


ANA ĐORIĆ 
 Belgrade, Serbia
 E-mail: ana.djoric96@gmail.com

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THE LOOK THAT CAN PETRIFY: ANCIENT SPOLIA WITH MEDUSA MOTIF EMBEDDED IN SACRAL BUILDINGS ON THE TERRITORY OF SERBIA

ABSTRACT

The motif of a Gorgon i.e., Medusa, with prominent curls of hair and snakes wrapped in a Hercules knot, was very widespread in ancient Roman art. Inspired by the myth, Medusa's appearance was initially terrifying, but over time it changed and transformed into a representation of a beautiful young woman. Her apotropaic role in art was highlighted, but the Gorgon possessed both a prophylactic and astral character. Medusa as a protector transferred from the ancient pagan culture to the time of Christianity, as part of which her representations also appeared on spolia. Among them are funerary monuments built into the medieval monasteries of Rukumija, Nimnik, and the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Smederevo. Interpreted by the people, the three built-in spolia with the depiction of Medusa became the protection of these sacred buildings.

KEYWORDS: MEDUSA, GORGON, MYTHOLOGY, ANTIQUITY, PROTECTION, MIDDLE AGES, SPOLIA, SACRAL BUILDINGS, FOLK TALE.

INTRODUCTION

Medusa was the archetype of the “femme fatale”, whose destructive nature was expressed in her contradictions, and she was, at the same time, feminine but violent, beautiful but terrible, and represented eroticism but also death itself (Karoglou 2018: 4-5). Her representation in the form of a hybrid had the power to ward off evil and intimidate enemies, however, Medusa's apotropaic function was particularly prominent and significant (Milovanović and Anđelković Grašar 2017: 167).¹ Due to the similarity in appearance, the origin of the Gorgon was associated with the Neolithic snake goddess who symbolised, like Medu-

sa, birth, life, death, and rebirth, which was the reason for the appearance of the Gorgon's image on funerary monuments, ritual places of rebirth or, as described in the words of Miriam Robbins Dexter: “The tomb was also a womb” (Dexter 2018: 472).

With her mortality and a dangerous look that had the power to petrify, Medusa represented the embodiment of the harsh truth that death is an inevitable aspect of life, and her figure decorated and protected many funerary monuments of Roman art (Karoglou 2018: 8, 12), while it was one of the most represented decorative ornaments on the funerary stelae of the Roman provinces, especially around the year 100 (Dautova-Ruševljan 1983: 46). Examples of such funerary monuments were used as spolia by embedding them in the walls of medieval sacred buildings in the area of the Central Balkans, which will be the subject of this research. This paper aims to use mythological

¹ A hybrid is a being that was considered an anomaly, created from a mixture of human and animal body parts, as well as their characteristics. They were introduced to Greece from the Near East and Egypt during the 8th and 7th centuries BC.

and folk stories, as well as the characteristics and properties attributed to Medusa, to point out her role in the funerary context, as well as the importance of the reuse of ancient monuments in later construction.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MEDUSA MYTH

Medusa's name is formed by shortening Poseidon's title "Eurymedon", in other words, "the wide ruling one", into a feminine form that denotes epithets such as goddess, protector, or Medusa (Howe 1954: 214), while the term "gorgos" is translated from the Greek language as dreadful, dire, and atrocious. The myth of the Gorgon enjoyed popularity in ancient and Christian times, but its roots go back to the European Neolithic era, and can also be recognised in Indo-European iconography and mythology (Dexter 2018: 463-464).

The inspiration for certain elements of the Medusa myth were found in "The Epic of Gilgamesh", more precisely in the character of the demon Humbaba who was defeated in battle by the Sumerian king and hero Gilgamesh by cutting off his head. In addition to the same tragic death and protective role they both had, Medusa's representation in art finds a prototype in the appearance of Humbaba's head (Dexter 2018: 473-474). Nevertheless, Homer's "Iliad", which dates from around 750 BC, contains the first mention of the Gorgon in literature when describing the aegis of the goddess Athena and Agamemnon (Leaf 1900: 5.741-42, 11.36-11.37).² The terrifying appearance of the mythological creature could frighten the enemies, so shields decorated with her image were rich in Greek iconography (Dexter 2010: 26). In the description of the Trojan hero Hector, in the same literary work, Medusa's eyes are also shown as eyes that petrify and bring evil (Homer 2013: 8.349), while in Homer's "Odyssey", the Gorgon is described by Odysseus himself as a terrifying creature that resides in the Underworld (Dexter 2018: 465). Then, in Hesiod's "Theogony", the book talks about Steno and Euryale, the immortal sisters of Medusa, while she is described as a mortal and terrifying being, and at the same time an attractive young girl who mesmer-

ised the god Poseidon with her beauty. Also, in the same text, there is the first mention of Perseus beheading Medusa, after which the man with the golden sword, Chrysador, and the winged horse, Pegasus, are born (Solmsen, Merkelbach and West 1970: 270-281). The story of Gorgon also found a place in the literary pieces of authors such as the Greek poet Pindar, who significantly changed her description by attaching locks of serpents to Medusa's hair (Dexter 2018: 466-467), the Greek historian Herodotus (Hude 1908: 2.91) and Diodorus Siculus who connected the mythological being with Libya (Dindorf 1866: 3.55.3).³ Medusa appears in the play "Ion" by the tragedian Euripides, attached to the walls in the form of an antefix, where her apotropaic role was emphasised, considering that she guards the temple as well as buildings of different purposes (Dexter 2018: 467). In the same play, the Gorgon's blood is mentioned, which has the power to recover from illness and, at the same time, it can be deadly (Murray and Diggle 1913: 1003-1005), while from Apollodorus, in the 2nd century BC, it can be learned that her blood can save or destroy humanity (Hard 2008: 2.4.3, 3.10.3). Medusa's blood is like the poison of a snake, it is both a poison and its medicine at the same time, and Medusa herself represents both death and regeneration (Dexter 2018: 468). A significantly different story about the Gorgon than the one recorded by Hesiod in his "Theogony", which is still known today, is presented by the Roman poet Ovid. He provides us an insight into the story of the transformation of a beautiful woman into a serpent-haired Gorgon, as well as Perseus' slaying of her with a mirror, which he used so that he could see and avoid the power of her gaze (Humphries 1960: 4.617-20, 4.779-86, 4.794-801). It is notable that both Greek and Roman writers believed in the apotropaic power and dual role of the Medusa (Dexter 2010: 32).

THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF MEDUSA'S DEPICTION

Medusa, an important aspect of ancient iconography, was also considered a significant deco-

² The aegis is a shield.

³ The literary piece by Pindar is named "Pythia" and it dates back to 500 BC. The work of Diodorus Siculus dates back to the middle of the 5th century BC.

rative-ornamental element, which conditioned the adaptation of its appearance to suit the taste of the craftsmen who created it as well as their patrons (Jeremić 2017: 256, 259). At the beginning of the 5th century BC, the monstrous creatures of the archaic period were humanised and rationalised under the influence of the beauty standards of ancient Greece.⁴ During the Classical and Late Classical periods of Greek art, Gorgon's appearance changed, she underwent feminisation and her animalistic features softened, and she became an attractive young woman, with a noticeable influence of the archaic period. The composition with many new elements, which is considered the first beautified representation of Medusa in the art of Greece, is known as Medusa Rondanini. The altered depiction adorned with subtle, small wings on her head and a pair of snakes tied in a knot below her neck remains the embodiment of a tragic figure, who was both the aggressor and victim (Karoglou 2018: 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 14, 16).

Medusa's mesmerising gaze attracted attention but, at the same time, it posed a danger to any onlooker. The ability to look at the Gorgon's depiction without becoming petrified signifies that the viewer is immune to her powers and thereby becomes aware that Medusa is a representation, rendering her harmless. "Can represent the dangerous without endangering, the harmful without harming, the desirable without satiating" (Grethlein 2016: 100). A potential joke is created when depicting the Gorgon in works of art where she is made of stone - instead of the viewer, the Gorgon herself is petrified (Elsner 2018: 360).

During the Roman era, Medusa's image became a decorative element of numerous architectural buildings, such as temples and villas, but also objects of applied art, military equipment (belts and armour), weapons (shields), and oil lamps where, in addition to its ornamental and prophylactic character, its apotropaic function could also be seen. According to the myth, Perseus gave the head of the Gorgon, or Gorgoneion, to Athena/Minerva, who placed it on her shield. Gorgoneion, a representation of the head, bust, or mask of Medusa whose symbolic meaning is linked to the

expression and overcoming of subconscious fears such as the fear of natural disasters and animals, belongs to a group of demon depictions (Jeremić 2017: 255-256). The prevalence and popularity of the representation of this mythical creature was evidenced by the fact that the Romans created a Medusa cult for women who wore jewellery with her motif and believed in Medusa's protective power.⁵ For respectable Roman matrons, jewellery decorated with the image of the Gorgon was a symbol of divine female wisdom and a protector of women, it shunned unwanted glances and immoral behaviour and also had the function of an amulet, which made it very common and often worn. Jewellery with the representation of Medusa was found stored in the tombs of the necropolis of Viminacium, which indicates that, in addition to the protection of women, she was also associated with the perception of the afterlife (Milovanović and Anđelković Grašar 2017: 168-173, 175, 178).

The Gorgon representation, the emblem of suffering and death, was also used as a decoration for sarcophagi, urns, and funerary stelae (Frothingham 1915: 13). The reason for erecting a monument can be interpreted in several ways, but among the Romans who were familiar with the saying "Mors janua vitae", there was a fear of transience and that the deceased would fall into oblivion. They strove to use motifs that symbolised the phenomenon of dying and birth to create a vision of the world in which the souls of the deceased resided eternally (Milovanović 2001: 109). Also, anxiety and concern for the safety of the grave were present and, due to the need for protection, Medusa's figure appeared on them, which, with its apotropaic purpose, replaced the rosette, a favourite motif in the tympanum of the Noric-Pannonian stelae. On them, physiognomic similarities between the Gorgon and certain deceased individuals were observed, which indicates their intimacy with possible eschatological adulterants (Gregl and Migotti 1999: 155).

According to the beliefs of the Roman civilisation, the dead represented a greater threat to the living, and funerary monuments did not depict a terrible and sinister Gorgon, but a mythologi-

⁴ According to Kiki Karoglou, an integral part of the beauty standards of ancient Greece was harmony and proportion (Karoglou 2018: 3).

⁵ The Gorgon motif could be found on rings, cameos, lockets and earrings.

cal being with a sometimes worried, sometimes frowning, but essentially beautiful face. Medusa's role was based on her chthonic-astral qualities, and the Gorgon's character, especially in Late Antiquity, was associated with the Sun and the Moon (Gregl and Migotti 1999: 155-156). Medusa's head can possess solar roundness (Frothingham 1915: 16), as well as productive and destructive energy, and was considered an emblem of the Sun's disc. However, its representation resembles the Moon and, together with its prophylactic and apotropaic character, was associated with the lunar cult. According to Orphic interpretations, Medusa was presented at the entrance to Hades, and since Pythagorean teachings state that Hades was located on the Moon, in addition to being a lunar symbol, the Gorgon had the role of encouraging mortals on their way across the ocean to the Isle of the Blessed (Milovanović and Anđelković Grašar 2017: 167-168). With the added astral character, in which capacity it began to decorate funerary monuments, Medusa remained an important motif, weather with ornamental or symbolical connotations.

