

## Article

# Rethinking the Medieval Visual Culture of Eastern Europe: Two Case Studies in Dialogue (Serbia and Wallachia)

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**Abstract:** This article explores how the visual culture of Eastern Europe has been studied and often excluded from the grander narratives of art history and more specialized conversations due to political and cultural limitations, as well as bias in the field. The history and visual culture of Eastern Europe have been shaped by contacts with Byzantium, transforming, in local contexts, aspects of the rich legacy of the empire before and after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. This study expands and theorizes the eclectic visual cultures of Eastern Europe during the late medieval period by focusing on two ecclesiastical buildings of the 14th century built under princely and noble patronage in regions of North Macedonia and Wallachia, respectively: the Church of St George at Staro Nagoričane, near Skopje, modern-day North Macedonia (1315–17) and Cozia Monastery in Călimănești, Wallachia, modern-day Romania (founded 1388). The 14th century was a transformative period for the regions to the north and south of the Danube River, establishing the contacts that were to develop further during the 15th century and especially after 1453.

**Keywords:** Eastern Europe; Serbia; Wallachia; Byzantium; Hungary; Danube River; architecture; monasticism; church; monumental art; sculpture; iconography; eclecticism; cultural contact; patronage



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## 1. Introduction

The medieval visual culture of Eastern Europe contributes, and has much to offer, to understandings of historical and artistic developments in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the regions of the Balkan Peninsula, the Carpathian Mountains, and further north, have remained elusive within art history, Medieval Studies, and Byzantine Studies. They have been difficult to define, explain, and position on global, scholarly, and imaginary maps. The implications of 20th and 21st century politics have impacted the field and further complicated the picture, marginalizing Eastern Europe and the sources available for study. The beauty and relevance of this territory lie in the richness and diversity of its artistic production, which exhibits an eclecticism with respect to sources. But this has not been easy to define and categorize within established narratives of art history. Our recent efforts have sought to highlight the importance of the medieval visual culture of Eastern Europe relative to competing traditions and local developments, repeatedly arguing for intentional use, transformation, and adaptation in local contexts as evidenced in the extant visual and material evidence (Rossi and Sullivan 2020, 2022).

The study of Western medieval art and the study of Byzantine art routinely exclude the territories of Eastern Europe that interest us here. These main frameworks of teaching and research have left out most of Eastern Europe geographically, but also temporally and theoretically, as much of the visual culture produced in these regions goes beyond the 15th century (which is generally considered the end of the Middle Ages and the end of the study of Byzantium). Although decisively excluded from the study of medieval art, which tends to stop at the eastern borders of the former Holy Roman Empire, within Byzantine

Studies, the long-durée of Eastern European visual culture has been interpreted solely in view of the Byzantine heritage (or “influence”) which continued in these territories after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. But even earlier, in the 14th century, the history and artistic production of the Balkans and the Carpathians are presented only tangentially to Byzantium and developments in the rest of Europe, offering a simplified picture of cultural contact, interchange, and local adaptation.

As such, even when taken into account, Eastern European territories, within Medieval and Byzantine Studies, have been regarded as “peripheral,” and have often been discussed as “places of influence” from elsewhere (Iorga [1935] 2000; Obolensky 1974). This is not the case, however, when the visual and material evidence is examined critically and contextualized historically (Patton and Rossi 2023). In a recent survey text on Byzantine architecture, Robert G. Ousterhout presented the “diversity” of the medieval architecture in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania relative to Byzantine traditions and sought to integrate it into the broader story of the development of architecture in the East. “The distinctiveness of the various architectural styles,” he wrote, “depended on distance—both geographical and political—from Byzantium” (Ousterhout 2019, p. 649). Ousterhout continued:

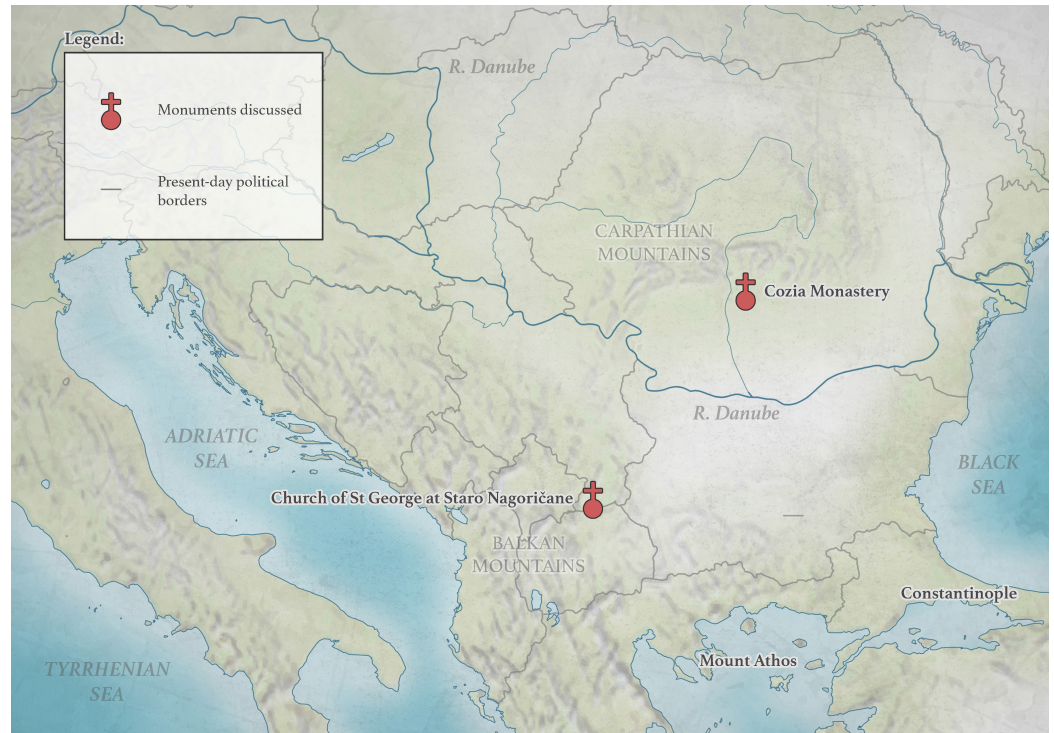
As in earlier centuries, Bulgarian architecture maintained close ties to Constantinople, but with a greater emphasis on the decorative features of the exterior. Serbia relied heavily on Byzantine styles and Byzantine craftsmen in the early fourteenth century, when political connections were strongest, but by the end of the century had developed a characteristic “national” style, often called the Morava School. Romania—Wallachia and Moldavia, latecomers on the scene—found initial architectural inspiration in Serbia, while Moldavia developed a distinctive church architecture with its exterior walls decorated with frescoes. (Ousterhout 2019, p. 649)

The connections with Byzantium are evident in the architectural production of the Balkans and the Carpathians, but how each region mediated between Byzantine models in local contexts and among examples derived from other competing traditions is complex and requires careful consideration of the formal and stylistic features of each monument, aspects of patronage and artistic practices in the region, as well as historical context.

