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THE SYMBOLS IN THE BRICK: THE MEANING BEHIND THE APSE OF ST. DEMETRIOS CHURCH (MARK'S MONASTERY) IN MARKOVA SUŠICA NEAR SKOPJE²

The apse of St. Demetrios Church in Markova Sušica stands as a profound testament to the intricate interplay of symbolism within the 14th century Serbian architecture. The analysis delves into the specific brickwork patterns, decoding their symbolic meaning. Drawing from the Christian symbolism and theological insights from St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Basil the Great, the article explores the use of geometric patterns to elevate the mind toward divine contemplation. The article also integrates these symbols into the broader theological context, referencing the Economy of Salvation and iconographic representations within the apse. Thus, it is concluded that the apse of St. Demetrios Church emerges as a powerful embodiment of the divine principle, intricately connected to the sacred landscape of Matka. Its rounded form, reminiscent of a womb, symbolizes the nurturing embrace of the Mother of God. The interplay of colors and symbols invites the faithful on a spiritual journey guided by the divine feminine principle, providing a comprehensive exploration of the architectural and symbolic aspects of this medieval Serbian masterpiece.

Keywords: St. Demetrios church (Mark's monastery), medieval architecture, the apse, brickwork patterns, sacred narrative, rhombus pattern, architectural symbolism

1. INTRODUCTION

Nestled within the serene embrace of Mark's Monastery in the village Markova Sušica near Skopje (Republic of North Macedonia), the St. Demetrios Church is a magnificent testament to the rich heritage of Serbian medieval architecture (Mirković, Tatić 1925; Deroko 1953: 263, 264; Ćurčić 2010: 640–642, figs. 748–749). Its awe-inspiring apse, embellished with intricate brickwork patterns and imbued with profound symbolism, invites a deeper understanding and unveils a hidden world of meaning (Fig.1). This article delves into the depths of this architectural

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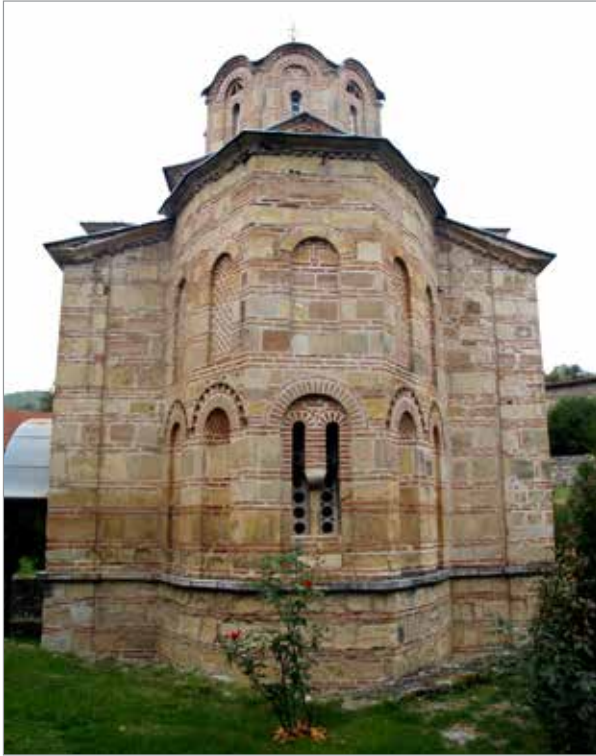


Fig. 1: St. Demetrios Church, Mark's Monastery, east façade, photo: © Jasmina S. Ćirić

masterpiece, exploring the symbolic significance of its apse's brickwork and decoding the hidden messages embedded within its intricate patterns. At the beginning of this study, we bring to mind the statement of architect Žarko M. Tatić concerning the effects of polychromy of the facade of St. Demetrios church: "Smoothly executed arches made of red bricks in a contemporary, modern manner; archivolts formed by alternating rows of bricks with distinct yellowish sandstone on the buttresses; infills beneath relieving arches on the dome, each with a different pattern; cornices with zigzag patterns, recessed or protruding; geometric brick ornaments on the apse; meanders, joints, crosses, decorative brick arrangements, checkerboard patterns, archivolts with recessed zigzag patterns, and many, many other details" (Mirković, Tatić 1925: 20). Almost a century ago, when Žarko M. Tatić wrote this conclusion, he was not aware that his statement would stand as a cornerstone in the historiography of architecture, strongly arguing the artistic tendencies of the apse of the church. Among the most evocative descriptions and the appreciation of artistic values, simultaneously emphasizing the divine values of architecture, are encapsulated in Tatić's description where he states: "Everything is speckled with colorful bricks and white mortar joints, giving these walls, sometimes toward the blue sky, and sometimes toward the green forest,

