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FEMINAE VIRTUOSAE: POWERFUL WOMEN OF MEDIEVAL MACEDONIA

Abstract: The article deals with the manners in which socially, politically and religiously powerful women were represented in the material culture, as well as painterly ensembles of the medieval period in the territory of present-day Republic of Macedonia. In that regard, the usage of historic sources, characteristic inscriptions and painterly representations show the “know how” of male donors to accentuate the role of feminine khetors, administrators and religious authorities found in archaeological artifacts and fresco painting.

Key words: Stobi, Lyncidos, Empress Jelena of Serbia, Lesnovo monastery, Mateič monastery, St. Constantine and Helena in Ohrid, Dormition of the Holy Virgin in Matka.

When James Brown sings: “This is a men’s world”, he refers to constructed superiority of men over women who have little power in societies. His emotional throwback, on the other hand, saying: “but it’s nothing without a woman or a girl”, only adds a romantic spice to the role of the ladies as being faithful and honest partners to their male companions. However, catalyzed by historical, social, political and cultural changes in the 20th and 21st century, women have become increasingly challenging gender in the way that feminine features are portrayed in all spheres of visual and other manifestations of their specific and highly penetrating appearance. An entire industry is devoted to promote femininity as equal or even more appealing compared to masculinity which cannot compete with the notion and image of *womanity* due to the sustainably developed and highly articulated feminine production of sources and significance. In that regard, the sociology has recently composed the term *Powerful femininity*¹ as an outcome of the search for appropriate structure of material means, focusing on women’s capability for strength and dominance.

Powerful femininity sees women adopting and maintaining what has been regarded as typical masculine characteristics – such are strength and competitiveness – to succeed in what still is, as James Brown has already put it

¹ E. J. Windsor, *Scripts of femininity*, in: International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Ed. J. D. Wright), Amsterdam, 2015, 893-897.



Fig. 1 Inscription from the three aisled basilica in Lychnidos

Сл. 1 Натпис из трокорабне базилике у Охриду

- a male dominant world. By appropriating such traits, women who aspire to *Powerful femininity* as a category of social existence², are seeking to demonstrate their equal, yet much more alluring status in comparison to male counterparts. However, one should not forget feminine attributes of skillfulness and resourcefulness in combining masculine features of strength and success with traditionally feminine traits of cooperation and teamwork. In that sense, their attractive physique and delicate manners become much more appealing and charismatic than the masculine matrix of height and width, raw power and affluent position in the society. Such women are not only historic figures of the 20th/21st century, i.e. the modern world. There is the sophisticated Hypatia in the 4th century Alexandria³ – a respectable scholar who rises as an example of the changing political and social climate of the ancient world, another example is St. Hildegard of Bingen⁴, born in 1098, admired by popes and celebrated for being a feisty Benedictine abbess, mystic, physician, musician and polymath, also St. Catherine of Siena⁵ who in late 1300 due to her gifts of philosophy

² M. Kimmel, *Masculinities and Femininities*, in: International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Ed. J. D. Wright), Oxford 2001, 9318-9321.

³ A. Cameron, *Hypatia: Life, Death and Works*, Oxford 2016; Ch. Booth, *Hypatia: Mathematician, Philosopher, Myth*, London 2017.

⁴ F. Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age*, New York 2001.

⁵ F. Th. Longo, *Cloistering Catherine: Religious Identity in Raymond of Capua's Legenda Maior of Catherine of Siena*, Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History Vol 3, Amsterdam 2006, 25-69.

