profile, and often with an expression of pathos. The 'beautiful' Medusa, however, did not drive out her monstrous counterpart, which would continue to appear both in written and visual sources.<sup>22</sup>

The motif of Medusa's head had apotropaic qualities and later acquired an astrological character as well. According to myth, Medusa, together with Perseus or Andromeda, was a symbol of victory over evil, as well as life over death.<sup>23</sup> Medusa's apotropaic power in Roman art is confirmed by representations on architectural objects and defensive walls, weapons, tombstones, amulets, etc.<sup>24</sup> The special role of Medusa's head in funeral contexts is also indicated by the fact that she is not sinister and frightening as was the archaic version; rather, the Hellenistic Medusa is beautiful, often sad and worried, and sometimes frowning.<sup>25</sup> Instead of scaring people, Medusa was a means of reminding them of the journey across the ocean to the Blessed Isles and the eternity of stars.<sup>26</sup> The Orphics placed Medusa in the Moon's circle, and thus, the three Gorgona sisters symbolized the three phases of the Moon: the new moon, the full moon and the dark moon.<sup>27</sup> Medusa's head was also paired with dolphins and therefore can be read as referencing the destination to which the dolphins took the souls of the deceased.<sup>28</sup> She was linked with other deities such as Artemis, Apollo,<sup>29</sup> Athens, and seems to have been presented as a counterpart to

<sup>21</sup> Pettazzoni 1922, 491; Trivelone 2008, 211; Currie 2011, 170.

<sup>22</sup> Currie 2011, 171.

<sup>23</sup> Toynbee 1977, 407.

<sup>24</sup> Cagnat 1914, 290; Garbsch 1978, 31; Dautova-Rusevljan 1983, 46; Calabi Limentani 1991, 183; Toynbee 1996, 76.

<sup>25</sup> Niese 1912, 1654; Barb 1953, 210; Toynbee 1996, 35; Kastelić 1998, 293-298; Gregl Migotti 1999, 155.

<sup>26</sup> Cumont 1942.

<sup>27</sup> *Orph.* Fr. 33.

<sup>28</sup> On the symbolism and meaning of Medusa's head in Roman funerary art see, Fuchs 2001, 79-84; cf. Vasić 1972, 303-310 with earlier bibliography, as well as list of the monuments with this motif in Dalmatia. For this motif on funerary monuments in Lower Pannonia cf. Dautova-Rušeavljan 1983, 46-47.

<sup>29</sup> Fronthingam 2011, 349-377.

Helios.<sup>30</sup> The astral associations of the figure of Medusa are found especially in the Late antique period, when she was equated with the Sun and even more often with the Moon.<sup>31</sup>

The head of Medusa as a decoration of a gable is a favorite motif on steles in the Roman provinces, especially in the first and second century AD, and somewhat less frequently in the third century. By the first century, a rosette in the gable fields of stele had begun to be replaced with the motif of the Medusa's head, which would become one of the most popular motifs on Noric-Pannonian steles.<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to note that the figure of Medusa here often shows a resemblance to the physiognomy of the deceased, suggesting an eschatological role. In Noricum and Pannonia, Medusa's head is most often depicted alone or surrounded by various motifs, such as two birds, which also appear on the spoil from the church in Smederevo.<sup>33</sup>

Stele bearing the head of Medusa in a gable mostly originate from *Viminacium*, an important archeological site located near Stari Kostolac. Five tombstones from this site are known, fragments of four of which have been preserved. The closest analogy with the spoil of Medusa from the Church of the Assumption is the stele of *Sex. Valerius Valens* from *Viminacium* where the head of Medusa is likewise framed by acroteria with two birds.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to these tombstones displaying *gorgonéion*, it is necessary to mention three more examples. The first is a sarcophagus that is today in the museum in Požarevac.<sup>35</sup> Its longitudinal sides have *putti* holding garlands beneath Medusa heads. The second is a fragment of a monument on which only a part of a framed inscription field and a winged Victory, survive. A triangular field enclosing a Medusa head flanked by an eagle and a rosette, lies between Victory and the

<sup>30</sup> Fronthingam 2011, 425.

<sup>31</sup> Niese 1912, 1645-1646; Garbsch 1978, 31; Dautova-Ruševljan 1983, 46; Kukoč 1998; Gregl Migotti 1999, 155.

<sup>32</sup> Nagy 1971, 103-160; Dautova-Ruševljan 1989, 46; Schober 1923, 41, 200; Hoffiller, Saria 1938, no. 167, 406, 429, 380, 247; Ferri 1933, 284-287; Fulep, Burger 1974, T. 10, cat. 38, 39; Gregl Migotti 1999, 155.

<sup>33</sup> Gregl, Migotti 1999, 134-135.

