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Legends, Images and Miracles of the Virgin Mary in the Bay of Kotor in Early Modern Period

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The aim of this paper is to present two icons of the Virgin from the Bay of Kotor: their iconography, style, but above all the legends about them, the miracles they performed and, in particular, the ways in which these wonders were used in the process of constituting the legitimacy of the communes and the region. At the root of the myth of *Our Lady of the Reef* was the political aspiration of the citizens of Perast to consolidate their domination over the broader territory. The citizens of Prčanj had a similar aspiration. But, while the creation of the cult of *Our Lady of the Reef* was officially based and rested on the heroic and masculine principle, the establishment of the cult of *Our Lady of Prčanj*, the cult of the icon of Italo-Cretan origin was based quite opposite, on the private and women's domain. Therefore, the creation of the Virgin cults in the early modern Bay performed a variety of cultural roles. The two icons followed the meticulously designed Post-Tridentine model of linking sacral and political power and both served as mirrors of social hierarchy. However, the dynamic nature of their cultural impact, which involved more than subtle differences in the ways in which the two Virgins were produced and consumed, resulted in the justification of local cults. The similarities and variations which followed their fashioning should be perceived as two sides of the same coin, complementary and interdependent, rather than mutually exclusive phenomena.

Keywords: Marian piety, Virgins' icons, Bay of Kotor, legends, miracles, integrity of the region

The cult of the Virgin, as a result of unfavorable social-political circumstances, gradually migrated from the southern part of the Montenegrin coast, in the direction of the partial security offered by the Bay of Kotor (Boka Kotorska), a part of the Venetian Republic from the end of the 14th century, under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Archbishopric of Bar. Holy images of the Virgin always stood at the core of this cult. The legends which surround them speak of its omnipotence: they performed miracles, had corporeal qualities which gave them the ability to swim, travel, move, talk, weep or to be injured and be the injurers. A study of the legends is a means of reconstructing the story of Marian piety, as well as the history of the shaping the identity and integrity of Boka Kotorska. Here we present two icons of the Virgin from the Bay: their iconography, style, the legends about them, the miracles they performed and, in particular, the ways in which these wonders were used in the process of constituting the legitimacy of the communes and the whole region of Boka Kotorska.

The first is the well-known icon of *Gospa od Škrpjela (Our Lady of the Reef)*.¹ It was painted around the middle of the 15th century on wood, claimed to be cedar (106.5x75 cm), over a thin mortar base (fig. 1). The Virgin is portrayed in half-length in the iconographic form of the Dexiokratousa Hodegetria.² Instead of the complete frontality of the Hodegetria archetype, on the icon the Child is turned in a three-quarter profile towards his Mother, who is represented as inclining her head towards him. This shift of postures, which appeared at the beginning of the 12th century, introduces humanity, motherly love and sorrow. The Child is seated on the Virgin's right arm, holding a scroll in the left and blessing with the right. The Virgin wears a red *maphorion* with a narrow yellow strip on the

hem, also visible on her left arm, and is shrouded by an azure cloak with golden stars on the shoulders. A transparent white veil covers her head. Christ is clad in a long white tunic. The heads of Mother and Child bear golden halos. Christ's halo is inscribed with the letters *ΩΩΝ*, and that of the Virgin with Gabriel's salutation and prayer *AVE MARIA GRATIA PLENA D(OMI)N(U)S TECUM BENEDICTA TUI MULIERIBUS ET BENE*. Above the head of Christ stand the letters spelling *ICXC*, and by that of the Virgin those of her epithet *ΜΡΘΥ*. A red drapery with white edges, reminiscent of ermine, is painted behind the figures. The Virgin sits on a yellow crescent moon. This motif can be regarded as a symbol of Mary's immaculate nature by which she triumphs over evil, and not as an explication of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, for, even though it had already been formulated at the time of the creation of the icon, it was not yet fully developed in iconography.³