the appearance of a building imagined only in fairy tales. Every detail is a poem in itself, an echo, and the heartbeat of its poet. However, the artist is not satisfied only with the colors given by the nature of his material. Natural colors of the bricks seem too weak to him. He intensifies them. A large part of insufficiently vivid red bricks, he paints with *al fresco*, red, slightly brighter than cherry” (Mirković, Tatić 1925: 20).

The church of St. Demetrios Church, commissioned by ktetors King Vukašin Mrnjavčević (r. 1360–1371) and his son Marko Mrnjavčević in 1344/45 (Fig.2), stands with its apse as the culminating element point in the polychromatic spectrum of the architectural masterpieces of the 14th century (Mirković, Tatić 1925: 2; Kasapova 2012: 119–122, 256–272; Tomić Đurić 2019: 29). The vibrant hues within the apse draw the faithful into a realm of spiritual enlightenment and divine connection, reinforce the architectural and artistic significance of the Mrnjavčević foundation (Mirković, Tatić 1925: 3; Balabanov 1966: 28–29; Rasolkoska–Nikolovska 1995: 38–43; Gavrilović 1990: 415–428; Đorđević 1997: 299–308; Cvetković 2012: 185–198; Dimitrova 2020: 15).



Fig. 2: King Vukašin and King Markov Mrnjavčević, ktetorial portraits on the south facade of the church, St. Demetrios Church, Mark's Monastery, photo: © Jasmina S. Ćirić

In the rich panorama of religious architecture, apses hold a position of profound significance. These semicircular or polygonal recesses, typically situated at the eastern end of a church, serve as focal points, drawing the gaze and inspiring spiritual reflection. Beyond their artistic significance, apses are imbued with deep symbolic meaning, representing the divine presence, the celestial realm, and the connection between

the earthly and heavenly spheres (Brenk 2010). The apse's form, often a hemispherical dome or a conch, echoes the celestial vault, suggesting the embracing presence of the divine (Newman 1891: 565). This symbolic interpretation is exemplified in St. Gregory of Nissa's writings, where he describes the apse as a "microcosm of the universe" (Newman 1891: 431). The apse's positioning within the church plan further underscores its symbolic significance (Fig.3). In various Christian denominations, the east is considered the direction of spiritual enlightenment and the abode of the divine. The apse's orientation towards the east aligns the sacred space with the rising sun, symbolizing the emergence of light from darkness, prevalence of righteousness over darkness, and the promise of eternal salvation (Coyle 1987: 334; Hellmo 1989; Miziolek 1990: 42 – 60; Fideler 1993).



Fig. 3: The Apse of St. Demetrios Church, Mark's Monastery, photo: © Jasmina S. Ćirić

The architectural elements of the apse also contribute to its symbolic richness. The apse's proportions and orientation are carefully calibrated to create a sense of harmony and balance, mirroring the order and perfection of the cosmos (Hart, Ormerod 1990: 212). The apse, in its entirety, serves as a microcosm of the universe, encapsulated symbol of the vast and

mysterious world and unseen universe (Coyle 1987: 334). It is a place of transition, a threshold between the mundane and the divine, guiding the faithful to transcend the physical world's limitations and connect with the spiritual realm (Bradshaw, Johnson 2012: 186).

2. SYMBOLIC LAYERS OF ST. DEMETRIOS CHURCH'S APSE

The captivating architectural element of St. Demetrios Church in Mark's Monastery extends beyond its exterior adorned with intricate brickwork patterns. The semi-circular sanctuary harmoniously extending from the church's eastern end serves as a most sacred point, drawing the gaze upwards and prompting profound contemplation of the divine realm (Mirković, Tatić 1925: 8).³ Its bipartite exterior design, divided into a lower zone of blind arches and an upper zone of intricate brickwork patterns, creates a mesmerizing interplay of forms and creates a sense of dimensionality to the apse's structural arrangement (Korać, Šuput 1998: 353; Korać 2003, 291; Kasapova 2012, 90).

