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The Virgin of Savina Identity and Multiculturalism

Abstract: The sixteenth-century miracle-working icon of the Virgin Glykophilousa in the Serbian Orthodox monastery of Savina, modern Montenegro, has been the focus of cult and devotions for centuries. A compelling visual presence, it played multiple roles: liturgical, social, legal, and cultic. In each of its roles, it provided support for ethnic and religious identity, being above all a palladium both for believers as individuals and for the Orthodox Christian community as a whole in the complex multicultural and multiconfessional contexts of foreign Venetian rule in the eighteenth-century Gulf of Kotor (Boka Kotorska/Bocche di Cattaro).

Keywords: Gulf of Kotor (Boka Kotorska/Bocche di Cattaro), Virgin of Savina, Cretan School, ex-voto, palladium, multiculturalism, identity

The silver-clad icon of the Virgin of Tenderness *Background information. Iconography. Style*

One of the most highly revered miracle-working icons in the Serbian Orthodox Church, the icon of the Virgin from the monastery of Savina, in present-day Montenegro, has not hitherto been an object of scholarly scrutiny. In the second half of the twentieth century, the icon was transferred from the tier of despotic icons in what is popularly called the monastery's Small Church to its Big Church dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin, where it was placed on the left-hand side of the altar screen. It is known that miracle-working icons of the Virgin, Mother of God, were the focus of particular reverence in churches dedicated to the Dormition, which was based on the belief that the Virgin's miracle-working had begun at her death and assumption to heaven.¹ Although the Savina monastery has a rich archive, there are virtually no data about the icon of the Virgin. There are no original documents suggesting possible donors, and the icon itself, being covered with a revetment, does not allow a more detailed examination. Local traditions refer to Josif Komnenović² or the well-known

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¹ M. Timotijević, "Bogorodica Smederevska", *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti* 36 (2008), 74.

² S. Nakićenović, *Boka: antropogeografska studija* (Belgrade: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1913), 498.

Lombardić³ family from the town of Herceg Novi as donors of the icon to the monastery. It is reliably known that the icon was already in the monastery by the mid-eighteenth century. This is evidenced by scant data from the monastery's income record book (*libro ot prihodka*), where an entry reads that, after the Day of the Dormition of the Virgin in 1755, on 29 August: "Count Basil offered a red gold-threaded cloth in front of the icon of the Virgin."⁴ The next relevant entry is dated 27 June 1760, when the icon was furnished with a new glass case which could be locked with a key.⁵

Since the scant archival data make no mention of the silver revetment that now covers the entire icon except for the faces of the painted figures (fig. 1), it cannot be known whether it was already there in the eighteenth century or whether it was added later, in keeping with the then widespread practice of lavishly adorning highly-venerated icons.⁶ The practice of completely covering an icon with a precious metal revetment, as is the case with the Virgin of Savina, was not common in Serbian Orthodox churches north of the Sava and Danube rivers, where the purpose of adorning the Virgin's icons with a metal crown, more frequent in the age of the Baroque, was to emphasize her status as Queen of Heaven.⁷ The complete covering of icons was characteristic of Russian and Levantine practice.⁸ There was almost no icon venerated in a public setting on the Eastern Adriatic coast which was not adorned with a silver cover, often called by the borrowed Italian word *camicia* (shirt).⁹ Besides being simply an

³ L. Seferović, *Manastir Savina*, a catalogue (Herceg Novi: Bratstvo manastira Savina, 2012), 14.

⁴ Arhiv manastira Savine [Archive of the Monastery of Savina], *Libro ot prihodka* [Income record book], inv. no. 40 (1755), 3: "Kont Vasil priloži skut crven zlatotkan pred ikonu Bogorodičinu."

⁵ D. Medaković, *Manastir Savina: Velika crkva, riznica, rukopisi* (Belgrade: Filozofski fakultet, 1978), 39: "Vestno budi kako opravismo prestolnu čudotvornu ikonu Prestia Bogorodica iznovu staklo i kornič s ključem koe sve kostalo cekina osam (N: 8) i libara 7 dobre i dadosmo s iste ikone zavetnie cekina 6; a dva cekina (N: 2) dade Gdn kapetan Marko Mirković, i suviše munite dobre libara 7: Bila mu pomoštnica Prestaja Bogorodica" [We have furnished the miracle-working despoticon of the Virgin with new glass and a frame with a key, all for the price of eight sequins (N: 8) and libro seven, we have given from the same icon six votive sequins, and two sequins (N: 2) were donated by Captain Marko Mirković: May the Most Holy Mother of God help him!].

⁶ An expert on Italo-Cretan painting, and especially on the Eastern Adriatic coast, Z. Demori-Staničić of the Croatian Conservation Institute, Split, believes that the revetment may be of an eighteenth-century date.

⁷ M. Timotijević, "Bogorodica Bezdinska i versko-politički program patrijarha Arsenija IV Jovanovića", *Balcanica* 32–33 (2002), 325.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Z. Demori-Staničić, "Ikone Bogorodice Skopiotise u Dalmaciji", *Prilozi povijesti umjetnosti u Dalmaciji* 34 (1994), 327–328.

Fig. 1 The Virgin of Savina, 16th-century Cretan School icon, Big Church of the Monastery of Savina, Herceg Novi, Gulf of Kotor



external decorative addition, or an expression of particular reverence, the re-vestment could, of course, have a deeper theological justification. Some authors interpret the icon's metal cover as functionally analogous to the *podēa* or to the iconostasis, which protect the front of a holy icon or the holiest space of the church, respectively, from the eyes of the laity.¹⁰ This corresponds to the view of those researchers who link the origin of the "icon cover" with the symbolism of the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant which shielded the relics from being accessed and seen by the faithful.¹¹ In that respect, however, the icon cover may also be interpreted in a markedly mystical manner as a source of divine grace. Similarly to the iconostasis which screens the altar table, it at the same time reveals the symbolism of holiness in its fullness and indicates direction.¹² The well-known theologian of the Baroque period Dimitrii of Rostov drew an analogy between

¹⁰ M. E. Gasper-Hulvat, "The icon as performer and as performative utterance: The sixteenth-century Vladimir Mother of God in the Moscow Dormition Cathedral", *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 57/58 (2010), 182.