This icon possesses exceptional aesthetic and emotional qualities. The strong and lasting cult which developed around this icon was, at least partly, based on its beauty. The deep sensibility with which she is graced was pointed out by its first biographer, historian Flaminie Corner in 1760: "The Virgin face of the blessed Lady is beautiful. With a vibrant expression of love she looks at her divine Son, whom she holds on her right arm, while he turns his magnificent and, yet, sweet face and eyes toward his beloved Mother, observing, all the while, the pious faithful..."⁴ Corner had probably seen the miracle working image from Perast by means of one of its graphic print replicas. However, it is not only the imprecision of the visual source that caused him to claim the Christ is also looking at the faithful people. Observed from the perspective of Baroque rhetoric which emphasizes the immediacy of emotional communication between man and God, Corner was absolutely right: although Christ is not looking directly at the viewer but towards his Mother, their love is transferred to the faithful. Corner points out that the image is *graecanico opere expressam*. Half a century earlier, cartographer of the *Serenissima* Vincenzo Coronelli had claimed that it had arrived from Negropontes (Euboea).⁵ In 1933 Ljubo Karaman ascribed this painting to Lovro Dobričević, one of the most prominent representatives of the Kotor-Dubrovnik school, which is confirmed by an extensive stylistic analysis by Vojislav Djurić.⁶ Based on highly grounded reasonable doubts concerning the documents related to the commissioning of the painting and dating from 1454 (first stated in 1986 by Grgo Gamulin), as well as on an analysis of style, Ivana Prijatelj Pavičić is of the opinion that this painting was created by the so-called Master of Gospa od Škrpjela, whose Madonnas are more elegant and elongated than those of Dobričević.⁷

Setting out to paint the icon, the painter probably had as a model an older copy of the Virgin Hodegetria of Byzantine origin brought, perhaps, from the island of Skopelos. In his *Storia di Perasto* from the end of the 19th century, count Frano Vicković from Perast refers to certain letters of his ancestor, count Vjekoslav Vicković, a diplomat, Austrian consul general in Thessaloniki, who says that the name - Gospa od Škrpjela - derives from the name of the island of Skopelos.⁸ It was there that he learned that the name of the said island, known for a celebrated miracle-working icon of the Virgin, comes from *scopulus*, the term denoting a sea reef, as is also the case with the island in front of Perast. Being that Euboea was also under Venetian control, mutual naval and commercial contacts were strong and it can thus be assumed that members of the illustrious Mortešić family from Perast had brought the picture from this island and that it soon gained a reputation due to the mercy granted to this family.⁹ But, philologists point out that "škrpjel" is the traditional vernacular name for a sea reef which comes from the Italian word for reef, *scarpello*, preserved metaphorically among the south Slavic population to denote a sharp stone,¹⁰ and that it can be ascertained that the name of the island in front of Perast has a Romance-Slavonic root. Still, the perseverance of the legend does indicate the possibility that the miracle-working icon arrived in Perast from the Aegean archipelagos.

The "Eastern trademark" of this holy image boosted its aura especially from the Post-Tridentine period, which insists on the tradition of the defense and veneration of sacred images.¹¹ Documents from the 17th century are the first to record the legends and miracles performed by this holy image and so it can be concluded that the expansion of its cult is the product of the Baroque era. That period shaped legends made up of all the prerequisite and typical medieval components: the icon was created by the evangelist Luke, it fled from the occupied Byzan-

tine East; it had drifted in by the sea and appeared on an especially beautiful and suggestive spot, in the middle of the sea in front of the town of Perast; it was found by fishermen, modest folk befitting the surroundings (the legend turned the wealthy Mortešić brothers, before whom the icon appeared, into simple fishermen); it didn't want to stay in the church on the mainland and returned to the same inaccessible spot three times. The citizens of Perast fulfilled the icon's desire, stealing from the sea foot by foot of firm ground and building an artificial island on a small surface of an underwater ridge (fig. 2). The legend specifies that the history of the church began on 22 July 1452, immediately before the creation of the icon.¹²