THE USE OF ANCIENT SPOLIA WITH THE REPRESENTATION OF MEDUSA IN THE MIDDLE AGES

As an eternal reminder of the defeat of pagan ideology, the victory of the church, and the glorification of the new religion, the phenomenon of using ancient spolia in the Christian context was very common. However, the changes to the ancient forms in the evolutionary process that they went through in contact with influences and Christianity itself are noticeable. Among them is the Gorgon, which was utilised in the time of Christianity because of the decorativeness of its representation, the continuous belief in its protective role, or, simply, the popularity of the motif (Milovanović and Anđelković Grašar 2017: 177-178).

There are several known uses of spolia with Medusa's image in Christian times on the territory of Serbia and one such example was built into the upper part of the outer wall of the Small Town of the medieval Smederevo Fortress, more precisely on the second tower to the left of the entrance. It is a stela from the Roman province of Upper Moesia, from the 2nd or the beginning of the 3rd

century AD, which most likely belongs to a group of monuments from Viminacium.⁶ The relief of the monument depicts the mythological story of the Return of Alceste, dedicated to the love and sacrifice of Alceste who died in place of her husband Admetus (**Figure 1**). The scene consists of a male figure with a lion's skin draped over his shoulder and a club in his hand, representing Hercules, while with the other hand he holds the hand of a veiled female figure, representing Alceste, whom the hero brings out of the Underworld. On the right is depicted a female figure standing behind a chair and Admetus, depicted in mourning. Based on the symbolism, it can be concluded that the sepulchral monument is dedicated to a woman who died before her husband, and the key theme is conjugal love. Regardless of the poor preservation of the portraits of the depicted figures, it is noticeable that it is the work of a skilled artist and that it possesses a few characteristics of provincial art, in which it was common to depict the described mythological scene (Pilipović 2007: 76-81). On the frieze of this architectural-type marble stele, below the scene of the Return of Alceste, wild animals, more precisely a hunting scene, are depicted. The upper part of the spolia, i.e., the tympanum, is decorated with the protectress of this monument, Medusa, with luxurious hair and two hippocampi flanking her (Pilipović 2006: 337-338, 341). Although displaced from its original context, the described monument retains its essential, apotropaic role, as indicated by the displayed Gorgon's head.

However, with the change of circumstances, the ancient spolia acquired a new meaning (Вранешевих и Шпехар 2019: 34), such as a female statue made of white marble, which was once situated in a specially walled niche of the first tower at the court entrance of the Small Town. The figure embedded into Smederevo Fortress was probably a sculptural work of the Viminaci-

⁶ Sanja Pilipović points out the fact that the creation of the monument to the Return of Alceste is attributed to a local, Upper Moesian workshop. It is assumed that the work was created in Viminacium or its surroundings, considering that the ruins of Viminacium were used as construction material for Smederevo Fortress. However, we should not ignore the possibility that the workshop of ancient Vincea (near Smederevo) was also able to create a complex monument such as this (Pilipović 2007: 11, 76-77).



Figure 1. Spolia with a representation of the Return of Alceste, Smederevo Fortress (photographic documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).

um forum of the 2nd century AD, to which Leontije Pavlović adds the interpretation that it was a rare statue of the Greek goddess Hestia or the Roman Vesta (Павловић 1980: 153). In the statue, the people of medieval Serbia recognised the image of the Despotess Irene Kantakouzene, wife of the Despot Đurađ Branković, whose foreign origin was perceived in a negative context.⁷ Foreigners were characterised as evil, thus, in folklore the Despotess was described as an arrogant and damned woman, blamed for the political downfall of the Despotate. She was also credited with compelling people into forced labour, and in the desire to avenge the sufferings of their ancestors during the construction of Smederevo Fortress, “every good Serb had the duty to throw a stone” at the sculpture of the Roman goddess. The reason was the perception of the female figure as the Despotess, known among the people as the Damned Jerina, which caused the tower in whose niche the statue was placed to be named “Jerina's Tower” (Anđelković Grašar and Nikolić 2017: 100).

⁷ Irene Kantakouzene was Greek by origin.

Thanks to folk tradition, the Christian world accepted a pagan mythical being like Medusa (Николић 2018: 255). People interpreted myths and legends in many ways, which led to the creation of certain patterns and models in folk tales that served to explain various behaviours and phenomena (Anđelković Grašar and Nikolić 2017: 95). The same situation is noticeable in the myth and representation of Medusa, which, depicted on ancient spolia in the territory of the Central Balkans, is connected with Christianity and received a different purpose from the original one (Milovanović and Anđelković Grašar 2017: 176).

Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Smederevo

The foundations of the spiritual structure of the ideal vision of the medieval town were its sacral topoi, which for the last capital of the Serbian medieval state, the fortified city of Smederevo, was a church dedicated to the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The church has been preserved in its entirety and is located

on the plateau of a small elevation known as Karadorđe Hill, southwest of the former medieval fortifications and integrated into the framework of the present-day Old Cemetery of Smederevo (Црнчевић 2007: 63, 68, 72).

According to the results of scientific research so far, there is not a single piece of information that would precisely establish the time of construction and painting, or the name of the founder, besides the epigraphical material that was engraved into the fresco-plaster or carved into the church's door and window sills. The mentioned inscriptions have different content and date from several time periods, the youngest mentions the year 1914, while the oldest is placed above the southern window of the nave, on which it is mentioned that the temple was built in 1012. In addition to numerous interpretations by researchers, Mladen Cunjak and Branislav Cvetković state that the engraved year does not indicate the date of construction of the church according to today's reckoning of time and that its meaning corresponds to the time of the 15th century, more precisely the first half or middle of the century (Цуњак и Цветковић 1997: 19-24). It can be concluded that the church was built during the construction of the nearby fortification, between 1428-1456, during the reign of the Despot Đurađ Branković (Спречић 2020: 122-149).