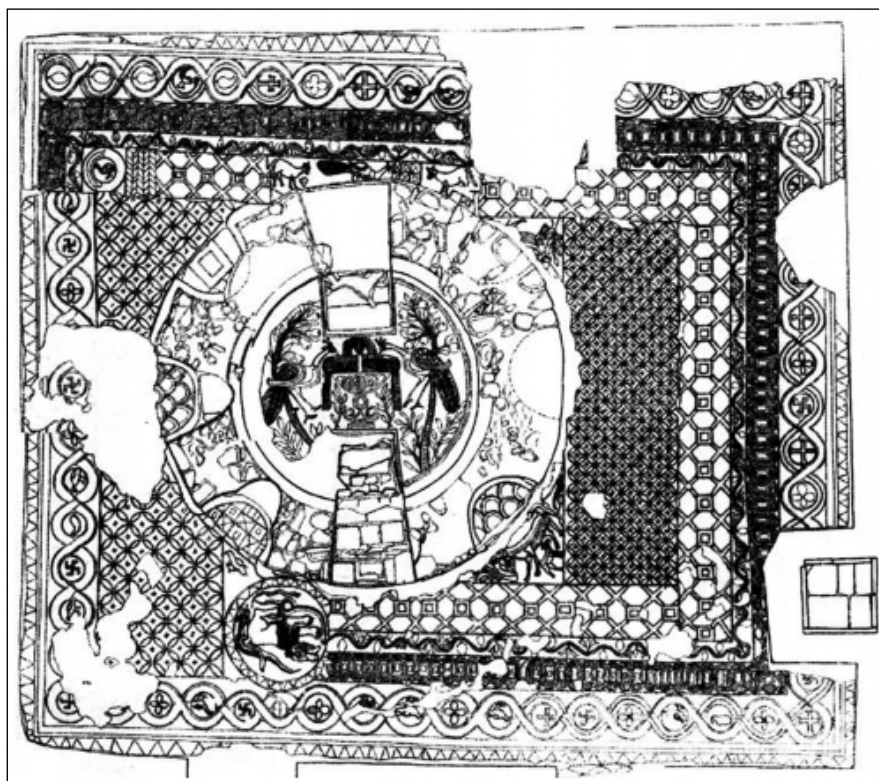


Fig. 2 Baptistery in the three aisled basilica in Lychnidos

Сл. 2 Крстионица у трокорабној базилици у Охриду

and theology became doctor of the Catholic church, than Joan of Arc⁶ who in the 15th century became a national hero of France for her pivotal role in the Hundred Years' War, and many more.

If we put Byzantium in relation to the notion of *powerful femininity*, the first and foremost association is Theodora. Each civilization produces a female paramount and the Byzantine époque is marked by Theodora, the wife of Justinian I, icon of the imperial "feminine power"— composite and enigmatic, intelligent, ambitious and charismatic to the historical memory. Conformist to the moral milestones of Christianity, and prudent to the intellectual magnitudes of the imperial office⁷, the person of Theodora is a Magdalenian archetype and frame of the Byzantine feminine stamina. *Historia Arcana*⁸, the longest and

⁶ J. L. Taylor, *Joan of Arc, the church, the papacy*, in: *The Catholic Historical Review* 98/2, Washington 2012, 217-240.

⁷ Justinian called Theodora his "partner in deliberations" (in *Novela* 8.1), whereas according to Procopius she also participated in state councils, and helped her husband make decisions, plans and political strategies.

⁸ Тајната историја – Прокопиј Кесариски, Скопје, 2008.

most detailed narrative of her life, although intended to make her a “villain”, nevertheless turned Procopius into the historical loudspeaker of the most powerful woman of the Byzantine world. So, it turns out that “bad publicity is good publicity” after all and if stripped of the malicious propaganda against the image of Theodora, *Historia Arcana* could be a great wonder woman epic of nobody who became somebody. And that somebody promoted important religious and social policies, commissioned urban public activities and was probably the first ruler to recognize the rights of women and to introduce the rehabilitation policies and support for female sex workers⁹. Thus we can conclude that Theodora’s historical fame owes little to destiny and a lot to her hard work, leadership, strategic reasoning, emotional intelligence and devotion to the office she held.

If one should make a list of the powerful women in Macedonian Middle Ages, in terms of their participation in political life, economic strategies, diplomatic issues and/or religious matters, that document will surely not be very long. However, there are ladies who deserve their place in such a file due to their social engagements and not only on behalf of their significant others, i.e. male partners, rather due to their personal commitments in the spheres of religious commissions, humanitarian activities, private initiatives and so on. Their names can be found in khetorial inscriptions, historic records, archival documents etc. testifying to their ambition, vigor and enterprise the products of which can be seen in the treasury of artistic heritage usually marked by specific “feminine touch” and delicate aesthetic expectations in creation of the visual culture mostly labeled as graceful and refined.