¹¹ A. Lidov, "Miracle-Working Icons of the Mother of God", in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. M. Vassilaki (Athens and Milan: Skira, 2000), 56.

¹² I. A. Sterligova, "O znachenii dragotsennogo ubora v pochitanii sviatykh ikon", in *Chudotvornaia ikona v Vizantii i Drevnei Rusi*, ed. A.M. Lidov (Moscow: Martis, 1996), 125.

the icon with its cover and the dual nature of Christ.¹³ Some philosophers see some sort of unconscious iconoclasm in the practice of covering icons. According to them, cladding the icon “in a cover” entails a negation of its painting and a pious lack of taste which reveals the loss of religious and artistic meaning.¹⁴

The rich metal cover of the Savina icon indeed constitutes an impenetrable barrier between us and its painting. Deprived of the opportunity to examine it more closely, we have to content ourselves with whatever information, however meagre, the icon’s uncovered portions may offer. What can be established beyond doubt is that it is a frequent iconographic type of the Mother of God and the Christ Child known as Eleousa (*Ελεούσα*), Glykophilousa (*Γλυκοφιλούσα*), Virgin of Tenderness or of Loving Kindness.¹⁵ The name of this representation of the Virgin has, however, been the subject of long and well-known debates. Based on the analysis of the accompanying inscriptions, it has been generally accepted that Eleousa is not an iconographic type but a dogmatic attribute (Merciful) which belongs to all representations of the Virgin, including those of the Glykophilousa type.¹⁶ Perhaps the most illustrative example of the relativity of this kind of iconographic classification is the famous Virgin of Vladimir. Although this icon is of the Glykophilousa type, its veneration in Russia on the model of the Constantinopolitan Virgin Hodegetria perceives it, historically and spiritually, as a Hodegetria without evoking a sense of contradiction.¹⁷

Some authors interpret the tenderness between the mother and child as the effort of the Virgin, an acknowledged intercessor, to soften Christ towards

¹³ Timotijević, “Bogorodica Bezdinska”, 325.

¹⁴ J. Trubeckoj, *Istina u bojama* (Belgrade: Logos, 1996), 33.

¹⁵ Some authors distinguish three different subtypes of the Glykophilousa type, cf. N. P. Lihachev, *Istoricheskoe znachenie italo-grecheskoi ikonopisi, izobrazhenia Bogomateri* (St. Petersburg: Izd. Imp. rus. arkheol. o. va., 1911), 171–177. The epithet Glykophilousa (Slavic *Umilenie*) was quite common in Russian icons of the type in the seventeenth century, cf. G. Babić, “Epiteti Bogorodice koju dete grli”, *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti* 21 (1985), 264. The Glykophilousa type is believed to have been introduced in Cretan painting by the famous Cretan painter Andreas Ritzos in the second half of the fifteenth century, cf. M. Chatzidakis, *Icons of Patmos: Questions of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Painting* (Athens: National Bank of Greece 1995), 67.

¹⁶ M. Tatić-Djurić, “Bogorodica Vladimirska”, *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti* 21 (1985), 31, provides an overview of this debate and relevant bibliography.

¹⁷ L. A. Shchennikova, “Chudotvornaia ikona ‘Bogomater’ Vladimirskaia’ kak ‘Odigitriia evangelista Luki’”, in *Chudotvornaia ikona v Vizantii i Drevnei Rusi*, ed. A. M. Lidov (Moscow: Martis, 1996), 252, believes that the Glykophilousa developed from the Hodegetria, as assumed much earlier by V. Lasareff, “Studies in the iconography of the Virgin”, *Art Bulletin* 20/1 (1938), 38. It is thought that the theme of the “loving mother” did not become popular until the tenth century, cf. H. Belting, *Bild und Kunst*, reference after the Serbian edition: *Slika i kult* (Novi Sad: Akademaska knjiga, 2014), 329.

mankind for the sake of its salvation.¹⁸ Yet, the interpretation associating the iconography of the Virgin Glykophilousa with the Passion of Christ seems more convincing.¹⁹ It may also be pertinent to note that the introduction of the Passion service (in the eleventh and twelfth century) coincides with the spread of this iconographic type.²⁰ The purpose of such a depiction of sorrow and emotion is believed to have been to emphasize God's closeness to humanity.²¹

The relief surface of the silver revetment apparently faithfully follows the outlines of the painted shapes under it,²² allowing us to see the waist-length figure of the Virgin holding the Christ Child on her left side with both arms and gently pressing her cheek to his. To the left and right of the Virgin's head is the usual abbreviated inscription for the Mother of God, ΜΡ ΟΥ, and, next to the Child's head, ΙΧ ΧΙ for Christ. Christ is holding a scroll with both hands. He wears a tunic and sandals, and his left leg is bare to above the knee. The revetment is decorated with fine floral patterns, including the nimbus and the entire surface of the Virgin's maphorion. The three symbolic flowerlike stars are in their usual place, on the Virgin's shoulders and head.

The manner of painting flesh classifies the icon among high-quality works of the so-called Cretan School.²³ Products of this school of icon painting were

¹⁸ A. Grabar, "L'Hodigitria et l'Eléousa", *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti* 10 (1974), 10; on similar lines, Lasareff, "Studies", 38, believed that the Glykophilousa type expressed the idea of the Virgin's kind, merciful intercession on behalf of humankind.

¹⁹ M. Vassilaki and N. Tsironis, "Representations of the Virgin and their Association with the Passion of Christ", in *Mother of God*, ed. M. Vassilaki, 453–454.

²⁰ L. Kouneni, "The Kykkotissa Virgin and its Italian Appropriation", *Artibus et Historiae* 29/57 (2008), 98. Also, this period, the end of the 11th and the 12th century, is believed to have been crucial in formulating the cult of icons, cf. A. Weyl Carr, "Icons and the Object of Pilgrimage in Middle Byzantine Constantinople", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 56 (2002), 90.