Considering the similarity of the materials and ornamentation used in the construction of the church and the medieval fortification, as well as the fact that no founding charter was found and that the founder remains unknown, many researchers associate the sacred building with the Branković family. More precisely, one of the assumptions about the original function of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is that it was the eternal resting place of Đurađ Branković and his wife Irene with their sons (Црнчевић 2007: 17-18). Many researchers tried to fathom the answer to this complex question, and from certain literary works that describe the *translatio* of St. Apostle Luke's relic, it could be concluded that the incorruptible body of the Evangelist was kept in the church itself (Мано-Зиси 1951: 154). A different claim, namely that the church had the function of a burial chapel, made by Žarko Tatić, was supplemented with an explanation many years later (Татић 1930: 55-62). M. Cunjak and B. Cvetković state that the building was

used for cult purposes since Late Antiquity, which found its justification in the claim that during the First World War when the Germans found a pagan temple with a sculpture of the goddess Nike in the area of the cemetery. In addition, research and the discovery of a triconchal church within Smederevo Fortress led to the conclusion that there is a possibility that the Old Cemetery was created around the cemeterial building, i.e., early Christian martyrdom, and that the church was intended to maintain the continuity of the old cult. The presented thesis is complemented by the archaeological research of Mladen Cunjak, carried out in the inner space of the sacred building, when thirteen graves were discovered in the nave and the western passage. One of them, discovered in the nave, is particularly highlighted as a potential burial place of the bishop of the Smederevo diocese or Metropolitan Athanasius, and the burial of the grave dates back to the middle of the 15th century (Цуњак и Цветковић 1997: 11, 47). Dejan Crnčević adds to the previously stated, yet unconfirmed, cognitions, the most probable claim that, according to him, the building had the role of a monastery church.⁸ However, the original function of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary has still not been established with any certainty (Црнчевић 2007: 13-24).

In the hope of discovering more information about the origin of this sacred building, researchers rely on its stylistic and architectural characteristics. The time of creation, political circumstances, the ability of the architect and stonemason, as well as the economic power of the founder influenced the modest decoration and dimensions of the church. The architecture of the Moravian school of the late Middle Ages is indicated by the ground plan in the shape of a concise triconch (atrophied Greek-cross or cross-in-square plan) and a nave surmounted by an octagonal dome with a narthex. Based on the foundation of the sacral building, it can be concluded who the possible founder was, considering that the developed triconch churches were built by the rulers, while the concise type of churches were built by church dignitaries or landowners. The exterior facade of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is made

⁸ The final research results are expected to be published in the PhD thesis of Dejan Crnčević.

of hewn stone blocks, partially pressed blocks, bricks in lime mortar and a cornice that divides it into two zones. The polychrome effect created by the material is enhanced by the shallow-relief plastic decoration in the form of two-part interlacing and geometric decorations on the door jambs and window sills (Цуњак и Цветковић 1997: 25-37). Among the decoration of the facade, two fragments of Roman funerary monuments stand out, built near the portal, one of which, with an inscription, is rotated by 90° in relation to the basic position, while the face of Medusa is shown in the tympanum of the other (Николић 2018: 253).⁹

Similar to the individual bricks with Roman markings that adorn the floor of the church, fragments of ancient Roman stelaе, integrated into the facade, are spolia. The nearby Smederevo Fortress also contains spolia made of the same materials and it is assumed that they come from Viminacium, Vinceia, Margum, or Aureus Mons. On the upper part of the funerary stele, made of fine-grained white marble and embedded in the northern part of the western wall of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the head of Medusa is shown flanked by two birds placed in the triangular fields of the monument (**Figures 2a and 2b**). The Gorgon is represented as a young girl, with an oval face and lush hair with clearly defined curls. However, due to damage, it cannot be confirmed with certainty that instead of certain strands of her hair, as in numerous other representations, snakes can be found that are tied into a Hercules knot under Medusa's chin (Milanović and Pilipović 2021: 264-265). The birds that frame the Gorgon's head, as on numer-

ous Pannonian monuments, suggest an eschatological rather than the usual, apotropaic function attributed to Medusa's representations (Gregl and Migotti 1999: 156). The described fragment indicates the possibility that the church was rebuilt during the time of Miloš Obrenović, similar to the Rukumija and Nimnik monasteries, whose walls were also embedded with ancient spolia (Цуњак и Цветковић 1997: 32).¹⁰

Rukumija monastery

The Imperial Chrysobull from 1018-19 describes the expansion of the Braničevo eparchy, but more information about the spiritual life there is obtained with the arrival of monks from Sinai, at the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century.¹¹ The mentioned monks founded monastery churches around the caves where they practiced asceticism or at the places of their graves. Among the sacral buildings, the Rukumija monastery was built on the burial place of Saint Martyr. The preserved sources do not provide the exact year of construction of the monastery, nor the identity of its first founder, who is assumed to be one of the Sinaites (Цуњак 1996: 5-6, 8) or Prince Lazar, with whom the building was associated (Спасић 1996: 219).

The medieval monastery is located on the left bank of the Mlava, between the villages of Bradarac and Kostolac, together with the Church of the Holy Ascension. Its name is associated with the now-disappeared village of Rukomija, which was first mentioned, together with the monastery, in the Ravanička Charter of Prince Lazar (Николић 2018: 137). However, according to Leontije Pavlović, the name Rukumija is connected with the word “gerokomija” which, translated from Greek, means home for the elderly, while Olga Zrnojević makes a different assumption and identifies the medieval monastery of Rukumija with the Vrljište monastery.¹² A detailed description of the

⁹ Branka Vranešević and Olga Špehar define this phenomenon as the “desacralisation” of funerary monuments. When reusing and turning the monument upside down, it becomes “unreadable” in order to ensure easier control of the forces that resided in the monument. They can also act in favour of the person who is responsible for its installation (Вранешев и Шпехар 2019: 35). Jelena Bogdanović states that Christian relics were embedded in the buildings of Constantinople, while commemorative inscriptions and reliefs with crosses were placed in the city walls, and had the function of strengthening the sacredness of the city. She then draws an analogy between the architecture of the ideal Christian capital, Constantinople, and its “miniature copy, Smederevo”, in order to point out the rulers' aspirations for the continuity of their capital. (Bogdanović 2016: 106, 130-131).