Through its entropy Christianity gradually marginalized the gentler gender. The historical female stakeholders remained largely below the radar of popularity, thus creating a paradoxical belief that women did not have commitments, apart from the chastity marketing and household activities. This cannot be further away from the truth. Within the administrative core of the ecclesiastical institution, women were proactive managers and leaders, worthy to the cause and the faith - true descendants of the biblical *Phoebe*¹⁰.

The “Phoebian order”¹¹ of female servants to God was attested in Macedonia in the Early Christian oases of Lychnidos (Ohrid) and Stobi, enhancing the altogether abundant material and cultural remains of these ecclesiastical and political centers in the Balkan. The floor mosaic inscription (Fig. 1)

⁹ The *Metanoia (Repentance)* convent mentioned by both Procopius and John Malalas (although the two references are in juxtaposition), was a social project aimed at empowering and freeing women from prostitution.

¹⁰ *Phoebe* was a first century notable woman in the Church of Cenchreae, trusted by Apostle Paul to be his emissary to the Church in Rome - credential and trustworthy to deliver his letter to the Romans. Described as a *diakonos* (deacon), the rank of Phoebe is debatable since it might both refer to a specially appointed assistant to the overseers of a church, or to a “servant” as opposed to a church office. The New Testament reference to Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2), nevertheless introduces a rank in the ecclesiastical administration which will be term of office for female clergy in the centuries to follow.

¹¹ *Phoebian order* came as an association to our attempt to denote an ecclesiastical office still held by women during the Early Christianity, practiced in the rank of deaconess of the church.

ΥΠΕΡ[....]	υπέρ ευ[χῆν]	поради завет
ΤΗΣΜΑ[....]	τῆς μα[τρῶας]	од матроната
ΗΕΥΛΑΒ[....]	η ευλαβ[εστά]	најпoboжната
ΤΗΔΙΑΚ[....]	τη διακ[όνισσα]	ѓакониса
ΤΗΝΕΞ[....]	τήν ἐξέδραν	ја поплочи exedra-та
ΕΥΕΦΩ[....]	ἐψηφω[σεν]	со мозаик ⁵

Вториот натпис се наоѓа на долниот дел од третото мозаично поле инкорпориран во декоративниот аранжман. Во натписот се споменува Перистерија или Перистеријас како донатор на мозаичното поле, иако експлицитно не е назначено.

ΥΠΕΡΕΥΧΕΣ	υπέρ εὐχῆς	поради завет
ΕΠΟΙΗΣΕ[Ν]	εποίησεν	го направи
[Π]ΕΡΙΣΤΕ[....]	Περιστέρ[ρια]	Перистерија ⁶ Win

Fig. 3 Inscription from the Philip's basilica in Stobi

Сл. 3 Натпис у базилици епископа Филипа у Стобима

unearthed in the north-west annex of the three aisled basilica at the archaeological site Plaoshnik in Ohrid, unveils the institutional presence of the “venerable Paula the deaconess” in the ecclesiastical organization of the Early Christian Lychnidos. The office of female deacons was not a coincidence, but an established rank redacted in the ecclesiastical documents, the jurisprudence¹² and in the historical writings, altogether being part of the discussions of the Ecumenical Councils. The deaconesses had an important role in the life of the community. Primarily defined as “servants of God”, their service outreached their administrative office and spread onto the ordinary people, especially the poor, sick and helpless, for whom they cared. The deaconesses also had a pivotal role in the baptismal ceremony of the female catechumens, as well as in the maintaining of the order in the temple¹³. This notion of bringing order into the faith and the life of the community defines them as capable managers, into whom the church invested executive power within its field operative. From a modern perspective, the deaconesses were a kind of brand managers, responsible for the perceived value of the Christian faith, which we must admit is not an easy job. The location of the inscription and the mosaic decoration of the north-west annex of the basilica at Plaoshnik in Ohrid and its close correspondence to the exceptional baptistery of the same (Fig. 2), give ways to possible feminine interpretation of the premises, allowing for a gender related analysis of the spatial disposition of the temple and the public function it possessed¹⁴.

¹² The Late Antique common law, e.g. the Codex of Theodosius of 390 and the Codex of Justinian (535) formalized their selection, activities, ethical codex etc., see Д. Спасова, Сведоштва за жените –ѓакони во Лихнидус, *Folia Archaeologica Balkanica* III, 2015, 329-342, p. 330.

¹³ Д. Спасова, Сведоштва за жените –ѓакони во Лихнидус, 331.