²¹ Vassilaki and Tsironis, "Representations", 453–454.

²² Demori-Staničić, "Ikone Bogorodice", 327–328.

²³ Post-Byzantine Cretan religious painting, flourishing from the mid-15th century until the end of the 17th century, is considered to be the only Orthodox school of art which can legitimately lay claim to that name, cf. G. Babić and M. Hadžidakis, "Ikone Balkanskog poluostrva i grčkih ostrva (2)", in *Ikone*, ed. K. Vajcman et al. (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga and Vuk Karadžić, 1983), 310; on the Cretan school, with a broader bibliography, see Z. Rakić, "Kritsko slikarstvo", in *Enciklopedija pravoslavlja*, vol. II: I-O, ed. D. M. Kalezić (Belgrade: Savremena administracija, 2002), 1051–1052. The debate on defining this school is still ongoing, see D. Mourelatos, "The debate over Cretan icons in twentieth-century Greek historiography and their incorporation into the national narrative", in *A Singular Antiquity: Archaeology and Hellenic Identity in Twentieth-century Greece* (Suppl. 3), eds. D. Damaskos and D. Plantzos (Athens: Benaki Museum, 2008), 201. M. Chatzidakis was instrumental in emphasizing the artistic values of Cretan School icons as an expression of Greek national identity. The term Italo-Cretan School is also in frequent usage – cf. S. Bettini, *La pittura di icone cretese-veneziana e i madonneri* (Padova: Cedam, 1933) – but, as a result of Chatzida-

tremendously popular as much for the refinement of style and precision of technique as for their diversity and openness to different artistic influences.²⁴ There were on the Eastern Adriatic coast under Venetian rule several painting centres and there were many Greek artists working in them,²⁵ but the refined execution of the Savina icon indicates that it may be attributed to a more prominent, possibly Venetian, workshop. The flourishing period of post-Byzantine Cretan painting in Venice began in the second half of the sixteenth century, when there arose a genuine school of painting centred on the Greek Orthodox church of St. George – *San Giorgio dei Greci*.²⁶ The trade in Cretan icons in Venice was so extensive that it led local Italian painters to lodge a complaint with the authorities.²⁷ From this main centre, icons travelled via merchant routes to destinations all along the Eastern Adriatic coast and beyond.²⁸ Thus many arrived in Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Dalmatia and the Gulf of Kotor where, despite their sustained contact with Russia, Cretan icons were often quite numerous.²⁹ How the Virgin of Savina arrived in the monastery remains unknown but, judging by

kis's research, it remains in use only as a matter of habit, because it actually is Greek art with various admixtures, cf. G. Gamulin, "Italokrećani na našoj obali", *Prilozi povijesti umjetnosti u Dalmaciji* 16 (1966), 267.

²⁴ In keeping with the tradition of Palaiologan art but also of earlier Byzantine periods, the most popular icons of the Cretan School were those of the Virgin, notably the Glykophilousa, Hodegetria and Passion types, cf. S. Rakić, "The Representations of the Virgin on Cretan Icons in Serbian Churches in Bosnia-Herzegovina", *Serbian Studies: Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies* 20/1 (2006), 58. For a detailed classification with iconographic and stylistic characteristics of Cretan School production by period supported by plentiful examples see P. L. Vocotopoulos, "Iconographie et style des icônes dans le Bassin méditerranéen et les Balkans", in *Îcônes: Le Monde orthodoxe après Byzance*, ed. T. Velmans (Paris: Hazan, 2005), 35–98.

²⁵ L. Mirković, "Ikone grčkih zografa u Jugoslaviji i u srpskim crkvama van Jugoslavije", *Ikono-grafske studije* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1974), 336–343.

²⁶ On the church of St George in historical context and on its importance for the Greek Orthodox community in Venice and beyond see S. Antoniadis, "Introduction", in *Îcônes de Saint-Georges des Grecs et de la Collection de l'Institut*, ed. M. Chatzidakis (Venice: Neri Pozza, 1962), xvii–xxvi.

²⁷ Z. Demori-Staničić, "Neki problemi kretske-venecijanskog slikarstva u Dalmaciji", *Prilozi povijesti umjetnosti u Dalmaciji* 29 (1990), 89–90. It may be interesting to note that in 1499 Venetian dealers commissioned Cretan painters to paint 700 icons of the Virgin, of which 200 "alla greca". Cretan painters were commissioned to do icons for Roman Catholic cathedrals and monasteries across the territories under Venetian administration, cf. Chatzidakis, *Icons of Patmos*, 25.

²⁸ Dj. Mazalić, *Slikarska umjetnost u Bosni i Hercegovini u tursko doba (1500–1878)* (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1965), 168; Bettini, *La pittura di icone cretese*, 12.

²⁹ D. Medaković, "Srpska umetnost u severnoj Dalmaciji", *Muzeji* 5 (1950), 191.

the facts mentioned above, it seems clear that Cretan icons were easily available along the entire coast.

The Virgin and Christ's flesh is basically painted a fine cinnamon shade of brown.³⁰ Some parts of the faces are illuminated more prominently, with delicate whitish hatching around the eyes, on the forehead, nose and neck. The cheeks are painted in a fine pink, while the lips show a somewhat deeper pink shade. Two parallel lines drawn on each of their eyelids are quite typical of the Cretan School. The figures of mother and child are graciously elongated in the tradition of Palaiologan art, which is most distinctly expressed in the Virgin's left hand fingers.³¹ The icon gives the impression of technical perfection, balance and careful modelling characteristic of the best work of Cretan masters.³² The Virgin's grave and sad eyes, carefully traced eyebrows, soft and delicate skin are in the manner of the great masters of the Cretan School such as Angelos Akotantos³³ and Andreas Ritzos. The impression of volume is achieved by the strong contrast between broad highlighted areas and dark brown shadows, which is skilfully attenuated by layers of warm, pale pink flesh paint. The Virgin's strikingly sad eyes under her long arched eyebrows framed with a strong shadow running to the root of the nose lend particular expressiveness to her countenance. Still, the meticulous execution does not result in the cold, calligraphically precise form subsequently characteristic of the work of Emanuel Lambardos,³⁴ slightly

