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The Cult of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in Montenegro

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Abstract: This work raises issues and points to the basic guidelines referring to the possibilities of bringing to life particular characteristics of the Christian cult of Saints Sergius and Bacchus on the territory of Montenegro, especially relating to the south-eastern area of the Adriatic.

The purpose and goal of this research is to transform the theoretical construct focused on the aforementioned cult in the area of the Montenegrin coastline into a practical, concrete tourist offer of the cross-border region of Montenegro and Albania, which in the early Christian period was territorially and historically unique, by selecting and developing the most significant holy places dedicated to the abovementioned saints.

The basic methodological hypothesis of the work is a description of the most significant sacral monuments or their remains on the Montenegrin coastline which are dedicated and devoted to Saints Sergius and Bacchus, analysis of what these sites signify in terms of this cult and how they may be developed for pilgrimage-based tourism. It goes without saying that this is taking place in order to explore new possibilities to develop and improve cultural tourism. The sacral monuments dedicated and devoted to Saints Sergius and Bacchus, as well as the affirmation of the saints' cult, represent a special significant cultural potential that requires protection, adequate presentation and particular positioning within the overall cultural tourism offer. Furthermore, this would serve as a precondition for additional and advanced possibilities in regard to the development and improvement of pilgrimage-based tourism as a special segment of cultural tourism, and this also includes the highlighted valourisation and affirmation of cultural and historical heritage.

Key words: History, Christianity, cult, culture, art, architecture, temple, Saints Sergius and Bacchus, Montenegro coast, cultural heritage, tourist valourisation

In Christian culture, the term 'cult' represents one of the most interdisciplinary issues, bearing in mind that it is the subject of further analysis within the fields of ethnology, cultural sociology, anthropology, theology and the history of art. I am personally taking into consideration the complexity of this question, having looked at the diversity of approaches by numerous authors, regarding the problem of the methodological schools or movements they belong to.

I emphasise this due to frequent discrepancies or controversies that I encountered at the time when this definition of the word 'cult' itself emerged. Therefore, the fundamental issue here is what constitutes this definition and which source or sources it has been derived from. In terms of etymology, the word cult derives from the Latin word *cultus*, which represents a form of the verb *colere*, which means "to celebrate" or "to worship" a deity. With polytheists, *cultus* was a common word that displayed celebration regardless of which god it would have referred to, which, for instance, was confirmed in the Acts of the Apostles (17:3-25). This word is also used in early Christian texts that referred to the worship of the one true God. Therefore, the term cult in the Christian sense emerged from the holiness that derives from Jesus Christ. The ultimate theological foundation of the phenomenon of "those that are closer to God" can, of course, be seen in the New Testament teaching regarding the community of the saints, the holy and mystical body of Christ and the nature of the church itself.

It was the attitude towards the meaning and preservation of the term of a family patron saint (guardian) or protecting patron of the wider community that would determine why the cult of certain saintly figures would expand in breadth and depth as a tangible embodiment, throughout history. According to this, it is important to outline that the forming of a cult of a certain saint also influenced the construction and number of sacred and sacral monuments in certain areas, including miraculous icons and the number of families that mark and celebrate the Christian name devoted to that particular saintly figure.

The cult of **Saints Sergius** (Sergije) and **Bacchus** (Vakh) moved towards the southern region of the Adriatic, that is the Montenegrin coastline, mostly by sea, and later via Constantinople and Dardania (the central Balkans). The number of discovered churches that are dedicated and devoted to these two saints verifies the significance that this cult had in the Middle Ages, particularly in this area of the Balkans. The fact that relics of both these saints are held in Mileševa Monastery (courtesy of Saint Sava from his pilgrimage from Syria and Antioch¹) made a significant contribution towards the glorification of their cult. However, even prior to these times, the cult of Saints Sergius and Bacchus was active and very much present, and it has always been considered one of the oldest cults in this region, being particularly related to the southern region of the Adriatic (from Dubrovnik to Shkodra in south), and this fact, according to all indicators, has proved to be crucial in researching and studying this cult, since the largest number of churches dedicated to these saints are located in this particular area (according to the preserved information – more than 15 churches). Also a large proportion of the local population marks and celebrates *Srđevdan* as its patron saint's day. For example, right up until the year 972 Dubrovnik had Saints Sergius and Bacchus as the city's patron saints. Centuries of migration into and out of those areas brought the celebration of this patron saint's day, namely *Srđevdan*, into new regions.