The original architectural plan outlines the apse, yet describing it as a plan in the true sense is challenging given its pentagonal form, with sides lying in distinct planes. Nonetheless, owing to the distinct volume enclosed by these five sides and its prominently convex form, as well as consistent shaping across all sides, we perceive the apse as a cohesive architectural element defining the primary layout of the eastern facade (Korać 2003: 292; Kasapova, 2010: 25; Kasapova 2012: 61).

Horizontal division of the facade involves segmenting the five sides, with the central one being the widest and most prominent, and the remaining four being compressed and symmetrically arranged on either side, intersecting and intersecting with the secondary plane of the facade. Vertical segmentation resembles that of the side facades (north and south) in three horizontal zones (Kasapova 2012: 61).

The first zone is a plain vertical expanse. The second zone of the apse showcases the most elaborate ornamentation. The upper row of niches features ornamentation. The four side niches, excluding the central one, feature various combined patterns on the inner surface, creating a visually intriguing interplay of patterns. One motif incorporates diamond-shaped motifs with two concentrically arranged bricks and a smaller square brick positioned below them, creating a visual effect akin to concentric rhombi. Slight variations in placement and subtle deviations from the standard pattern within the confined space contribute to this effect (Figs. 4, 5). This pattern is evident in the first southeast niche of the apse, confined solely to the rectangular area of the niche, and the arched section is adorned

3 Tatić stated that the apse is closely resembling a semicircle inside, with a vault designed to be concentric with arches and the vaults of the middle section. However, there seems to be an error in execution, as it deviates from the intended centrality.

with vertical bricks. The second niche in the southeast features contrasting patterns. In the rectangular part, a chessboard pattern is formed by alternating rows of small bricks and mortar. These diamond shapes are arranged symmetrically around a central axis defined by a row of vertical bricks. The motifs exhibit symmetry, but minor deviations from the pattern are discernible. Above this dominant part, the niche contains diagonal bricks. The second northeast niche is adorned with a combination of the previous two motifs with rhombi fields (Korać 2003: 292).



Fig. 4: Niche with rhombus brick ornamentation, the apse of St. Demetrios Church, Mark's Monastery, photo: © Jasmina S. Ćirić



Fig. 5: Niche with rhombus brick ornamentation and the lily motif inscribed in the rhombus, the apse of St. Demetrios Church, Mark's Monastery, photo: © Jasmina S. Ćirić

The motif with diagonally arranged bricks, referred to as 'V'-bricks by E. Kasapova (2010: 69) is predominantly found on facades, appearing in the panels of the lower niches of the apse, the northern tympanum of the naos, and on four arched panels of the drum of the dome (northern, northwestern, western, and southwestern). The apse's lower zone, evokes a sense of solidity and stability, providing a foundation for the more dynamic and expressive patterns that adorn the upper zone. Their rhythmic arrangement, echoing the form of the apse itself, creates a sense of order and balance, while their depth adds a sense of mystery and intrigue. To summarize, the central upper niche is distinguished by a prominent cross pattern at its centre (Fig. 6). This is a brickwork symbol of *Crux Gemmata*, originating from Golgotha, served as an emblem of divine supremacy

and the triumph of Christianity. Found in various early Christian artistic expressions, these crosses carried profound eschatological implications, symbolizing the ultimate victory and salvation in Christian doctrine, embodying the radiance of transfigured Divine Light. Cyril of Jerusalem articulated the luminous cross as a precursor to the King, openly revealing the one who had previously been crucified, serving as both a terror to adversaries and a source of joy to believers, preachers, and those who endured suffering for His sake. As previously discussed in our study (Ćirić 2023: 93), this motif further underscores its significance in the broader context of Christian symbolism. The niche adjacent to the central one, on the left side, displays a chessboard-like motif and within the lower section, the niches are elaborately adorned with 'V'-shaped brick motifs, a motif previously discussed and associated with the Tree of Life symbolism (Ćirić 2013: 17–30; Ćirić, 2014: [231]–244; Ćirić, 2016: 303–312; Ćirić, 2023: 77–102).