³⁰ Dionysius of Fournà, in the section of his manual devoted to painting in the Cretan manner, prescribes the use of a mixture of dark ochre, a bit of black and just a tad of white for a brown underpainting of the faces and flesh, cf. M. Medić, *Stari slikarski priručnici*, vol. III: *Erminija o slikarskim veštinama Dionisija iz Furne* (Belgrade: Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture, 2005), 153. Dj. Mazalić, "Kritska škola i njezini primjerci u Sarajevu", *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja u Bosni i Hercegovini* XLIX (1937), 58–59, explains that the difference between the Cretan and the Greek manners of painting flesh is in that the latter used different colour mixtures resulting in a predominantly greenish, olive-green shade instead of brown.

³¹ The second and third fingers of this hand are almost without exception prominently set apart from each other in the other Cretan icons of the Virgin Glykophilousa. It was obviously a standardized feature, tirelessly passed on and on by means of various models and painting manuals.

³² Z. Rakić, *Dela kritskih majstora i njihovih sledbenika iz Zbirke ikona Sekulić u Beogradu*, an exhibition catalogue (Belgrade: Muzej grada Beograda, 2013), 7.

³³ Very similar to the Savina Virgin in painting technique, shading and colour pattern is the well-known icon of St Anne and the Virgin Child produced by Akotantos's workshop (mid-15th c.), now in the Benaki Museum in Athens; for this icon see A. Delivorrias, *A Guide to the Benaki Museum* (Athens: Benaki Museum, 2000), 75; some authors, e.g. G. Babić and M. Hadžidakis, "Ikone Balkanskog poluostrva", 336, attribute this icon to Emmanuel Tzanes.

³⁴ Chatzidakis, *Icons de Saint-Georges des Grecs*, 85 – *The Virgin of Passion*, late 16th or early 17th century, fig. 56, Pl. 44; Z. Auflage, *Kurzgefasster Museumsführer* (Athens: Benaki Museum, 1965) – *The Virgin of Tenderness*, 1609, Γ-66.

diminishing the immediacy of manner and emotion. The general impression made by the Savina icon is that of rhythm and symmetry complemented by a noble elegance of posture and movement. The modelling of form by delicate hatching and shading, and the harmony of colours heighten the impression of the voiceless melancholy of the captured moment. As far as the demanding depiction of flesh is concerned, the Virgin of Savina is very close to several other icons, notably the despotic icon of the Virgin Hodegetria (late sixteenth century) from the Krupa Monastery painted by a renowned Cretan painter from Venice;³⁵ the Virgin Glykophilousa (Pelagonitissa) (sixteenth century) from the Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo;³⁶ the Virgin of Tenderness from the Church of the Dormition in Novi Sad (second half of the sixteenth century);³⁷ the Virgin of Tenderness from the Sekulić Collection of Icons in Belgrade (sixteenth century);³⁸ or the two icons of the Virgin of the Passion, one from the Collection of Icons of the Church of St. George of the Greeks in Venice (mid-sixteenth century),³⁹ and the other from the Banja Monastery near Risan, Gulf of Kotor (sixteenth/seventeenth century).⁴⁰

However, the painters or workshops of most Cretan icons, scattered throughout the Balkans and beyond, remain unknown. The Virgin of Savina cannot be dated with precision but comparisons with the published high-quality icons of the same iconographic type suggest a sixteenth century date.⁴¹ The sixteenth century was the flourishing period of post-Byzantine Cretan paint-

³⁵ He probably painted the despotic icons for the Krupa Monastery in Dalmatia in the late 16th and early 17th century. The icons remained unnoticed for a long time because they, too, were covered with silver revetments, which are now removed, cf. A. Skovran, "Nepoznato delo zografa Jovana Apake", *Zograf* 4 (1972), 44.

³⁶ Rakić, "Representations", 72 (R-8).

³⁷ P. Momirović, "Dve italokritske ikone Uspenjske crkve u Novom Sadu", *Zograf* 4 (1972), 65–67.

³⁸ Rakić, *Dela kritskih majstora*, 4 (3S 51).

³⁹ Chatzidakis, *Icones de Saint-Georges des Grecs*, 56 (fig. 20, Pl. 11). The icon might have been painted by M. Damaskinos.

⁴⁰ A. Čilikov, *Ikone u Crnoj Gori* (Podgorica: CID, 2014), 140.

⁴¹ Most of these icons have been dated to the 16th century, e.g. those from the already mentioned Sekulić Collection, where the Virgin Glykophilousa (3C 53), originating from Dalmatia, shows an identical iconographic pattern as the Virgin of Savina – cf. M. Bajić-Filipović, *Zbirka ikona Sekulić*, catalogue (Belgrade: Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture, 1967), 53; or several Cretan icons from south-western Serbia – cf. R. Stanić, "Nepoznate ikone u jugozapadnoj Srbiji", *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti* 11 (1975), 255–262; or the very sophisticated icon of *Our Lady of Dobrić* – cf. C. Fisković, "Tri ikone u Splitu", *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti* 11 (1975), 247–248; the icon of the Virgin Glykophilousa from the Dormition Church in Novi Sad – cf. Momirović, "Dve italokritske ikone", 66; and others.

ing and significant artists. It seems, therefore, that the Virgin of Savina may be dated, with some reservations, to the same period.⁴²

The interrelatedness of the image, cult and popular piety in the social context of identity confirmation and preservation

It is known that the cult of the Virgin in the age of Baroque was largely focused on miracle-working icons in both Orthodox and Catholic environments.⁴³ It should be noted that such icons owed much of their increasing popularity to the famous writing of Agapios Landos *Miracles of the Virgin*, which was copied by hand or mechanically reproduced in many Serbian monasteries in the second half of the seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth century.⁴⁴ Copies of famous miracle-working icons brought from various lands contributed to a wider revival of the cult of the Virgin in the seventeenth century. The most popular were copies of the Virgin of Vladimir, the most highly revered icon of the Muscovite empire, its *palladium*.⁴⁵ It was in this capacity that it gained fame and was replicated across the Orthodox Christian world, since Russia was also seen as the protector of the Orthodox Christians living under Ottoman rule.⁴⁶ The veneration of the Virgin of Savina, which follows the Virgin of Vladimir in terms of iconography, may also be viewed in that light.