<sup>34</sup> Valtrović 1886, no. 1; Kalinka, Swoboda 1890, 34, no. 11; Milovanović 2001, cat. 8; Pilipović 2008, 339; Pilipović 2011, 596-597, no. 4, fig. 4. Inscription: *AE* 2011, 1106; *CIL* III, 8128; *IMS* II, 77; *EDH* 35771.

<sup>35</sup> Koch, Sichtermann, 1982, 334 fig. 355, 356; Đorđević 1990, 133 no. 1 fig. 14-16; Spasić-Đurić 2002, 120, fig. 100.

inscription.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the third example is from a stele located on the exterior of the fortress at Smederevo, which faces the large courtyard, on the second tower to the right of the entrance. This work dates back to the second or the beginning of the third century. The gable bears a Medusa head flanked by two hippocampuses in triangular acroteria. The central relief on this stele depicts the Return of Alceste above a hunting scene (**Fig. 4**). Unfortunately, the latter is quite damaged so the animal figures are not easily discernible.<sup>37</sup>

The spoil on the church in Smederevo is not a unique feature. Several walls of the fortress similarly include Roman spoils. The manner in which they were incorporated suggests that they were not chosen at random as mere construction material, but that they were interpolated with purpose (**Fig 5**).<sup>38</sup> Use of spoils demonstrates the Christian reinterpretation of ancient monuments and continuity with the past.<sup>39</sup> The Latin term spoil refers to war booty. Such trophies were used to emphasize the importance of a new building and the achievements of its founder. These elements either underscored continuity with the past, or stressed the ruler's present power over the physical remains of the past.<sup>40</sup> Spoils were not only used in antiquity, but continued to be used during the Middle Ages.

The majority of scholars hold that the spoil of Medusa in Smederevo was inserted in the church wall during the large campaign of church renovation that took place in the nineteenth century, during the reign of prince Miloš Obrenović.<sup>41</sup> Their arguments are largely bas-

<sup>36</sup> *IMS* II 65.

<sup>37</sup> Ladek, Premerstein, Vulić 1901, 124, fig. 4; Vulić, Ladek, Premerštajn 1903, 67, fig. 10; Kondić 1965, 231, no. 35; Toynbee 1977, 377, ii; Milovanović 2001, cat. 5; *LIMC* I, s. v. *Alkestis*, no. 27; Pilipović 2007, cat. 8, fig. 15 and 16; Pilipović 2008, 341, fig. 6; Pilipović 2011, cat. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ever since the first archeological excavations at the beginning of the twentieth century, it has been pointed out that a large number of monuments from the ruins of Viminacium were used again in the Middle Ages for building purposes, which is also accepted by later researchers, Cvetković 2009, 29-44; Cvetković 2011, 393-407.

<sup>39</sup> On spoils in general and in Christianity see, Kinney 1995, 52-67; Poeschke 1996; Saradi 1997, 395-423; Kinney 2001, 138-150; Papalexandrou 2003, 56-80; Kinney 2006, 233-252; Greenhalgh 2009; Bevilacqua 2018, 173-195; Barsanti, Guiglia 2018, 97-125; Magdalino 2018, 341-351.

<sup>40</sup> Geymonat 2012, 47-67, 47; Uytterhoeven 2018, 25-51.

<sup>41</sup> Cunjak-Cvetković 1997, 32; Spasić, 317-318; Nikolić 254-255; Milovanović, Anđelković-Grašar 2018, 176-177.

ed upon two folk legends that were extremely popular in that period. The legends were connected with two medieval monasteries, Nimnik and Rukumija, that lay in the vicinity of the town of Požarevac, and which were burned and razed during the First Serbian Uprising at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> The main characters of both legends are two young, innocent girls. One legend describes the unfortunate Jelica, who was viscously quartered by her brothers.<sup>43</sup> The monastery of Rukumija was established on the site of her death. The other legend, connected with the monastery Nimnik, tells of Nikolina, who was attacked and killed by Hajduks (local bandits), or Turks. She is buried in the monastery. The church dedicated to St. Nicholas in Nimnik was subsequently rebuilt in 1825 by prince Miloš Obrenović.<sup>44</sup> Notably, the church was constructed out of large, carved stones, probably reused from some of the nearby ancient sites. The lower portion of the southwest corner of the south wall of the monastery church has an embedded spoil, a relief bearing a Medusa head set in a triangular field (**Fig. 6**). Unlike in the church of Smederevo, here the face is well preserved and that of a young, beautiful girl. A similar spoil was inserted during the reconstruction in 1825 in the church wall of the nearby Rukumija monastery.<sup>45</sup> Here, in a church dedicated to the Ascension, the spoil is located also in the southwest corner of the south wall, close to the roof (**Fig. 7**). In Rukumija, the head of Medusa is rendered in a gable adorned by what appear to be Dioscuri.<sup>46</sup> Scholars argue that, inspired by the folk legends, nineteenth century builders inserted these Medusal spoil in remembrance of the two murdered girls. We do not, however, have any evidence that these two spoils were not already part of the medieval churches and simply reused during their reconstruction of 1825. Dragana Spasić has correctly concluded that the spoil in Nimnik may have originally been inserted in the wall, and

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<sup>42</sup> For more on legends see, Cunjak 1996, 10-14; Milovanović, Anđelković-Grašar 2018, 176-177.

