



# SERBIAN MEDIEVAL CULTURAL HERITAGE


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BEOGRAD

2013

DERETA



This book focuses on Serbian cultural heritage and the state's important international relations. It also features historic and traditional inheritance, remembering particular events, personalities and Christian values.

This book chronicles the formation of the Serbian Medieval Kingdom under the Nemanjić Dynasty from the early 12<sup>th</sup> c. until the mid-15<sup>th</sup> c. After 1459 Serbia came under Ottoman rule, bringing the Medieval Serbian Kingdom to an end. Under Nemanjić, Serbia was prosperous enough to become one of the richest countries in the region, and this was reflected through an original, extraordinary development of culture, art (frescos, icons) and especially architecture, when many monasteries were built by kings and queens as their life endowments. New skills developed at the monasteries: writing and illuminating manuscripts. The most important source of income was mining (silver and gold at Novo Brdo near Gnjilane-Kosovo, Trepča, Srebrenica, Rudnik among others) which made medieval Serbia one of the richest kingdoms in the region.

Serbia was on the crossroad between the East and West and a passageway for the mighty Crusaders and medieval travelers. One of the main political tasks of the rulers was to balance the great powers emerging after the split of the former Roman Empire, which they achieved through convenient marriages, rich gifts and military help to relevant sides.

Serbia's rich cultural heritage was less known to the world and for a long time was neglected. The recent conflict brought more attention to the medieval heritage hidden in the Serbia and Kosovo regions, which unfortunately needed more protection from malicious damage and ignorance.

Vesna Petković





## AT THE BEGINNING

It is hard to determine the precise origins of the Ancient Slavs. One theory is that they originate from the Carpathian region and the Baltic Sea, Central and Eastern Europe. From there, they migrated in all directions (North, South, East and West), in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. They lived in tribal social groups and were first mentioned under the name *Venethi* by Tacitus and Pliny, while later writers identified them as *Antes* and *Sclaveni* or *Sclavini*. The first reliable source was *De Bellis* by Procopius, a historian who lived during Justinian time (482-565). Procopius connected two tribes, *Antes* and *Sclavenoi* – Slavs, because they spoke the same language.

There are also many theories about the origin of the Serbs. One theory is that the Serbs initially arrived on the Balkan Peninsula between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, according to the writings of the Byzantine Emperor, writer and historian, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (*De Administrando Imperio*, 10<sup>th</sup> c.). They first settled on the Southern coast of the Adriatic and its immediate vicinity, later spreading through the valleys of the River Lim and River Drina and eventually through the rivers Piva, Tara and Ibar. Most relevantly, they settled in the upper territories of the West Morava River where they founded the first Serbian states.

Between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Serbs had created three new countries: *Duklja* (Zeta), *Zahumlje* (Hum) and *Ras* or *Rassia* (Raška Srbija) with a special territory of *Travunija* (Trebinje). Trebinje ceased to exist independently in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but was included as an administrative part of medieval Serbia.

At that time, however, the lands of the Serbs did not form a single state, but were inhabited by tribes led by the *archonts*, the heads of the tribal states. The Serbs were not in control of their own lands at this time, but the Byzantine



Migration of the Slavs:  
5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> c.

Věnceslav Čermý – Cyril and  
Methodius converting the  
Moravians to Christianity



Migration of the Serbs 7<sup>th</sup> c.  
Serbia in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c.

Latin and Greek literacy spread most quickly and where Catholicism and Orthodoxy came face to face - with varying success.



The first Serbian state territory, the Principality of Serbia, was established from the united tribes under Višeslav, the first named ruler of the Serbs (768-814) and the founder of the Vlastimirović Dynasty. This dynasty brought forth Mutimir, who founded the Bishopric of Ras, the focal point of the lands of the Serbs, and had this acknowledged in the Fourth Council of Constantinople in about 880. Časlav Klonimirović (927-960) united several provinces (without central rule) into a Grand Principality, a coalition of Slavic dominions. Klonimirović was the most powerful leader at the time. He ruled Serbia independently until his death in 960, upon which Byzantium promptly annexed the state.



