

= Church of the Holy Mother of God , Donja Kamenica =

The Church of the Holy Mother of God ( Serbian : ????? ?e?? ?????????? , Crkva svete Bogorodice ; Bulgarian : ????? ? ????? ?????????? ? , Tsarkva ? Sveta Bogoroditsa ? ) is a medieval Eastern Orthodox church in the village of Donja Kamenica in Knjaževac municipality , Zaječar District , eastern Serbia . The church is generally considered to have been built in the 14th century , when this area was part of the Second Bulgarian Empire 's Vidin appanage , though alternative datings have been proposed .

While small , the Church of the Holy Mother of God is notable for its unusual architectural style , in particular for its high narthex flanked by two sharp @-@ pointed towers . These features , which hint at Hungarian or Transylvanian influences , are highly atypical for medieval Bulgarian church architecture . The church is richly decorated on the inside , with as many as eleven frescoes of historical figures . One of these portraits , captioned as a despot , is variously identified as an eponymous son of Bulgarian tsar Michael Shishman or as an undocumented son of co @-@ tsar Michael Asen IV ; earlier speculation that the image depicted Serbian noble Mihailo Anđelović or Michael Shishman himself have since fallen out of favor with art historians . In addition to these early portraits , the interior walls of the church were painted with canonical murals , which can stylistically be assigned to the 14th ? 15th century . The church was reconstructed in 1958 and has been under Serbian state protection since 1982 .

= = History and architecture = =

The Church of the Holy Mother of God lies in the eastern Serbian village of Donja Kamenica , some 10 to 15 kilometres ( 6 @.@ 2 to 9 @.@ 3 mi ) southeast of Knjaževac , northeast of Niš and not far from the Bulgarian border . The church is located at the square in the centre of the village , by the left bank of the Trgoviški Timok river and along an old military road from Pirot to Vidin . The church acquired its name due to its abundance of frescoes featuring Mary , the mother of Jesus .

The prevalent opinion is that the church was constructed and painted in the early 14th century , which coincides with the lifetimes of the individuals most widely accepted as represented by the figures depicted in the church 's frescoes . At the time , the village of Donja Kamenica , along with much of the Timočka Krajina region , belonged to the Vidin appanage of the Second Bulgarian Empire . However , alternative theories place the construction of the church in the mid @-@ 14th century , the mid @-@ 15th century or even the 16th century . The church and its frescoes were restored in 1958 . The church was declared a Monument of Culture of Great Importance in 1982 , and it is protected by the Republic of Serbia .

In terms of architecture , the church features a round dome and a single apse . The naos or cella has the shape of a cross , in line with the popular Byzantine cross @-@ in @-@ square design . Of particular interest is the formerly two @-@ storey narthex , which is notable for its unusual verticality and the towers on either side of the entrance . Judging by the models depicted in the donor 's portraits inside the church , it is clear that the towers were originally further apart and the west facade with the narthex included much woodwork . The towers are topped off by sharp @-@ pointed pyramidal elements , with additional sharp @-@ pointed details in each of the pyramids ' four corners . The towers and their design are entirely unusual and unprecedented in medieval Bulgarian church architecture . Art historian Nikola Mavrodinov believes these resemble Gothic architecture , though a more modern researcher , Bistra Nikolova , dismisses his assessment and considers these an influence from Hungary or Transylvania .

Despite its monumental appearance , the church is rather small in size . It measures 7 @.@ 80 by 6 @.@ 50 metres ( 25 @.@ 6 ft × 21 @.@ 3 ft ) ( according to Nikolova ) or 7 @.@ 70 by 6 @.@ 20 metres ( 25 @.@ 3 ft × 20 @.@ 3 ft ) ( per Mavrodinova ) . The materials employed in the church 's construction were chiefly chiseled stones welded together using mortar masonry . Several rows of bricks were added in order to even out the structure and to serve as decoration , particularly in the dome , which features more elaborate brickwork .

= = Decoration = =

The frescoes inside the church are commonly dated to the 14th ? 15th century , though they follow a standard compositional model which had been established in Bulgarian church decoration since the 13th century . Unusually , most of the captions which accompany the images are in Byzantine Greek , though a few are in Old Church Slavonic . In terms of style , the murals have much in common with churches from the southwestern Bulgarian lands .