There has never been any written tradition about the Virgin of Savina. The belief in its miracle-working power was transmitted orally.⁴⁷ Such oral leg-

⁴² The eminent experts we consulted during our research also favour the proposed time span. Z. Rakić of the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, dates the Virgin of Savina to the second half of the 16th century, while B. Miljković of the Institute for Byzantine Studies, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, dates it to the late 15th or first half of the 16th century; Z. Demori-Staničić of the Split Department of the Croatian Conservation Institute, expresses the view that: "Delicately and softly executed linear patterns, with gradation and a marked use of linear parallels, indicate the period around the middle of the sixteenth century, i.e. the period before Damaskinos (1568–1600)."

⁴³ S. Brajović, *U Bogorodičinom vrtu: Bogorodica i Boka Kotorska, barokna pobožnost zapadnog brišćanstva* (Belgrade: Filozofski fakultet, 2006), 184–211; M. Timotijević, "Poštovanje Bogorodice Brnske kod Srba", *Saopštenja XXIX* (1997), 181.

⁴⁴ T. Jovanović, "Čuda Presvete Bogorodice Agapija Landosa Krićanina", in A. Landos Krićanin, *Čuda Presvete Bogorodice* (Vršac: Eparhija banatska, 2002), 241–252.

⁴⁵ Timotijević, "Bogorodica Smederevska", 57.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ The veneration of miracle-working icons among the Serbian Orthodox population north of the Sava and Danube rivers, where there were many respected miracle-working icons of the Virgin, was also based on and perpetuated by oral traditions, cf. M. Timotijević, "Između sećanja i istorije: predanje o čudotvornoj ikoni Bogorodice Šikluške", *Saopštenja XLII* (2010), 167.

ends and tales actively connected the experiences of the community in the historical past and present with the holy image (Virgin) painted in the icon.⁴⁸ This historical memory of myths reflects psychological changes in the human perception of miracles.⁴⁹ Thus the miracle, as an experience of divine grace, becomes part of local collective memory entailed by icon veneration.⁵⁰

The practices surrounding the Virgin of Savina included the institution-ization, as it were, of some socially important aspects of customary law. For example, if there were no eyewitnesses to a crime, it was common to resort to having the suspect take an oath in the church, usually before its holiest icon. The same practice was followed in Savina, before the icon of the Virgin.⁵¹

It is important to keep in mind that the Virgin of Savina as a despotic icon in the Small Church played a role in daily religious services until deep into the twentieth century. The first time the icon was temporarily transferred from the Small to the Big Church was on the day of the Dormition of the Virgin in 1877. It was returned to the Small Church eight days later.⁵² The celebration of the feast day of the Dormition – when the icon was ceremonially carried in a procession around the monastery and then to an oak grove (*Dubrava*) and back – featured a particular amalgamation of official church ritual and popular piety.⁵³ The official celebration would begin with vespers at five in the afternoon, after which the procession with the icon of the Virgin would start from the church. Since, in the given religious and political circumstances, i.e. under Venetian rule, the Orthodox in the Gulf of Kotor were not allowed to mount a large town celebration such as was commonly set up by the Catholics,⁵⁴ they resorted to a compromise solution. The procession with the miracle-working icon would start from the monastery, *locus*

⁴⁸ V. Shevzov, "Icons, Miracles, and the Ecclesial Identity of Laity in Late Imperial Russian Orthodoxy", *Church History* 69/3 (2000), 628.

⁴⁹ Lidov, "Miracle-Working Icons", 49.

⁵⁰ Shevzov, "Icons, Miracles", 628–629.

⁵¹ Dj. D. Milović, *Prilog proučavanju krivičnih sudova dobrih ljudi u Komunitadi topaljskoj (mletački period)* (Cetinje: Istoriski institut NR Crne Gore, 1959), 62–63; Arhiv Herceg Novi [Archives of Herceg Novi], Političko-upravni mletački arhiv [Venetian political-administrative archive], fasc. 130, 103 (1); 210, 47 (1); 232, 4 (1), 13 (1); 233, 35 (2), 36; 247, 21 (1), 59 (1); 321, 336 (1).

⁵² J. Šarić, "Biļeške", *Šematizam pravoslavne eparhije Bokokotorsko-dubrovničke za godinu 1878* (1878), 29.

⁵³ Brajović, *U Bogorodičinom vrtu*, 8–9, clarifies the difference between cult (*culto*) and devotions (*devotione*). Cult denotes the official, canonically shaped expression of faith, while devotions are a form of popular piety expressed individually or in community outside of the liturgy. In practice, the two intertwine.

⁵⁴ On the Roman Catholic ritual celebration of the icon miracle-working icons of the Virgin in the Gulf of Kotor (Our Lady of the Rocks) see *ibid.* 266–294.

sanctus, proceed along the *via sancta* to the oak grove, and return to the monastery, symbolically completing a full circle.⁵⁵ In that way, profane spaces outside the monastic precinct, such as the abovementioned oak grove, become transformed into sacred spaces. A much larger area becomes included in the space for collective prayer, repentance and liturgical acclamation.⁵⁶ The processional completion of a full circle also becomes part of a more universal symbolism which goes back to the very roots, the archetypes at the heart of the order of the universe.

