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**«THROUGH THE LABYRINTH»: THE REPRESENTATION
OF THE MAZE IN RESAVA MONASTERY. PATRISTIC
SOURCES AND CONSTANTINOPOLITAN INFLUENCES ****

For medieval Christian societies, both in the East and in the West, the idea of labyrinth (λαβύρινθος) or the maze was a central symbol that conveyed an astonishing wealth of meanings.¹ As with any symbol, the potency of this sign was directly proportional to the number of its implied meanings. Adding to the allure of the maze was that its significance could change according to the context in which appeared.²

In the Church, it suggested both death and eternal life. Even the position of the viewer affected the psychological force of the labyrinth seen as a whole from above, the maze resonated with Divine perfection; but experienced from within it baffled and warned the spiritual pilgrim.³ Within many of the great Gothic cathedrals such as Chartres, San Michele Maggiore, Pavia, and San Vitale, Ravenna, lay large floor labyrinths.⁴ Most of these face the altar as

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G. Ladner, *Homo Viator: Medieval Ideas on Alienation and Order*, Speculum 42-2 (1967), 233-259; *Labyrinth*, In: Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art, ed. H. E. Roberts, Routledge, London 2013, 485.

² K. Critchlow, *Chartres Maze: A Model of the Universe*, Architecture Association Quarterly 5/2 (1973): 11-21; E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, London: Oxford University Press, 1903, 128-29; E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, London:

George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1952, 75; P. Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 123, 134.

³ I. Chodorow, *To Move and Be Moved*, Quadrant Vol. 17, 2 (1984), 41.

⁴ J. Fawcett, *Historic floors: Their care and Conservation*, Butterworth – Heine-mann, Oxford 2001, 23; S. Skinner, *Sacred Geometry: Deciphering the Code*, Octopus Publishing Group, New York 2006, 134; E. Paliou, - D.J. Knight, *Mapping the senses: Perceptual and Social aspects of Late Antique Liturgy in San Vitale, Ravenna*, Proceedings of



Fig. 1. Labyrinth motif, above doors of lateral apses, Holy Trinity Church, Resava Monastery, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл. 1. Мотив лавиринта, изнад врата бочних апсида, црква Свете Тројице манастира Ресава, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

the dominant feature of the nave, and are either round or octagonal in shape. They vary in size from cathedral to cathedral. In France, some measure massive twelve and half meters in diameter, large enough to walk on, following the path into the center.⁵ Neo - Platonic writer Pseudo - Dionysius (c. 5th-6th century A.D.) used the concept of the illumination of God traveling through the angelic spheres. The hierarchy of the nine angelic spheres danced a tripartite dance.⁶ The purpose of the choral dance of the angels was to spread the illumination of God to the human hierarchy below. The head of the human hierarchy was the hi-

CAA 2010, Computer Applications and Quantitative methods in Archaeology, International Conference, Granada 6-9 April, 2010, British Archaeological Reports S2494, Archaeopress, Oxford 2013, 229 – 236.

⁵ Notre Dame de Chartres Cathedral is built over the original spring in the crypt where the Druids used to worship, and the statue in the crypt chapel of the Black Madonna, Notre Dame Sous-Terre, seated with her divine son in her lap, is a reproduction of the original pear-wood carving (destroyed in the Revolution) that predated the Christianization of Western Europe and the twelfth century cathedral itself. Even before the birth of Christ, there was at the *partitura*. This was the Virgin of the Druids, one third of the Triple Goddess, transposed into Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus, as the pagans were converted. L. Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path* (New York: Riverhead Books 1995, 120; K. Critchlow, *Chartres Maze: A Model of the Universe*, Architecture Association Quarterly 5/2 (1973), 11-21.

⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* Translated by Colm Lubheid (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987).

erarch or bishop, whose main task was to mimic the angelic hierarchy. The hierarch performed the Eucharist and the main purpose of the Eucharist was to pass on the illumination of God.⁷ By the time the large labyrinths were built into medieval cathedrals, Pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* were two of the most influential books of their time. The *tripartite* dances of the clerics in the Church on Easter Monday were danced on a labyrinth. To follow the pattern of these large labyrinths is to encircle the labyrinth, halt and then encircle the labyrinth in opposite direction, to move through the labyrinth is to turn – halt – counter-turn. This Easter ceremony was the path of pilgrimage of the soul to receive the illumination of God to seek the understanding of Perfect.⁸ Through the performance of this dance, the Christian mysteries could transcend the mere natural and enter into the realm of the incorporeal through the symbols of the corporeal realm.⁹

Spiritual pilgrimage became embodied in the concept of the labyrinth mentioned in preserved written sources. Resava monastery is mentioned as a *path* to the Heavenly *Jerusalem* in Vita of despot Stefan Lazarević, written by Constantine of Kosteneć. Motif of the path indicates that the Resava's ktetor had built his monastery of St Trinity "in imitation of and as a path to the Heavenly Jerusalem".¹⁰ This sort of narrative could be additionally confirmed in lavishly conceived register with the labyrinth motif above lateral doors in St Trinity



Fig. 2. Labyrinthine pattern above northern door, the Holy Trinity Church, Resava Monastery, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл. 2. Мотив лавиринта, изглед изнад северних врата, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

⁷ *Ibid*, 425c.

⁸ E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, London: Oxford University Press, 1903, 128-29; E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1952, 75; P. Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, London: Cornell University Press, 1990, 123.

⁹ C. Wright, *The Maze and the Warrior. Symbols in Architecture, Theology, and Music*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge - London 2001, 65.

¹⁰ V. Jagić, Konstantin Filozof I njegov Život Stefana Lazarevića Despota srpskoga, Glasnik SUD XLII (1875), 223 -328; especially 288; N. Radošević, *Laudes Serbiae. The Life of Despot Stephan Lazarević by Constantine the Philosopher*, ZRVI 24-25 (1986), 445-451; J. Erdeljan, *Beograd kao novi Jerusalem - razmišljanja o recepciji jednog toposa u doba despota Stefana Lazarevića*, ZRVI 43 (2006), 96-110; B. Cvetković, *Some Hierotopical Aspects of the New Jerusalem Programs in the Fifteenth-Century Serbia*, Novie Ierusalimi. Ierotopija i ikonografija sakralnih prostranstv, ed. A. Lidov, Moskva 2009, 607-632, esp. 608 – 609.



Fig. 3. Labyrinth depicted on the south door jambs between narthex and naos in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki, photo: Rémi Terryn

Сл. 3. Лабиринт насликан поред јужних врата између нартекса и наоса, црква Светих Апостола у Солуну, фото: Реми Теран

Church in Resava Monastery (Fig. 1, 2). Precisely, motif is placed above the entrances of both lateral apses, between the representations of Holy Warriors, exactly below their feet. It is painted with red, yellow, blue and green color.¹¹ While on the north side mentioned labyrinthine pattern is combined with grid, on the south side labyrinth is depicted as in two rows connected Greek key motif. This meander pattern is a path basic to the Classical labyrinths.¹²

Having in mind richness of written sources in Byzantium, it is possible to find correct exegetic explanations of this motif. It is well known fact that Gregory of Nyssa in his comments on Song of the Songs wrote: “In the art of painting, the material of the different colors fills out the representations of the model. But anyone who looks at the picture that has been completed through the skilful use of colors does not stop with the mere contemplation of the colors that have been painted on the tablet; rather he looks at the form which the artist has created in colors.”¹³ Painted labyrinth with four different colors represent the medieval metaphor which observed earthly life as a journey to Salvation¹⁴ sug-

¹¹ This motif is not mentioned in previous examinations of Resava. B. Todić, *Manastir Resava*, Beograd 1995, 95, 96 (with selected bibliography).

¹² N. Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, London: Robert Hale Ltd. 1990, 30.

¹³ *First Sermon on the Song of Songs*, PG 44: 776A.

¹⁴ P. Borgeaud, *The Open Entrance to the Closed Palace of the King: the Greek Labyrinth in Context*, *History of Religions* 14-1 (1974), 1-27; G. Ladner, *Homo Viator: Medieval Ideas on Alienation and Order*, *Speculum* 42-2 (1967), 233-259.