¹⁴ Д. Спасова, Сведоштва за жените –ѓакони во Лихнидус, 333; М. Tutkovski,



Fig. 4 Saint Nicholas Bolnički in Ohrid, Queen Jelena
Сл. 4 Свети Никола Болнички у Охриду, Краљица Јелена

Another inscription bearing the dedication to a deaconess has been discovered in the Philip's Basilica at Stobi, in the mosaic pavement of the south aisle of this object. This inscription (Fig. 3), the non-canonic location of which still raises debate among scholars, mentions that "due to the vow of/to the *matrona*¹⁵ the most pious among the deaconesses paved the exedra"¹⁶. The chronological closeness of these inscriptions, as well as the fact that they appear in important Early Christian urban centers in Macedonia, speak that in the course, testifying to the existence of an active female clergy which maintained important public relations with the community, the municipal administration and urban elite. Thus, the original label of the deaconesses as servants seems to have encompassed a large variety of services – PR (public relations), HR (human resources), "customers' support" and venerability. Since the last epithet was "a must", we can clearly conclude that the women vested with this rank were honorable, trustworthy, diligent, devoted and capable – all emanating features of true power.

The Symbolic Messages of the Mosaics in the Southern Basilica at Plaoshnik in Ohrid, Niš & Byzantium Symposium, Collection of scientific works XII, Niš, 2014, 129-142, 131-134.

¹⁵ *Matrona* was common reference to a married woman belonging to the equestrian provincial aristocracy.

¹⁶ И. Т. Весевска, *Жените во доцната антика и раното христијанство – Гласовите и делата на „замолкнатото“ малцинство*, Годишен зборник на Филозофски факултет книга 71, Скопје, 2018, 121-133, 126-128.

Fig. 5
Lesnovo
monastery,
Empress
Jelena and
Emperor
Dušan
Сл. 5
Манастир
Лесново,
Царица
Јелена и цар
Душан



When one talks about powerful, ambitious and active females in medieval Macedonia, one should give the VIP position to the Serbian Empress Jelena, wife of Tsar Stefan Dušan, a woman of tactfulness and merit, prudence and resourcefulness, luxurious taste and opulent means to vouch for its physical sustainability¹⁷. A number of artistic representations of Jelena in the time when she was a queen consort to the Serbian monarch¹⁸ (Fig. 4) and later, when she

¹⁷ М. Ал. Пурковић, *Јелена жена цара Душана*, Диселдорф 1975

¹⁸ As in: St. Nicholas Bolnički, cf. Ц. Грозданов, *Охридското ѕидно сликарство од XIV век*, Охрид 1980, 56-57; Dobrun, cf. И. М. Ђорђевић, *Ѕидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, Београд 1994, 144; in Деџани, cf. Д. Војводић, *Портрети владара и црквених достојанственика у наосу и припрати*, Ѕидно сликарство манастира Дечана, Београд 2995, 268-270; in Љуботен, cf. З. Расолкоска Николовска, *О владарским портретима у Љуботену и времену настанка ѕидне декорације*, Зограф 17, Београд



Fig. 6 Lesnovo monastery,
Empress Jelena

Сл. 6 Манастир Лесново,
Царица Јелена



Fig. 7 Mateič monastery

Сл. 7 Манастир Матеич

became an empress, in other words the most powerful lady in the realm, testify to her sensitive approach to how she wanted to be seen by the subjects of her husband – as his loving partner and an ardent source of feminine support.

That becomes obvious when one looks at her image in the Lesnovo monastery, where, within the khetorial composition, she is depicted slightly inferior to her husband¹⁹ (Fig. 5). Although her powerful femininity, as well as her extravagantly stylish appearance cannot be denied (Fig. 6), her gestures and her position spontaneously situated one feet behind the Emperor, only add to her well calculated methodical approach for creation of an irresistible feminine portrait which radiates with encouragement, fidelity and commitment²⁰. The same lady, cordial and affectionate companion of the Emperor, managed

1986, 45-53; И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 146; S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, Milano 2006, 181; E. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, Македонија. Милениумски културно-историски факти, Скопје 2013, 1718; in Pološko, cf. Ц. Грозданов, Д. Ђорнаков, *Историјски портрети у Полошком*, Зограф 14, Београд 1983, 60-67; И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 148; S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 178; E. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1716-1717.