So Montenegro (along with the coastal area and other smaller regions) has always been considered a territory where this particular cult was

always significantly developed. The Benedictine order of monks played a major role in preserving and glorifying this particular cult.



Fresco with illustrations of Saints Sergius and Bacchus

Saints Sergius and Bacchus lived at the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th centuries AD, during the reforms of the Roman Empire and during the vast persecutions of Christians by Emperor Diocletian (who ruled from 286 to 305 AD). They were Roman army border officials in the Syrian provinces of Augustus Euphrates and Augusta Euphratensis in the area bordering on the Persian Sassanid Empire. Due to the fact that they were Christians, Sergius and Bacchus found themselves victims of Emperor Galerius Maximianus (Gaius Galerius Valerius Maximianus, who ruled from 305 to 311 AD), who was one of the four tetrarchs, co-emperors of the Roman Empire. The two were stripped of their military insignias and paraded in women's clothing through the streets (possibly in the city of Arabissus in Cappadocia, Asia Minor), which at the time was a common way of humiliating soldiers. After this, they were sent to the governor of Antioch who ordered that they be tortured and killed; Bacchus was whipped to death in the city of Barbalissus, while wooden boards were *nailed to Sergius' feet*, upon which he was forced to walk until he was completely exhausted. In the end, he was beheaded in the city of Resafa in Syria in 305 AD. The city of Resafa (Reṣafa in Arabic) was established sometime in the 9th century BC and then served as a military camp for the Assyrians. During the Roman and Byzantine periods it was a stronghold towards the border with Persia. The frequent miracles that were occurring in city of Resafa around the tombs of Saint Sergius and of

¹ See: R. M. Grujić, *Sv. Sava i mošti Sv. Srđa i Vakha*, Glasnik Skopskog naučnog društva, knj. 15–16, Skopje, 1936.

Saint Bacchus, and also around that of Saint Justina, a Christian female martyr who was most probably also buried in the same place, made this city one of the most important pilgrimage sites for early Christians. Archaeological research and surveys have confirmed that until 425 AD Resafa was the centre of the cult of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, which was widespread and venerated throughout the Orient until the Arab conquests in the 7th and 8th centuries AD. The Arab Christian Taghlib tribe had Saints Sergius and Bacchus on their flag, while the Ghassanids, a group of nomadic tribes, honoured Saint Sergius, that is Sarkisin (in Arabic), as their protecting patron saint.

One of the biggest admirers of Saint Sergius was Chosroes II, a Persian king who ruled between 590 and 628 AD, who also believed that Saint Sergius had helped him on several occasions. From the 4th century AD, and with recognition of Christianity as the official religion, Resafa and the cult of Saints Sergius and Bacchus would have enormous significance in the later Roman Empire, that is, during the early Byzantine Empire.

Not long after, in around 434 AD, Resafa changed its name to Sergiopolis and became a bishopric where, during the reign of Emperor Justinian (527–565) in the year 559 AD, the construction of a magnificent church dedicated and devoted to Saints Sergius and Bacchus was finally completed. Emperor Justinian built churches dedicated and devoted to these two saints in Constantinople and the city of Accra, which again confirms the glorification of this particular cult in the early Christian era.

Saints Sergius and Bacchus also became two of the protecting patron saints of the Byzantine army and the city of Resafa itself, and the church with its crypt and relics also became one of the most important and biggest pilgrimage places in the entire Orient. During an offensive by the Persian army in the 7th century and an Arab invasion in the 8th century, the church in Resafa was severely damaged and, under the ever-growing influence of Islam along with the decline of Christianity, the cult of Saints Sergius and Bacchus slowly began to vanish in this particular region.