By raising the island, and the church upon it, the citizens of Perast planned to consolidate their domination over the broader territory which had previously belonged to Kotor, an old medieval and aristocratic town and the seat of the Venetian governor for so-called Venetian Albania. To achieve this goal they undertook a series of activities: they forged documents, murdered a priest from Kotor at the altar of the church, lobbied in Venice for their cause. Their self-advertising campaign was successful. They gained patronage over the church in 1539 from the *provveditore* of Kotor, Zane Mattia Bembo, as a reward for their role in repelling the attack of the Turkish admiral Hairudin Barbarossa. By decree of the Venetian senate they soon gained commercial privileges and the status of *comunità*. However, their patronage over the church was not confirmed until 1664, following two decades of litigation before the Venetian *Consiglio dei Quaranta*.¹³ At the same time, Perast was obtaining the reputation of a heroic place defending the entire eastern part of Boka Kotorska, called *Regnum Mariae*, from the Turks. Side by side Perast experienced exceptional economic growth thanks to a maritime economy and the risky overseas expeditions by pirates and brigands (*hajduks*).

The miraculous image always stood center-stage in propaganda. The icon on the altar in the church which was raised for her in the mid-aquatorium of the Bay - the demarcation point between Venetian and Turkish property - played the role of the main symbolic guardian. Within this framework it was an emblem of the protective power of the Virgin Mary who by her vigilant eye watched over the southern part of the Bay of Kotor - a part of the stable and just Venetian state, embodied in the maxim *Venetia Vergine*.

The icon protected from the attacks of pirates and offered deliverance from slavery: during the attack of pirates from Tunisia on the town of Perast in 1624, many of its citizens were taken into slavery. *Our Lady of the Reef* was hurt "personally": the church was robbed and the icon struck by a bullet.¹⁴ The wounded Madonna inspired the citizens of Perast to collect ransom money. One of the slaves in Algeria, Nikola Buća, a patrician from Kotor, offered his gratitude to the icon by the means of a silver votive plaque (fig. 3).

Like her great archetype, the Hodegetria of Constantinople, *Our Lady of the Reef* was carried from the island to the fortress of the Holy Cross, or to main altar of the parish church of St Nicholas whenever there was danger of a Turkish attack. During the great offence of the Turkish army in 1654 it was placed in the fortress of the Holy Cross. Women, children and old men knelt before it in "fervent prayer."¹⁵ At this turning point in the process of the formation of self-awareness of the town of Perast the icon of the Virgin turned its "pupils full of grace" to the citizens of Perast and guided the bullet into the body of the Turkish leader which resulted in the withdrawal of his forces. The vision of the Virgin at this crucial moment, a *topos* in the mythologies of urban centers of the Mediterranean world, was noted also in Venetian sources: "The Great Lady" above the walls repelled enemy fire with her shroud.¹⁶ The Perast legend stresses that the Virgin had thrown ashes into the eyes of the Turks who were thus blinded and had to run away. Documents testify that in times of plagues, earthquakes, floods, social tensions and changes, the icon of *Our Lady of the Reef* functioned as an instrument of preservation of social and economic order. Marian piety, especially in the form of devotion to *Our Lady of the Reef* as the central Marian church and icon in the Bay, also expressed confessional and ethnical integrity, which was of utmost importance in times of the Turkish presence and arrival of the Orthodox population from the hinterland.¹⁷

The holy image and its pertaining church were the axis around which sacral and profane space was shaped, as well as the public and private life of the inhabitants of this area. The icon became the focal point of the icono-



