

Novelty Perspectives on Art and Heraldic Display of Nineteenth Century Historicist Retables in the Banat¹

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Abstract: In this study I will question the function of images and symbols present on a selection of nineteenth-century altars in the Banat region, analyzing the use of heraldic symbols and particular iconography related to the holy kings of Hungary, providing an interpretation of the political engagement of their formulation and use. In order to augment knowledge on their semantic multivalence we will include a topical discussion on the ideas generating their specific morphology and integrated historicism, applying an interdisciplinary methodology, revealing multiple layers of novel meaning and connections.

Keywords: nineteenth-century altarpieces; heraldry charged altars; sancti reges Hungariae; Banat; heritage

ES Perspectivas novedosas sobre el arte y la exhibición heráldica de retablos historicistas del siglo XIX en el Banato

Resumen: En este estudio, se cuestiona la función de las imágenes y símbolos presentes en una selección de altares del siglo XIX en la región de Banat, analizando el uso de símbolos heráldicos e iconografía particular relacionada con los santos reyes de Hungría, proporcionando una interpretación del compromiso político en su formulación y uso. Para aumentar el conocimiento sobre su multivalencia semántica, incluiremos una discusión temática sobre las ideas que generan su morfología específica y el historicismo integrado, aplicando una metodología interdisciplinaria que revele múltiples capas de nuevos significados y conexiones.

Palabras clave: retablos del siglo XIX; altares cargados de heráldica; sancti reges Hungariae; Banat; patrimonio

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Objectives and methodological framework 3. Historiography - an overview 4. Visual imagery of dominion - the heraldic charged altars and an introduction to the iconography of the holy kings of medieval Hungary 5. Conclusions 6. Written Sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

To document the specific historical and geographical context of the nineteenth-century Banat region and analyze its geopolitical and geostrategic intricacies²,

one needs to explore the broader historical context, highlighting the emergence of Hungarian statehood during the Romantic era and its influence on the interpretation of religious art.

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² See Victor Neumann, "From Habsburg centralism to Austro-Hungarian Monarchy", in *The Banat of Timișoara. A European Melting Pot*, ed. Victor Neumann (Scala Arts & Heritage Publishers, London, 2019), 259-276; Bálint Varga, "The Two Faces of the Hungarian Empire." *Austrian History Yearbook* 52 (2021): 118-130. Accessed 23 June 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237820000545>; Bálint Varga "In the Middle of the Nation, on the Margins of the Academia: Historiography in Banat in the Long 19th Century", *New Europe College Yearbook (2012-2013)*: 307-340. Accessed 28 April 2024. <https://www.academia.edu/162933500>; John Deak, *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Anna Millo, "From Cosmopolitanism to the Nation". In *Different Paths to the Nation: Regional and National Identities in Central Europe and Italy, 1830-1870*, ed. Laurence Cole (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 60-81. Accessed 2 June 2024. <http://doi.org/10.1057/9780230801424>

Following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 (*Ausgleich*), the Banat became part of the Kingdom of Hungary within the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary. This change brought about a new administrative structure and greater Hungarian influence. The political act sanctioned the transfer of Banat to Hungarian administration, while Timișoara gained full internal autonomy with the 1871 designation as a free royal city. This autonomy included the rights to manage taxes and revenue and to be represented in the Diet³.

When addressing the topic of altars with heraldic achievement it is worth emphasizing *ab initio*, the intricate relationship between their heraldry and iconography offering novel perspectives on their presence as historical documents⁴, by questioning existing interpretations and proposing new lines of inquiry as the period under scrutiny witnessed significant historical changes that validated specific iconography⁵. Building on several hypotheses proposed in a recently initiated study⁶, this scholarship delves into the conceptual context, primarily introducing heraldry-charged altars into the historiographic discourse through meticulous analysis. This is followed by an overview of key concepts related to the cult and iconography of the holy Hungarian kings.

As the Enlightenment transitioned into Romanticism, historians began to develop their scholarship, emphasizing the expansive foreign policy of medieval Hungary, particularly through the concept of medievalism⁷, which was based on the idea of reconstructing the golden age of the kingdom of Hungary.

My research builds on the inquiry into the function of heraldry-charged altars, examining how symbols of nation-building and figurative representations of the holy kings served as visual propaganda?

The obvious response to this would be that they are liturgical auxiliaries. Viewed as a form of sacred theater, where the arrangement and depiction of figures and symbols created a dramatic narrative, these altars engaged viewers and conveyed deeper religious and political meanings.

By focusing on these aspects, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how heraldry and iconography intertwined functioned as tools for historical documentation and communication in the intricate identity construction process of the period. That was, by and large, the climate in which new expressions developed, defined by a characteristic still present in the Catholic Church: the idea of visual propaganda.

2. Objectives and methodological framework

The methodology used in this study combines consecrated approaches and instruments of analysis, as the topic is both challenging and a work in progress⁸, with novelty interpretations on objects of material culture where art and heraldry intertwine. Consequently, the main objective of the study we have initiated fosters imaginative exploration bringing artistic analysis closer to current debates and ongoing reformulations of research practices in art history. To achieve this, we direct our attention from macro-history to the detailed realm of micro-history, thereby opening a new discussion of contextual data, themes, styles, and allegories representing power⁹.