Biblical scenes and figures depicted in the Church of the Holy Mother of God include the worshipping of the Christ child as the eucharistic victim ( the Melismos ) in the lower part of the apse , the raising of Lazarus , the Annunciation , Jesus ' triumphal entry into Jerusalem , Judas Iscariot 's betrayal of Jesus , the Passion of the Christ in the upper part of the cella , the Descent from the Cross , the mourning of Jesus , and the Dormition of the Theotokos on the west wall . The north and south walls of the cella , as well as the wall piers , bear frescoes of saints , including rare images of military saints on horseback . Murals of Saint Petka and Saint Nicholas were painted in the upper reaches of the narthex , in the south and the north tower respectively .

Besides religious imagery , the frescoes of the Donja Kamenica church also include eleven portraits of contemporary historical figures , separated into four compositions . Three of the compositions are uncaptioned , making the identification of the people practically impossible . The first composition is located in the cella and depicts two men preserved from the waist up , of which one holds a model of the church , and a child , of which only the head is visible today . The second composition was painted on the upper west wall of the narthex and portrays a man , a woman , a boy and a girl , with the man also holding a model of the church , a common symbol of donorship . Art historian Dragana Frfulanovi? believes that the images of men holding models in both compositions depict the same person , the main donor . The third composition is in the cella and depicts two men : a monk and a priest .

= = = Despot and despotissa 's portraits = = =

Of greatest interest is the fourth composition of historical figures , a young man and a woman , which was painted on the lowest west wall of the narthex and includes inscriptions in Old Church Slavonic . The figures are painted facing the viewer . The man 's red clothing is covered in pearls and double @-@ headed eagles , and he wears an archaic @-@ looking despot 's crown on his head . In his right hand , the man holds a sceptre with a cross . He extends his hand to a woman , clad in a despotissa 's attire and wearing a fitting crown .

The inscription next to the figure of the man has been deciphered either as ? Michael despot , in Christ [ our ] God ... faithful ? or ? Michael despot , in Christ [ our ] God faithful , son of Tsar Michael ? . Either reading presents significant challenges as to the proper identification of the portrayed person , who was clearly a despot , bore the name Michael , and , if the latter reading is correct , was the son of an eponymous tsar . As a result , various theories have been proposed by Bulgarian and Serbian researchers alike .

Early Bulgarian historian Petar Nikov suggested that despot Michael of the Donja Kamenica church is identical with Bulgarian tsar Michael Shishman ( r . 1323 ? 1330 ) who , before his accession to the throne , was despot of Vidin . However , Michael Shishman 's father was named Shishman , not Michael , and was usually titled despot rather than tsar . In turn , Mavrodinov proposed the theory that despot Michael is an otherwise unknown son of Michael Shishman , who was installed as despot of Vidin by his father after his coronation in 1323 . In any case , this unknown son of Michael Shishman was probably dead by 1331 because Belaur is mentioned as the ruler of Vidin shortly thereafter . The latter theory is the most established identification of despot Michael in Bulgarian historiography .

A third theory , supported by both Serbian and Bulgarian researchers , is that despot Michael is an unknown son of Michael Asen IV , the first @-@ born son of Bulgarian tsar Ivan Alexander ( r . 1331 ? 1371 ) , who was proclaimed co @-@ tsar shortly after his father 's accession and died in a battle against the Ottomans before 1354 ? 1355 . Against this identification is the account of Nikephoros

Gregoras , who mentions that Michael Asen 's widow returned childless to Constantinople after his death . Another issue with this theory is that no source mentions Michael Asen as a despot .

Another theory , which was put forward by early Serbian historians and has subsequently lost support in Serbian scholarship , is that despot Michael is to be identified with mid 15th century Serbian noble Mihailo Anđelović , a brother of Ottoman statesman Mahmud Pasha Angelović . However , in depth research of the frescoes has concluded that they cannot be ascribed to the 1450s , as the artistic style , the clothing and hairstyles in the portraits are uncommon for this period . Furthermore , the church seems to bear little architectural similarity to churches of the Morava school , which dominated 15th century Serbian architecture . It has also been revealed that in 1454 ? 1455 , Donja Kamenica was controlled by the Ottomans and in possession of a certain Yusuf , rather than part of the Serbian Despotate , and Mihailo Anđelović was never titled despot .

The identity of the woman has also been a matter of debate . The inscription which accompanies her image clearly includes her title , despotissa , as well as the word ? daughter ? . Based on a possible reading of her name as Anna , she has been identified as Anna Neda , the Serbian wife of Michael Shishman , which is in line with the first identification of the despot . Nikolova believes that it is possible that the woman is Anna Neda even if the despot is her son rather than her husband . She theorises that Anna Neda settled in Vidin after Michael Shishman 's second marriage and owned a personal domain which included Donja Kamenica . Another reading of the inscription deciphers the name of the despotissa as Elena .