Across Eastern Europe, each monument that survives (in various states of preservation) reveals local adaptations of building and decorating models, with elements intentionally used, transformed, or rejected, giving rise to an eclectic visual culture with respect to sources. In the Serbian context, Western building traditions mediated through the Adriatic littoral have been evident since the 12th century, and have been categorized by Gabriel Millet as the “School of Raška” (Millet 1919, chps. 2 and 3). Setting aside the nationalistic interpretations of the different “schools” (Bogdanović 2020, pp. 168–69), it is clear that Western features, Romanesque stone sculpture, and Gothic-style ornamentations made their way to the Serbian lands mediated through various contexts, with the Adriatic littoral being one of many other avenues of contact and exchange (Stevović 2016, pp. 317–29). Gothic architectural features are also evident in door and window framings, as well as stone carvings, in the Wallachian and Moldavian cultural contexts, indicating the connections of these Carpathian regions with various neighboring lands for which the Gothic served as a favored mode of architectural construction and design (Sullivan 2023, chp. 4; for comparative phenomena in Greece and Cyprus, see, among others, Bouras 2001; Kaffenberger 2020).

Our study aims to build upon this scholarship, expand understandings of the visual culture of Eastern Europe during the late medieval period, and argue for the usefulness of the notion of stylistic eclecticism by putting in conversation two ecclesiastical buildings of the 14th century built under princely patronage in the regions of North Macedonia and Wallachia, respectively: the Church of Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, near Skopje, modern-day North Macedonia (1315–17) and Cozia Monastery in Călimănești, Wallachia, modern-day Romania (founded 1388) (Figure 1). The 14th century was a transformative period for the regions to the north and south of the Danube River, establishing various contacts and cultural negotiations that informed local artistic developments. These contacts

were not just with Byzantium, but extended far beyond, in addition to the continued movement of people and objects across the Danube River. The cultural connections of the 14th century, which informed the appearance of the two key buildings under investigation, developed further during the 15th century and especially after 1453.



**Figure 1.** Map of Eastern Europe with the location of the two churches discussed in the article (source: Richard Thomson | [www.rt-imagery.com](http://www.rt-imagery.com), accessed on 1 November 2023).

The two case studies we selected demonstrate aspects of local adaptation and transformation relative to competing traditions, as well as how the visual culture of Eastern Europe has been shaped by contacts with Byzantium, both direct and mediated through intermediary zones during the life of the empire and in the post-Byzantine period (in addition to Constantinople, examples include Mount Athos, Epiros, and Thessaloniki), as well as with other Central-European traditions, including those from Hungary. In particular, the two case studies reveal various aspects of similarities in the landscape of Eastern Europe, including issues of patronage and ideology, the significance that Orthodox monasteries assumed in the political landscape of the region, and the local negotiations of power that present themselves through iconographic choices, architectural decor, inscriptions, and functions. The following sections address these issues for the church of Saint George at Staro Nagoričane and for the church at Cozia Monastery, underscoring the different modes of adaptation and translation in local contexts—all intentional on the part of the patron and based on the availability of resources—which reflect and contribute to the development of local artistic trends. The penultimate section on “Negotiations” summarizes the main points of our argument and highlights the key issues that these case studies raise independently and when considered in conversation. Finally, the “Coda” opens up new avenues of research so that the study of the visual culture of Eastern Europe can come to the center of attention and find new ways to be included in the field of art history.

## 2. The Church of Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, Serbia

The first case study is the church of Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, located near Skopje (modern-day Republic of North Macedonia) (Figure 2). It was built in the early 14th century by the Serbian King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282–1321) at the time of the *hegoumenos* (abbot) Antonije and later Venjamin (Todić 1993; 1999, pp. 320–25; Bošković



1930; Popović and Petković 1993, pp. 1–50; Dimitrova and Korunovski 2006, pp. 111–12, 161–68). Milutin's reign was a period of military expansion, wealth, and religious fervor (Mavromatis 1973, 1978; Fine 1987, pp. 217–85; Stanković 2012; Vojvodić and Popović 2016). He was a great military leader and conquered many territories, especially at the expense of the Byzantine Empire. These victories brought new revenues: the silver mines near Novo Brdo made him one of the richest men of his time. We can trace his wealth from Jerusalem to Skopje, including Constantinople, Mount Athos, Thessaloniki, and the Adriatic littoral where he commissioned churches, palaces, fortresses, and hospitals, creating new secular and religious networks tied to the flourishing Serbian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, these building campaigns mirror historical, as well as current political and dynastic alliances. In fact, since its establishment, the Nemanjić dynasty (ca. 1165/68–1371) looked to all of its neighbors for legitimacy and power, ranging from the papacy to Venice, and from Hungary to Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire. Milutin himself was married four times, creating diplomatic connections with the Bulgarian, Hungarian, and Byzantine courts (Malamut 2000).