Given that we are dealing with idioms infused with messages of power reflecting the ideologies of the state and the Catholic Church, our research methodology incorporates an interdisciplinary approach, including object¹⁰, historical, and cultural analysis. We will employ several established methods in art history literature: the Panofskyan method of formal composition and iconographical analysis, the Warburgian approach to iconological interpretation, and Morrellian focus on stylistic details and authentication of works, highlighting Peter Burke's seminal concept of reading images from the past as a reliable historical source. In the case study presented, the heraldic coat of arms are interpreted as iconographic motifs, and by the symbolic meaning they embody, it allows one to find significance beyond these decorative forms, recalling the narrative of a glorious past concept, often highlighted by historians. We will engage in a discussion of the artistic elements of the altar sculptures, focusing on how the form (such as the design and structure) and content (the images and symbols) worked together to convey the complex messages highlighted. And, by decoding these symbols, we can infer the intended message or narrative but also the prevailing attitudes towards heroism, nationalism, and visual power of the monument.

³ Mihai Opreș, *Timișoara. Mică monografie urbanistică* (București: Editura Tehnică, 1987), 83.

⁴ See Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Use of Images as Historical Evidence*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2001):10. Accessed 3 June 2024. https://imagesociale.fr/wp-content/uploads/Burke_Eyewitnessing.pdf

⁵ Michael Göbl, "The Constant Reformation of the Habsburg Austrian Coat of Arms from 1740 to the end of the Monarchy through Times of Political Upheaval". In *Genealogica & Heraldica* XXV, (2022): 10-24. Accessed 23 June 2024. <https://www.theheraldryociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2.-Goeb.pdf>

⁶ Mihaela Vlăsceanu, "Notes on the Agency of Historicism: the Banat Nineteenth-Century Catholic Church of Vinga as a Case Study". [Manuscript submitted for publication]; Mihaela Vlăsceanu, "The Creation of New Visual Content in Altar Sculpture: an Overview of the Neo-Gothic Altars in the Catholic Cathedral of Timișoara". In *Banatica* 34 (2024): 677-692. Available at <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=rm&ogbl#search/banatica/FMfcgzQXKhJXNjCHHBjDmFKhQRmHvzIZ?projector=1&messagePartId=0.1>

⁷ On the concept and its theoretical framework see, Gábor György Papp, "Medievalism in Nineteenth-Century Hungarian Architecture". In *The Art of Medieval Hungary. Bibliotheca Academiae Hungariae Studia* 7. (Roma: Viella Libreria Editrice, 2018): 333-344. Accessed 3 June 2024. <http://real.mtak.hu/id/eprint/101826>

⁸ With investigations that will form the corpus of future research, especially regarding the iconography of the holy kings in sculpture and painting during the analyzed period in Banat, as well as the artistic trajectory of the most prolific sculptor who authored these works, Ferdinand Stufferler.

⁹ For an analysis on matter of allegory and the illusion of power see, Mihaela Vlăsceanu, "Imperial Identity seen through Art. The case of Maria Theresa-Considerations", *Gender Studies*, volume 20 (2021): 128-148. <https://doi.org/10.278/genst-2022-0009>; Mihaela Vlăsceanu, "Illusion and Allegory in the Baroque Art of the Banat: An Introduction", *Eikon Imago* 11 (2022):381-391. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/eiko.76757>

¹⁰ The altars can be interpreted as objects of art and read accordingly. For this approach, see the theoretical framework and methodology outlined by Chiara Zuanni, "Object Biographies in the Digital Age: Documentation, Life-Histories, and Data". *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 29 (7), (2023): 695-710. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2215733>

All the aforementioned methods enable a rich and nuanced interpretation of the monument as a historical source¹¹, within the overall framework of Central and South-Eastern Europe where the Banat evolved as one of the most heterogeneous provinces of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Finally, the discussion on the iconography of the three holy kings will shed light on the reasons behind the promotion of their image in altar sculpture, highlighting an introduction of the topic due to its complexity and dimension¹².

3. Written sources - an overview

The perspective of the scholarship remains open in this case study due to the scarcity of written documentation on the subject. The only available sources briefly describe the altars of the Neo-Gothic church in Vinga, built in 1892 according to the plans of Viennese architect Eduard Reiter. These sources typically refer to entries in donor registers or listings of saints represented on the nine altars. Needless to say, none of these authors have attempted to identify the heraldic symbols or justify their placement on the structures of the altars within the complex liturgical setting¹³. Therefore, starting from the analysis of existing sources in national, local, and international contexts that specifically address this topic, we aim to decipher the artistic formulas used by workshops, particularly those from southern Tyrol (Gröden¹⁴, today Val Gardena), part of Austro-Hungary in the period.

Overall, recent scholarship continues to uncover and analyze these artistic representations, providing a richer understanding of the interplay between religious devotion, artistic expression, and political symbolism in the chronotopographical frame scrutinized. As the art of any period develops and manifests in close dependence on ideology, a fresh perspective emerges regarding the interpretation of church interior embellishment, departing from the conventional emphasis on official commissions by diverse benefactors. In our case, focus is directed towards the evocative nation-building imagery elicited by heraldic symbols¹⁵. Varga investigates how the historical narrative was used to reframe the identity of Hungarians, especially in light of the tension between urban and rural landscapes as well as between different nationalities¹⁶.

Additionally, the study prompts inquiries into the significance of these symbols and their positioning

on the high altar and the two secondary altars within the naos. It incites contemplation as to whether the author of these structures—Joseph Runggaldier formally pledged allegiance to the composite empire to which he belonged, or if the community¹⁷ utilized these symbols to assert their position on par with neighboring areas? In contrast, the cult of the holy kings has garnered significant attention from Hungarian scholars¹⁸, especially in recent years, whereas sources are sparse or non-existent for our case study when it comes to the creation of heraldic altars. Specifically, primary documents such as contracts, inventories, and correspondence that could shed light on the motivations and intentions behind their construction are notably lacking¹⁹.

We should delve into archival sources to trace the commissioning, production, and installation of heraldic altars in southern Hungary in particular, identifying the patrons, artists, and craftsmen involved. Furthermore, we should compare heraldic altars in Hungary with similar examples from other regions and periods, identifying common motifs, techniques, and cultural influences.