The procession was frequently headed by a bishop clad in episcopal vestments and holding a cross in his hand. Behind him followed many priests singing the hymn for the Dormition, and a crowd of the faithful. Having circled the church three times, the procession would head towards the oak grove, where prayers to the Virgin were sung. Upon the procession's return to the (Small) church, where the icon was put back in its place on the iconostasis, there followed the rite of anointing the faithful with myrrh and the folk rituals of making vows, honouring, kissing and giving offerings to the icon.⁵⁷ The relationship between these two forms of active piety was complex and inspiring, and ultimately in the service of the cult and power of the image.⁵⁸ The whole event also perpetuated the ancient hierotopic practice, where the beholder/believer, possessing collective and individual memory, spiritual experience and knowledge, participates in the creation of a sacred space.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ It may be interesting to mention a unique procession practice of the Hilandar monks recorded in the mid-18th century: the monks carrying icons in a procession begin to shake, jump and bend at the waist under the influence of invisible divine force. For more see B. Miljković, "Povest o čudotvornim ikonama manastira Hilandara", *Zograf* 31 (2006–2007), 219–220.

⁵⁶ These aspects have been discussed in detail by A. Lidov with regard to the Byzantine period, but their universality makes them applicable to later periods as well, cf. A. Lidov, "Spatial Icons. The Miraculous Performance with the Hodegetria of Constantinople", in *Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. A. Lidov (Moscow: Indrik, 2006), 351.

⁵⁷ N. Velimirović, *Uspomene iz Boke* (Herceg Novi: J. Sekulović, 1904), 51–53. The celebration of the feast day of the monastery, the Dormition of the Virgin, as described by Velimirović at the beginning of the 20th century has not since changed significantly. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that his detailed account may be taken as a fairly reliable basis for assuming how the celebration may have looked like in the 18th century, although we have no contemporary accounts.

⁵⁸ D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 96.

⁵⁹ A. Lidov, "Hierotopy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces as a Form of Creativity and Subject of Cultural History", in *Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. A. Lidov (Moscow: Indrik, 2006), 41.

The most explicit expression of popular piety was the practice of presenting votive offerings to the icon. The practice of offering votive gifts to the Virgin's holy images can be traced back to pre-iconoclastic times,⁶⁰ but it subsequently became widespread. It was common in coastal churches dedicated to the Virgin,⁶¹ and the miracle-working Virgin of Savina is no exception in that respect.⁶²

Most of the Savina *ex-votos* date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (figs. 2 and 3). They do not provide much information either about those who made them or those who offered them. Only a few are engraved with the mark of the workshop and the year of production (later period). Tradition has it that many believers, even the richest and the most prominent, used to come barefoot to the church to present their offerings.⁶³ Rows of votive gifts suspended on threads used to cover almost the entire icon.⁶⁴ When the icon was moved to the Big Church, the *ex-votos* were deposited in the monastery's treasury. Presently some fifty framed artefacts of the type are stored there. The *ex-votos* are diverse but all are made of metal. They have the form of crowns, hearts, small icons, boats, portraits, body parts (arms, legs, eyes), medallions, kneeling supplicants. The exact list of votive gifts in the treasury is as follows: three crowns; six hearts (one in association with a hand); five showing one or both eyes (two as one eye, three as both eyes); four hands or arms; three legs;

⁶⁰ P. J. Nordhagen, "Icons Designed for the Display of Sumptuous Votive Gifts", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41, *Studies on Art and Archaeology in Honor of Ernst Kitzinger on His Seventy-fifth Birthday* (1987), 459, argues that the practice led to the shaping of a special type of the Virgin's image in order to create the impression that the Virgin accepts the offerings with her own hands.

⁶¹ Brajović, *U Bogorodičinom vrtu*, 221. There were on the Eastern Adriatic coast several important Catholic votive shrines to the Virgin in the 18th century. One of the biggest collections of votive gifts is kept in the church of Our Lady of the Rocks in the Gulf of Kotor, cf. P. Pazzi, *Tesori del Montenegro II. Ex-voto delle Bocche di Cattaro: Perasto, Mula, Perzagno e Stolivo nelle Bocche di Cattaro (Secoli XVII–XIX)* (Venice: Merigo Art Books, 2010). Stating the exact number of offerings (1,427), Pazzi describes the technique of their manufacture and discusses the workshops that produced them. On votive offerings in Our Lady of the Rocks in the context of Marian piety see Brajović, *U Bogorodičinom vrtu*, 218–227. The shrines to the Virgin in Kaštel Štafarić (Kaštel) and Stomorska on the island of Šolta, Dalmatia, also had rich collections of *ex-votos* in the 18th century, cf. F. Cornaro, *Notizie storiche delle apparizioni e delle immagini piu celebri di Maria Vergine* (Venice: Presso Antonio Zatta, 1761), 570.

⁶² Besides respected icons, votive gifts were also offered to the relics of saints. A large number of such *ex-votos* can be found in the Serbian Orthodox monasteries of Hilandar, Dečani, Patriarchate of Peć, Ostrog, Studenica etc., cf. L. Pavlović, *Kultovi lica kod Srba i Makedonaca* (Smederevo: Narodni muzej, 1965), 285.

⁶³ G. Petranović, "Manastir Savina", *Srbsko-dalmatinski magazin za leto 1852. i 1853* (1856), 114–115.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*; B. Drobnjaković, "Manastir Savina u Boki Kotorskoj i ikona Bogomaterne Čudotvorke", *Pravda*, 8, 9, 10 and 11 April 1939.

Figs. 2 and 3

Votive gifts offered to the miracle-working icon of the Virgin of Savina, Treasury of the Monastery of Savina



one arm and leg combined; nine portraits; five kneeling supplicants; four boats; two depictions of bedridden ailing persons; two small icons of the Virgin and Christ; one icon of a praying saint; one icon of a saint praying to the Virgin and Christ; three medallions (one with a coat-of-arms showing a two-headed eagle and a partially legible inscription BURG CO. TVR. 1780. X on one side, and only DUX legible on the other; and one showing a man and a boy in oriental clothes).⁶⁵

By presenting votive offerings, believers established contact with the divine and made their intentions public, visible to others.⁶⁶ Being a part of popular culture, ex-votos constitute a rich source for studying the history of everyday life, of people's perceptions of death, fears and beliefs, as well as individual and

⁶⁵ Some ex-votos indicate the possibility that they were offered by members of other religions, which opens the way for interesting further research into the spread of the cult of the Virgin of Savina beyond the boundaries of Orthodox Christianity.