The next great Serbian leader who emerged in medieval time was Mihajlo, the Grand Prince of Duklja. He ruled as Prince from 1050 to 1077, when he was crowned as the King Mihajlo of Duklja, Trebinje and Ras. He won independence from Byzantium and received the crown, a royal symbol, from the Pope, who recognised Serbian independence for the first time in history. Mihajlo was a wise leader, also maintaining good relationship with the Normans who ruled South Italy and Sicily. King Mihajlo's reign lasted until 1081, and he is popularly remembered from his depiction in a fresco with a model of his church, St Michael in Stone. His son, Konstantin Bodin, succeeded him and fought the Western powers, also making Bosnia and Raška his vassal states. Bodin ruled until 1100.

After Bodin's death there was a struggle for power. In 1163, the side branch of the Dynasty Vlastimirović took over. Tihomir, son of Zavida who was obscurely known in history, became the

Grand Prince (*Grand Župan*) of Raška, appointed and acknowledged by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenus. He ruled Serbia with his three brothers. Stefan Nemanja was the youngest brother and eventually fought with his eldest brother Tihomir, who drowned in the river Sitnica fighting Nemanja. Stefan Nemanja became Grand Župan and ruler of Raška and gave his two brothers other Serbian territories to rule. Stracimir became ruler of Šumadija around the Čačak region and Miroslav became ruler of Zahumlje. Stefan Nemanja succeeded to the Serbian throne in 1166 and founded a new dynasty, possibly the most famous in all of Serbian history.



Serbian land in the 10<sup>th</sup> c.



Grand Prince, later King Mihajlo Vojislavljević, ruling 1050–81, with a model of his church St Michael in Stone. It is a unique example of Zeta's mural paintings preserved to this day. The paintings had characteristics of early Romanesque style



South-Eastern Europe 1080 AD. The zenith of Dukljan (Zeta) power during King Bodin's rule

Serbs performed a delicate balancing act between the two religious powers. This lasted until St Sava, youngest son of Stefan Nemanja, founded the Autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church in 1219, during the reign of his brother, King Stefan the First Crowned.



King Bodin

Nemanja's eldest son, Vukan, considered himself to be the restorer of the old Dioclean dynasty (Zeta-Duklja). He was in conflict with his brother Stefan the First Crowned, who inherited Serbia by their father Nemanja's wish. Vukan looked for help at the Hungarian court in order to oust Stefan. Stefan fought back and annexed Zeta and other territories, including Prizren, which became the new residence of the Serbian King (1216-17). He received the crown from the Pope Honorius III, and the title of the King of all Serbs and Maritime Lands, in 1217. This made him the first Serbian King.

In religious matters, there were constant struggles between Rome and Constantinople and the

## THE CONVERSION OF SERBS TO CHRISTIANITY

Not much is known about the pagan Serbs before their conversion to Christianity. According to the writings of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, the conversion of Serbs and Croats began soon after their arrival in the Balkans, during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (610-641). Heraclius asked Pope John IV to send clergymen from Rome to Dalmatian cities to introduce Christianity amongst the Slavic pagans.





The Audience of the Serbs and Croats to Byzantine Emperor Basileus I, manuscript 9<sup>th</sup> c. Chronicle of John Skylitres (*Ioannis Skylitrae Synopsis Historiarum 811–1057*)

Christianity at that time was not divided by schisms, and converted territories were under the jurisdiction of the place where they received the new faith. The territories under Rome's *Salona* (Split) jurisdiction were Croatia and the River Neretva region. Byzantium had strong authority through *Duess* (Drač), *Zahumlje* (Hum) and the *Metropolitan of Sirmium* (Sremska Mitrovica). Sremska Mitrovica was one of the capitals of the Eastern Roman Empire, which was destroyed by the pagan Hungarian invaders in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Christianity was introduced in Serbia through its leaders. The Byzantines managed to baptize Serbian rulers, making them *federati* (tribes who were not colonised or were not Roman citizens, but provided soldiers). This opened the way for the further conversion of Serbs to Christianity and helped impose strong political and cultural influences from the Empire. Under the Byzantine Emperor Basil I (867–886), the Serbs embraced the Christian teachings from Constantinople, but had no cultural freedom, because they had inherited firmly established rituals and customs.