Altars with a specific ideological program, rarely encountered in the area under study, the nine altars of the Catholic church in Vinga, built in 1892 in the Neo-Gothic style illicit historicist tendencies. The aspects discussed in this context reflect longstanding personal concerns related to the iconography present in altar sculpture, explored scientifically through comparative and synthesis studies focused on the artistic phenomenon of the region, particularly for the eighteenth century²⁰. Recently, by directing my personal research towards this century of reconfiguration and nation formation in Central Europe, it involved a careful analysis of the monument as a source of both imagination and historical documentation, which can indicate many aspects defining creation in relation to ideology²¹. Observations on historicism as a distinctive note in the context of stylistic Romanticism have also been researched throughout the aforesaid scholarship. In contrast, the present study aims to build upon several hypotheses previously introduced, and to expand the knowledge of

¹¹ Burke, "Eyewitnessing", 14.

¹² I propose outlining an in-depth study of the presence of the three Holy Kings in the iconography of nineteenth-century altars across Banat. This subject is at the beginning stages of documentation and represents novelty for the region under scrutiny.

¹³ Nicolae Markov, Claudiu Călin, *Bisericile bulgarilor bănăţeni*. (Timișoara: Mirton, 2015), 27-28; Dan N. Buruleanu, Victor Cociuba, *Vinga-istorie și imagini*, [*Vinga- History and Images*] (Timișoara: Editura Tipar, 2014).

¹⁴ Located in the Dolomites in northern Italy, specifically in the South Tyrol province.

¹⁵ Urte Krass, Miguel Metelo de Seixas (eds.), "Heraldry in Contact Perspectives and Challenges of an Image Form", *Heraldic Studies* 5, (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2023).

¹⁶ For further reading see, Bálint Varga, "The Monumental Nation: Magyar Nationalism and Symbolic Politics", in *Fin-de-siècle Hungary, Austrian and Habsburg Studies*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016).

¹⁷ The commission of Catholic church architecture and historicist altars was undertaken by the Bulgarian community of Vinga (Eighteenth century-*Theresiopol*), a historically significant city in northern Banat.

¹⁸ Building on the idea that the dynastic saints cult was a true expression of power and authority within the territories of the medieval Hungary, see Gábor Klaniczay, "Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses. Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe". (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 339-341; Elena Dana Prioteasa, *Medieval Wall Paintings in Transylvanian Orthodox Churches*, (București-Cluj-Napoca: Editura Academiei Române/ Editura Mega, 2016), 65.

¹⁹ The situation arose due to the transfer of archival funds from Timișoara to the Hungarian National Archives in Budapest in 1889.

²⁰ See Mihaela Vlăsceanu, "Die Barockkunst des Banats", in *Das Temeswarer Banat. Eine europäische Regionalgeschichte*, ed. V. Neumann (München: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2023):187-212.

²¹ Mihaela Vlăsceanu, "Art and Ideology in Nineteenth Century Banat", *Euroregionalia. Journal of Interdisciplinary studies*, No.6/no.1, (2019): 111-128; Marius Porumb, Mihaela Vlăsceanu, "Arhitectura secolului XIX în Transilvania și Banat", in *Arta din România. Din preistorie în contemporaneitate*, eds. Răzvan Theodorescu and Marius Porumb, vol. II. (București: Ed. Academiei Române & Ed. Mega, 2018), 129-135.

the phenomenon (historicist altars), which combine a unique category of saints, the occurrence of medieval kings of Hungary and heraldic symbols increasing the teaching function of art in multicultural contexts.

4. Visual imagery of dominion- the heraldic charged altars and an introduction to the iconography of the holy kings of Hungary

Heraldry played a significant role in the visual language of religious art during the nineteenth century, particularly in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, where noble families and religious institutions sought to display their status and prestige through coats of arms and heraldic symbols. Furthermore, the historicist altars studied embody principles and norms that direct the researcher towards the interdisciplinarity of auxiliary sciences, as heraldry operates with visual symbols. Similarly, the saints depicted in the iconography of these altars refer to a paradigm dating back to the medieval period of the Kingdom of Hungary, specifically the representation of the holy kings triad: Stephen, Ladislaus, and Emeric. In the political mythology of the Habsburg Empire until the last decade of the nineteenth century, Saint Stephen and the associated Marian cult played crucial symbolic roles. According to Sinkó (1983), "Saint Stephen was emblematic of imperial unity, intertwining with themes like Catholicism, universalism, and multinationalism". This portrayal of Saint Stephen is rooted in his historical testimony, which emphasized "the vulnerabilities of a nation confined to a single language and culture"²².

In the context, established by the Compromise, the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary, formally recognized the empire's diverse ethnic and linguistic composition. That is why the symbolism associated with the national emblem was particularly poignant, as it reinforced the idea that the strength of the empire lay in its diversity and the integration of various nationalities under a unified imperial rule²³. This integration was not just political but also cultural and religious, with Catholicism serving as a binding force among the different nations of the empire. Thus, Saint Stephen's image and the associated Marian devotion were central to the Habsburg political narrative, promoting a vision of a cohesive yet diverse imperial entity.

These connotations are vividly expressed in the iconography of the high altar, where Catholic universalism is highlighted by statues of the most significant saints of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, such as Saint Stephen²⁴ and Saint Gerhard of Sagredo, the first bishop of Csanád in the Kingdom of Hungary²⁵, positioned in niches crowned with coronets and adorned with dynamic pinnacles (Fig. 1).