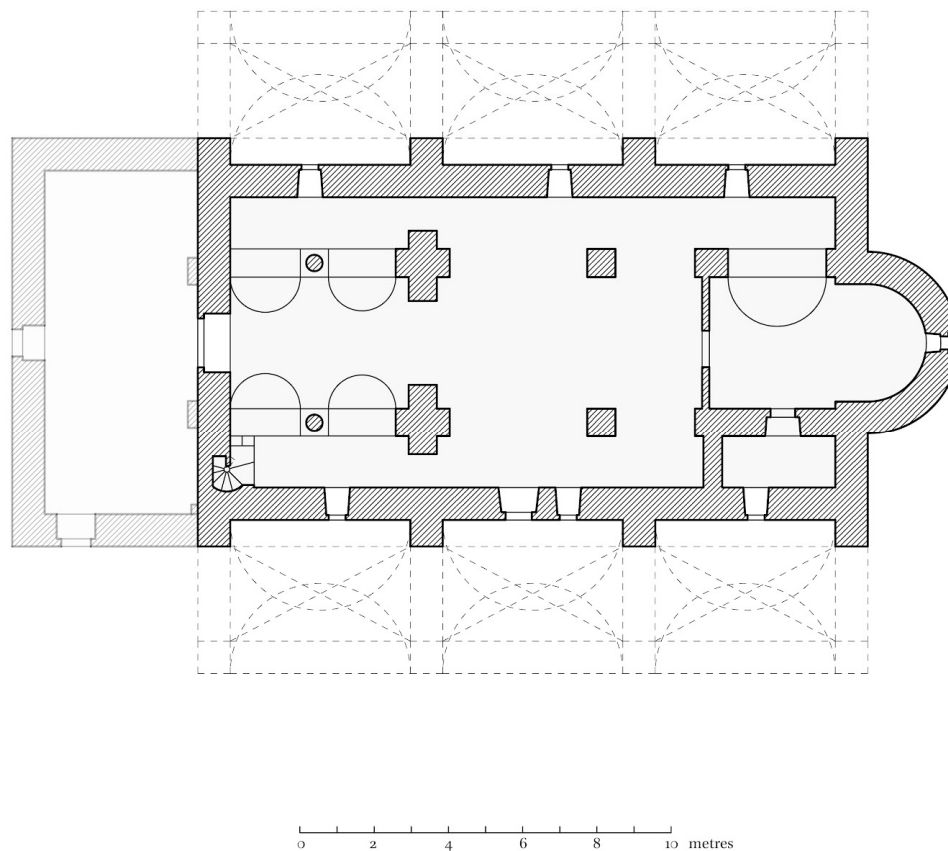
**Figure 2.** Exterior of the western and southern walls of Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, Republic of North Macedonia (source: Maria Alessia Rossi).

Stefan Uroš I (r. 1243–1276), Milutin's father, designated his brother, Dragutin (r. 1276–1282), as the rightful heir, and when Milutin replaced him, it was agreed that it would be Dragutin's son that would succeed Milutin on the throne. Like any usurper, Milutin had to find the legitimization for his rule elsewhere. It was on this occasion, and thanks to his military prowess, that he became the son-in-law of the Byzantine Emperor Andronikos II (1282–1328) and married his daughter, the infant princess Simonis (b. 1293/4) (Nicol 1993, p. 120; Laiou 1972, pp. 93–100; Malamut 2000). Through its architecture, monumental art, and inscriptions, Saint George embodies these current political negotiations, the ideological aspirations of its patron, as well as the religious desires of the flourishing Serbian Orthodox Church in the 14th century.

Except for the church of Saint George, practically nothing survives or is known of the monastic complex to which it once belonged (no archaeological excavations seem to have been undertaken). The plan of the building follows the cross-in-square type with a narthex at the west end and five domes over the naos (Figure 3). The five-domed building became the standard plan for most of Milutin's foundations, as is the case at Gračanica (1320–21) (Ćurčić 1979); however, this was not the case for his royal mausoleum, Saint Stefan's church



in Banjska (1312–16), which is clearly in dialogue with Western-inspired structural and aesthetic choices (Sinkević 2022; Stanković and Erdeljan 2021).



**Figure 3.** Plan of Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, Republic of North Macedonia (source: Richard Thomson | [www.rt-imagery.com](http://www.rt-imagery.com), accessed on 1 November 2023).

The architecture of Saint George references contemporary Byzantine models. The cloisonné masonry construction and the brickwork of the church find their closest parallels in the architecture of Epiros (Ćurčić 2005; Ousterhout 2019, p. 656). Slobodan Ćurčić has argued that the master builder was likely brought to Serbia from Epiros (Ćurčić 2010, p. 664). However, it should be noted that Saint George was not a new foundation; instead, it was rebuilt on the site of a previous church. According to the vitae of the hermits Sts. Joachim of Osogovo and Prohor of Pčinja, the original 11th-century church was commissioned by the Byzantine Emperor Romanos Diogenes IV (r. 1068–1071) (Popović 2008; Palaret 2015). Milutin erected his new church upon the previous structure, literally incorporating its earlier history and presenting himself as part of its continuation. From an architectural perspective, though, this meant that the preexisting structure, of which the monumental ashlars are still visible today, imposed an elongated plan that took over the naos and narthex (see Figure 2). This design, however, did not preclude the addition of the twin-domed narthex. This feature originated in the *katholikon* (main church) of Hilandar (1320–21), which was also commissioned by Milutin (Ćurčić 1971; 2010, p. 664), and whose *hegoumenos* was Danilo II, before he joined Milutin's court and became the archbishop of the Serbian Church in 1324 (Djurić 1991).

The exterior of Saint George features brick decoration, such as hollow cross-shaped jars used for framing windows, and ceramic insets (Figure 4). The dedicatory inscription on the west portal is offered in Church Slavonic and explains that the church, as well as the dedication to Saint George Tropaiophoros, should be viewed in connection to a victory of the Byzantine emperor over the Turks in Asia Minor, thanks to the military contingent sent by Milutin (Todić 1993, pp. 71–87). This allows us to date the monument to 1312–13

(Todić 1999, p. 320). Above the inscription, and within a lunette, is a depiction of Saint George. It seems like the building was encircled by an open portico with arched arcades resting on columns or pilasters on the southern and northern sides, while a separate closed structure was situated along the western wall. Interestingly, a portico on the southern wall appears on the model held by Milutin in the dedicatory panel (or votive mural), but it should be noted that this does not match the archaeological and material evidence on site (Todić 1993, pp. 48–49).



**Figure 4.** Detail of the exterior decoration of the southern wall of Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, Republic of North Macedonia (source: Maria Alessia Rossi).

The painted murals at Saint George are just as exemplary and creative in conception as its architecture. The iconographic program of the naos includes the Life of Christ, that of Saint George, and standing saints. The life of the Virgin Mary is depicted in the prothesis, and that of Saint Nicholas in the diakonikon, by the altar area. The narthex is covered with scenes from the Menologium. The stone iconostasis is still in place and seems to have been walled up to include two fresco-painted icons of Saint George (originally named Tropaiophoros as in the inscription on the exterior of the west wall, and later changed to Diasorititis) (Figure 5), and the Theotokos with Christ Child, inscribed as Pelagonitissa.