2 The Church of Our Lady of the Reef on an island in the Bay of Kotor (photo: S. Brajović, M. Ulčar)

1 The icon of Our Lady of the Reef, The Church of Our Lady of the Reef, Perast, c. 1450 (photo: S. Brajović, M. Ulčar)



3 A silver votive plaque from the church of Our Lady of the Reef (photo: P. Pazzi)



4 Tripo Kokolja, *Nativity of Jesus*, oil on canvas, the ceiling of the Church of Our Lady of the Reef (photo: D. Babović)

graphic program of painted and sculptural decoration of the church (fig. 4), urban rituals and ceremonies,¹⁸ as well as the most prominent pilgrimage goal in the region with hundreds of *ex-votos*.¹⁹

The other icon is the one from Prčanj (52x68 cm). The Virgin is represented to the waist, turned in a three-quarter pose toward the Christ Child, whom she holds in her left hand (fig. 5). Christ puts his cheek against his Mother's, grasps her hand with his left, and holds a closed scroll on his knees. They are both looking toward the spectator, represented against a golden ground, where the abbreviations of their names are written in red capital letters. The haloes of both figures are punched with floral decoration. Mutual tenderness and affection, the positions of their heads and hands, and Christ's crossed legs with a loosened sandal on one foot, testify that it is the iconographic type follows the Byzantine model of the Virgin Glykophilousa (Virgin of Tenderness) and Eleousa (the Merciful) as established by the Cretan masters,²⁰ in particular Andreas Ritzos in the second half of the 15th century (fig. 6).²¹ The similarity to the work of Ritzos is evident not only in the position and relationship of the figures, but also in the facial types - the Virgin's face is marked by expressive sad eyes and long arched eyebrows, as well as colors - deep red *maphorion* with a gold border, Christ's dark blue chiton and an ochre *chimation*. The icon from Prčanj doesn't have such delicate and dense gold lines as Ritzos' icons, the brushstrokes are not precise and the colors are not so vivid. But, the iconographic and stylistic affinities of the icon with those by Andreas Ritzos allow its assignment to a workshop associated with this great Cretan painter. Commissions from Cretan painters were frequent from the capital of the Venetian state,²² and trade links between the regions of Adriatic, Ionian and Aegean coasts, which all belonged to the *Serenissima*, explained many copies of Ritzos' work in Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia.²³



5 The icon of the Virgin from Prčanj, The Church of the Nativity of the Virgin, Prčanj, second half of the 16th century (photo: S. Brajović, M. Ulčar)



6 The Virgin of Tenderness, Andreas Ritzos, second half of the 15th century, Velimezis Collection, Benaki Museum, Athens (Wikimedia Commons)

On 3 February 1672, the icon caused a great commotion in Prčanj. In medieval times Prčanj was a small village on top of the hill of Vrmac, half an hour's walk from the sea. The land by the sea belonged to the Benedictine abbey of St George from Kotor, as well as to other abbeys, churches, and nobles from Kotor. The locals gradually turned to ship building and began acquiring the land by the sea. They soon created an elaborate trade network and were granted permission to perform a state postal service from Kotor, via Zadar to Venice. While it consisted of 35 houses and approximately 200 inhabitants in 1565, in 1688 Prčanj numbered as many as 80 houses by the shore, and close to a thousand inhabitants. Under Doge Alvise Mocenigo, on 5 September 1704, Prčanj was granted the status of *Comunità*.²⁴

Documents confirm that the miracle performed by the icon of the Virgin was carefully investigated. The parson Petar Sbutega and the bishop of Kotor, Ivan Zborovac, on 9 February began the process of the interrogation of the maids and owners of the most prominent houses in the town, those of Jozo Pavličević (Joseph Paulichievich), in which the miracle took place.

The first to testify was Marija Ragusina, known as Radova, a maid in that household, who was the first to notice the strange occurrences. She said that the *imagine benedetta* (holy image) produced screams and unusual sounds, moved and detached itself from the wall. *Ripiena di terrore et horrore* (taken by terror and horror) the servant called on the Virgin and begged for the forgiveness of sin but the image kept on moving *tre passa in circa* (for about three steps) and began to exude a fine odor. Upon hearing her testimony, everyone present fell on their knees and called for the parish priest. Next to speak was Ana Pavličević, who repeated everything, adding that the image was also moving to the left, towards the window, as though it wanted to fly out. She then found the picture far from its proper location, stood "on its own feet" *con volto adente et rubicondo* (with turned and ruddy face). The parson Petar Sbutega left for Kotor to inform Bishop Zborovac.