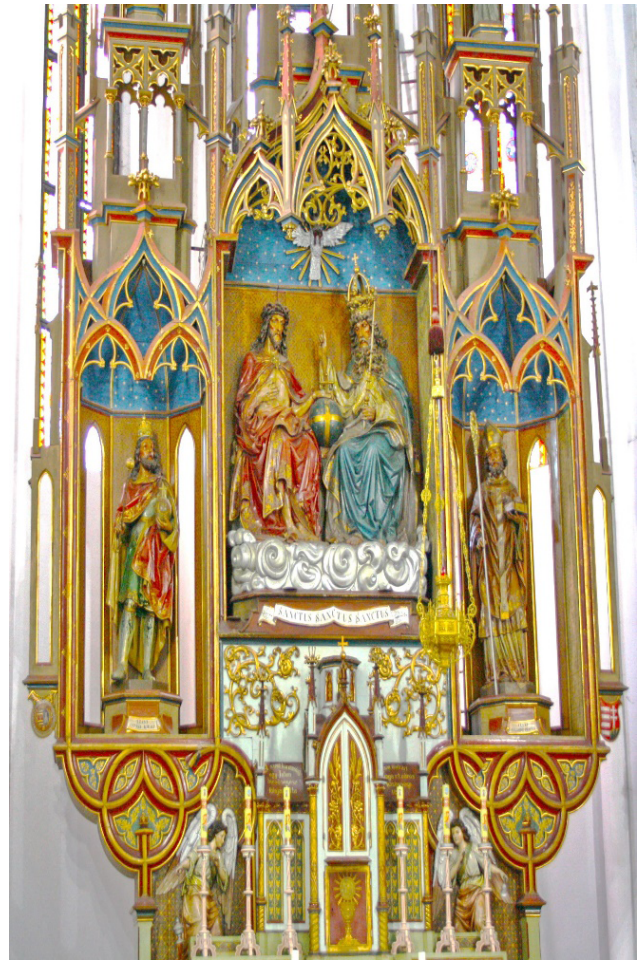


Figure 1. High altar of the Catholic Church in Vinga (Theresiopol), 1892, Joseph Runggaldier studio. Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu

The stylistic repertoire of the altar incorporates medieval art elements, particularly noticeable in its dominant form, which resembles Gothic medieval retables. The altar's structure includes a predella, forming the base upon which the entire architectural composition is built, stipes and coronament.

The statues of Saint Stephen and Saint Gerhard, both defenders of Christianity, can be interpreted with a semantic bias as representing the concept of state versus church. Saint Stephen (Fig. 2), symbolizing imperial unity and multinationalism, and Saint Gerhard, signifying the religious and ecclesiastical authority.

The interpretation of the arrangement of heraldic shields on the high altar not only highlights the union between the House of Habsburg and the Kingdom of Hungary, but also helps one comprehend how heraldry can reflect political changes and the formation of national identities in European history²⁶. In order to increase their "cultural capital" the merchants of the free city of Vinga were bestowed by Maria Theresa, in 1744, with a coat of arms described as follows: "A circular shield adorned with a crown emblematic of the Old Bulgarian kingdom, situated centrally upon a crimson backdrop, with the letter 'T' signifying the appellation", thus allowing the Bulgarian community in Vinga to hold tax-free trade fairs²⁷ (Fig. 3).

²² Katalin Sinkó, "Árpád versus Saint István. Competing Heroes and competing Interests in the Figurative Representation of Hungarian History", *Ethnologia Europaea* 19(1), (1983): 67-84. Accessed 30 May 2024. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346324625>.

²³ Sinkó, "Árpád versus Saint István", 80.

²⁴ Stephen (István), the first Hungarian king (1000/1-1038), and his son Emeric (Imre, †1031) were canonized in 1083 at the initiative of King Ladislaus I (1077-1095), together with Gerard of Sagredo (Gellért), bishop of Csanád and martyr, and the hermits Zoerard-Andrew and Benedict.

²⁵ Established in 1039.

²⁶ Göbl, "The Constant Reformation", 16.

²⁷ Ivan Bogdanov, Ildiko Szöke, "The Bulgarian Catholics in the Banat Region", *Euroregionalia*, 6/1 (2019): 45-92.



Figure 2. Detail of the high altar, Holy Saint Stephen.
Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu

The first potent symbol of Hungarian identity present on the right side of the high altar is the Árpáds' coat of arms, the red and white stripes impaled with the double cross on the escutcheon. (Fig. 4). The double cross representing historical continuity, resilience, and the enduring legacy of Saint Stephen's reign, connecting conceptually the state and the Christian Church. The earliest known mention of the three hills on which this cross rests in connection with the coat of arms dates back to Antonius Macedo, a Portuguese Jesuit, who in 1687 described the three hills without naming them specifically. In the eighteenth century, Jesuit József Koller elaborated further in his work "*Cerographia*" and Timon in "*Imago Novae Hungariae*", both referring to the three hills as Tátra (situated in present-day Slovakia and Poland), Mátra (situated in northern Hungary), and Fáttra (in present-day Slovakia).



Figure 4. Saint Gerard of Sagredo, bishop of Cenad, and detail of the Árpáds' coat of arms, the red and white stripes impaled with the double cross on the escutcheon.
Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu



Figure 3. The coat of arms of Vinga (Theresiopolis).
Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu

Notably, the heraldic motto "*Sanctus Sanctus Sanctus*" positioned beneath the votive depiction of the Holy Trinity on the high altar pertains to historicism's agency in the lands of the crown sustained by the presence of the three holy kings (as triad) in the iconography of the main altars.

In the upper part of the high altar angels hold the instruments of Passion (*Arma Christi*): a spear, a cane with sponge, replacing in iconography the two Roman soldiers, Longinus and Stephaton, and Veronica's veil recalling the acheiropoietic image of Christ (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Coronament of the high altar with angels holding the instruments of Passion (Arma Christi).
Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu

On the left altar devoted to the Mother of God, the heraldry recalls the coat of arms of two territories that were part of the Lands of the Crown of Saint Stephen: Croatia and Dalmatia, as part of the Triune²⁸. The coat of arms of Croatia (Fig. 6), featuring a red and white checkerboard shield and that of Dalmatia displaying three golden crowned leopard heads on a blue background, symbolize the dominion previously mentioned (Fig. 7).