Later, the *Duess* jurisdiction was replaced by Dubrovnik and Bar, which both advanced in the Byzantine administrative system, and Belgrade and Braničevo came under the Bulgarian Archbishopric. The region around Belgrade and Braničevo became the battlefield upon which Stefan





St Cyril and St Methodius,  
fresco, 12<sup>th</sup> c.

Nemanja made his name when fighting against Byzantium.

In 862-3, Prince Rastislav of Great Moravia appealed to the Emperor Michael III and to the Patriarch Photius to send missionaries to introduce Christianity in the Slavonic language. His intention was political rather than religious, as he wished to prevent the influence of the Pope through spread of the German clergy. Prayer books were in Greek and Latin and were not understood by the Serbs and other Slavs. However, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Byzantine brothers Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonika, devised the characters that formed the Slavic alphabet - called the Glagolitic alphabet (*Glagoljica*). They were the first Christian missionaries among

†	ⱄ	ⱆ	ⱇ	ⱈ	ⱉ	ⱊ	ⱋ
a	b	v	g	d	ε	ž	dz
ⱌ	ⱍ	ⱎ	ⱏ	ⱐ	ⱑ	ⱒ	ⱓ
z	i	i	ǰ	k	l	m	n
ⱔ	ⱕ	ⱖ	ⱗ	ⱘ	ⱙ	ⱚ	ⱛ
o	p	r	s	t	u	f	x (kh)
ⱜ	ⱝ	ⱞ	ⱟ	Ⱡ	ⱡ	Ɫ	Ᵽ
o	ts	č	š	št	w/a	i	y
Ɽ	ⱥ	ⱦ	Ⱨ	ⱨ	Ⱪ	ⱪ	ⱬ
æ/e	yu	ž	yž	š	yš	f	i/v

Glagolitic alphabet

the Slavs who knew the Slavic language well, so were able to advance literacy with far greater effect than other missionaries.

However, the brothers began their historic work of translating the Bible into the Old Church Slavonic script, Cyril's original alphabet, the difficult Glagolitic. It was soon abandoned for a new Cyrillic alphabet, a more convenient script developed by Kliment (Clement), the Bishop of Ohrid (840–916), who was a disciple of Cyril and Methodius. The Cyrillic script was accepted by all Slavs of the Orthodox denomination, and is still used today in a modified form by Bulgarians, Russians, Macedonians and Serbs. At first they copied Cyril and Methodius' books, preserving the original text, but later they introduced the phonetic, morphological and lexicographical features of their living language into the original text.



St Clement of Ohrid, 12<sup>th</sup> c. fresco from the Church of St George in Kurbinovo, Prespa, Macedonia

А а	Б б	В в	Г г	Д д	Е е	Ж ж	С с	З з / Ъ ѡ
azû	bukû	věšû	glagol	dobro	esû	živěto	dzelo	zernjâ
a	b	v	g	d	e	ž	dz	z
[a]	[b]	[v]	[g]	[d]	[e]	[ž]	[dz]	[z]
Н н	И и / Ї ї	К к	Л л	М м	Н н	О о	П п	Р р
ize	i	kako	ljape	mûsite	naši	onû	pokol	rici
i	i, i	k	l	m	n	o	p	r
[i]	[i]	[k]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[o]	[p]	[r]
Ц ц	Т т	У у / Ѹ ѹ	Ф ф	Х х	У у	Ц ц	У у	Ш ш
slovo	tydo	ukû	ŕtû	xerû	onû	ci	ŕvi	ša
s	t	u	f	x	ô, w	c	č, ch	š, sh
[s]	[t]	[u]	[f]	[x]	[ô]	[c]	[č]	[š]
Щ щ	Ъ ѡ	Ъ ѡ	Ъ ѡ	Ъ ѡ	Ъ ѡ	Ъ ѡ	Ъ ѡ	Ъ ѡ
šta	jevû	jevû	jevû	jevû	jevû	jevû	jevû	jevû
št, shna	û, u	û	t	é	ju	ja	g, ě	ŕ, ŕ
[št]	[u]	[y]	[t]	[é]	[ju]	[ja]	[g]	[ŕ]
Ж ж	И ж	И ж	П п	Ф ф	У у	К к	Г г	У у
gšû	ŕgšû	hšû	pei	štû	lâpa	ŕ-	gery	onû
g, š	jo, jš	ko	ps	ŕ, tv	u	je	d, dj	ôt, wt
[g]	[j]	[ko]	[ps]	[t, ô, f]	[x, y]	[io]	[d, dj]	[ot]