**Figure 5.** Detail of the fresco icon of Saint George Tropaiophoros, Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, Republic of North Macedonia (source: Maria Alessia Rossi).

The frescoes date to between 1315 and 1317 and can be attributed with certainty to Michael Astrapas (Marković 2010) (Figure 6). The artist Michael Astrapas was Greek, most likely from Thessaloniki. His signature appears twice in the decoration: once, on the hiton of the holy warrior Saint Theodore Teron depicted between the naos and the narthex (ΧΕΙΡ ΜΙΧΑΗΛ ΕΥΤΥΧΙΟΥ), and a second time, in the inscription on the west wall of the narthex (ΧΕΙΡ ΜΙΧΑΗΛ [ΤΟΥ] ΖΟΓΡΑΦΟΥ). There are no historical records of Michael, but by tracing his signatures, scholars have suggested that he was trained in the church of Saint Clement (Peribleptos) in Ohrid (1294/5) with his father Eutybios, whose signatures are also found on this monument. Michael then moved to the Serbian Kingdom, where he became Milutin's chief painter.



**Figure 6.** Interior view of the western wall of the naos, Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, Republic of North Macedonia (source: Maria Alessia Rossi).

Yet, there are several details in the iconographic program that deviate from Byzantine canons and instead place Saint George at the heart of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Nemanjić dynasty. A significant detail is the meaning of Christ's miracles in the naos. These episodes do not appear frequently in monumental decorations before the end of the 13th century, yet they seem to proliferate in both the Byzantine and Serbian territories in the early Palaiologan period (Rossi 2024). As I have argued elsewhere (Rossi 2020), in several of Milutin's churches, including Saint George, the episodes of Christ and the Samaritan woman, the headline of the man born blind, the healing of the paralytic, and Christ calling Zacchaeus (Figure 7) assume a new meaning connected to the Serbian Orthodox liturgy: they are all Sunday lections. The paralytic, the Samaritan woman, and the man born blind are celebrated, respectively, on the fourth, fifth, and sixth Sundays after Easter, while the fifth Sunday before the beginning of Great Lent is dedicated, only in the Slavic tradition (and not in the Byzantine one), to Christ calling Zacchaeus.





**Figure 7.** Christ calling Zacchaeus, 1315–17, church of Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, naos, west wall, Republic of North Macedonia (source: Maria Alessia Rossi).

The choice of local saints and bishops included in the monumental decoration aptly strikes a balance between including local saints such as Constantine Kabasilas, Clement of Ohrid, Joachim of Osogovo, and Prohor of Pčinja, and placing figures such as Saint Sava (b. 1175), the first bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church, in prominent places. It is telling that the inscription identifying Sava is in Greek and includes the exact title that the patriarchate of Constantinople used for Serbian Orthodox bishops in official documents. Thus, while it acknowledges local cults and the fact that this territory was previously under the archbishopric of Ohrid, the imagery and the text that accompanies it wants to emphasize clearly the new status of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its desire for complete independence from the Byzantine Church.

The dedicatory portrait on the north wall of the narthex is a striking example of the different religious and secular aspirations at play: Milutin is celebrated as ruler, military commander, and son-in-law of the Byzantine Emperor (Figure 8).

Milutin holds a model of the church, alongside his wife, the Byzantine Princess and Serbian Queen, Simonis; Saints Constantine and Helena are on the left, and Saint George on the right. The clothes Simonis and Milutin are wearing reveal their relationship with Byzantium. They are identical to those worn by the Byzantine imperial family. Both are wearing the *loros*-costume on top of a red gown with a tall neck and long sleeves in the case of Simonis, and a blue or black tunic for Milutin. The imperial costume changed exceedingly in time, but the depictions reflect 14th-century fashion. For instance, the crown of Milutin is domed, just like that of Andronikos II in an illumination from the chrysobull in the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens, Ms 80, XAE 3570, recalling the ones sent to him as gifts by Irene-Yolanda; while that of Simonis is taller with pinnacles along the upper rim and a veil or net that covered the hair and part of the shoulders, just like in the case of Anna of Savoy (d. ca. 1365) in an illumination from Stuttgart, *cod. Hist.* 2 601, f.4.

This deliberate representation and appropriation of the Byzantine dress code for the Serbian ruling couple is no coincidence. Yet the inscriptions identifying their portraits are all in Church Slavonic: “Simonida the most exalted Kraljica (Queen) Komnena” and “Stefan Uroš in Christ God faithful Kralj (King) of all Serbian lands and the Littoral.” The use of the titles *kralj* and *kraljica* authenticate their role within Serbian society and the choice of Church Slavonic speaks to the intended audience. The text legitimizes Milutin as the sole

lawful ruler by God's will. In practice, this had been made possible by his marriage to Simonis, who was depicted by his side. The written and visual sources need to be read side-by-side to understand the local and global meanings and dimensions of Milutin's political ideology.



**Figure 8.** Dedicatory panel with, from left to right, Saints Constantine and Helena, Queen Simonis, King Milutin, and Saint George, 1315–17, monumental painting. Church of Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, narthex, north wall, Republic of North Macedonia (source: Maria Alessia Rossi).

When discussing inscriptions, it is significant that Greek was used alongside Church Slavonic (Zarras 2010), and sometimes, even both in one single inscription. As previously mentioned, the decision to use Church Slavonic both for the inscription mentioning Milutin on the exterior of the church and for his donor portrait in the narthex are expressions of his political identity and his intended audience. The same language was also consciously used by *hegoumenos* Venjamin in the inscription on the west wall of the narthex, promoting the Serbian Orthodox Church. As such, text, image, and architecture come together creatively and deliberately in Saint George to reflect and comment on ideologies and identities in the 14th-century Serbian context. Similar concerns are evident in key monuments from nearby regions, which too emerged at the crossroads of traditions and princely ambitions but with varying visual effects.