⁶⁶ L. Silling, "Metalni votivi u pravoslavnom manastiru u Bodjanima", *Rad muzeja Vojvodine* 53 (2011), 187.

collective identities.⁶⁷ Furthermore, through their visual rhetoric conveying human experiences, they acted as a link between generations and a means of their mutual identification.⁶⁸

As we have seen, most ex-votos in the Savina collection show anthropomorphic motifs. The votive identical in shape to persons seeking divine assistance or to a part of their body has been termed identificational or analogical.⁶⁹ Thus the votive depicting a head or a face, besides representing a particular person, was offered for fertility and a fortunate childbirth.⁷⁰ Having left their kneeling portraits in front of the icon, people believed they were under constant protection against illness because they were, symbolically, forever kneeling before the Virgin.⁷¹ A very frequent motif was the heart or the flaming heart. Its meaning could range from earnestness and gratitude⁷² to a prayer for the restoration of health or for a successful marriage.⁷³

Some Savina ex-votos are simple compositions. Their plain and schematically structured language was not a random choice. It ensured that their message was direct and readily understood.⁷⁴ There are two types of such compositions in the Savina collection. One type comprises depictions of prayers for recovering from illness, with the ailing person lying in bed (praying or surrounded by praying family members), and the Virgin and Christ in the clouds shown in the upper part. The other type comprises so-called maritime ex-votos,⁷⁵ which also have a two-part composition. The lower shows a boat, often in distress, while

⁶⁷ Brajović, *U Bogorodičinom vrtu*, 221; T. Mayhew, "Facing Death on the Sea. Ex-voto Paintings of Northern Adriatic Sailing Ships in the 19th Century", in *Faces of Death: Visualising History*, eds. A. Petö and K. Schrijvers (Pisa: University Press, 2009), 208.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 209.

⁶⁹ Ž. Dugac, "Zavjetni darovi za zdravlje u zbirci dominikanskog samostana u Starome Gradu (otok Hvar)", *Medicus* 13/1 (2004), 131. According to some authors, this type of votive offerings, often called health gifts because of their being offered due to health problems, indicate a great respect of female believers for the Virgin, cf. M. Timotijević, "Bogorodica Neštinska", *Sunčani sat* 10 (2001), 196.

⁷⁰ Dugac, "Zavjetni darovi", 133.

⁷¹ Silling, "Metalni votivi", 191.

⁷² R. W. Lightbown, "Ex-votos in Gold and Silver: A Forgotten Art", *Burlington Magazine* 121/915 (1979), 354.

⁷³ Silling, "Metalni votivi", 189.

⁷⁴ A. Pampalone, "Gli ex voto del Santuario di Gallinaro Riflessioni sui rapporti fra immagine culta e immagine popolare", *La Ricerca Folklorica* 24 (Artisti, icone, simulacri. Per una antropologia dell'arte popolare) (1991), 84.

⁷⁵ That the Savina monastery was held in great respect by seamen may be seen from a legend (happening at an unspecified time in the past) according to which the ships sailing past the monastery used to fire three shots in salute, and the brotherhood responded by raising flags and ringing all bells, cf. Petranović, "Manastir Savina", 119.

the Virgin and Christ are depicted in the heavenly space above.⁷⁶ Besides their prayerful function or the function of expressing gratitude for salvation from a dramatic storm at sea, maritime votive offerings were also an expression of seamen's wish to maintain a connection with land. Since the sea was often perceived as a God-forsaken, dangerous expanse of primordial chaos,⁷⁷ the ex-voto also implied symbolic communication between seamen and their families praying for them on dry land.⁷⁸

The veneration of miracle-working icons, including the Virgin of Savina, involved an especially important dimension which nurtured the sense of belonging and identification.⁷⁹ The holy image enabled bonding within the religious community and fostering ecclesial cohesion through the shared faith in the same divine power.⁸⁰ The reputation of miracle-working icons often crossed narrow religious boundaries, and icons kept in Orthodox churches were venerated by Catholics as well.⁸¹ There is a written record that "Serbs of the Muslim faith" also came to bow and pray to the Virgin of Savina.⁸² We know that Catholics of the Gulf of Kotor and Dubrovnik used to come to the Savina monastery for the celebration of Dormition Day.⁸³ Although there was a strong Marian cult within the local Catholic community,⁸⁴ some of the Savina ex-votos were of-

⁷⁶ Brajović, *U Bogorodičinom vrtu*, 221.

⁷⁷ G. Restifo, "Hanging Ships: Ex-Voto and Votive Offerings in Modern Age Messina Churches", *Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea* 4 (2010), 421.

⁷⁸ Mayhew, "Facing Death", 219.

⁷⁹ The Roman Catholic Church expressed itself as a distinct entity through public events, town rituals, processions and sacred dramas. The Orthodox Church did not have that opportunity under the Venetian religious and political administration, and for that reason there was yet another distinctive aspect to its role. Since it was not the official church of the Venetian Republic, its fundamental role involved the effort to preserve the ethnic and religious identity of the Serbian Orthodox community as one of the pivotal points of multiculturalism in the area. For more on this subject and on socio-ethnic and religio-cultural aspects of multiculturalism and multiconfessionalism in the Gulf of Kotor in the 18th century see M. Matić, "Multikulturalnost i multikonfesionalnost u Boki Kotorskoj pod Mletačkom republikom u XVIII veku", *Etnoantropološki problemi* 4 (2016), 1101–1116. For intercultural relations in the Gulf of Kotor in earlier periods (15th–17th c.) see S. Brajović, "Interkulturalnost u Boki Kotorskoj renesansnog i baroknog doba", *Interkulturalnost* 1 (2011), 192–203.

⁸⁰ Shevzov, "Icons, Miracles", 629.

⁸¹ Timotijević, "Poštovanje Bogorodice Brnske", 186.

⁸² N. Ružičić, "Manastir Presvete Bogorodice na Savini", *Starinar* XI (1894), 109. The votive gift showing figures dressed in oriental clothes mentioned earlier in the text may be evidence of visits paid to the monastery by members of Islamic religion.