Fig. 4. Labyrinth below medallion with Archangel Michael, parekklesion of Christ the Chora Church in Constantinople, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл. 4. Лавиринт испод медаљона са представом Светог Арханђела Михаила, црква Христа Хоре у Цариграду, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



gesting that this life is full of challenges and a higher form of reality - Paradise - a place ruled by Divine order.¹⁵ Peculiar question is what could be the meaning of the labyrinths between the Holy Warriors above the door and could it be interpreted as translation of the Christ's prerogative to protect and defend the faithful, summarizing allusive and religious attributes where watching is an act of faith?¹⁶ Having in mind available and preserved sources, apotropaic functions are containable in Labyrinthine motives,¹⁷ summarizing allusive and religious attributes of walking through the act of faith identification of the liturgical function of believers or Christ's warriors as said in spiritual passage Ephesians 6: 11 – 16: "Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace."¹⁸ It is interesting fact that Gregory of Nyssa mentioned also path of labyrinth in connection with the rite of passage and divine presence during the Baptism. Moment of the bodyness and body movements through the labyrinth could be in direct nexus with the idea that every passage through portal and Christ as the Door ("I am the Door. Those who come in through me will be saved" John 10:9) and renewal through the Baptism. The essence of Christianity is in the focus in the act of passage: it is necessary to follow Christ

¹⁵ C. Wright, *The Maze and the Warrior*, 65.

¹⁶ E. Alloa, *Changer de sens. De quelques effets du tournant iconique*, *Critique, numéro spécial A quoi pense l'art contemporain?* N° 759-760 (2010), 647-658; Idem, *Visual Studies in Byzantium. A pictorial turn avant la letter*, *Journal of Visual Culture* 12.1 (2013), 2013, 3-29.

¹⁷ Gregory Nazianzen, *The Second Oration on Easter*, *A Selected Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. P. Schaff – H. Wace, vol. 7, Grand Rapids, MI: Eardmans 1989, 431.

¹⁸ *Grégoire de Nysse: La cathéchèse de la foi*, trans. Annette Maignan, Paris 1978, 90, footnote. 75.



Fig. 5. Labyrinth below Descent into Hades, parekklesion of Christ the Chora Church in Constantinople

Сл. 5. Лавиринт испод Силаска у Ад, црква Христа Хоре у Цариграду, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

in order to reach promised eternal life. In eschatological sense of speaking it means that it is necessary to follow the footsteps of Christ *as one would in a labyrinth*.¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa described this act as marching of faithful through the maze and continuous following the Savior who knows the exit.²⁰ Applied to the medium of frescoes in Resava above the portals this means that the worldly sins tempt the warriors.²¹

¹⁹ For the same motif below Anastasis composition in the parekklesion of the Chora Church in Constantinople cf. J. S. Ćirić, “*Πυ τούτ[η]ς νίκης*”: brickwork ornamentation narrative in Constantinopolitan Architecture during the period of Palaiologoi, *Niš i Vizantija* 12 (2014), 240, fig. 11.

²⁰ *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. L. Francisco Mateo-Seco, G. Maspero, transl. S. Cherney, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2010, 92. Similar is mentioned by Romanus Melodus and his comments on Hades and Christ’s descent in Hades: “While they slapped my face with prophecies, psalms, and hymns, Women arose and prophesied, dancing in triumph over me“. *On the Resurrection II, Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*, ed. M. Carpenter, Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1970, 266.

²¹ Saint Augustin also anticipated the image of Christian labyrinth and its parallels with Theseus and other personalities from classical mythology. Especially he noted that: “Let us therefore keep to the straight path, which is Christ, and with Him as our Guide and Saviour, let us turn away in heart and mind from unreal and futile cycles of the godless.” *City of God*, transl. Marcus Dods, New York 1950, 404. Ideology of Byzantine Empire and generally speaking Christendom this is also the symbol of Holy Warriors as carriers of light and crowned with the glory of martyrdom wreath because they did not convince the empire on Earth. Đ. Trifunović, *Srpski srednjovekovni spisi o Knezu Lazaru i kosovskom boju*,



Fig.6. Labyrinth below feet of Holy Archangel depicted in the dome of parekklesion of the Chora Church, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл. 6. Лавиринт испод представе Светих Арханђела у куполи нартекса параклиса цркве Христа Хоре у Цариграду, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

Labyrinths between Holy Warriors on both sides of lateral apses of the St Trinity Church in Resava could be seen as sort of representation of floor beneath feet represented in so called inverse perspective.²² Maze contains highly allusive meaning associated with the idea of wandering and *chorographic walking*,²³ possibilities of writing the body in Byzantine church; that is, of narrating a form of corporeal «autobiography» or body story, in which the movements of the body, and ones experiences of those workings, are key ingredients in the Liturgy and reception of metamorphosis by passing through these portals.²⁴

Kruševac 1968, 365 – 371.