Lazar Pavličević, the brother of the owner of the house, was questioned the following day and he claimed that he saw a *mutazione di diversi colori* (changing of colors) on the painting, as well as the movement, upon which he proceeded to light a candle, the one that had touched the blood of Christ in the Church of San Marco in Venice on Maundy Thursday. He claimed that the image had been in the house for nearly 40 years and that it was venerated by everyone in the household and the town (first in the town of Kotor, where the earthquake of 1667 ruined the Pavličević-Lazzari palace, and then in Prčanj, where the family, along with 11 other families, founded the *comunità di Perzagno* in 1704 and gave it a great number of captains, ship owners and priests; Jozo Pavličević was its first notable representative from Prčanj), that a light always burned in front of it, and that all other images had perished in the earthquake while this one had been preserved by the will of God. He, too, testified that *trovasimo l'immagine santa star in piedi* (we have found the holy image standing safely). This was also confirmed by Katarina Pavličević.²⁵

These questionings validated the decision that, immediately after the miraculous events, the icon of the Virgin be transferred to the altar of the Episcopal Church *posita in montana* (placed on an elevated position), on February 3rd, 1672, accompanied by prayer and the holy mass.

The Church of the Nativity of the Virgin is mentioned in 1399 as *ecclesia Sanctae Mariae de Porzana*. In 1656 the citizens of Prčanj petitioned the Venetian Senate with a request to be granted permission to construct a new parish church on the seashore because the old church was virtually inaccessible due to its remote location and



7 The Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in Prčanj, 8 September 1913 (photo from the Church archive in Prčanj)

the steep terrain. They were granted permission at a considerably later date, on 2 January 1789, by the last doge of Venice, Lodovico Manin. However, the church was enlarged and reconstructed precisely in 1672, the year of the miracles, through the efforts of the vicar, Don Petar Sbutega.²⁶ We believe that this was no coincidence: the miracle with the icon of the Virgin was instrumentalized to empower the status of the town which, relying on its economic growth, like Perast before it, wanted to rid itself of the patronage of the town of Kotor. What's more, the date on which the miracle took place was no coincidence, either. It was the day when the town of Kotor celebrated its most important feast, that of St Tryphon (1 February). Even the period after the earthquake of 1667, which badly affected Kotor, appears to have been very favorable for such a strategy. However, the icon became silent. The *Madonna di Perzagno* imposed itself as the main cultic image of Prčanj and was transferred to a new church and installed at the main altar on 9 July 1910.²⁷ The icon was then transferred to the altar of the Holy Cross in 1909 which was raised from the donation of Pope Pius XI and upon the bequest of Josipa Luković, nee Lazzari 1925. We have no knowledge of the time and the reason behind its detachment but we do know that it had been completely forgotten for decades: we discovered it in a sort of depot of the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin.

We can only hypothesize that a contest of some kind had taken place between the two icons in the old episcopal church, one in which the older image, or at least the one first venerated, gained priority. Perhaps there was never any contest: the copy of Ritzos' icon had a "limited" task to perform - to strengthen the reputation of the wealthiest family and help it in its efforts to free the town from the domination of Kotor and constitute it as an independent community. It rallied a spirit of unity in the strivings to restore the church and to transfer it from an inaccessible terrain to the seashore. These efforts were crowned by the most representative building in the Bay, a church which visualized the economic domination of Prčanj in Boka Kotorska in the 18th century (fig. 7).

