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Old Testament Topics in the Visual Culture of *Slavia Orthodoxa* in the Middle Ages[1]

A number of Old Testament topics played a central role in the construction of the political and visual identities of states in *Slavia Orthodoxa* in the Middle Ages (Biliarsky, 2010, 2013; Eshel, 2018; Magdalino & Nelson, 2010). Among them, the topic of the God-chosen and God-protected status of Jerusalem assumed fundamental significance as one of the major topoi underlying the construction of the identities of the capital cities of *Slavia Orthodoxa* in the medieval era. This was based on the biblical theme of Jerusalem – the city that triumphs in eternity and suffers in temporal history, thereby assuring ultimate victory – and thus on the antinomic biblical motif of triumph and fall. This theme constituted a cornerstone of the self-determination of capital cities as loci of the presence and effect of the *shekinah*, divine power, and providence and, consequently, as key points on the eschatological path of history towards universal power (Erdeljan, 2017). The approach to self-definition based on these principles was

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established by the Old Testament kings David and Solomon in Jerusalem itself. It has continued to function as a *topos* in Judeo-Christian civilisation to this day, undergoing crucial transformations and definitions of the visual aspects of its realisation and representation in the Middle Ages. This paper aims to present some of the key aspects of the formulation of the idea of Jerusalem, its associated spatial-visual matrix, and its theological, ideological, and visual implications for the construction of the status of Orthodox capital cities as God-chosen places. In particular, it focuses on the cases of Tarnovo, Belgrade and Moscow and the practice of *translatio Hierosolymi* through the transfer of components of sacral space.

Topoi feature as historical formulae that encapsulate the complex structures of belief and thought patterns defining a particular society, serving as keys to whole worlds of spiritual and visual experience. They are a gateway to numerous strata of meaning, uniting into a coherent entity a whole spectrum of activities and their resonance, within both the individual and the whole of society at any given moment in time. That is why the ability to understand and creatively engage with a *topos* reflects the extent to which a society has embraced and understood a particular cultural model and is able to engage with the main currents of the civilisation of its time.

The first and, in every respect, foremost example of *translatio Hierosolymi* is Constantinople, the capital of the Christian Roman Empire. In Constantinople, from the very beginning, Jerusalem as the God-chosen and God-protected *locus* was emulated in the domain of ideas and ideology through the construction of an image and awareness of its special status in the eyes of the Lord, reinforced by the material receptacles of His blessings – relics and icons. This did not always and necessarily imply direct citation or imitation of the *loca sancta* of Jerusalem or its topography. The emulation of Jerusalem was primarily metaphorical and allegorical, and constructs within the domain of visual culture played a significant role in this project, serving not only as fitting settings for holy and hallowed objects, but also as means of visually representing and materialising heaven on earth – the concept underlying the idea of Jerusalem (Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 52–62). The *translatio* of this matrix implies the *imitatio* or *emulatio* of the very essence of Jerusalem as the metaphor of holiness and the dwelling place of the *shekinah*. The principal means by which this aim is realised – above all liturgical practice, but also relics, miracle-working icons, and associated hierotopic entities – originate, for the most part, in Jerusalem itself. Some, such as the most hallowed Passion relics, relics of the Holy

Virgin, and the miracle-working icon of the Virgin of Jerusalem that stood at the entrance to the Anastasis complex – indeed, according to tradition, even the Virgin Hodegetria herself – were literally and materially transferred from Jerusalem. Others, such as the liturgical processions performed in the urban space of the Byzantine capital, represent a different kind of transposition – an emulation of events from sacred history that took place in Jerusalem.[2]

Thus, Constantinople appears to be the clearest or most complete physical representation of what an 'ideal city' was imagined to be (Lidov, 2004a) and was regarded as a prototype to be emulated, transferred or, more precisely, imprinted on other spaces (Бадаланова-Покровская & Плюханова, 1989). These spaces thus strove to become its iconic likeness, both in the general idea of a God-chosen and God-protected place – i.e., New Jerusalem, which was at the core of its identity as a universal capital – and/or through the individual devotional and visual elements upon which such an identity was constructed. In that sense and for the purpose of realising such a goal, this sort of appropriation or reinvestment relied, among other means, on a new utilisation of definitive Constantinopolitan relics, above all those of the Passion of the Lord.