Fig. 6: Niche with the Crux Gemmata ornament, central register of the apse of St. Demetrios Church, Mark's Monastery, photo: © Jasmina S. Ćirić

Throughout the Middle Byzantine and Late Byzantine periods, triconch apses, considered a characteristic feature of architecture in Byzantine provinces such as southern and central Greece, Epirus, and Macedonia, were more prevalent. St. Niketas at Čučer, the second phase of St. George at Staro Nagoričino, Virgin Mary church at Kučeviste, St. Nicholas at Ljuboten, Virgin Mary church at Mateič, St. Stephen church

at Konče, and St. Demetrios church – Marko's Monastery have pentagonal apses (Korać 2003: 22, 51, 62, 114, 224, 264).

At the apse of St. Demetrios Church in Markov Monastery, the brickwork emerges as a symphony of symbolism, a harmonious blend of patterns, colours, and textures that transcends mere decoration to convey profound spiritual messages. The careful selection and arrangement of bricks create a visual narrative that speaks to the essence of faith, the cosmos' order, and the divine's enduring presence as St. Basil the Great wrote. In this Homily, St. Basil indeed explores the idea that geometric patterns can serve as a means to elevate the mind from the visible to the invisible and to contemplate the divine beauty. St. Basil suggests that these patterns, including the rhombus, can symbolize the perfection of God and the harmony of the universe. While interpretations of such symbolism may vary, St. Basil's writings, particularly in "De Spiritu Sancto," are recognized for their theological insights and reflections on the relationship between the visible world and the divine (Migne 1857: 172–234). Tree of Life motif symbolize the ascending movement of the soul (Fig.7). This jagged pattern, intricately woven into the brickwork, serve as constant reminders of the underlying order and harmony that permeate the cosmos. Symbolically speaking, St. Gregory of Nyssa explained jagged ornament: "Τα πρότυπα της κτίσεως, τα οποία βλέπουμε στον κόσμο, όπως το οδοντωτό μοτίβο των ορέων ή τα κύματα του ωκεανού, μπορούν να μας μιλήσουν για τη θεϊκή τάξη και την αρμονία του σύμπαντος"/ "The patterns of creation, which we see in the world, such as the zig-zag pattern of mountains or the waves of the ocean, can speak to us about the divine order and harmony of the universe" (Roth 1997: 36).⁴

On a contrary, rhombi patterns, which represents the main ornamental pattern of the apse, formed by intersecting diagonal lines of bricks, create a sense of interconnectedness and harmony, mirroring the universe's divine order. Generally in Christianity, the rhombus is often associated with the Holy Father, representing his role as the head of the Church. The four sides of the rhombus symbolize the four pillars of the Church: faith, hope, charity, and prudence. Additionally, the rhombus's internal symmetry and balance mirror the harmonious order of the universe believed to be established by God (Migne 1845: cols. 979–980; Leclercq et al. 1971: 152–153). The rhombus symbolically invoked the intellectual essence of Christ's divinity (Hunt 2009: 15; Strezova 2014: 97). While the rhombus is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, there are instances where geometric shapes hold symbolic meaning.⁵ For example,

4 „οδοντωτό“ (odontōtō)– „toothed“ or „jagged,“ and it can be used to describe any pattern that has a series of sharp angles or points.

5 The rhombus's similarity to a diamond, a precious gemstone, further enhances its symbolic significance. Diamond motif is frequently linked with purity, strength, and spiritual enlightenment, qualities that align with the virtues of the Holy Father and the ideals of the Christian faith. In some Christian traditions, the diamond is considered as a symbol of divine illumination and the eternal presence of God.

the Tabernacle, the portable place of worship utilized by the Israelites in their travels through the wilderness, featured various geometric shapes, including squares, rectangles, and circles. These shapes were believed to represent the divine perfection and order of the cosmos (**Exodus 25:8–9; Leviticus 17:4–5; Brock 2004: 493**). The rhombi, characterized by its four sides, symbolizes the four Divine promises articulated in Exodus 6:6–7: “I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians, I will free you from being slaves to them, I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians”. As a double triangle, the rhombus signifies the dyadic communication, emphasizing the distinction between essence and energies. The architect engaged in shaping the architectural concept of St. Demetrios Church at St. Mark’s Monastery strategically incorporated the rhombi into the upper level of the apse. This integration aimed to symbolize the immaterial, indivisible, and simultaneous unity, contrasting with the material, divisible, and plural nature of the world (Migne 1897: 586–997; 697A–708D; Fiene 1989: 449–476).