Ternic Inscription of 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> c. National Museum of Belgrade  
This is one of the oldest Old Slavonic Scripts found in the region of Ternic, Serbia. There are engraved names of 40 martyred saints contained within it. Medieval builders believed that tablet would protect their buildings.

Cyrillic alphabet





Stefan Nemanja with the model of the Studenica Monastery, 12<sup>th</sup> c.



## THE NEMANJIĆ DYNASTY



At the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Byzantine political and cultural influence had begun to decline, national awareness increased, education developed and arts blossomed in Serbia. In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Vukanović branch of the Vlastimirović princes ruled the Great Dalmatia territories, which included Serbia. Stefan Nemanja founded

the Nemanjić Dynasty. Under the Nemanjić kings, Serbia reached its peak territorially, politically, culturally and economically, becoming recognised as an independent Kingdom, establishing at the same time the Autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church. But progress was cut short during the Ottoman occupation in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Under Nemanja, Serbia became a rich and prosperous state, and continued to grow thanks to the clever politics and diplomacy of its rulers, who balanced the great powers from the East and West and managed their own family affairs. A major diplomatic task of the time was to choose the right spouse. Marriages were arranged and dowries comprised vast territories and towns with serfs and peasants working on lands or maintaining their landlord's farms and animals. The wealth of the



Coat of Arms of the Nemanjić dynasty

Grand Župan Stefan Nemanja's seal, National Museum of Belgrade

Map of Serbia during Stefan Nemanja's rule







**The Church of the St Apostles Peter and Paul, 12<sup>th</sup> c.** also known as St Peter's Church (Petrova crkva) is one of the oldest religious edifices in Serbia, founded by the Romans in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The additional buildings were built in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Stefan Nemanja's biographers, his sons King Stefan The First Crowned and St Sava, said that it was in St Peter's that Nemanja converted from the Catholic faith to the Orthodox Church and held a council condemning the Bogumils. It was as well in St Peter's that Stefan Nemanja abdicated in favour of his son Stefan. It was also the seat of the Raška Bishopric and Metropolitan. St Peter's is a small early Romanesque rotunda built of stone, with an inscribed cross, and surmounted by a great dome with four windows. Inside the church, the dome rests on four massive pillars.

Altar and interior of St Peter's Church



Nemanjić's Family Tree, the Dečani Monastery, 13<sup>th</sup> c.



Serbian rulers came mainly from gold and silver mines, the major ones being in Kosovo, Novo Brdo and Trepča, also Rudnik and Srebrenica, as well as mines of zinc and lead.

Christianity put down deep roots during the time of the Nemanjić kings, partly because they used their wealth to build monasteries and churches. They developed a new style of architecture, and richly decorated it with exquisite art. They collected treasures, luxurious objects and produced expensive manuscripts in the language and writing of the Slavs. Literature flourished and the princes became authors of famous poems, life stories, hagiographies as well as more elaborate literary works, such as constitutions, laws, charters and chronicles. In the beginning, they brought artists and architects from Byzantium and the Latin world, but the local artists learned fast and overpowered their tutors with an original and expressive style.