This is most persuasively attested by the programs of major Constantinopolitan hierotopic entities such as the Royal Doors of the Hagia Sophia (Lidov, 2004b), the Church of the Virgin of Pharos (Lidov, 2012; Лидов, 2005), and the Heroon of the Pantokrator monastery (Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 119–130), as well as by urban processions with the icons of the Virgin Hodegetria and the Blachernitissa (Lidov, 2000, 2004a, 2006). Through the staging of these processions, the whole of Constantinople was transformed into a spatial icon of Jerusalem as the archetype of a God-chosen and God-protected holy city, thereby displaying and confirming the identity of Constantinople as the ultimate sublimation of the Old Testament City-Temple and the New Testament City-Church-Bride (Virgin), to whom it was dedicated.

All these phenomena testify to the presence of visual mimesis, a visual rhetoric of sanctity (or hieroplasty), most often expressed through a symbolic, metaphoric mimesis of forms, or architectural articulation of Jerusalem's *loca sancta*. Thus, for example, the Heroon of the Pantokrator monastery was articulated as the new Holy Sepulchre, relying upon the symbolism of materials, forms, and spatial dispositions (Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 119–130). Moreover, these

[2] On the history and instruments of translatio Hierosolymi in Constantinople through the centuries of its existence, see Erdeljan (2017, pp. 72–143).

instruments were effectively used to construct a wider picture of Constantinople as the New Jerusalem – a city whose fate is an essential part of the plan of Divine Providence – with key examples in Hagia Sophia (Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 90–95) and the Church of the Virgin of the Pharos (Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 107–111). Over the centuries, the syntax of the visual culture of the capital city changed form but the discourse remained the same: constructing an image of heaven here on earth, accomplishing the eschatological reality *hinc et nunc* as a herald of and preparation for the end of time and the end of the world.

The Holy Cross was, beyond any doubt, the principal instrument in that endeavour. Its direct imperial connotations granted legitimacy to the rule of those who regarded themselves as legatees of the state and polity of the Empire of the Romaioi. Examples of the circulation and new exploitation of the relic of the True Cross – and, in certain cases, of other Passion relics in the Orthodox world that played a prominent role in the process of fragmentation or, rather, expansion of Byzantine identity or Romanness after 1204 (Stanković, 2025) – are found, for example, in Trebizond under Manuel I Great Komnenos, Nicea under John III Vatatzes, Serbia under the first Nemanides (Eastmond, 2003), and the tradition of the Second Bulgarian Empire (Бадаланова-Покровская & Плюханова, 1987). Because this phenomenon is well documented and studied, and thus easily identifiable, it appears at first glance to be the most clearly defined and convincing mode of appropriating Constantinopolitan identity – overshadowing others which, although not as immediately decipherable, are nonetheless equally significant in realising the same objective. Other modes include elements of liturgical practice, primarily urban litanies, as well as aspects of the more fluid and ever changeable sphere of visual culture.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1204 and the dissolution of the *taxis* – or the world order as it had previously functioned for almost a millennium – hallmarks of Constantinople's identity as a New Jerusalem, *umbilicus mundi* or *οφθαλμός της οικουμένις*, were appropriated by the capital cities of the Empire of Nicea, the Epirote state, and the Empire of Trebizond, political entities which appeared as the result of the fall and fragmentation of the Byzantine Empire. At roughly the same time, and following a mechanism structurally analogous to that of *translatio Hierosolymi*, other centres also embarked on a course of constructing their particular selves on the basis of appropriating and (re) interpreting the core Constantinopolitan identity. These included centres of the newly formed or restored states that were part of the broader framework of the Byzantine cultural and political sphere, or the sphere of its soft power

(Stanković, 2025), such as the Serbian state of the Nemanides, the restored or Second Bulgarian Empire, and the Muscovite state liberated from the dominance of the Golden Horde. At the same time, given the contemporary currents of political history, key elements of Constantinopolitan identity as a New Jerusalem were also utilised and adapted to bolster the legitimacy and strengthen the status of the existing royal identities of Louis IX and the Venetian doges (both dynastic and state-related) and to transform, fittingly, Paris and Venice into universal centres of power (Erdeljan, 2011; Maguire & Nelson, 2010).