### 3. Cozia Monastery, Wallachia

In the last decades of the 14th century, soon after the principality of Wallachia declared its independence in 1330 (following the Battle of Posada), Mircea I (r. 1386–95 and 1397–1418) commissioned the building of Cozia Monastery along the Olt River in the Carpathian Mountains (Figure 9) (Ousterhout 2019, p. 669; Vaida 1977; Davidescu 1968; Lăzărescu 1962, pp. 107–33; Lăzărescu 1970, pp. 170–75; Mândru 2001, pp. 19–31). Mircea's lengthy reign in Wallachia established stability and growth for this relatively new principality extending to the north of the Danube River. He fostered political alliances with Sigismund of Luxemburg, King of Hungary (r. 1387–1437), the Moldavian ruler Peter II (r. 1375–91), and the Polish leader Vladislav II (r. 1386–1434). On the other hand, he turned his attention to the cultural and artistic spheres, promoting the work of local artists and workshops, and establishing cultural connections to the north and south: with Transylvania and the Kingdom of Hungary, and with Mount Athos and other intermediary zones in the Balkans, like Serbia and Bulgaria. The visual culture of Wallachia reflects the position of the

principality at a crossroads, with visual models adopted in local contexts from Byzantium and other Eastern European centers.



**Figure 9.** Church of the Holy Trinity, 1388, Cozia Monastery, Wallachia, modern-day Romania (source: Elisabeta Negrău).

Mircea's most important architectural project in Wallachia was Cozia Monastery. Consecrated on 18 May 1388, the monastery was designed as a fortified complex with the main church at the center of the compound and the rest of the monastic buildings nearby. These included the monastic living quarters, the refectory, and workshop spaces. In time, the monastery gained a significant status in the region and served as an important site of local artistic production with active workshops, and ongoing patronage from the ruling elite and church officials. The latter took the form of renovations and new additions to the complex, as well as the endowment of the monastery with monetary gifts and precious objects, like the so-called Cozia epitaphios (Cernea 2023; Rotaru and Gaunt 2023, pp. 109–25). By the 17th century, even Paul, Archdeacon of Aleppo, acknowledged Cozia Monastery during his travels in Wallachia between 21 August 1656 and 13 October 1658. He even recounted the scenic yet dangerous passageway to the monastery through a “narrow pass overhanging the river, through a deep ravine full of rocks and roaring waters. . . vast, impassable, wooden mountains.” On 28 June 1657, he arrived at Cozia, whose name, he explained, means “natural forest” (Paul 1836).

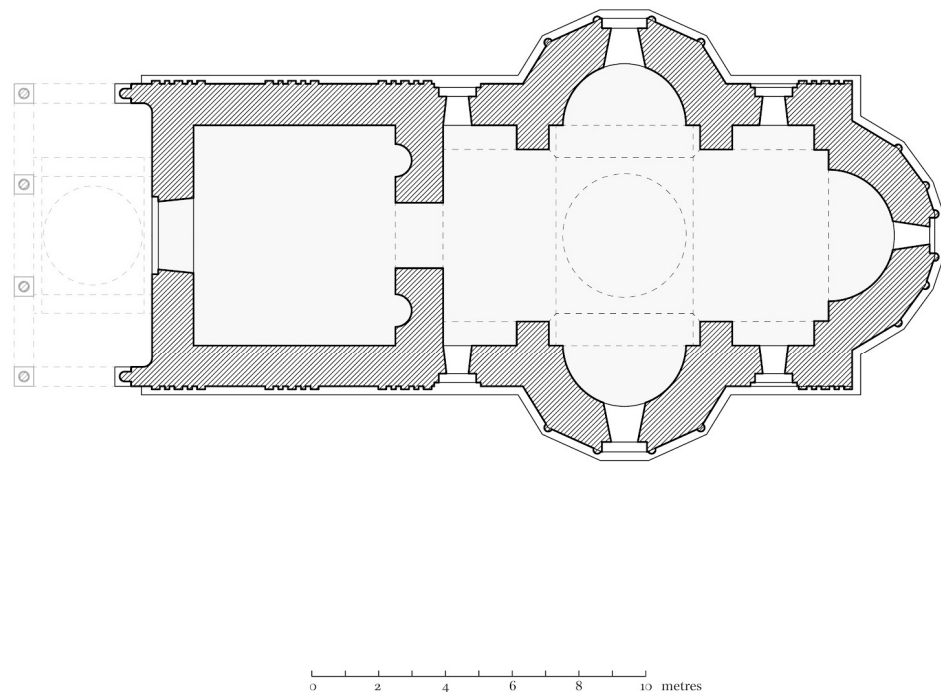
Due to its local significance, the monastery received ongoing support that helped expand it in time. Wallachian rulers after Mircea's time, like Neagoe Basarab (r. 1512–21) in the early 16th century, further endowed the monastery. He built a fountain within the monastic walls and oversaw the repainting of the interior of the church, for example. Two other important chapels were built within the monastic compound at Cozia during the 16th and 18th centuries. Today, however, much has been damaged and only portions of the original complex survive: the main church and a section of the fortifications dating to the 14th century. The belltower that once stood on the SW corner of the monastery was destroyed in the 19th century.

Some of the most significant transformations to Cozia Monastery and its main church took place during the reign of Constantin Brâncoveanu (r. 1688–1714), who also restored a dedicatory inscription placed above the main entrance to the church. Dated to 1707, the inscription in Church Slavonic mentions the name of the new patron of the church, Constantin, the metropolitan of Wallachia at that time, Theodosie, and also the name of the first founder, Mircea I. The inscription thus honors the original patron, the long history of the monument, and the deeds of its new ktetor in the early 18th century.

The main church, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, was built between 1387 and 1391 and reveals a fascinating adaptation of differing building and decorating traditions in a



local context. The church was erected using a Constantinopolitan technique of alternating layers of stone and 1–3 courses of thin bricks, which suggests the involvement of masons trained in those imperial building traditions (Ousterhout 1999). The plan is also inspired by Byzantine monastic models. Cozia was built using a triconch layout consisting of a square pronaos, a naos with lateral semicircular apses extending to the north and south, and an eastern apse in the direction of the altar (Figure 10). This type of plan is characteristic of monastic churches on Mount Athos, being first introduced in the Great Lavra in the late 10th century (Mamaloukos 2011, pp. 39–50; Mylonas 1984, pp. 89–112; Ousterhout 2019, pp. 92–93). The plan was arguably developed in order to accommodate and enhance the antiphonal singing of the choirs of monks that assembled in these lateral apses for liturgical duty, thus enhancing the experience of the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. This plan was adopted in other monastic contexts throughout the Balkans and the Carpathians, appearing in masonry constructions in the regions to the north of the Danube River by the second half of the 14th century (Sullivan 2023, pp. 55–56).



**Figure 10.** Plan of the church of the Holy Trinity, Cozia Monastery, Wallachia, modern-day Romania (source: Richard Thomson | [www.rt-imagery.com](http://www.rt-imagery.com), accessed on 1 November 2023).