¹⁰ Ljubomir Milanović and Sanja Pilipović oppose this claim and state that the implementation of the spolia happened earlier (Milanović and Pilipović 2021: 270).

¹¹ It is stated that the Braničevo eparchy extends on both sides of the Morava River, between the mountains Rudnik, Kotlenik, and Kosmaj, as well as the mountains that make up the watercourses of the Danube, Timok, and Mlava.

¹² Departments for the accommodation and treatment of



Figure 2a. Detail of the west facade of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Smederevo (photographic documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).



Figure 2b. Spolia with a representation of Medusa, Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Smederevo (photographic documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).

monastery itself was given in the year 1733, while the sacred building that M. Ratković conjured up was destroyed by the Turks in retaliation to the Serbian people during the suppression of the First Serbian Uprising (Цуњак 1996: 15-16). Later, in the year 1825, the monastery was restored by the “neimar” Janja Mihailović and Nikola Đorđević, on the orders of Miloš Obrenović, after which it became a lay church, the appearance of which was recorded by Joakim Vujić (Божковић и Ђокић 2016: 103, 105).¹³ Also, J. Vujić, after visiting the monastery in 1826, noted that the building was razed to the ground and then rebuilt, while Mlađan Cunjak claims that a part of the building was added, not the complete building. Confirmation of Cunjak’s assumption was found in the ancient Roman spolia placed on top of the southern wall of the church, which suggests that a fragment of the monument was embedded in the preserved height of the wall (Николић 2018: 138).

Today’s architecture of the Rukumija monastery includes a single-nave building with a semi-circular apse, a distinct altar space on the east side, and a narthex on the west side. The exterior facade, made of crushed stone in lime mortar, is decorated with two niches, two doors, and shallowly carved floral ornamentation in the semi-circular lintel, while the remains of architectural stucco and corniches are not visible (Цуњак 1996: 27, 32-33).¹⁴

A special note of uniqueness to the external appearance of Rukumija monastery is brought by the aforementioned marble spolia from the ancient era, built into the southwest corner of the south wall, under the corniche of the sacred building. On the pediment of a fragment of the funerary stele, the figure of Medusa is represented, facing the viewer, in shallow relief, flanked by a bird on the left and right side, while two horses with their riders are shown in triangular fields (Миловановић 2009: 101-102) (**Figures 3a and**

3b).¹⁵ Based on the decoration and the rusticity of the workmanship, the spolia of Rukumija is dated to the period between the second and the first half of the 3rd century AD, and it is assumed that it was brought from the territory of Viminacium. Literary sources about the monastery are scarce, so it is difficult to determine the exact time of integration of the Roman funerary fragment into the monastery wall. It is assumed that it was built during the restoration by Miloš Obrenović in 1825, but due to noticeable damage to the exterior, it is possible that it was built in and demolished together with the monastery several times (Спасић 1996: 222).

The monument fragment with horsemen and the Gorgon was an iconographic inspiration for a legend about the brothers Pavle and Radule and their sister Jelica, recorded in the folk song “God Settles All Scores”, which Vuk Stefanović Karadžić recorded and published in the second book of his songs (Цуњак 1996: 10, 14).¹⁶ In short, the legend takes place during the time of Prince Lazar and tells of Pavle and Radule Radić, two noble brothers, who lived near the monastery of Zaova with their families, including their sister Jelica. The harmony of the story is interrupted by Pavlovica, Pavle Radić’s wife, jealous of the attention and love that the brothers gave to their sister, committing a series of crimes for which Jelica is blamed.¹⁷ The brothers condemned Jelica for crimes she did not commit and tore her apart by tying her to the tails of their horses. Also, the poem records that Prince Lazar built churches in the places where Jelica’s body parts fell. The Zaova monastery was built on the place where her head fell, the Bradača monastery where her jaw fell, the Rukumija monastery where her hand fell, while the Sestroljin monastery, according to some sources, was built on the place where Jelica’s eyes fell (Anđelković Grašar and Nikolić 2017: 95), and according to others, on the place where her brothers tied her to the horses (Цуњак 1996: 12). Apart from Jelica’s hand influencing the origin of

old and infirm people were located within the larger medieval monasteries.

¹³ “Neimar” is a term used for architects of the time. Janja Mihailović and Nikola Đorđević are also known by the names Janja Mali and Nikola Cincar.

¹⁴ The niche on the western facade indicates the saint to whom the church is dedicated, St. Nicholas, since his icon is placed there. One door is located on the west side and the other on the north side.

¹⁵ Bebina Milovanović assumes that the birds are doves, carriers of the soul of the deceased, or personifications of the soul itself (Миловановић 2009: 101-102).

¹⁶ The original name of the song “God Settles All Scores” in Serbian is “Bog nikom dužan ne ostaje”.

¹⁷ Unpleasant events are listed in order of magnitude, so Pavlovica first killed her husband’s favourite horse and eagle, and then their child.



Figure 3a. View of the wall under the cornice of the south facade of the Rukumija monastery (photographic documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).



Figure 3b. Fragment of a funerary monument with a representation of Medusa, the Rukumija monastery (photographic documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).

the name Rukumija, it also represents an important relic of the monastery of the same name. Josif Veselić mentions this relic in his writings, around 1860, while Leontije Pavlović writes about the cult of Jelica, about Pavle who was called a prince and the legend of the creation of the four monasteries, according to which the Radić family, vassals of Prince Lazar, had in their possession Sopot Hill where their villa was located (Anđelković Grašar and Nikolić 2017: 96).¹⁸