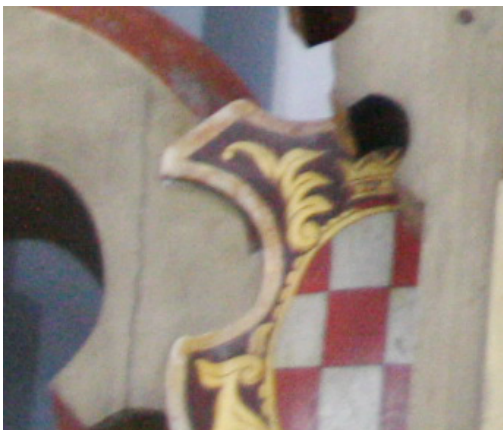


Figure 6. The coat of arms of Croatia, Chequy Gules and Argent.
Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu

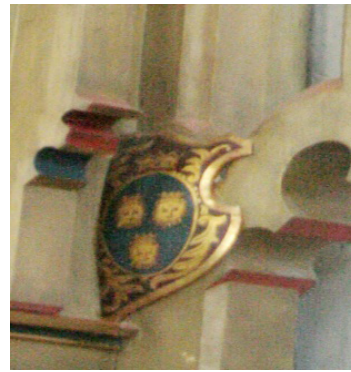


Figure 7. Quaterly, Azure, Three leopard's heads affrontés, crowned, coat of arms of Dalmatia. Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu

In connection with the main composition of this altar, the concept of Mary as the patron saint of Hungary represents a local adaptation of an idea prevalent in several European countries from the eleventh century onwards. Mary was often revered as *Patrona Galliae*, *Patrona Bavariae*, *Patrona Poloniae*, and *Patrona Hungariae*. In this latter hypostasis, Joseph Müller, a sculptor from Vienna, crafted the left side altar for the Catholic Cathedral in Timișoara in 1856, one of the first instances of *Patrona Hungariae* central of the edicula with St. Stephen depicted holding a model of Esztergom basilica, symbolizing his role in founding and supporting Christian institutions in Hungary²⁹ (Fig. 8).



Figure 8. Joseph Müller, *Patrona Hungariae* and Saint Stephen, Gerhard, Nepomuk and Ioan of Capistrano, secondary altar, 1856, Roman-Catholic Cathedral of Timișoara.
Source: Roman-Catholic Diocese of Timișoara

²⁹ Stephen I's connection to Esztergom Basilica is emblematic of his broader influence on Hungarian Christianity and statehood. The act of founding the Archdiocese of Esztergom, signified not only a personal religious commitment but also a strategic move to foster unity and legitimacy in the newly Christianized kingdom, which later evolved into the concept of *Regnum Marianum*. This notion, symbolizing Hungary as the Kingdom of Mary, remains a cornerstone of Hungarian religious identity, deeply influencing its cultural and spiritual heritage. Furthermore, the Esztergom Basilica, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, stands as a testament to this enduring legacy and devotion.

²⁸ Whereas Slavonia, the third part of the Condominium is not showcased.

The crown of Saint Stephen which surmounts the coat of arms, is another important national symbol³⁰. The disposition of the Holy Crown of Hungary on altars highlights the intertwined nature of religious and state affairs in Hungarian history, symbolizing the divine right and sacred responsibility of the Hungarian monarchy. The two angels hold the most important royal insignia, above the niche where the sculptor has positioned the statue of Mary, emphasizing the idea of kingdom dedicated to her by Stephen, thereby reaffirming the concept of *Regnum Marianum*, which includes the territories upon which our research directs (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. The Crown of Saint Stephen held by two angels.
Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu

In the heraldic and ceremonial traditions of the new monarchy, aligned with the titles of the King of Hungary, the national flags of the associated Lands of the Hungarian Crown (Dalmatia, Croatia, and Slavonia) are prominently featured, along with the lands claimed by the king: Bosnia, Serbia, Galicia, Lodomeria, Cumania, and Bulgaria. These coat of arms symbolized the presence and identities of these regions within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, each possessing its own historical, cultural, and political significance³¹.

Building on these insights, a novel scholarly perspective emerges concerning the interpretation of church interior adornment, diverging from the traditional emphasis on official commissions from various patrons. Instead, the focus shifts to the profound state and nation-building imagery evoked by heraldic symbols³².

³⁰ It is traditionally said to have been sent by Pope Sylvester II to Stephen I, the first King of Hungary, in the year 1000.

³¹ See Géza Pálffy, "The Heraldic Representation of Croatia at Hungarian Coronations from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries", in *Ars et Virtus. Croatia-Hungary: 800 Years Of Shared Cultural Heritage*, eds. Petra Vugrinec, Iva Sudec Andreis, Marina Bagarić, Dragan Damjanović (Zagreb: Klovićevi dvori Gallery, Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 2020): 81-93. Accessed 21 May 2024. <https://www.academia.edu/44161794>; Ivan Nacevski, "The Emergence and Development of the Coat of Arms of Macedonia in Illyrian Heraldry", *Genealogy*, 6(2), 44, (2022); Accessed 16 April 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy602004>