¹⁹ И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 160; С. Габелић, *Манастир Лесново. Историја и сликарство*, Београд 1998, 169; S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 142.

²⁰ E. Dimitrova, "Beauty and no Beast: Social and Cultural Perspectives in Byzantine Painting, *Patrimonium Mk 20*, Skorje 2022, 243.



Fig. 8 Mateič monastery, Empress Jelena and King Uroš
Сл. 8 Манастир Матеич, Царица Јелена и краљ Урош

to commission her own gigantic endowment in the highest horizon of Skopska Crna Mountain (Fig. 7) with monolithic architectural corpus and a solemn mausoleum function, embellished with the greatest by dimension fresco ensemble

in 14th century Macedonia²¹. The luxurious khetorial scene which, beside the image of Empress Jelena, encompasses the members of the ruling family, as well as the portrait of the Serbian patriarch²², united in a representative picture of the firm cohesion of political potency and ecclesiastical rule in the Empire is actually a painterly manifesto of the supreme power of medieval Serbia in its most authoritative historical momentum²³. Within this khetorial ensemble, Empress Jelena is holding the replica of her colossal endowment together with her son, Uroš (Fig. 8), the official administrator of the region where the monastery was erected²⁴ and heir to the throne, thus representing herself as a true matriarch of the Empire. In this occasion officially supported by her husband, Emperor Dušan, who is holding the document for establishment of the foundation, Jelena is not only depicted as a consort and a lady, but a true representative of an objectified feminine power in terms of her participation in the political capacity of the state²⁵.

An entirely different model of powerful femininity is represented by the presbyteress Maria, co-khetor of the church dedicated to Sts Constantine and Helena in Ohrid²⁶, precisely – commissioner of the paraclession of St. Paraskevi built adjacent to the south wall of the temple²⁷. In the highly explicative commissioners' composition, followed by a very extensive narration²⁸, Maria is represented behind her son, the hieromonk Partenius, who is obviously donating the replica of his endowment to Christ as a loving memory of his deceased son Michael (Fig. 9) In that context, Maria is giving her full support to Partenius as a loving matriarch of the family. Being a widow of the late priest John and belonging to a family with an exclusive ecclesiastic pedigree, she is pictured as a nun (Fig. 10) and represented with, again, an exclusive title of presbyter-

²¹ Е. Димитрова, *Манастир Матејче*, Скопје 2002, 75-271.

²² Е. Димитрова, *Манастир Матејче*, 185-190; Eadem, *On the New Dating of the Fresco Ensemble of the Church of the Holy Virgin in Matejče*, *Balcanoslavica* 30-31, Prilep 2002, 95-103; Eadem, *The Church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče*, Скопје 2016, 7-8; Eadem, *The Portal to Heaven. Reaching the Gates of Immortality*, 374-375; S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*. 178; Е. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1730.

²³ Е. Димитрова, *О ктиторској композицији и новом датовању фресака у цркви Свете Богородице у Матеичу*, Зограф 28, Београд 2003, 181-190.

²⁴ Н. Радојчић, *Српски државни сабори у средњем веку*, Београд 1940, 124-125; М. Благојевић, *Идеја и стварност Душановог царевања*, Историја српског народа I, Београд 1981, 527

²⁵ Е. Dimitrova, "Beauty and no Beast: Social and Cultural Perspectives in Byzantine Painting", 244.

²⁶ Г. Суботић, *Свети Константин и Јелена у Охриду*, Београд 1971, 4-8; Ц. Грозданов, *Охридското јидно сликарство од XIV век*, 159-160; Е. Dimitrova, G. Velkov, I. Pandžak Pineva, *Seven Churches in Ohrid*, Скопје 2022, 136-138.

²⁷ Г. Суботић, *Свети Константин и Јелена у Охриду*, 52-53; Ц. Грозданов, *Охридското јидно сликарство од XIV век*, 167- 168; Е. Dimitrova, G. Velkov, I. Pandžak Pineva, *Seven Churches in Ohrid*, 143-145.

²⁸ Г. Суботић, *Свети Константин и Јелена у Охриду*, 18-19; Ц. Грозданов, *Охридското јидно сликарство од XIV век*, 169.