Analysing the folk tale and the song, the presence of Christian influences can be assumed, while the basis of the story is of a much older, pagan origin. In the poem, there is a motif of sacrifice that arises from a myth as a reflection of ritual practice. Human sacrifice is necessary to ensure the fertility of the land, animals, and people. Additionally, sacrifices were made to strengthen buildings by incorporating body parts into the future creation. The blood of the victim creates a new life, while the body parts become the foundation of the sanctuary (Спасић 1998: 319-320), and the consequence of Jelica's death, in addition to the isolation of the heroine and her ritual death, is the transformation of her body into the foundation of the church (Бошковић 2005: 75-76). Vuk Karadžić's song was created without a specific historical background, but the influence of Eastern religions and cults can be seen in the conflicting principle of good and evil, a dualistic principle where Jelica is described as an example of goodness, while her sister-in-law, Pavlovica, is the embodiment of evil (Цуњак 1996: 12-14). The elements in the poem point to the demonic nature of Pavlovica, and when we add to the above that she was a woman without her own name, considering that the name Pavlovica originates as the feminine form of her husband Pavle's name, it is not unusual that her character is associated with the visual representation of Medusa on the Roman marble funerary monument built into the wall of the Rukumija monastery. Medusa, similar to Pavlovica, was presented as a demonic being that acquired more and more human characteristics over time, and this fact led to the folk legend and the association of Jelica and her two brothers with the ancient spolia, i.e., the depictions on it (Anđelković

Grašar and Nikolić 2017: 95-96). On the other hand, the presence of horses, psychopomps, and messengers of the gods in folk tales leads to the assumption that the legend is about a Chthonic deity. Given that Chthonic and fertility cults were connected, it can be concluded that Jelica's cult was about a lower Old Balkan deity of fertility, of Chthonic character, who was given a Serbian name, and the entire story was covered with the veil of Christianity (Спасић 1996: 224-225).

Misunderstanding of information led to folklore reinterpretations related to magic, supernatural, and mysterious forces, as well as the interpretation of the monument using folk tales that largely distanced it from its original function (Anđelković Grašar and Nikolić 2017: 96). The best example of this is the song "God Settles All Scores", which was created according to archaic, mythical models but, over time, those individual segments of mythical stories were lost. Individual motifs became symbolic while others were reimagined and, thus, a Christian moralistic story about the posthumous reward of the righteous was created by which the piece, like many others, was adapted to the given time and population (Бошковић 2005: 81).

Nimnik monastery

Near Požarevac, in the village of Kurjače, in the area of Stig, there is a medieval monastery of specific and obscure etymology - Nimnik. No literary sources have been found that would indicate the time of construction or the name of the founder, so researchers rely on the dimensions and architecture of the sacred building, as well as folk tradition for more information. According to one recorded by Joakim Vujić, the construction of the monastery is attributed to a nobleman, a contemporary of Despot Đurađ, Prince Bogosav. It dates back to the last decades of the existence of the independent Serbian state, until its fall in the year 1459. However, in the Ravanica charter, it is pointed out that Nimnik was built during the time of Prince Lazar and that it was a metochion of the Ravanica monastery. Nimnik, in other words, the Marian monastery, the Temple of St. Nicholas, is connected to the village of Marijani, where it was built, and which appears in historical sources such as the charter of the Hungarian king Sigismund in

¹⁸ According to Leontije Pavlović, the Radić family lived in Belgrade and spent their summers at the Sopot Hill villa.

the year 1428 and the written confirmation from 1428/29, of Despot Đurađ Branković on the right of ownership of certain villages to the great leader Radič Postupović. For this reason, in many documents, the monastery is inscribed with the name of the village (Bojčković и Ђокић 2016: 88-95).

According to M. Kolarić, Prince Miloš Obrenović rebuilt the monastery on the old foundations in 1821 (Коларић 1966: 24), while, according to D. Kašić, it was in the year 1825 (Кашић 1960: 270). Nimnik became a simple, rectangular building made of crushed stone, which was also used for the construction of a small chapel called "Svetinja" where, according to tradition, the grave of Venerable Nikolaj Sinajit is located (Спасић 1998: 315-316). Joakim Vujić, when writing about the chapel, mentions the preserved relics of the saint (Вујић 1901: 65), and later Josif Veselić describes in more detail the legend of Nikolaj, the child of a monk who later became a monk himself. According to the legend, the hajduks killed a boy who was then buried by the monks at the place where the hajduks' family would construct a building which, after some time, would be converted into a chapel (Мирковић 2005: 100-101).¹⁹

The folk legend about Nikolaj falls into oblivion, suppressed by a different lore, which is supposed to date from the 19th century, and whose main actor is a Vlach girl, Nikolina. According to one version of the story, Ottoman Turks were responsible for her tragic death and, according to another, more widespread version, hajduks killed her while searching for a monastery to rob. They met the girl while she was tending sheep in a Vlach village and asked her questions that would help them fathom the location of the monastery. Nikolina's answer to each of their questions was "Nu šću nimik" which, translated from the Vlach language, means "I don't know anything", yet the hajduks found the desired place and robbed it. One of the group members, who was also the girl's godfather, expressed concern that she had recognised him, which is why the leader ordered him to kill her. The inhabitants of the Vlach village begin the search for Nikolina, who had not returned home, but they came across her burning body on a tree. The girl was then placed in

an oxcart to transport her body, but the oxen did not want to move until it was suggested to go to the monastery. Nikolina was buried in the place where, after repentance, the girl's godfather built a chapel in memory of her, and the monastery was named Nimnik in remembrance of the words that the girl repeated to the hajduks (Anđelković Grašar and Nikolić 2017: 97).

The retold lore was adapted into a poem "Holy Relic of the Nimnik Monastery", which can be concluded, based on the style and composition, to have been composed in the first decades of the 20th century.²⁰ The original legend of Nikolaj Sinait was replaced by the story of the girl Nikolina, whose potential iconographic inspiration was found in the representation in the profiled triangular field of the marble Roman stele located in the south-western part of the south wall of the monastery. The memory of the girl is preserved by a humanised depiction of Medusa on the tympanum of the ancient spolia (**Figures 4a and 4b**). On the oval face of the mythical creature, which is framed by thick hair with especially prominent curls, the cheeks and sad look are emphasised, and under the chin are stylised snakes that are tied into a Hercules knot (Спасић 1998: 316-317). The fragment of the funerary stele, embedded in the wall of the monastery, dates back to the second half of the 2nd and the first half of the 3rd century AD and originates from one of the Roman sites that administratively and territorially belonged to Viminacium (Николић 2018: 254-255).