Fashioning the visual image as the center of devotional, social and political core of the community is a rather complex process which demands following a large number of rules. Therefore, the two icons, placed on the reef and in the hill, passed a somewhat similar path toward their final destinations. What is striking in both examples is the decisiveness and desire of the icons to abandon the safe walls of their dwellings. In order to do that Prčanj's Madonna gained legs and moved toward the window "as though she wanted to fly out" from the private household. The icon from Perast actually did it three times, not wanting to stay in the town's church, fulfilling her irrevocable desire to inhabit public space. Moreover, both icons suffered and survived natural and militant threats and proved themselves to be miraculously resilient to different adversities. On top of that, the two icons ended their turbulent journeys in places altered in their name. While the church in the mountain was renovated the very same year as the icon became a part of it, the reef in front of the Perast grew into an island with a church, created to treasure the image.

However, not similarities but differences in their appearance and use are the arguments for the distinctive ways of their veneration. While the creation of the cult of *Our Lady of the Reef* was officially based and rested on the heroic and masculine principle, the establishment of the cult of Prčanj's Madonna was based quite opposite, on the private and women's domain. The socially and politically proved Hodegetria, like her great archetype from Constantinople, took the important role as the protectress of the whole community, able to fight and throw ashes in the eyes of her enemies when needed. Gentle but powerful Eleousa from Prčanj spent years of miracle-working inside the walls of a private household, finally revealing to the female members of the family its desire to leave.

The complex play between iconographical, social and political features of both icons reveals the importance of establishing a cult within the early modern communities in the Bay of Kotor. This widespread process included the diligent relying on rules and well-known models, necessary for reaching the desired outcome. On the other hand, it was the creativity, as well as negotiation and flexibility of the steps that made this journey successful and recognizable within local devotional groups.

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Bogorodičine slike, legende i čuda u Boki Kotorskoj u ranom novom vijeku

U tekstu se prikazuju dvije Bogorodičine ikone iz Boke Kotorske - Gospa od Škrpjela i Gospa iz Prčnja - njihova ikonografija, stil, legende oko njih satkane i čuda koje su počinile. Objašnjava se kako su ta predanja iskorištena u procesu konstituiranja integriteta gradova i čitave regije. Prati se proces oblikovanja Bogorodičnih ikona kao središta devocionalnog, socijalnog i političkog sustava komune. Obje ikone imale su jednaku želju da napuste svoja sigurna utočišta: prčanjaska Gospa dobija noge i moć da ode iz privatnoga prostora, a Gospa iz Perasta doplovljava morem s Istoka, napušta građanski dom i župnu crkvu, prateći svoju neopozivu želju da se nastani u novom prostoru. Obje ikone prolaze kroz razne nedaće i završavaju svoja putovanja na mjestima podignutim ili rekonstruiranim upravo za njih: crkva u brdu iznad Prčnja obnovljena je iste godine kad je u nju kročila ikona, a hrid ispred Perasta izrasla je u umjetni otok s crkvom koja čuva ikonu. Ipak, dvije bokeljske Gospe različito su štovane i "korištene". Dok je nastanak kulta Gospe od Škrpjela bio oficijelno utemeljen i počiva na herojskom i maskulinom, formiranje kulta Gospe iz Prčnja oslanjalo se na privatni i ženski princip. Hodegitrija, poput njenog konstantinopolskog arhetipa, izborila se za najvažniju ulogu - zaštitnice Perasta i cijele Boke, jer je bila sposobna da se bori i zasipa pepelom oči neprijatelja. Nježna Eleousa iz Prčnja provela je godine čineći čuda u kući patricija, da bi se, u punoj snazi, odrekla svog okrilja i otišla u javni prostor. Kompleksna povezanost ikonografskih, društvenih i političkih segmenata ukazuje na dosljedno sproveden proces oblikovanja kulta Bogorodičnih ikona u Boki Kotorskoj. Ovaj proces zasnovan je na post-tridentskim pravilima i prihvaćenim modelima, ali i na kreativnosti utemeljenoj na lokalnim karakteristikama i okolnostima.

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