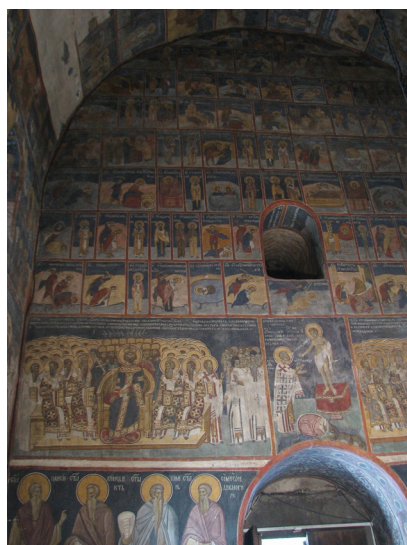
Historical sources also attest to the direct involvement of an Athonite monk in the design of Cozia Monastery. It is known that a certain monk named Nikodemos/Nikodim from Mount Athos contributed insight to the building of Cozia in the 14th century, along with other churches in the Olt River regions (known as Oltenia) (Bogdanović 2020, pp. 167–99; Speake 2018, p. 145; Lăzărescu 1965, pp. 269–70). From the outset, therefore, the monastery was informed by Athonite models, and developed into a key center of cultural and spiritual activity. The church also served as a burial site for its patron, Mircea I, and even developed an important monastic school, active since 1415.

Finally, the open exonarthex of the church was added to the edifice ca. 1705, during the reign of Constantin Brâncoveanu, reflecting new developments in church architecture in Wallachia. The church originally had steeple-like domes over the pronaos and naos, but only the latter survives. Although it served as an example for later church constructions in Wallachia, Cozia was never directly copied in other local monuments. As such, it remains distinct in Wallachian architecture.

In addition to the Athonite connections, the layout of the *katholikon* at Cozia, as well as the large and vertically attenuated proportions of the church, have prompted scholars to draw architectural and stylistic parallels with contemporary churches of the so-called Morava School in the Serbian cultural context, including the church of the Ascension at Ravanica Monastery (1377), the church of Saint Stephen, known as Lazarica, in Kruševac (1378), the church of the Birth of the Virgin at Naupara Monastery (1382), and the church of the Dormition at Ljubostinja Monastery (ca. 1389); and in the next century, to the church of the Mother of God at Kalenić Monastery (1407–13) and the church of the Trinity at Manasija Monastery (1407–18), to name a few key and better-known Serbian models (Ćurčić 2010, pp. 670–82; Bogdanović 2020, pp. 167–99; Balș 1930, pp. 277–94; Millet 1933, pp. 827–56). All of these churches were based on simple triconch plans with polygonal apses and towers with multiple narrow openings rising over the naos and pronaos.

Like the architecture, the decorations of the church at Cozia Monastery draw on different artistic traditions, some encountered directly, and others mediated through neighboring regions of the Balkans and the Carpathians. The church was entirely painted in the 1390s, but only the murals that adorn the interior walls of the pronaos are preserved from this early period. The naos was repainted in the 18th century, at the time the church received the open exonarthex.

The murals of the pronaos offer the earliest representation in Wallachia of an iconography consisting of the Menologium in the upper portions and the dome, the Ecumenical Councils in the middle register, and the Akathistos Hymn on the eastern wall (Figures 11 and 12) (Negrău 2018, pp. 119–48). The archangels Michael and Gabriel stand to either side of the entrance into the naos, guiding the spiritual progression through the space, and serving as models of monastic virtue. Similarly, scenes like Abraham's sacrifice and Saint Elijah being fed by the raven speak of spiritual, and, in particular, monastic, sacrifice. The image cycles were thus carefully selected for the interior of Cozia to reflect spiritual and monastic ideals on the part of the patron and the local community. The narratives found in the pronaos at Cozia became a standard feature of monastic churches in regions of the Balkans and the Carpathians. Moreover, at Cozia, and elsewhere, the murals display a style and iconography rooted in Byzantine models, which suggests the availability of trained artists and the desires of the patron to build and decorate a monument rooted in Byzantine iconographic and stylistic traditions. The inscriptions, however, are offered in Church Slavonic (Negrău 2018, pp. 129–48).



**Figure 11.** View of the murals of the pronaos, including scenes from the Menologium, the Akathistos Cycle, and the Ecumenical Councils, Cozia Monastery, Wallachia, modern-day Romania (source: Elisabeta Negrău).



**Figure 12.** View of the murals of the pronaos, including scenes from the Akathistos Cycle, Cozia Monastery, Wallachia, modern-day Romania (source: Vlad Bedros).

The exterior of Cozia reveals additional intricate visual schemes of architectural and sculptural elements, like those found at the Serbian churches of the “Morava School.” When compared to the church of Saint Stephen (Lazarica) in Kruševac (Figure 13), the exteriors of both churches show engaged columns, tall blind arcades with recessed niches, intricately carved rosette windows with interlace patterns in distinct configurations, and sculptural ornament around the window openings. In addition, two stone string-courses round around the entire edifice, dividing the facade and accentuating key features. The “highly decorative, saturated, almost ‘Baroque’ quality” of Lazarica, Ćurčić noted, “coincided chronologically, and to some extent formally, with certain Late Gothic manifestations that reached the Dalmatian coast via Venice” and, while parallels have been pointed out, “no definitive answers have been produced as to what this may have actually meant, or how it might have come about” (Ćurčić 2010, p. 673). There is further evidence, however, that some of these decorative features of the exterior, especially around the door and window framings, might be connected with artistic developments in the Kingdom of Hungary. Similar visual schemes, for example, are preserved on the famous 13th-century Porta Speciosa (or ornate entrance) at the Benedictine Abbey, Pannonhalma, Hungary. These aesthetic qualities of buildings from Eastern Europe, and the cultural connections that extended in all directions, remain a rich topic of investigation.

Finally, a striking feature of the exterior of Cozia, evident also in some of the above-mentioned Serbian churches, is the upper zones of the facade that display sections of the wall that had been plastered and painted with a checkerboard pattern in a limited color palette (Figures 14 and 15). The extent to which these painted motifs covered other areas of the building is difficult to reconstruct. Nevertheless, the fact that they still survive in the upper section of the church at Cozia indicates that this was a deliberate decorative choice, the meaning and value of which have been lost to time. Fortunately, these details survive in fragmentary form at Cozia. In some of the Serbia churches, like Lazarica, the plaster and paint have been removed during modern restoration efforts. This has thus erased a significant component of the initial visual aesthetic of the building. These aspects and outer layers ought to be considered carefully and critically, especially in modern times, as the exterior articulation was an integral facet of the design, building, and decoration of these churches from across the Eastern European cultural spheres.