³² Ivan Nacevski, "The Emergence and Development of the Coat of Arms of Macedonia in Illyrian Heraldry", *Genealogy*, 6(2), (2022): 44. Accessed 23 June 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy6020044>; Dinko Šokčević, "The Croats and the Hungarians. An Account of Centuries of Coexistence under the Sign of shared History, Culture and Art", in *Ars et Virtus. Croatia-Hungary: 800 Years Of Shared Cultural Heritage*, eds. Petra Vugrinec, Iva Sudec Andreis, Marina Bagarić, Dragan Damjanović, (Zagreb, Budapest, Klovićevi dvori Gallery, Hungarian National Museum, 2020): 15-43. Accessed 13 June 2024. <https://www.academia.edu/44161794>

Heraldic by all regulations is the lion (rampant) often interpreted as a symbol of Jesus Christ, in this case stands for the establishment of Bulgaria as a state in 1878³³, drawing inspiration from the works of Pavle Ritter Vitezovich and Hristofor Zhefarovich³⁴ (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. Golden crowned lion on a crimson field, coat of arms of Bulgaria. Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu

The coat of arms on the right side altar alludes to Bosnia as part of the condominium, and a subject territory charging a red-armored arm emerging from clouds, wielding a sword on the crowned escutcheon (Fig. 11).



Figure 11. Coat of arms of Bosnia.
Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu

³³ Article 21 of the Tarnovo Constitution of 1879, defines: "The coat of arms of the Bulgarian state is a golden crowned lion on a crimson field. Above the field is a princely crown", apud Jovan Jonovski, "The Development of the State Emblems and Coats of Arms in Southeast Europe", in *Genealogia, Special Issue: The Balkans in Heraldry-Emergence, Development, Future*, ed. Jovan Jonovski, 2023, 7, 54. Accessed 29 June 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7030054>

³⁴ Pavao Vitezović-Ritter, "Stemmatographia, sive Armorum Illyricorum delineatio, descriptio, et restitutio. 1701. Accessed 17 June 2024. <http://www.dlib.si/?URN=URN:NBN:SI:doc-F6MLGXHK>; Göbl, "The Constant Reformation", 12-13.

The ultimate justification for the inclusion of these arms of dominion, derive from a more abstract legal concept: the doctrine of the Holy Crown of St. Stephen. This doctrine stated that Hungary was a sovereign and indivisible polity divided into several lands (regna): Hungary proper, Transylvania, Slavonia, and Croatia (sometimes Dalmatia was also added to the list³⁵). Placing the coat of arms on the altars was an important feature as historicism mediating the idea of medieval ancestors as emblematic for the state they represent, “the armiger”, according to Jonovski, reflected the state apparatus, the administration on a defined territory³⁶. The state also used the Millennial celebrations in 1896 and monuments to glorify the year 896, when the Magyars settled in the region. The inclusion of holy saints Stephen, Ladislaus, and Emeric in altar sculptures of the Austro-Hungarian Empire can be understood from several historical, cultural, and religious perspectives. In summary, the emergence of South Tyrolean sculptors in the Austro-Hungarian Empire can be attributed to their deep-rooted artistic traditions, strategic geographic location, imperial patronage, religious commissions, economic networks, and the dynamic cultural exchanges within the empire. These factors combined to create a fertile environment for their art to flourish and spread across the empire. We will not insist on the generalized phenomenon, but through the analysis of these heraldic charged altars and those highlighted as representative of the holy kings iconography, underscore the dimension of this cult in the nineteenth-century Banat region.

The funding for the high altar dedicated to the Holy Trinity, as well as for the altars of the Holy Cross and St Joseph, was provided by the local town hall administration. Generous contributions came from Bulgarian individuals like Francisc Rankov, who supported the altar of the Mother of God, and Petru Augustinov, who sponsored the St Peter altar. In addition, Anton Cokanj financed the St Anton altar, and Bonaventura Necov contributed to the creation of the St Michael altar³⁷. The altars located within the main part of the church, arranged in pairs, honor the Heart of Jesus and the Sorrowful Mother of God, were both sponsored by Nicolae Guran. Thus, the significance of patronage is also highlighted, suggesting that the ethnic background of the donors (in this case, Bulgarians) likely influenced the configuration of the altars. This implies that the true authors of these altarpieces were the patrons, rather than the artists or workshops, as it was their intentions and preferences that shaped the final outcome.

The presence of the three Árpadian kings in the art of Upper Hungary has been scientifically explored through dedicated studies³⁸. In relevant literature³⁹, research has focused on how these figures are integrated into the narrative, and according to Năstăsoiu⁴⁰ the iconography was always in correlation with certain characteristics derived from the king's life and legend: old and wise King St. Stephen, young and chaste Duke St. Emeric, and the crusader King St. Ladislas.

Two of the side altars of the Catholic Church in Vinga were decorated with Saints Emeric⁴¹ and Ladislas. In both cases, the association with Saints Margaret and Therese of Avilla carries connotations that link episodes from the legends of the sanctified kings' lives with indications of the sacrifices of the two saints. In each instance they were represented with royal crown, orb, and scepter, serving as props to embody the concept of *mi-les Christi*, or knights.

The composition situated on the right-side retable of the nave revolves around the encounter

³⁸ For further reading refer to Katalin Sinkó, “Árpád versus Saint István: Competing Heroes and Competing Interests in the Figurative Representation of Hungarian History”, *Ethnologia Europaea* XIX, (1989): 67-83. Accessed, 5 June 2024, <https://doi.org/10.16995/ee.1001>; Marija Mirković, “Ikonografija sv. Ladislava na području Zagrebačke (nad)biskupije” [St Ladislas' iconography in the Zagreb (arch) diocese], in *Zagrebačka biskupija i Zagreb. 1094.-1994.*, ed. Antun Škvorčević (Zagreb, Horvátország/Magyarország. Évszázados irodalmi és képzőművészeti kapcsolatok, 1995): 579-591; Linda Burke, “A Sister in the World: Saint Elizabeth of Hungary in the “Golden Legend”, *The Hungarian Historical Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3, *Saints Abroad*, Budapest: Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2016): 509-535. Accessed 2 May 2024. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44390788>; Danko Šourek: “Arpadian Royal Cult in the Zagreb Cathedral: From Gothic to Baroque”, *Rad. Inst. povij. umjet.* 41 (2017):47-58; Marija Mirković, “Ugarski sveci u hrvatskoj likovnoj umjetnosti” [Hungarian saints in Croatian visual arts], in *Hrvatska/Mađarska. Stoljetne književne i likovno-umjetničke veze.* ed. Jadranka Damjanov (Zagreb: Horvátország/Magyarország. Évszázados irodalmi és képzőművészeti kapcsolatok, 1995): 18-26.