⁸³ Velimirović, *Uspomene iz Boke*, 38–40.

⁸⁴ There was almost no church in the Gulf of Kotor without an altar dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary or at least an especially respected painting of the Virgin, cf. N. Luković, *Zvijezda*

ferred by Catholics. The town of Herceg Novi, like most of the Gulf of Kotor and Dalmatia, was a multiconfessional and multicultural environment. Most of the social interaction was taking place between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic population, and under the watchful eye of the Venetian authorities. Although ordinary people belonged to different religious communities, their common ethnic origin, economic and political interests favoured interconfessional tolerance in Herceg Novi, and in the Gulf of Kotor in general,⁸⁵ as may be seen from mixed marriages concluded as early as the first decades following the Venetian conquest of the north-western part of the Gulf of Kotor from the Ottomans (1684–1687). The establishment of such ties was inspired primarily by the common striving for prosperity and they were the strongest guarantee of peaceful coexistence.⁸⁶ They are also considered to have had a considerable impact on the reshaping of old Balkan culture, on the intertwining of its eastern and western components, which is one of the features of the Baroque age in the Herceg Novi area, and of interculturality in general.⁸⁷ One of the most explicit examples of the influences of different environments, periods, motifs and forms amalgamated with distinctly local features is the Baroque structure of the Savina monastery's Big Church itself.⁸⁸ What also played an important role in local intercultural relations was the belief in the power of the cult of miracle-working icons which brought local people together regardless of their differences.

The aura of reverence surrounding the Virgin of Savina in this multi-confessional environment was closely connected with the role of the Virgin as "Champion Leader" or "Defender General" (*Vozbranoj vojvodje*). Her help in the successful defence of the monastery and the destruction of an attacking Venetian ship⁸⁹ strongly resounded in the local community both as a miracle and as

mora (Perast: Gospa od Škrpjela, 2000).

⁸⁵ V. Radović, "Prilog o migracionom faktoru u istoriji Boke", *Boka* 9 (1977), 309–310.

⁸⁶ M. Crnić-Pejović, "Prilog proučavanju društvenih prilika baroknog doba u hercegnovskom kraju", *Istorijski zapisi* 1 (1996), 100.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ M. Matić, "Architectural Forms of the Savina Monastery Big Church", in *Beyond the Adriatic Sea: A Plurality of Identities and Floating Borders in Visual Culture*, ed. S. Brajović (Novi Sad: Mediteran, 2015), 173–200.

⁸⁹ Legend has it that in 1762 a Venetian ship captain, Germano, tried to destroy the monastery with cannon fire from his ship. The brotherhood invited people to the monastery, and they ardently prayed together before the icon of the Virgin. As they prayed, the Venetian ship was struck by thunder and destroyed, and the monastery remained intact, cf. Petranović, "Manastir Savina", 114. In that way the Virgin's well-known role as Protectress of the City, crowned with a legend, was refocused to a different symbolic and visual centre, the monastery. Cf. C. Angelidi and T. Papamastorakis, "Picturing the spiritual protector: from Blachernitissa to Hodegetria", in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. M. Vassilaki (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2005), 209–223;

a warning. Perhaps it was this legend that inspired the respect of the Catholics and of the Venetian authorities as well⁹⁰ for the Savina miracle-working icon, thereby indirectly creating a “protective canopy” over the monastery and the Serbian ethnic community in the Gulf of Kotor. In this respect, the Virgin of Savina is certainly not a lonely example.⁹¹

The idea underlying the cult of the Virgin of Savina, then, was that of direct protection of the monastery and the local Serbian Orthodox community. The icon also played a role in consolidating the social power of the monastery as a centre. Thus, the miracle-working Virgin of Savina was given the role of an instrument of heavenly protection over the ethnic and religious identity of the community united by the authority of the monastery as a rallying point in the circumstances of foreign, Venetian, rule and the absence of the Orthodox ecclesiastical organization and bishop in the eighteenth-century Gulf of Kotor. That identity remains, therefore, an undeniable constitutive element of the multicultural Gulf of Kotor.

A. Naumov, “Bogorodičine ikone i ritualizacija odbrane grada”, *Crkvene studije* 3 (2006), 187–198. For more on this particular case of transposing the idea of the protection of the Savina monastery into the iconographic programme of the iconostasis of its Big Church see M. Matić, “Predstava ‘Stena jesi djevam’ iz manastira Savina”, *Saopštenja XLVIII* (2016), 291–297; M. Matić, “Ikona Bogorodičinog Pokrova iz manastira Savina”, *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti* 45 (2017), (in the press).

⁹⁰ Since religion was usually closely linked with tradition and ethnicity, it was an important factor in shaping Venetian policies. Unlike the Roman See and its Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, however, the *Serenissima* tended to look at other religious communities through the ethnic rather than the religious lens. Striving for the absolute sovereignty of the state authority, it uncompromisingly blocked every foreign influence which it thought might threaten the primacy of state interest (*ragione di stato*), cf. B. Cecchetti, *La Repubblica di Venezia e la corte di Roma nei rapporti della religione I* (Venice: P. Naratovich, 1874), 455–457. This is the background against which the attempted destruction of the Savina monastery (1762) by the Venetians should be viewed. From the Venetian point of view, it was not as much an attack on an Orthodox monastery as it was on a potential centre of the Serbian idea in an area under its rule.

⁹¹ In medieval times, a similar role of protector and conciliator was assigned to the Greek icon of the Virgin Mesopanditissa in Crete. It was the “guarantor” of peace and of peaceful coexistence between two opposed Cretan communities, the Venetian colonizers and the native Greeks. The cult of the icon was incorporated into Venetian religious practice, the icon became the palladium of Venetian Crete and a symbol of the “harmony” of colonial cohabitation, cf. M. Georgopoulou, “Late Medieval Crete and Venice: An Appropriation of Byzantine Heritage”, *Art Bulletin* 77/3 (1995), 488–489.

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