²² A. Stojaković, *Arhitektonski prostor u slikarstvu srednjovekovne Srbije*, Novi Sad 1970, 50, 80, 153, 166.

²³ L. Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice*, Riverhead Trade 2006; W. H. Mathews, *Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and Development*, Dover publications 2011; C. Wright, *The Maze and the Warrior*, 145 – 150.

²⁴ L. B. Lawler, *The Geranos Dance – A New Interpretation*, *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 77, (1946), 118; N. Isar, *The Vision and Its „Exceedingly Blessed Beholder“: Of Desire and Participation in the Icon*, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 38 (Autumn, 2000), 56-72. Especially: “to see the divine as something external is to be outside it; to become it is to be most truly in beauty: since sight deals with the external, there can here be no vision unless in the sense of identification with the object”. Ibid, 66; D. Freedberg, *Movement, Embodiment, Emotion, Cannibalismes disciplinaires*, *Quand l’histoire de l’art et l’anthropologie se rencontrent: Actes du colloque Histoire de l’art et anthropologie organisé par l’INHA et le musée du quai Branly* (21 et 23 juin 2007),

The Church has always used pre-Christian myths as prefigurations of episodes in the life of Christ, antitypes, in much the same way that it uses narratives from the Old Testament. This is possible because it is not the historicity of the type that matters in typology but deep underlying spiritual meaning it shares with the antitype. It requires little imagination to see how Church Fathers could readily use Theseus as a type of Christ and typologically interpret the myth in a variety of ways. The most basic interpretation would see Theseus' journey into the labyrinth and slaying of the Minotaur as a type of Christ's descent into Hades, conquest of Satan and release of the imprisoned souls.²⁵

Epiphanius of Salamis referred to Christ's descent to Hades and he assigned a symbolical interpretation to this event also. He used it as an image of how Christ redeemed us from Death's hold on us. He said that "Christ, who is our 'Door', untied the doorless entrance of Hades when He had broken down the woodless doors by the wood of the cross." The doors operate in symbolic dialogue with the whole organism of the Church, representing incarnated Logos as the visible image of renovation.²⁶

Beholding of these visual labyrinths is closely connected with traps, pitfalls, wrong turnings and blind alleys, through which Christ has threaded the pathway to Salvation. As Gregory of Nyssa put it: "It is, in fact, impossible for persons to reach the same goal unless they travel by the same ways. For as persons who are at a loss how to thread **the turns of mazes, when they happen to fall in with someone who has experience of them**, get to the end of those various misleading **turnings** in the chambers by following him behind, which they could not do, did they not follow him their leader step by step, so too, I pray you mark, the labyrinth of this our life cannot be threaded by the faculties of human nature unless a man pursues that same path as He did Who, though once in it, yet got beyond the difficulties which hemmed Him in. I apply this figure of a labyrinth to that prison of death, which is without an egress and environs the wretched race of mankind. What, then, have we beheld in the case of the Captain of our salvation? A three days' state of death and then life again. (...) And as He, that Man from above, having taken deadness on Himself, after His being deposited in the earth, returned back to life the third day, so everyone who is knitted to Him by virtue of his bodily form, looking forward to the same successful issue, I mean this arriving at life by having, instead of earth, water poured on him and so submitting to that element, has represented for him in the *three movements* the three-days-delayed grace of the resurrection. (...) *The laby-*

Paris 2010, 38.

²⁵ Theseus has undertaken a journey, receiving help to go underground and confront the frightful monster hidden therein the dark. Through his actions, Theseus delivers the people from the terror of the Minotaur, restoring the balance to society from the disorder Minos' greed had caused. C. Kendall, *Allegory of the Church*, University of Toronto Press Incorporated, Toronto 1998, 104.

²⁶ It is important to emphasize that this episode is not about "destruction" of doors, but doorless Hades caused by the energy of Jesus Christ. About Epiphanius of Salamis: H. F. Stander, *Images of Christ's Saving Work in Ps.-Epiphanius' Homilies*, HTS 53/4 (1997), 1116.