³⁹ S. Norbert Medgyesy, The figure of Saint Ladislaus in Hungarian Baroque Chants and Sermons, in *Saeculum Christianum* t. XXV (2018): 95-112. Accessed 3 June, 2024. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21697/sc.2018.25.9>

⁴⁰ In his MA thesis addressing the issue, Dragoş Gh. Năstăsoiu, “*Sancti reges Hungariae*” in *Mural Painting of Late-medieval Hungary*, (Budapest: Central European University, 2019): 5, defines the features of the three royal characters of Hungarian kingship saying that these were established independently into each saint's hagiography, quoting Melinda Tóth, *Árpád-kori falfestészet* [Arpadian Age Mural Painting] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1974); Terézia Kerny, “Szent László középkori tisztelete és ikonográfiája,” [The Cult and Iconography of Saint Ladislas] in *Ave Rex Ladislaus*, ed. Zoltán Móser (Budapest: Paulus Hungarus Kairosz, 2000): 30-39; Edit Madas, György Zoltán Horváth, *Középkori prédikációk és falképek Szent László királyról. San Ladislao d'Ungheria nella predicazione e nei dipinti murali* (Budapest: Romanika Kiadó, 2008).

⁴¹ For the attributes of St. Emeric, see Terézia Kerny, “A magyar szent királyok tisztelete és ikonográfiája a XIV. század közepéig” [The cult and iconography of the holy kings of Hungary until the middle of the 14th century], in *Szent Imre 1000 éve. Tanulmányok Szent Imre tiszteletére születésének ezredik évfordulója alkalmából. 1000 Jahre heiliger Emmerich. Beiträge zu Ehren des heiligen Emmerich anlässlich seines 1000. Geburtstages*, ed. Terézia Kerny (Székesfehérvár: Székesfehérvári Egyházmegyei Múzeum, 2007), 76.

³⁵ For an examination of the Magyar nationalism through the politics of monuments, see chapter two of Bálint Varga, “The Monumental Nation: Magyar Nationalism and Symbolic Politics in Fin-de-siècle Hungary”, in *Austrian and Habsburg Studies*, vol. 20 (New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016).

³⁶ Jonovski, “The Development of the State Emblems”, 2; Harold D., Laswell, Daniel Lerner, Ithiel de Sola Pool, “The Comparative Study of Symbols. An Introduction”. In *Hoover Institute Studies*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1952).

³⁷ The association between the donors' names and the saints represented in the central votive part of the secondary altars is obvious.

involving St Peter, Elizabeth of Thuringia/ or of Hungary and Mary Magdalene. The altar of St Anthony of Padua features Sts. Elizabeth of Hungary and Helen, and the St Michael altar is associated with Sts Bonaventura and Juliana. Similarly, the Sorrowful Mother of God altar displays the statues of Sts Francis of Assisi and Elizabeth of Hungary. In addition to serving dynastic propaganda, these representations were viewed as political concepts⁴², Sts. Stephen and Ladislav, as protectors of the law, having their cult subsequently appropriated by the nobility.

From a stylistic perspective, these altars were often dismissed as mere stereotypes in literature, and for many historians addressing the topic, the term 'Tyrolean altars' became synonymous with large-scale works lacking innovation⁴³. However, there has been a recent reevaluation of these pieces of liturgical furniture aimed at achieving a more comprehensive understanding of the period. This reassessment involved analyzing their iconography, stylistic representations, and the backgrounds of their creators. Ferdinand Stuflesser who trained under masters like Joseph Knabl at the Academy of Munich⁴⁴- that was the epicenter of Nazarene painting at that time-plays a crucial role in this study, as he authored over 700 statues for altars in the whole empire⁴⁵. One may also see that the establishment of art institutions in Vienna, Zagreb, Budapest, and Prague in the same period played a crucial role in shaping the artistic landscape of the region. These schools contributed to the dissemination of artistic techniques and styles, fostering a rich cultural and artistic exchange from center to the periphery.

One may presume that J. Runggaldier⁴⁶-the author of the altars with heraldry- was likely in possession of graphic illustrations that served as sources of inspiration for these special iconographies. St. Stephen cathedral in Zagreb, was according to Klaniczay⁴⁷ the site where the oldest

liturgical evidence for the cult of three canonised saints appeared.

In the Middle Ages the cult of royal and dynastic saints was a popular way to prove and promote dynastic legitimacy across Europe, what happened in late 1900's was a rebirth of the same idea. In churches refurbished in the nineteenth century, new Neo-Gothic altars replaced the baroque forms, as seen in the case of the Brethren of Mercy church in Timișoara (Fig. 12).



Figure 12. High altar of the Brethren of Mercy Catholic church in Timișoara, rebuilt in 1851, high altar with Saint Stephen bearing royal insignia (right side). Source: Roman-Catholic Diocese in Timișoara.

The following examples belong to the same register, evoking the iconography of the saintly kings and underscoring Timișoara's role as a capital under the Angevins.