Fig. 9 Sts Constantine and Helena in Ohrid, Khtetors
Сл. 9 Свети Константин и Елена у Охриду, Ктитори



Fig. 10 Sts Constantine and Helena in Ohrid, Khtetors
Сл. 10 Свети Константин и Елена у Охриду, Ктитори



Fig. 11 Dormition of the Holy Virgin, Matka, Lady Milica and son
Сл. 11 Богородичино успење, Матка, Ктиторка Милица са сином

ess²⁹ – the one and only of that kind given to a female character in medieval Macedonia. If one thinks that Maria could have been given such a unique religious title which in the male dominant orthodox church was always reserved for masculine individuals simply because she ones was a wife of a priest, one has to be reminded of the fact that her husbands' name is not mentioned with that epithet³⁰, so it could have become hereditary. In that sense, there is much more to it than a formal case of spousal inheritance of privileges. Having in mind the ambitious participation of Maria in the health care, as well as charitable activities in some of the Ohrid's parishes³¹ is a highly sustainable testimony to her

²⁹ S. Grandakovska, *Monastic Atmosphere in the Church of St. Constantine and Helena in Ohrid (Aspects of intemediality of the icon painting and literary forms)*, Niš & Byzantium Symposium, The Collection of scientific works III, Niš 2005, 71-73.

³⁰ Г. Суботић, *Свети Константин и Јелена у Охриду*, 6; Ц. Грозданов, *Охридското видно сликарство од XIV век*, 160.

³¹ S. Grandakovska, *Monastic Atmosphere in the Church of St. Constantine and*

noble engagements in the organization of the social life in the city at the turn of the 15th century. In that regard, the dedication of the endowment to Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena, accentuates the equal position of Partenius and Maria in the organization of the religious life and on her part – the welfare in the archbishopric center towards the end of the medieval era.

The social privilege of landownership as a feature of high-class member of the feudal elite was, by all means, a masculine characteristic for the historic era in question, i.e. the medieval period. Yet, there are existing data that some females have succeeded in ways and manners that are not quite clarified (due to nonexistent historic sources or documents) to adopt this attribute of proprietors of material possession which enabled them to commission activities in the domain of religious enterprises and spiritual wellbeing. That is the case with the lady Milica, the one who restored the church dedicated to the Dormition of the Holy Virgin in the gorge of Matka near Skopje³² after being damaged and lost all of its fresco painting. After repairing the damaged portions of the upper structure of the temple and donating an entire vineyard to her new establishment³³, lady Milica took care of the fresco arrangement which embellishes the interior walls of the church. The khetorial inscription confirms the date of 1496/97 as a year when the fresco arrangement was completed by the painters³⁴, while the khetorial composition confirms that lady Milica is depicted with her young son³⁵ (Fig. 11), after, what is a reasonable assumption, Milica's husband died and left her as a wealthy widow. Despite that, she is not dressed very stylishly as it should be expected of a commissioner and a landowner, which, again, can be attributed to her refined feminine sense for presenting herself as a matriarch who has invested in spiritual virtues rather than in self-presentable and transient earthly extravagance.

When John Lennon says Women is the nigger of the world, he refers to the subordinating role of female gender which is mostly expected to be beautiful, obedient and entertaining. However, he should have known better that his Yoko did not fit in those categories; on the contrary, she successfully managed to put him under her firm control and even facilitated the disintegration of the Beatles despite the resentment of the three other members of the band. At present times, there are a great number of Yokos, yet in the course of the medieval world the powerful women were not controllable, possessive and counterproductive, rather virtuous, creative and probably much more dignified than we can ever imagine. Wives and mothers, consorts and true partners to their male companions, the mentioned female individuals were much more than pictures in the frames of religious fresco paintings. They were visual emblems of chastity

Helena in Ohrid (Aspects of intemediality of the icon painting and literary forms), 72.

³² Е. Димитрова, В. Лилчиќ, К. Антевска, А. Василески, *Матка. Културно наследство*, Скопје 2011, 183-200.

³³ Г. Суботиќ, *Охридската сликарска школа од XV век*, Охрид 1980, 141; Е. Димитрова, В. Лилчиќ, К. Антевска, А. Василески, *Матка. Културно наследство*, 186.