The tale was finalised in a song of lyrical sensibility which, although containing metaphors of historical-ideological origin, was based on an older core, myth, or ritual. Lyrical tradition and ancient spolia found the closest analogy in the Rukumija monastery, i.e., to the song "God Settles All Scores", which is much older. Regardless of the chronological differences, both songs hide a mythological meaning and have an identical key motif of the victim, i.e., the innocent suffering of the female protagonist. Sacrifice was necessary in order for a new beginning to be created, and every birth results from death, and death foreshadows a new birth. Christianity incorporated

¹⁹ In the 19th century, the term "hajduk" denoted Balkan brigands or bandits who attacked and robbed the wealthy.

²⁰ All written traces of the poem "Holy Relic of the Nimnik Monastery" have been lost and its original name in Serbian is "Svetinja manastira Nimnika".



Figure 4a. View of the south-western part of the south wall of the Nimnik monastery (photographic documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade);



Figure 4b. Tympanum of a Roman funerary stele as spolia, the Nimnik monastery (photographic documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).

concepts such as immortality, universal fertility, and renewal, which permeate the poem and form the essence of fertility myths and mysteries, into the concept of Salvation (Спасић 1998: 318-320).²¹ In the case of the spolia installed in the monasteries of Nimnik and Rukumija, with decoration in the form of a subtle and gentle face of Medusa, whose apotropaic function was accepted, due to folk tale, in the world of Christianity, the triumph of justice, punishment of the guilty and repentance, which was achieved by uniting pagan and Christian ideas, is visible (Milovanović and Andelković Grašar 2017: 177).

CONCLUSION

Medusa's motif with locks of hair curled in the form of snakes, represented alone or in combination with birds, was widespread in almost all Roman provinces, especially during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. Her image, which adorns the tympanums of ancient funerary stelae, was particularly cherished in the West and was transferred to Pannonia via Italy. As an eagle and a rosette, the Gorgon possessed a symbolic meaning such as prophylactic and apotropaic, and later an astral character on funerary monuments. Medusa's head is represented on numerous Aquincum stelae, dated to the period between Trajan and Antoninus. In Sopianae it appears in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, on the stela of Brigetius and Intercisa from the first half of the 2nd to the 3rd century AD, and its motif also adorns 2nd and 3rd century AD stelae from Dalmatia, Dacia, and Pannonia. The companions of souls in the afterlife, dolphins, are also combined with the Gorgon motif and can be found on one stele from Singidunum and one from the province of Upper Moesia, more precisely Viminacium, which dates to the middle of the 2nd century AD. According to their skills and abilities, local craftsmen independently made stelae with the widespread and popular Medusa decoration on them (Dautova-Ruševljan 1983: 46-47).

Thanks to its eschatological and protective role, the use of the motif of Gorgon's face continued in Christian visual culture. In Byzantium and the medieval West, the representation of Medusa found numerous applications, and on the walls of

Hagia Sophia, she was a symbol of the triumph of Christianity over paganism, the protector of the Chalke Gate, but also of a private object such as an ink container, whose lid is adorned with Medusa's image that has the function of a guardian of ink, but also the protector of the container from the jealousy of other scribes. The Gorgon also appears in literary texts of the Middle Ages, and its apotropaic function is significantly learned from Ovid's "Metamorphosis" (Milanović and Pilipović 2021: 270-272).

Spoliation, which finds a new use for neglected, damaged, or deliberately removed parts of monuments, is considered a representative phenomenon of medieval culture (Вранешевић и Шпехар 2019: 34), and this is also the case with spolia decorated with representations of Medusa. Spolia built into the texture of a wall of a building were not chosen at random and were not hidden but highlighted together with the complicated, ideological messages they carried. Also, spolia established continuity and connection between the ancient past and the medieval present but also provided magical protection (Kiilerich 2005: 104-106). The motif depicted on the monument took on the role of a talisman, which stemmed from the superstitious Christian view of pagan statues that were not seen as evil but, on the contrary, as powerful (Вранешевић и Шпехар 2019: 35). It is difficult to determine precisely the purpose of the stone spolia used in architecture, but considering that they are mostly visible, it is assumed that this use was of an apotropaic character (Greenhalgh 2011: 86).

Researchers started to look at the process of using spolia contextually, especially on the Balkan Peninsula. The area of Viminacium and the ancient sites in the vicinity abounded in Roman monuments that were chosen as adequate building materials for construction during turbulent times for the medieval Serbian state. The appearance, selection, and new position of the spolia indicate that the builders were guided by the wishes of the founders of the buildings or the creators of the ideas of the Despot's ideological and political programme (Вранешевић и Шпехар 2019: 29-30). In order to emphasise the civil and city concept, as well as his own prestige, Đurađ Branković developed a system of "tying" the Despotate to the continuity of ancient Rome and the political legitima-

²¹ Eleusinian and Orphic Mysteries.

cy of the founder of Constantinople (Цветковић 2011: 400-401). The aforementioned claim suggests that numerous Roman monuments were not built in the fortification walls of Smederevo due to a lack of materials. Unfortunately, the founder of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary remains unknown, but it is possible that the inspiration for incorporating spolia into this sacred building was found in the future capital, i.e., the nearby medieval fortress (Milanović and Pilipović 2021: 273). Also, ancient material was used and interpolated during the construction of later churches. After the Second Serbian Uprising and the restoration of Miloš Obrenović, during the 19th and 20th centuries, the local population of the Braničevo district carried away bricks and stones after dismantling the graves (Николић 2018: 39, 243). Based on the assumptions presented, it can be concluded that, under the influence of Antiquity and its authority, the incorporation of spolia was a clearly planned programme of builders and founders with the aim of establishing political legitimacy.