The influence of Romanticism is visible in the neo-Gothic altars and iconography of saints in various churches, all reflecting the Regnum Marianum concept that emphasizes Hungary's devotion to the Virgin Mary and its Christian heritage through the representation of the holy kings. In Timișoara, this influence is particularly evident in the main and secondary altarpieces of churches built in the period. Two examples retain our attention, the side altar of the parish Catholic church in Mehala, where young and chaste Duke Emeric holds the lily branch in his hand, allusion to his chastity (Fig. 13).

⁴² Năstăsioiu, "Sancti reges Hungariae", 11.

⁴³ Dragan Damjanović, "Altars of Blessed Virgin Mary's Ascension in Molve", *Podravina*, vol. 8/15 (2009):117-138. Accessed 20 April 2024. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/77859>

⁴⁴ For studies on Stuflesser's presence in altar sculpture across Croatia, refer to Irena Kraševac, "Kipar Ferdinand Stuflesser. Doprinosi tirolskom kiparstvu druge polovine 19. Stoljeća u sjevernoj Hrvatskoj", *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti*, br. 27, Zagreb, 2003, 231-239, Accessed 19 May 2024, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/326990>; Irena Kraševac, "Neostilska sakralna skulptura i oltarna arhitektura u sjeverozapadnoj Hrvatskoj", doktorska disertacija, Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Filozofski fakultet, Zagreb, 2005; Irena Kraševac, "Tirolska sakralna skulptura i oltari na prijelazu iz 19. u 20. stoljeće u sjevernoj Hrvatskoj", *Anali Galerije Antuna Augustinčića*, 26/2006, 3-34. Accessed 20 May 2024, http://www.gaa.mhz.hr/storage/upload/calendar_activities/anali-26_d_101534.pdf

⁴⁵ High-quality works signed by Ferdinand Stuflesser were commissioned by Catholic churches all over the world; one such example can be found in Wyckoff, USA.

⁴⁶ The intricate conceptual connections were woven by the sculptor Joseph Runggaldier across various geographical and cultural contexts, particularly in Croatia and southern regions of Austria, Hungary, Bohemia, Moravia, Banat, and Transylvania. Runggaldier's work in churches such as the Ursuline Church of Varaždin and St. Nicholas Church in Krapina, Lepajci, and Toborsko reveals his distinctive style and thematic focus on altar iconography and iconology.

⁴⁷ Gábor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic cults in Medieval Central Europe*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).



Figure 13. Holy Saint Emeric, detail of the left side altar of the parish Catholic church in Mehala/Timișoara, Ferdinand Stufferler, 1897. Source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu

Other examples, such as the high altar votive painting of the Millennium Church in Timișoara, depict *Patrona Hungariae* bearing royal insignia: the crown of St. Stephen on her head and a scepter in her hand. The angel positioned at her feet used to bear the coat of arms of the Árpád dynasty, evoking Timișoara's significance as a capital under the Angevins, when Carol Robert of Anjou established the Hungarian kingdom's capital there from 1316 to 1323⁴⁸. The high altar was adorned with neo-Romanesque ornamentation, with the holy kings Stephen and Ladislaus flanking the statue of Christ the Savior enthroned above the entire ensemble. These statues were crafted by another South Tyrolean workshop, that of Dominik Demetz.

A comprehensive study focused on the iconography of Hungarian holy kings in altar sculpture from Banat will form the subject of future research, given the significant presence of this theme and the large number of churches built in the nineteenth century that are subject to documentation and analysis.

5. Conclusions

As this discussion of visual sources has revealed, in the troubled context of nineteenth-century Banat, the iconographic program of the altarpieces was loaded with various connotations. This paper expands upon the limited art historical knowledge concerning the shape and content providing additional insights

into the versatility of heraldry as 'a visual tool for communication'.

During the examined period, the Banat region, located within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and an area of overlapping historical interests, experienced significant developments. This made the Temes Banat/Banat of Timișoara a focal point for religious and artistic discourse, where mechanisms of Catholicization became prominent.

Altars with heraldic achievements in this context were more than just religious artifacts, they served as complex historical documents, providing valuable insights into the neo-absolutist era, encapsulating the intricate relationships between the Church, the state, and noble patrons. Through their heraldic and iconographic elements, these altars reveal the multifaceted nature of power, legitimacy, and artistic expression in the studied historical context.

Overall, the propagandistic use of heraldry served not only as a visual representation of identity and power but also as a medium for conveying complex historical and cultural messages transcending time and geographical boundaries⁴⁹.

In conclusion, the appropriation of heraldry and the iconography of holy kings in artistic commissions was not just about religious devotion but also encompassed intricate layers of political symbolism, cultural identity, and historical memory. Patrons strategically used these representations to assert legitimacy, promote piety, and reinforce communal bonds, thereby shaping both religious practices and broader societal values. In the 'multicultural periphery' of the Banat⁵⁰, located at the outskirts of the Kingdom of Hungary, a project of cultural assimilation reflects these strategies of transculturation and acculturation.

At this stage of the research, we have begun analyzing this complex subject, which we will develop into an original research theme for the mentioned area, where the plurality of manifestations is defined by multi-cultural approaches.

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⁴⁸ The work was completed in 1901 by György Vastagh. During the interwar years, amid deteriorating bilateral relations with Hungary and in an effort to bolster Romanian authority, the symbol was overpainted, see Joseph Geml, *Vechea Timișoară în ultima jumătate de secol (1870–1920)*. (Timișoara: Cosmopolitan Art, 2016).

⁴⁹ Varga, "Toward a Composite Nation State", 121.

⁵⁰ Bálint Varga, 2021, The two faces of the Hungarian Empire, in *A Companion to the Hungarian Empire, Austrian History Yearbook* 52 (2021):1–13, accessed 27 June 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237820000545>

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