**Figure 13.** Church of Saint Stephen (Lazarica) in Kruševac, Serbia (source: Bandzimir | Wikimedia Commons).



**Figure 14.** Exterior view of the upper portion of the church, showing the plastered and painted surfaces under the arches, Cozia Monastery, Wallachia, modern-day Romania (source: Elisabeta Negrău).



**Figure 15.** Exterior view of the upper portion of the church, showing the plastered and painted surfaces under the arches, Cozia Monastery, Wallachia, modern-day Romania (source: Elisabeta Negrău).

#### 4. Negotiations

The two churches under consideration in this study—Saint George and Cozia Monastery—offer an eclectic mixture of artistic, cultural, and religious models that demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Balkan and Carpathian regions during the 14th century. The churches deploy a Byzantine aesthetic, adapted with different results in each context, as well as aspects of Serbian and Wallachian political ideology, respectively. Saint George preserves representations of key figures of the Ohrid archbishopric side by side with those of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Nemanjić dynasty, as well as Greek and Church Slavonic, which are interchangeably used throughout the decoration and even merged into a single inscription. Cozia displays architectural and decorative features and iconographic cycles that reveal the mediation of diverse traditions in the Wallachian sphere during the 14th century. These two examples, set in dialogue, reveal, most notably, three key aspects of negotiation. In both cases, the patronage of the local ruling elite was manifested in the cultural landscapes of Serbia and Wallachia. These efforts functioned as expressions of piety and ruling ideology, and worked toward the promotion of spiritual ideals and remembrance. The religious monuments reflected these aspects of patronage, and, in turn, transformed the sacred landscapes of Eastern Europe through building projects within and beyond the domains of local rulers.

Milutin and Mircea, as leaders of Eastern Christian realms neighboring Byzantium, looked to the empire for immediate spiritual and ideological models, which were reflected in their artistic and architectural projects. Although Byzantium offered the initial inspiration, in each case other facets of cultural contact contributed to the final appearance of these monuments. For Saint George, the authority of the Serbian Orthodox Church is evident in the choices made in the iconographic program of (or in agreement with) the *hegoumenos* Venjamin, allowing us a glimpse into the negotiations at play between the spiritual unity of Orthodoxy and local religious politics. In Cozia, Byzantine monastic ideals, especially Athonite monasticism, served as primary models for the choice of layout and the interior decorative scheme of the church, with notable cycles selected to reflect monastic (esp. hesychast) ideals (for Hesychasm in Wallachia, see [Speake 2018](#), pp. 145–60). But what did it mean in each case that Byzantine traditions were involved in the shaping of local culture and visual idioms? Each monument, and each context, reveals different



modes of adaptation and translation rooted in the desires of the patron and his circle of advisors, as well as the availability of resources, artists, masons, and other artistic ideas.

Indeed, the examples of Saint George and Cozia Monastery bring to light how Byzantine architectural and artistic models were mediated in each local context. Whereas in both cases the interior painted decorations present Byzantine stylistic and iconographic connections, the exterior of the churches might be similarly revealing. Both churches in their construction show brickwork characteristic of Byzantine church building traditions. Moreover, the exteriors of both churches display aspects of decoration that have not survived in full: at Saint George the painted lunette with the homonymous saint and at Cozia the plastered and painted upper sections under the rounded arches of the facade. Eastern Christian churches were likely regularly decorated in this manner throughout Byzantium and regions of Eastern Europe, although the evidence remains in a fragmentary state for researchers today. As Ćurčić concluded, these churches “may have been routinely plastered and painted externally, presenting very different impressions from those upon which modern perceptions of their aesthetics have been based” (Ćurčić 2010, p. 383). Nevertheless, these exterior surfaces are equally important in connecting the visual vocabulary of these churches with Byzantine building and decorating traditions as well as in exploring the function of and the rituals taking place in these spaces, and they ought to be considered as part of the large picture of the creative and building activities in these regions of the Balkans and the Carpathians.

How Byzantium was perceived and what a Byzantinizing monument implies are central concerns at the heart of this study. In Saint George, the Byzantine masonry and the painted decoration reflect Byzantine trends, but they were employed and transformed in a Serbian context (Rossi 2021). Through his marriage with Simonis, Milutin could participate in the Byzantine visual language, and even employ Byzantine-trained artists. Yet, in Saint George, the outcome is not what one would find in a contemporary Byzantine church in Thessaloniki: the inscriptions in Church Slavonic, the alterations to the iconographic program based on the Serbian liturgy, as well as the emphasis on figures from the Nemanjić dynasty speak of a different agenda and to a different audience. Milutin built upon the Byzantine heritage, through its many variations, from Mount Athos to Epiros and Thessaloniki, like he built Saint George based on an 11th-century Byzantine church. Similarly, Mircea’s project at Cozia Monastery adapted Byzantine models in a Wallachian context to give rise to something new, reflective of his ambitions. The church was designed based on an Athonite-inspired monastic layout in order to reflect the deep spiritual convictions of the patron, and it was decorated with cycles of images that also highlighted monastic values and Christian beliefs. The inclusion of scenes from the Menologium, alongside the representation of the Akathistos Hymn and the Ecumenical Councils in the space of the pronaos, all with inscriptions in Church Slavonic, brings together image cycles that would not be found together in contemporary Byzantine churches. But in the Wallachian context, these images convey aspects of spirituality and monastic ideals that the patron sought to foster in his relatively young principality. Cozia, like Saint George, is a church that looks Byzantine-like, but adapts more traditional Byzantine models to the local context. The outcome is something that can only be fully grasped when considered within the specific context of its production, be it the patron, historical moment, available artists and resources, etc.