Anticipating constant threats meant rulers were also concerned about defense, so they erected towns surrounded by high walls and military fortifications. However, they also introduced an aesthetic quality, which marked the beginning of cultural development. They com-



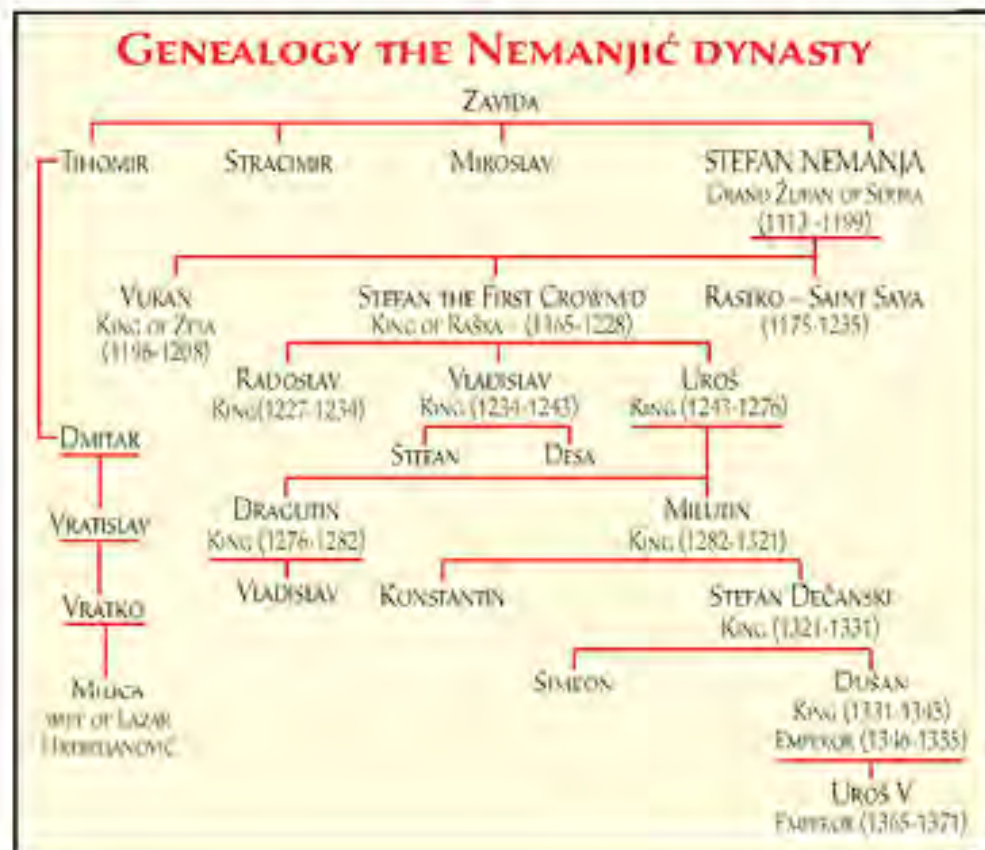
missioned frescoes and icons, established libraries supplied with books from all parts of Europe, and encouraged education by opening schools at monasteries for the copying of books and for illuminating manuscripts.

Rich fresco themes conjure up life in medieval Serbia and portray how closely connected religion was with everyday life. More compellingly, they are the first depictions of the more joyous events in people's lives, such as big feasts, festivals, weddings, coronations, celebrations with musicians and actors – often even depicting humour in some situations. On the other hand there were also presentations of misery, illness and poverty.



**The Monastery of the Pillars of St. George** was built by Stefan Nemanja in 1170 and is situated near Novi Pazar, Serbia. It is an unusual monastery built on a narrow area, surrounded by massive walls and has an atypical merging of two styles, Byzantine and Romanesque. The central part of the fortification is occupied by the church, with closely-built buildings encircling it, as well as an old cemetery, altogether resembling a small citadel.

King Dragutin, following his abdication in favour of his brother King Milutin, transformed the original main entrance of the monastery into a chapel in 1282. He was buried there in 1316. The monastery's fresco paintings have not survived; only the monumental figure of St. George on a white horse, as well as some badly damaged frescos depicting details from his life, still exist. These are supreme achievements of late 12th century painting in Serbia and, appropriately, the site is also one of the UNESCO World Heritage monuments.







Stefan Nemanja as Monk  
Simeon, the Church of the  
Mother of God of Ljeviška  
(Bogorodica Ljeviška), 13<sup>th</sup> c.