*rinth of this our life cannot be threaded by the faculties of human nature unless a person pursues that same path as He [Christ] did who, though once in it, yet got beyond the difficulties which hemmed Him in.*²⁷

The idea of labyrinth in connection with portals was depicted earlier in the Byzantine art and architecture.²⁸ Same type of labyrinth is depicted on the south door jambs between narthex and naos in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki (Fig. 3).²⁹ Nevertheless, this is exclusively Constantinopolitan type of ornament that is displayed below medallion with Archangel Michael, in the windows of dome leading to parekklesion, (Fig. 4) and above Descent into Hades fresco in the parekklesion in the Chora Church in Constantinople (Fig. 5).³⁰

Presence of above mentioned motives in Church of Holy Trinity in Resava Monastery stand in line with ornaments and overall architectural structure regardless of the material used. Ultimately Constantinopolitan idea of viewing labyrinth above as it is the case with representation below feet of Holy Archangels depicted in the dome of the western bay of the parekklesion of the Chora church (Fig. 6), involves the question of possible associations and transforming of pre-existing visual narration of the epoch.³¹

Movements and walking the sacred path rather than standing in the Church, reveals the iconicity of the doors and beholders in the ontological act of passage. Labyrinth motif appears to be framing concept which visually unified the idea of sanctity of all passages and opening zones in the architecture of Late Byzantine world.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa used terms ‘ἀδιέξοδον...φρουράν’. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series Vol. V, Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, ed.P. Schaff, Cosimo Inc., New York 2007, 502. Cf. Plato, *Phaed.* p. 62 B, “We men are in a sort of prison.”

²⁸ J. S. Ćirić, “~ν τοῦτ[η] νίκ[η]“: *brickwork ornamentation narrative*, 231 – 244 (with bibliography and illustrations of brickwork labyrinths).

²⁹ J. S. Ćirić, *Décryptage du mur : l'Arbre de Vie dans l'architecture byzantine tardive*, Collection of Works „Spaces of Memory: Art, Architecture and Heritage“, ed. A. Kadijević, Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade 2012, 19 – 31.

³⁰ I. Akşit, *Le musée de Chora: Mosaïques et Fresques*, Istanbul 2005, 120, 129.

³¹ The dodecagonal ribbed dome is pierced by twelve windows, above which, in the triangular spaces between the ribs, there are the representations of twelve Angels and Archangels, representing the celestial court of Christ and the Virgin. P. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, vol. 4, New York: Pantheon Books, 1966, 242; I. Akşit, *Le musée de Chora*, 129. Selective replication or question of appropriation in Late Byzantine cultural frames was convincingly demonstrated by: R. S. Nelson, *The Chora and the Great Church: Intervisuality in Fourteenth-Century Constantinople*, *BMGS* 23 (1999), 67 – 101.

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„КРОЗ ЛАВИРИНТ“: ПРЕДСТАВА ЗАМРШЕНОГ ПРОЛАЗА У МОНАСТИРУ
РЕСАВА. ПАТРИСТИЧКИ ИЗВОРИ И ЦАРИГРАДСКИ УТИЦАЈИ

Визуелни наратив портала цркава Моравске Србије поседује специфичан контекст који пре свега може бити препознат и као резултат одјека цариградске архитектуре. Један од речитих примера представља мотив лавиринта насликан између представа светих ратника у бочним певницама, непосредно испод њихових ногу чиме се алудира да је реч о простору намењеном за кретање (приказаном у начелима византијске перспективе карактеристичне за позновизантијски период). Имајући у виду сачуване писане изворе, пре свега Григорија из Нисе и његових тумачења чина Крштења и верника „који се крећу кроз лавиринт пратећи Христа Спаса“ могуће је разумети структуру и семиотику лавиринта на поменутом месту у цркви Свете Тројице у манастиру Ресава као и неколико архитектонских аналогича из позновизантијског света. Уз употребу писаних извора и неколико сачуваних примера лавиринта, пре свега оних у параклису цркве Христа Хоре у Цариграду, као и поред врата цркве Светих Апостола у Солуну показано је да лавиринт отелотворује идеју хороса и хорографског кретања, могућност „писања“ телом у сакралном простору тј. наративност корпоралне „аутобиографије“ у којој кретање тела представља кључни моменат у Литургији и рецепцији преображења актом проласка кроз врата.