This mode of realisation of the idea of Jerusalem lies at the foundation of the programmes which constituted the basis of the identities of the capital cities in Orthodox Slavic states of the Late Middle Ages (Lidov, 2009). An essentially important characteristic of those programmes is that the same metaphoric-allegorical approach that had been developed in Constantinople in relation to Jerusalem was then applied to Constantinople itself. In time, and certainly at the time of the construction of these cities, the capital of the Byzantine Empire had been regarded as an embodiment, a paradigm, not only of New Jerusalem but also of sanctity in general. Notwithstanding its real historical tribulations and, in eschatological terms, precisely because of them, it was experienced not only as a paradigmatic Christian capital, but also as a veritable substitute for Jerusalem. Thus, in liturgical practice and visual culture, the sacralisation of the space of the capital and the construction of its identity as a God-chosen, God-protected city was accomplished not only by means of metaphoric-allegorical conformity to the Constantinopolitan model (as a metaphor for Jerusalem), but also through a literal translation of the Constantinopolitan liturgical practice, cults of saints, relics and icons, hierotopic solutions, and trademark elements of the visual identity of the major sacral foci of the city. Accordingly, as in Constantinople, the construction of the identities of the capital cities in the *Slavia Orthodoxa* of the late Middle Ages (Бадаланова-Покровская, 1990) involved their identification with and dedication to the Virgin Mary through the *translatio* of her relics, miracle-working icons, church dedications, and public celebration of feast days, as well as their placement under the protection of Christ, the True Cross, and the Holy Emperor Constantine (Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 144–221).

Thus, following the model set up by Constantinople, Belgrade, as the capital of the Serbian state at the time of despot Stefan Lazarević, was fashioned as the residence of the Virgin, a city dedicated to the Theotokos and under her protection. This is explicitly stated in the ktetor's inscription which stood at the portal to the cathedral church dedicated to the feast of her Dormition

(Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 183–185; Поповић & Бикић, 2004). Furthermore, the text of the despot's vita, composed by Constantine of Kostenec, renders an eschatological scene which took place over the horizon in the skies above Belgrade at the moment of despot Stefan's death inside his cathedral church, demonstrating divine protection over this New Jerusalem, as is explicitly mentioned in the vita text. During the reign of despot Stefan, the intervention and protection of Divine Providence was desired in difficult times not only for obvious political reasons, but also because of the overall climate associated with the upcoming 7,000th year and the expected end of the world. This was definitely the case at the moment of the despot's death, when the sky above Belgrade was filled with lightning, thunder, and storm clouds – all standard Old Testament topoi associated with manifestations of the divine in earthly surroundings – which shrouded the city. From the iconostasis of the metropolitan church of Belgrade, altar icons rose up and formed the act of Deisis in the air as final, irrefutable proof of the status of the despot's capital as a God-protected and God-chosen city (Erdeljan, 2017, p. 189).

Along with universal cults, such as that of the Mother of God, the capital cities of *Slavia Orthodoxa* also relied on the cults of local, national, and dynastic holy protectors. In Tarnovo, for example, the cult of the Bulgarian Holy Emperor Peter functioned as a substitute for the cult of the Holy Emperor Constantine (Erdeljan, 2017, p. 167; Билярски, 2001, 2004). The close intertwining of the identities of the first Christian emperor and the Bulgarian Holy Emperor Peter is attested by the text of the Apocryphal Bulgarian Chronicle (11th century), which contains a story in which the birth of Emperor Constantine took place during the reign of Emperor Peter – in other words, during his reign the True Cross was discovered and Constantinople was inaugurated. Later, in the text of the "Life of Saint John of Rila" from Dragan's Menaion (13th century), the religious zeal of the emperor Ivan I Asen, who translated the relics of this saint from Serdica to Tarnovo, was compared to that of the Holy Emperors Constantine and Peter. Emperor Peter's devotion to the faith and piousness of his rule were especially accentuated in his close contacts with monks and hermits. Especially important in that context was his encounter with Saint John of Rila and his correspondence with Saint Paul of Latros. Moreover, at the time of this 'monk-loving' emperor (whose reign saw the reform of monasticism in Bulgaria and the translation and introduction of the Studite Typikon, and who himself took the monastic habit prior to his death), Bulgaria became an 'empire of monks', likened to the ideal of heaven on earth and informed by universal principles outlined by the Byzantine