Fig. 7: Tree of Life brick ornament of the apse of St. Demetrios Church, Mark's Monastery, photo: © Jasmina S. Ćirić

Intriguingly, akin to the categorization of brick rhombuses into those with inscribed lily motifs and those with inscribed rhombi, similar rhombuses are prevalent in well-preserved church doors from the Middle Ages. This design transcends walls and can be observed on the facades, as exemplified by Zaum Monastery near Ohrid (Cvetković 2009: 4). The symbolic dimension of the iconographic language has facilitated the widespread adoption of the lily network as a symbol of divine presence. Herbert Kessler illustrates this through reference to the Vatican Ladder manuscript. Within this context, the Mandylion and Keramidion are correlated with Moses' tablets through inscriptions, while the network-like ornamentation is linked to the external appearance of the Tabernacle (*skiniya*) (Kessler 2000: 53–103, esp. T.IVb; Cvetković 2009: 5, fig. 4).

The colour palette of the brickwork adds another layer of symbolism. The warm hues of red and orange, prevalent in the lower regions of the apse, evoke a sense of earthly warmth and connection to the physical world. As the gaze ascends, the brickwork transitions to cooler shades of blue and green, suggesting a shift towards the celestial realm and the tranquillity of the divine presence (Gage 1999: 60). This interplay of colours mirrors the light which enters in the apse through the window, symbolizing the soul's journey from the mundane to the sacred, from earthly concerns to spiritual enlightenment (Gage 1999: 48; Karakanov, Radevski 2022: 7–8).

The presence of brickwork symbols at the exterior that allude to the economy of salvation is further substantiated by the depicted themes in the altar space. Particularly, within the apse, alongside the representation of the Apostles' Communion, an iconographic composition unites the figures of Saints Joachim, Anne, Adam, and Eve (Tomić–Đurić 2018: 91, 103). This concept draws the attention of the faithful to the human nature of Christ, while the selection of the first ancestors emphasizes the role of the Virgin Mary's parents in the Economy of Salvation. It underscores the theological concept of liberation from ancestral sin and the rebirth of humanity, initiated by the Incarnation of the God–Man (Tomić–Đurić 2019: 128, 144–145).

The layered theological thought has taken diverse iconographic and programmatic forms, almost consistently directed towards explaining the concept of Incarnation, the Economy of Salvation, and the significance of Christ's ancestors in the flesh (Connor 2016: 131, 142). This is evident both in the ornamentation and the interior iconographic program of the apse .

3. CONCLUSION

The apse of St. Demetrios Church in Markov Monastery, with its intricate brickwork and rich symbolism, emerges as a powerful embodiment of the divine principle, deeply intertwined with the sacred landscape of Matka. The word “Matka,” resonating with the Mother of God, finds a

tangible expression in the apse's symbolic language (Marković 1920: 19; Okunjev 1930: 89).

The apse's rounded form, reminiscent of a womb, evokes the nurturing and protective embrace of the Mother of God, the embodiment of divine motherhood (Van Opstall 2018: 357; Milliner 2022: 183, 194, 198). The interplay of warm and cool colours suggests the nurturing warmth of the earthly realm and the serene tranquillity of the celestial realm, both aspects embodied by the Mother of God (Ćirić 2015: 162–172, esp.168). The apse's position within the church, facing the rising sun, further reinforces its connection to the Mother of God. The apse becomes a symbolic portal, inviting the faithful to embark on their spiritual journey guided by the divine feminine principle.