Judging by the number of churches dedicated and devoted to Saints Sergius and Bacchus throughout the coastal region and at the hinterland of the South Adriatic region, these two saints

must have been very venerated and particularly celebrated – primarily on the saints' day on 7 October (Julian calendar) or 20 October (Gregorian calendar). After the rise and development of this cult in Syria, during the period between the 4th and 7th centuries, the cult itself began to gradually weaken under the impact of Islam, although some customs linked to Christianity have managed to be preserved and sustained even today among the desert nomad population. In the subsequent period of the Middle Ages (and even later), the Western Balkan region would be an area with a stronghold of developed and sustained cult beliefs. The oldest known record of the celebration of this cult is considered to be in Pope Alexander II's bull of 1067 under the name "sanctorum Sergii et Bachi".²



The remains of the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus³

The most significant churches in Montenegro which glorify the cult of these two saints include the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus near Shkodra on the River Bojana, where the rulers of Zeta were buried – namely members of the Vojislavljevic Dynasty in the 11th and 12th centuries, and the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in the city of Herceg Novi (there is no historical evidence about the period when this church was built). Regarding the former, it is presumed that there was a temple devoted to these two saints from the period of Emperor Justinian (7th century) before the church was built in the area surrounding Shkodra (on the left bank of the River Bojana). The cult would later be propagated by Bene-

² Istorija Crne Gore, *Od najstarijih vremena do XII vijeka*, tom I, Titograd, 1967, p. 441.

³ Taken from <http://www.rastko.org.yu/rastko-al/zbornik1990/ljdurkovic-skadar.php>.

dictine monks, so therefore, according to certain scholars, the church became a constituent part of their monastery during the 11th century. The fact that the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus became a family tomb of the kings of the Duklja dynasty again displays the particular veneration of these two saints. Honouring the antiquity and significance of this church, Queen Helen of Anjou, along with her sons, Dragutin and Milutin, in 1290 built a new church on the foundations and ruins of the old one. Unfortunately, the monastery's position, its undermining by the River Bojana and also an Ottoman invasion in the 16th century together impacted to the extent that today we are left only with ruins and traces of this historical building site. This particular monument was mentioned in historical documents also as the Church of Saint Sergius at Obote (Obod), while the fact that from 1215 Shkodra began to be referred to as *Rosaf*, resembling thus the name of the town of Resafa in Syria where Sergius was beheaded at the beginning of 4th century and from where the veneration of this cult began to spread throughout the Roman Empire, testifies to the significance of the cult of Saints Sergius and Bacchus. The first mention of the church was highlighted in *The Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja*, while, on the other hand, more reliable documents were mentioned by the Serbian historian Jasterbov in "*O pravoslavnim srpskim starim i novim crkvama u Staroj Zeti*" ("About Orthodox Serbian Old and New Churches in Old Zeta" – which is the present-day area around Shkodra), which were published in 1879 in "*Podatci za istoriju srpske crkve*" ("Facts about the History of the Serbian Church").⁴



The Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in Podi near the city of Herceg Novi

⁴ See: И.С. Јастребов, *Подаци за историју српске цркве*, Београд 1879, 143–176.

The following churches are also significant in the spreading of this cult in the coastal area of Montenegro: the old Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in Podi, an area near Herceg Novi (already mentioned above) – this church dates back to the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries. There is the Church of Saint Sergius (*Sveti Srđa*) in the city of Tivat (from the 11th century), and the Chapel of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in Stonsko polje. There are also many other churches and chapels, particularly in the region around the city of Kotor.

Due to frequent migrations, the veneration of Saints Sergius and Bacchus is at present only linked with certain small areas in Montenegro, as well as some parts of Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Farmers (ploughmen) are particularly careful not to take their oxen into the fields on Saint Sergius' Day, because the common-folk believe that ploughing should not be done on this particular holy day. It is also believed that on this day wild beasts turn into tamed and gentle animals.

Having said this, along with other smaller regions, Montenegro and its coastline could be considered as a general area where the cult of Saints Sergius and Bacchus has always been significantly venerated and glorified. Even today, it provides many possibilities for the development of religious and pilgrimage-based tourism, as well as cultural tourism as a whole.