empire and its capital city (Билярски, 2004, pp. 40–42). Therefore, the cult of the Holy Emperor Peter had not only Constantinian and Constantinopolitan implications, but also a resultant eschatological meaning and, thus, an important role in constructing the Jerusalem identity of the Bulgarian capital (Бадалано-ва-Покровска & Плюханова, 1993).

As in Constantinople, eschatological ideas played an exceptionally significant role in Tarnovo, Belgrade and Moscow in the process of constructing their identities as the capital cities of the new Chosen People, understood as New Israel, that is, as New Jerusalems. Because of the metaphorical frame of mind of *homo medievalis*, political and eschatological substitutes for Constantinople – as well as cities regarded as metaphoric equivalents of Constantinople and Jerusalem (such as Thessaloniki or Novgorod) – were also considered important examples of holy cities. Therefore, the *translatio* of their cults and holy objects (i.e., the appropriation of their identities) essentially played the same role in the sacralisation of the capital cities as that of the transfer of Constantinopolitan models. However, it must be noted that these two processes do not necessarily exclude each other. Accordingly, Tarnovo may be at the same time the New Thessaloniki (owing to a translation of the protective powers of Saint Demetrius, expressed by means of *translatio* of his miracle-working and city-protecting icon) and the New Constantinople. At the same time, the programmatic use of spolia and the general tendency to reintegrate the histories of the First and Second Bulgarian empires enabled Tarnovo to function as the New Pliska and New Preslav (Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 154–175). On the other hand, Moscow – with the translation of the so-called Kherson relics and, above all, the translation and development of the cult of the Virgin of Vladimir – could become the New Kherson, New Kiev, New Vladimir, New Novgorod (even New Kazan) and, thus, the Second Constantinople, the Third Rome and the New Jerusalem (Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 196–221). This, at the same time, suggests that, in both Bulgaria and Russia, the Jerusalem programmes of the capital cities in the Late Middle Ages implied the incorporation of already constructed notions of sanctity and the identity of the state. In that respect, Belgrade, the capital of the Serbian Despotate under despot Stefan Lazarević, differs from Tarnovo and Moscow because its Jerusalem programme, within the wider framework of royal ideology, relies exclusively on the universal, distinctly Constantinopolitan cults of its holy protectors. Moreover, Belgrade lacks the cults of members of the saint-bearing dynasty of the Nemanides, which were otherwise very well developed among the medieval Serbs (Erdeljan, 2017, pp. 175–196).

Parallel to these channels of *translatio Hierosolymi* (as the most prominent and accessible under the historical circumstances of the time), there are instances of a more direct transfer of the sanctity of Jerusalem in all three discussed capitals of *Slavia Orthodoxa*, namely the transfer of Jerusalem's sacral toponomastics (i.e., topography). Within the urban matrix of the capital city and its wider environs, places named after significant locations in the sacral topography of Jerusalem are usually those assigned a prominent role in civic liturgical processions or royal rituals and cortèges. One example is Lobnoye mesto in Moscow (Erdeljan, 2017, p. 220), and to draw an analogy one should also consider the functions of Lobna skala in Tarnovo (Erdeljan, 2017, p. 175). The site of the metropolitan church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Belgrade was identified with and referred to as Gethsemane (Erdeljan, 2017, p. 183). A quite special and, possibly, the most distinctly metaphorical mode of *translatio Hierosolymi* among the three discussed capitals of *Slavia Orthodoxa* in the Late Middle Ages is the translation of the measurements of the Holy Sepulchre, which underlay the idea of erecting a Holy of Holies during the reign of Boris Godunov (Erdeljan, 2017, p. 219). Another example is the translation of the shape of church domes in Moscow, first of all that of Basil the Blessed, which alludes to the miracle of Holy Fire that occurs in the Kouvouklion on Holy Saturdays (Erdeljan, 2017, p. 213).