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Јасмина С. Ћирић / СИМБОЛИ У ОПЕЦИ: ЗНАЧЕЊЕ АПСИДЕ ЦРКВЕ СВ. ДИМИТРИЈА (МАРКОВ МАНАСТИР) У МАРКОВОЈ СУШИЦИ КОД СКОПЉА

Резиме / У тексту се разматра симболика употребе опеке на апсиди цркве Св. Димитрија (Марков манастир) у Марковој Сушици у близини Скопља (Република Северна Македонија) Изграђена 1344/45. године поменута црква представља ремек дело српске средњовековне архитектуре. Фокус рада је на апсиди полигоналног облика. У тумачењима архитектуре познато је да апсида поседује дубоко симболичко значење. Њена форма која је у свести човека средњег века симбол небеског свода, представља везу између земаљског и небеског. Оријентација према источној страни везана је за промишљања о вечном спасењу. Опис архитекте Жарка М. Татића написан пре готово једног века, представља основу овог рада, подсећањем на уметничке претензије архитекте који је храм зидао. У тексту су анализирани различити мотиви изведени на апсиди: Дрво Живота, мотив Крста, као и два варијетета ромбова, од којих се посебно издвајају ромбови у којима се повремено појављује мотив крина. Позивајући се на дела Св. Григорија Ниског и Св. Василија Великог, тумаче се архитектонски елементи изведени опеком и њихово значење, будући да се управо геометријским симболом постиже уздизање и уосећавање божанске лепоте којој је градитељ тежио. Ромб као доминантан мотив на апсиди, по учењу Светих Отаца, симболизује Светог Оца, а његове четири стране представљају четири камена темељца Цркве. У тексту се такође анализира генерално слика апсиде цркве Св. Димитрија као слике Икономије Спасења, нарочито уколико се узму у обзир иконографске теме насликане унутар олтарског простора (Причешће Апостола, Адам и Ева, Св. Јоаким и Ана). Закључено је да је апсида осмишљена као слика божанског принципа, али и женског принципа, нарочито уколико се имају у виду теме и идеје апсиде, али и генерално сакралног пејзажа кањона Матке (Матка = Мати Божја).

Кључне речи: црква Св. Димитрија (Марков манастир), средњовековна архитектура, апсида, орнаменти изведени опеком, ромбови, архитектонски симболизам

Jasmina S. Ćirić / LES SYMBOLES DANS LA BRIQUE : LA SIGNIFICATION DE L'ABSIDE DE L'ÉGLISE SAINT-DÉMÉTRIOS (MONASTÈRE DE MARK) À MARKOVA SUŠICA PRÈS DE SKOPJE

Résumé / Ce texte explore la symbolique de l'utilisation de la brique sur l'abside de l'église Saint-Démétrios (monastère de Mark) à Markova Sušica, près de Skopje (République de Macédoine du Nord). Construite en 1344/45, cette église est un chef-d'œuvre de l'architecture médiévale serbe. L'accent est mis sur l'abside de forme polygonale, connue pour sa signification symbolique profonde dans l'interprétation architecturale. Sa forme, souvent associée à une voûte céleste, représente le lien entre le terrestre et le divin dans la conscience médiévale. L'orientation vers l'est est liée à la réflexion sur le salut éternel et la montée de la lumière spirituelle. La description de l'architecte Žarko M. Tatić, remontant à près d'un siècle, sert de base à cette étude, soulignant les aspirations artistiques du constructeur du sanctuaire. Le texte analyse les divers motifs présents sur l'abside, tels que l'Arbre de Vie, le motif du Crux Gemmata, ainsi que deux variantes de losanges, avec une attention particulière portée aux losanges ornés du motif du cygne. En se référant aux œuvres de saint Grégoire de Nysse et de saint Basile le Grand, les éléments architecturaux réalisés en briques sont interprétés, car c'est précisément avec ce symbole géométrique que l'élévation et la célébration de la beauté divine recherchée par le bâtisseur sont atteintes. Le

losange, en tant que motif dominant sur l'abside, symbolise le Saint-Père, avec ses quatre côtés représentant les quatre piliers de l'Église selon les enseignements des Pères de l'Église. Le texte analyse également l'image générale de l'abside de l'église Saint-Démétrios en tant que représentation de l'Économie du Salut, en particulier en considérant les thèmes iconographiques présents dans l'espace de l'autel (la Communion des Apôtres, Adam et Ève, saint Joachim et sainte Anne). La conclusion souligne que l'abside est conçue comme une représentation du principe divin, mais aussi du principe féminin, en particulier lorsqu'on considère les thèmes et les idées spécifiques à l'abside, ainsi que le paysage sacré du canyon de Matka (Matka = Mère de Dieu).

Mots-clés : Église Saint-Démétrios (monastère de Mark), architecture médiévale, abside, ornements en brique, losanges, symbolisme architectural.

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