<sup>43</sup> The legend of Jelica was part of a folk song recorded by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić during the nineteenth century, Milovanović, Anđelković-Grašar 2018, 176.

<sup>44</sup> Spasić 1998, 316-317.

<sup>45</sup> The monastery church, which probably dates back to the fourteenth century, was also partially destroyed by Turks and rebuilt during the rule of prince Miloš. For more on the monastery and its church see, Cunjak 1996, also Nikolić 2018, 137-140, 254.

<sup>46</sup> Pilipović-Milanović 2020, 299-322

were reused in the reconstruction of the church.<sup>47</sup> The original position of the spoil would nevertheless remain unknown.

Be that as it may for the two monastery churches, Nimnik and Rukumija, the stories of the folk legends and the reason for use of spoil in the reconstructed churches should not automatically be applied to the church in Smederevo. Inside the church, there is an inscription that describes a renovation of the church undertaken in 1703, but there is no official record of what this consisted. Based on this inscription, however, Olivera Katanić has assumed that the spoil was inserted at that time.<sup>48</sup> After 1760, an exonarthex was added and the walls, including the western wall, were covered with mortar. It seems unlikely that some fifty years after a renovation program and the decoration of the church with the Medusa, that someone would cover it with mortar. The exonarthex was demolished in 1930 and old photographs clearly show the contours of the spoil's gable protruding from the mortar, indicating that it was in the same position as it today.<sup>49</sup> This also indicates that this part of the church was not reconstructed in the nineteenth century during the reign of prince Miloš Obrenović.<sup>50</sup> There is, therefore, no reason not to believe that the spoil of Medusa was inserted in the wall of the church in Smederevo during the original building campaign in the fifteenth century.

With its apotropaic and eschatological symbolism, as well as its evocation of metamorphic powers of transformation, the motif of Medusa would continue to be used in Christian visual culture, both in Byzantium and Medieval West. The early example of the reuse of a Medusan spoil comes from Constantinople, where a Medusa head was incorporated in the walls of Hagia Sophia. This trophy was given in a prominent location, next to the entrance to the church, likely to mark the domination of Christianity over paganism.<sup>51</sup> According to the VIII<sup>th</sup> or

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<sup>47</sup> On the cosmological and other potential aspects of the Medusa in Nimnik and Rukumija see, Spasić 1998, 315-325.

<sup>48</sup> Katanić 1988, 220.

<sup>49</sup> Documentation of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia, which we want to thank for allowing us to access their archives.

<sup>50</sup> Milošević 2006, 69-70. Cunjak and Cvetković mentioned that the presence of Medusa certified that the church was reconstructed during the reign of prince Miloš Obrenović, however, they do not provide any source that will support their claim. Cunjak-Cvetković 1997, 32.

<sup>51</sup> The Medusa was removed by Turks in 1871 and it was placed in the Ottoman Imperial Museum, see Shaw 2003, 39.

IX<sup>th</sup> century *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, four Medusa heads topped by crosses were placed as guardians in the vestibule of the bronze Chalke gate.<sup>52</sup> The gate, as the ceremonial entrance to the Great Palace, was also adorned with statues of various emperors and others.<sup>53</sup> The juxtaposition of Medusa's head and a cross also appears on a slab from the fifth or the sixth century now in the Byzantine Museum in Athens.<sup>54</sup> The meaning of this combination it is unclear; both signs incorporate apotropaic and eschatological meanings.

Medusal imagery was also used in more personal, intimate settings in Byzantium. An ink container whose lid is decorated with a head of the Gorgon was produced in tenth-century Constantinople. On this small, precious object, Medusa is rendered as a beautiful girl whose face is framed with serpents and wings. She still has her characteristic, protruding gaze. According to Henry Maguire this representation was likely intended to function as a guardian of ink and probably to "protect against slips of the pen."<sup>55</sup> It could also protect the container from the envious eyes of other scribes. Numerous Byzantine amulets were adorned with faces surrounded by radiating serpents. Whether these are representations of a Gorgona or some other creature, is hard to tell. Contemporary viewers of such objects may have identified them as bearing Medusa's head due to their familiarity with monumental representations.<sup>56</sup> Medusa's terrifying power of petrification was most likely the reason her image was placed on the shield of a warrior saint, probably Saint Theodore, depicted on the eight-century mural from the Nubian cathedral in Faras, currently in the National Museum in Warsaw.<sup>57</sup>

Medusa appears in Byzantine literature as well. The sixth century Byzantine scholar Ioannes Malalas incorporates the story of Perseus in his *Chronographia*, where Medusa is transformed from a monster to a simple country girl.<sup>58</sup> Another Byzantine source that makes

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<sup>52</sup> Four Gorgon heads, supposedly from the temple of Artemis at Ephesos, Cameron, Herrin 1984, 121, 159.