³⁴ Г. Суботиќ, *Охридската сликарска школа од XV век*, Охрид 1980, 141; Е. Димитрова, В. Лилчиќ, К. Антевска, А. Василески, *Матка. Културно наследство*, 186.

³⁵ Е. Димитрова, В. Лилчиќ, К. Антевска, А. Василески, *Матка. Културно наследство*, 192.

and honorability, of truthfulness and heartiness in their own time and social milieu; yet, today they represent aesthetically composed fugitives from ages fulfilled with chivalry, sincerity, righteousness and grandiose dimension of artistic creativity.

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FEMINAE VIRTUOSAE: МОЋНЕ ЖЕНЕ СРЕДЊОВЕКОВНЕ МАКЕДОНИЈЕ

Када се говори о улози жена у друштвеном животу ранохришћанске епохе и средњег века, уобичајено је да се њима приписује далеко нижи статус него социјалној функцији јачег пола, те се обично оне представљају као пратиље својих супруга, мајке репрезентативних чиновна високе властеле и/или као компоненте традиционалне иконографије у којој су оне увек подређене у односу на мушки род. Постоје, међутим примери из археолошке стратиграфије и ликовног стваралаштва поменутих периода који указују на динамични принцип одабраних дама које су се својим активним учешћем у историјским догађајима и политичком окружењу избориле за виши статус и различите привилегије као што су ктиторства сакралних грађевина, хуманитарне активности, личне иницијативе и тд. У том контексту, треба поменути податке из мозаичног натписа у северо-западном анексу трокорабне базилике на археолошком локалитету Плаошник у Охриду који указује на институционални ангажман *поштоване ђаконице Пауле* која је учествовала у црковној организацији ранохришћанског Лихнида бринући се не само о административном управљању епископије, већ и за добробит верника, нарочито сиротих, болесних и беспомоћних. Један други натпис из јужног брода базилике епископа Филипа у Стобима, који такође помиње ђаконицу и њене активности унутар базилике, указује на то да је у V веку у значајним епископским центрима у Македонији постојао активни женски клир који је одржавао важне јавне релације са хришћанском заједницом и њеним административним димензијама.

Што се средњег века тиче, ВИП позиција у списку друштвено остварених дама свакако припада српској царици Јелени, супрузи цара Стефана Душана. Њене представе у оквиру ктиторских композиција сведоче о дами коју красе тактичност и одмереност, али и луксузни укус и карактеристична средства њене визуелне одржљивости. Са једне стране (као што показује пример из лесновског нартекса из 1349), она манифестира веома суптилни начин на који њен лик гледају верни, т.ј. поданици њеног супруга – као лојална партнерка српског цара и непресушни извор женствене подршке. Са друге стране, у манастиру Матеич – у њеној маузолејској цркви (1348-1352), она даје подршку свом сину, Урошу, као моћни матријарх српске владарске династије. Поред чланова царске породице, матеички ктиторијал приказује и српског патријарха Јоаникија, симболизирајући чврсту кохезију политичке моћи и еклесијастичке власти у Царству, као ликовни манифест супремације средњовековне Србије у њеном најауторитативном историском моменту.

Сасвим другачији приступ у представљању женске енергије друштвеног капацитета приказан је у веома експликативној ктиторској слици у цркви светих Костантина и Јелене у Охриду, у којој је портретирама ко-ктиторска храма, Марија, са титулом презвитерке – једине којом се закитила женска индивидуа у средњовековној Македонији. Имајући на уму њено амбициозно учешће у бризи о болесним верницима, као и у хуманитарним активностима у охридским парохијама, не смемо заборавити да ова жена представља пример племенитог ангажмана у организацији социјалног живота у граду на крају XIV и у самом почетку XV века бринући се за добробит архијепископског

центра на крају средњег века. У региону Матке, у близини Скопља, тачније у цркви Богородичиног успења, у ктиторској композицији је приказана властелинка Милица са својим сином, са којим је, очито, делила привилегије не само ктиторства, него и материјалног поседа, те је обновила Богородичин храм и постарала се да он добије нову фреско декорацију 1496/97 године. Иако је, према податцима, Милица била веома богата удовица, у ктиторјалу је приказана скромно што се може приписати њеном рафинираном женском укусу за себе представљање као матријарх који је више уложио у духовним вредностима него у пролазној земаљској екстраваганцији.