Possibly the most allegorical and metaphorical case of *translatio Hierosolymi*, which is also a *translatio Constantinopoleos*, is represented by the so-called Novgorod Mandylion. Here, the sacred space of the Constantinopolitan imperial church-reliquary of the Virgin Pharos is transposed onto, or transferred into, the hierotopy of an icon, which becomes the ultimate sacred space. This is the oldest preserved icon of the Holy Face, *Spas Nerukotvornyi*, i.e., the Saviour Not-Made-by-Hands, created in the second half of the twelfth century and kept today at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. It is a double-sided image with a representation of the Veneration of the Cross on the obverse. On the grounds of the style and the inscriptions, this icon has been identified as a work produced by a master from Novgorod. Because of the ultimate fusion of Jerusalem and Constantinople it implied, the two-sided icon of the Novgorod Mandylion with a representation of the *acheiropoietos* image on one side and passion relics adored by two angels on the other is an entirely specific example of how the appropriation of the various elements of identity of the sacred space of the Pharos chapel from Constantinople, including visual ones, was employed as a means of *translatio Hierosolymi*. Not only does this icon substantiate the presence of Pharos chapel relics and underline the historical and

symbolic aspects of the archetype, but it also emphasises the idea of the direct connection between these two sacred places. It is a visualisation of the concept of translating Jerusalem to Constantinople through the translation of relics (Passion relics) and the creation of a space marked by *shekinah*, the presence of the Lord as manifested in the Mandylion. Moreover, as an icon of the sacred space of the Pharos chapel itself, it also demonstrates how the appropriation of the ultimate Constantinopolitan model and substitute for (New) Jerusalem, together with its performative presence through liturgy, granted the space into which it was introduced the status of a God-protected and God-chosen place – equal in this respect to Jerusalem, Edessa and Constantinople (Evseeva & Lidov, 2022).

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Tematy starotestamentowe w średniowiecznej kulturze wizualnej w kręgu *Slavia Orthodoxa*

Szereg tematów starotestamentowych odgrywa w średniowieczu kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu politycznej i wizualnej tożsamości ośrodków władzy w kręgu *Slavia Orthodoxa*. Wśród nich fundamentalne znaczenie ma idea Jerozolimy jako miasta wybranego i otoczonego Bożą opieką, stanowiąca jeden z głównych toposów leżących u podstaw kształtowania tożsamości stolic. Idea ta do dziś pozostaje obecna w cywilizacji judeochrześcijańskiej, a w średniowieczu podlegała istotnym przemianom i redefinicjom w zakresie sposobów jej wizualnej realizacji i reprezentacji. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest wskazanie kluczowych zagadnień związanych ze sposobami formułowania idei Jerozolimy oraz powiązanej z nią matrycy przestrzenno-wizualnej

w procesie kształtowania statusu stolic świata prawosławnego jako miejsc wybranych przez Boga. W szczególności analizie poddane zostają przypadki Tyrnowa, Belgradu i Moskwy.

Słowa kluczowe: tematy starotestamentowe; Jerozolima; Slavia Orthodoxa; stolica; kultura wizualna

Old Testament topics in the visual culture of *Slavia Orthodoxa* in the Middle Ages

A number of Old Testament topics stand at the core of creating the political and visual identities of polities in *Slavia Orthodoxa* in the Middle Ages. Among them, the topic of the God-chosen and God-protected status of Jerusalem assumes fundamental significance as one of the major topoi underlying the construction of the identities of the capital cities of *Slavia Orthodoxa* in the medieval era. This idea has continued to function as a *topos* in Judeo-Christian civilisation to this day, undergoing crucial transformations and definitions of the visual aspects of its realisation and representation in the Middle Ages. This paper aims to point out some key points related to the means of formulating the idea of Jerusalem and its associated spatial-visual matrix in the process of constructing the status of a God-chosen place of capital cities of the Orthodox world. In particular, it focuses on presenting the cases of Tarnovo, Belgrade and Moscow.

Keywords: Old Testament topics; Jerusalem; *Slavia Orthodoxa*; capital city; visual culture

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