<sup>53</sup> On the gate see, Mango 1959.

<sup>54</sup> Chatterjee 2015, 214.

<sup>55</sup> Maguire 1994, 113.

<sup>56</sup> Spier 1993, 25-62.

<sup>57</sup> Gorecki interprets it as a stylized form of gorgoneion. Gorecki 1980, 210, Grotowski 2010, 77-78.

<sup>58</sup> Ioannes 1986, II. 14. See also, Currie 2011, 173.

references to Medusa is the *Suda*, the tenth-century lexicon and encyclopedia. She is here mentioned in the context of the myth of Perseus but is also associated with Athena and her depiction on the goddess's aegis "because of the swiftness of her intelligence."<sup>59</sup>

Medusa's apotropaic symbolism was well known in medieval Europe, especially through Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>60</sup> Often the story of Perseus, the Gorgon's slayer, were used for moralizing allegories.<sup>61</sup> She was easily recognizable and often found on the margins and borders of moralizing manuscripts, accompanying other marginal figures such as monsters or fanciful, hybrid creatures.<sup>62</sup> Some of her Classical aspects were transformed to suit Christian beliefs. Interestingly, her astrological features were well known to medieval readers, as she was used to illustrate astronomy textbooks and popular tales.<sup>63</sup> Spoils with Medusa heads were also used to embellish medieval reliquaries. A thirteenth-century example in the shape of King David, preserved in Basel Cathedral's treasury, includes a banner identifying him but supplants his image with a cameo of Medusa.<sup>64</sup> As this suggests, it was not unusual for medieval iconographers to combine a pagan, female monster with the body of a male ancestor of Christ and writer of Psalms. A similar use of an antique spoil may be found in another reliquary, the Shrine of the Three Kings (c. 1225) in Cologne; here, however, the cameo of Medusa is inserted on one edge of the reliquary, among other antique gems. One may also reference the example of a Georgian fifteenth century icon revetment of St. George Victorious where the face of St. George is replaced with a, likely Roman, cameo with the face of Medusa.<sup>65</sup>

As shown above, the interpolation of ancient spoils or symbols into a Christian context was not unknown, either in Byzantium, or in the medieval West. It is in this context that one should understand the Medusa's head embedded in the church wall in Smederevo. To bet-

<sup>59</sup> Adler 1928-1938, Chatterjee 2015, 214.

<sup>60</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Books IV and V. For more on Ovid in the Middle age see, Fischer 2017, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Keith and Rupp 2007, 15-33.

<sup>62</sup> Camille 1992, 6-8.

<sup>63</sup> Smolak 1995, 111-122, Fischer 2017, 17.

<sup>64</sup> The purpose of the container was most likely for the Eucharist, Fischer 2017, 15.

<sup>65</sup> The icon is in The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia, inventory number: Гpy-154. Mirzoian 2016, 137.

ter grasp this phenomenon, one should keep in mind the attitude towards antiquity and Western culture in medieval Serbia. Despot Đurađ Branković was an educated ruler who was probably well aware of the legacy of antiquity in medieval culture and who recognized its political value. It is no coincidence that he adorned the Smederevo fortress with the ancient spoils. Most medieval rulers sought the prestige that came with asserting continuity with ancient Rome.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, we do not know who was founder of the church in Smederevo, but they were likely inspired by the nearby construction of the medieval fortress and future capital. Although it often merely functioned as a monstrosity in the medieval context, the Medusa head embedded in the wall of the church in Smederevo is better understood as a guardian and protector of its entrance. Facing the viewer with its protruding gaze, it guards the church from visitors with a sinful and evil thoughts. The mythic figure of Medusa is linked with the idea of change and transformation and thus its presence at the entrance signifies the change enacted by moving from profane to the sacred.

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<sup>66</sup> Cvetković 2011, 400.



**Fig. 7.** Tympanum of a Roman stele as spoil, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, south wall, the Church of St. Nicholas, Nimnik Monastery, Serbia (photo: Ljubomir Milanović).

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**Fig. 1**



**Fig. 2**



**Fig. 3****Fig. 4**



**Fig. 5**



**Fig. 6**



**Fig. 7**



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