For both churches, and their respective patrons, Mount Athos served as a key site of inspiration and impact. It is known that Milutin restored the *katholikon* of Hilandar, originally built by the founders of the Nemanjić dynasty, Saints Symeon and Sava in the 12th century (Todić 1999, pp. 352–55; Subotić 1998). He also built several other churches on the premises, the refectory, and the so-called tower of Milutin. As mentioned, Danilo II, Milutin’s advisor and biographer, was the *hegoumenos* of this monastery. To this day, Hilandar is known as the Serbian monastery on Mount Athos and was repeatedly granted gifts and donations from Serbian Kings throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. In Wallachia, the triconch plan of Cozia directly quotes Athonite examples, like the triconch

layout of the Great Lavra, which was then adapted in other churches on the Holy Mountain, including Hilandar. But the decoration and functions of the monastery similarly emulated Athonite examples. Like Milutin, Mircea fostered connections with Mount Athos through monetary donations and gifts. It is known that he favored Koutloumousiou Monastery near the capital of Karyes, which was first built in the late 12th century and rebuilt in its current form with Wallachian support in the 14th century. His patronage was even acknowledged by his followers, like Neagoe Basarab in the early 16th century, who continued Mircea's donations. This patronage of Mount Athos among the Serbian and Wallachian rulers during the 14th century, and after, fostered spiritual ties with one of the oldest centers of Orthodox spirituality, extended acts of patronage beyond limited domains, and promoted cultural contact and the transfer of ideas and artistic knowledge between far-off centers. Mount Athos as a center of Byzantine Orthodoxy played a key role in shaping the spiritual and ideological landscapes of Eastern Europe for much of the Middle Ages, and, to some extent, even to this day.

In addition to the connections with Byzantium, Serbia and Wallachia were interconnected with each other and other neighboring regions. The Danube River, which for a long time has been designated as a border and a marker of separation, was in fact an easy-to-cross boundary, facilitating contacts and the movements of people, objects, and ideas (Rossi and Sullivan 2024). In Wallachia, for example, Byzantine models could have been mediated directly from Mount Athos and via Serbia. The similarities between Cozia and the churches of the so-called Morava School are striking, indicating the transfer of building and decorating traditions across the Danube, between the north and south. But if we expand the repertoire of connections that could be considered in these regions, and engage in comparative work and with artistic developments in neighboring realms, some of the sculptural features of Cozia also find parallels in the Hungarian cultural context. As such, we might question to what extent these sculptural features have been informed by artistic trends in Hungary or from across the Adriatic coast in this period, or perhaps both? In lieu of the lack of concrete historical sources that could confirm these connections, a careful examination of the surviving monuments and broader research questions can open up exciting avenues of research. For Saint George, these connections with regions to the north of Serbia are not evident in the monument itself. But by looking beyond the monument, a network of other buildings and people becomes visible. In these same years, Milutin commissioned Saint Stefan's church in Banjska that clearly reflected Western models. Danilo II was in charge of the construction of this church, and a few decades later oversaw the building of the 14th-century monastery of Dečani that was designed by a Franciscan friar, Fra Vita (Pantelić 2002). In essence, what Saint George and Cozia reveal is that the regions of Serbia and Wallachia were interconnected with each other and with neighboring territories, which informed the appearance and decorative details of these churches and other aspects of visual culture in these realms.

The rich visual vocabulary of these monuments is difficult to classify and define within established art-historical narratives. We might best define this visual vocabulary as "eclectic" with respect to sources, offering opportunities to consider surface details and cultural processes using art-historical analysis. Eclecticism is evident in much of the visual culture of the Balkans and the Carpathians that developed at the crossroads of traditions during the medieval and early modern periods (Rossi and Sullivan 2022).

What emerges from this analysis is that stylistic eclecticism, which is evident across Eastern Europe, is a useful framework through which to examine and contextualize the visual culture of the Balkans, the Carpathians, and further north, which developed at the crossroads of distinct and often competing traditions (Rossi and Sullivan 2022). Eclecticism implies neither 'hybridity' nor 'entanglement', but rather speaks to a compound visual vocabulary that acquired its features through selective cultural processes and local negotiations. Some elements were adapted, others rejected, and still others altogether transformed locally in order to give rise to something new. The concept of eclecticism refocuses our attention on the agency of the patrons, advisors, and artists who worked in regions of



Eastern Europe; they were not passive recipients of knowledge and artistic forms, but rather active participants in new creative endeavors. Examining the medieval visual culture of Eastern Europe through cultural connections and local negotiations has the potential to help expand the geographical, temporal, methodological, and theoretical parameters of the study of medieval and Byzantine art.

Finally, Saint George and Cozia reveal just how stratified these Eastern European monuments have become over time. They have been sites of ongoing patronage, restorations, and addition for centuries after their construction, which have altered the appearance and enhanced the functions of these sites. Acknowledging their afterlives is perhaps as important as examining and contextualizing their moment of construction. Much changes with time, and in some instances aspects of the past are fully erased. This is the case, for example, with what survives of the exterior decorations of these churches. The exteriors have received far less attention than the interiors in research and preservation efforts. Only by safeguarding these monuments in their entirety, documenting their current state, and bringing them to the attention of scholarship for further research, will it be possible to keep their invaluable testimonies intact.

## 5. Coda

The medieval visual culture of Eastern Europe deserves sustained and critical scholarly attention in order for individual monuments and objects to be documented and studied in full, as a way of underscoring local developments that are exclusive to specific regions and contexts, engage in comparative work, establish the cultural contacts that contributed to the eclecticism evident in art and architecture, and, finally, so that this artistic production can be integrated within the broader narratives of medieval and Byzantine art history.

In this study, we focused on select aspects of monumental architectural projects, but there is yet more to be discovered and considered. Recent scholarship, for example, has critically questioned aspects of monumental painting programs in the Serbian sphere, seeking to uncover why mosaics were recreated in painted form in prominent religious buildings and what we can learn through such practices about medieval Serbian artistic production and local innovations (Drpić 2022). Other work is beginning to consider more ephemeral facets of religious spaces, which might help enhance understandings of how buildings were designed, built, and decorated, taking into consideration architectural and iconographic know-how from different traditions, as well as aspects of natural and artificial lighting, music, incense, and more (Sullivan et al. 2021, pp. 81–100; Ivanovici and Sullivan 2023). These new research questions and approaches can help scholars uncover more complex pictures of the eclectic visual culture of Eastern Europe that move beyond formalist considerations and the study of “schools.”

In these efforts, comparative studies take center stage—like the two case studies presented here—as they allow the cultural heritage of select regions to be considered in an interconnected framework, revealing new connections across space, time, and media across Eastern Europe specifically, and the medieval world more broadly.

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