Although they were placed in striking places for better visibility, many people do not know who, how, or why spolia were made. Insufficient knowledge of the real function of the monuments led to their interpretation by the people who explained the unknown by creating a legend that was linked to mysterious and supernatural forces. Considering that folk tales are placed between reality and imagination, they hide certain historical data but, at the same time, they distance the observers from understanding the original function of the monument. In addition to explaining phenomena, folklore formed the basis of what people consider culture, society, and history, and it could also serve to establish cultural heritage, norms, and values, and make a clear distinction between one's own and another's way of life (Voss 1987: 80-81, 88). There is an interesting connection established between the past and the present, but also a bond between the interpretation of folk poems and the ancient Roman spolia built in the medieval Serbian monasteries of Rukumija, Nimnik, and the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Smederevo. Three funerary fragments with the representation of Medusa acquired a different message by incorporating them into the walls of these buildings. The mythical being, with

its powerful gaze, protects the sacred places from unwanted visitors with sinful thoughts, which is best illustrated and concluded with the inscription on the Serapeon's treasury on Delos: "Visitor, do not be afraid to see me, when standing in front of me, Gorgon. Night and day, I am sleeplessly watching the sacrificial room, belonging to God. Throw it joyfully, as much as you wish, through my mouth, into my spacious belly" (Jeremić 2017: 255).

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REZIME

POGLED KOJI MOŽE DA OKAMENI: ANTIČKE SPOLIJE SA MOTIVOM MEDUZE UGRAĐENE U SAKRALNE GRAĐEVINE NA TERITORIJI SRBIJE

KLJUČNE REČI: MEDUZA, GORGONA, MITOLOGIJA, ANTIKA, ZAŠTITA, SREDNJI VEK, SPOLIJE, SAKRALNE GRAĐEVINE, NARODNA TRADICIJA.

Pogled Meduze koji može da okameni predstavljao je opasnost po svakog posmatrača, te je njen lik krasio brojna arhitektonska zdanja, predmete primenjene umetnosti, vojne opreme i nakitа rimske epohe. Kao otelotvorenje surove istine da je smrt neizbežan aspekt života, Gorgonina predstava postaje najzastupljeniji dekorativni ornament na funerarnim stelama rimskih provincija.

Predstava Gorgone inspirisana je njenim mitom koji uživa popularnost kod pagana i ranih hrišćana, a njegovi koreni sežu u epohu evropskog neolita i mogu se raspoznati i u indo-evropskoj mitologiji i ikonografiji. Meduzina predstava se vremenom adaptirala, te feminizacijom i ublažavanjem njenih animalističkih karakteristika ona postaje lepa mlada žena. Motiv Meduze postaje jedan od najmoćnijih simbola, a njen izmenjeni prikaz koji krase suptilna, mala krila na glavi i par zmija uvezanih u čvor ispod brade, postaje arhetip „fatalne žene”.

Rimljani su težili da motivima koji simbolišu fenomen umiranja i rađanja kreiraju viziju sveta u kome večno borave duše pokojnika. Takođe, u

rimskej eposi prisutne su strepnja i briga za sigurnost groba te se, zbog potrebe za zaštitom, na zabatima funerarnih spomenika pojavljuje Meduza sa istaknutom apotropejskom funkcijom.

Kao večni podsetnik na poraz paganske ideologije, pobjede crkve i glorifikaciju nove religije, dolazi do upotrebe antičkih spolija sa paganskom konotacijom u hrišćanskom kontekstu. Fenomen spolijacije, koji spomenicima pronalazi novu primenu, predstavljao je zastupljenu pojavu u srednjem veku.

Primer takve spolije uzidan je u gornji deo spoljašnjeg zida Malog grada srednjovekovne Smederevske tvrđave. Na reljefu spomenika prikazana je mitološka priča Povratak Alkeste, dok timpanon spolije krase zaštitnica ovog spomenika, Meduza, sa dva hipokampa koja je flankiraju. U blizini Smederevske tvrđave nalazi se crkva Uspenja Presvete Bogorodice, u čiji je severni deo zapadnog zida uzidana antička spolija. Gornji deo uzidane funerarne stele dekorisan je predstavom Meduzine glave sa dve ptice smeštene u trougaonu polju spomenika, koja ukazuje na mogućnost da je crkva obnovljena u vreme Miloša Obrenovića, nalik manastirima Rukumiji i Nimniku u čije zidine su takođe ugrađene antičke spolije.

U jugozapadni ugao južnog zida manastira Rukumije uzidana je mermerna spolija na čijem je zabatu predstavljen, frontalno sa pogledom ka posmatraču, Meduzin lik koji sa leve i desne strane flankira po jedna ptica, dok je u trougaonim poljima prikazan po jedan konj sa svojim jahačem. Fragment spomenika predstavlja ikonografsku inspiraciju predanja o braći Pavlu i Radulu i njihovoj sestri Jelici, opevanu u narodnoj pesmi „Bog nikom dužan ne ostaje”.

Narodno predanje i antička spolija Rukumije pronalaze najbližu analogiju u manastiru Nimnik gde je priča o Nikolaju Sinajitu, tačnije o devojčici Nikolini pronašla ikonografsku materijalizaciju na predstavi u profilisanom trougaonom polju mermerne rimske stele, smeštene u jugozapadni deo južnog zida. Sećanje na tragično stradalu devojčicu očuvano je humanizovanim prikazom Meduze na zabatnom delu antičke spolije.

Ljudi su mitove i legende tumačili na mnogo načina, što je dovelo do stvaranja određenih šablona i modela u narodnim pričama koji su služili da pojasne različite pojave. Ista situacija je primetna kod spolija, dekorisanih Meduzinim likom, sa ter-

itorije centralnog Balkana, te se može zaključiti da hrišćanski svet prihvata ovo pagansko mitsko biće zahvaljujući narodnoj tradiciji.

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