

The “Mongol” Cloud Collar of the Serbian Despot John Oliver: An Historical and Iconographic Investigation

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Academic research on textile production and trade in the Balkans has mainly been based on scattered evidence preserved in medieval archives relevant to the investigation of regional history, and sometimes supported by the analysis of wall paintings, illustrated manuscripts, and sporadic archaeological findings.¹ In the late Middle Ages some areas of the Balkan Peninsula, usually considered secluded in comparison to other European regions, played an active role in the trade and exchange of luxury goods with distant towns in western Europe, Asia, and northern Africa as part of the Mongols’ (1206–1368) strategic expansion.² The roughly-organized network of Roman and Byzantine imperial roads in use at least since the first century CE served to mediate trade and exchange between

1 Some important archives include the Dubrovnik Archive, other Croatian archives, and the State Archives of Venice. Jovan Kovačević’s study continues to offer the most complete collection of visual sources regarding medieval costumes. Jovan Kovačević, *Srednjovekovna nošnja Balkanskih Slovena—Studija iz istorije srednjovekovne kulture Balkana* [The medieval costume of the Balkan Slavs—a treatise from the history of the medieval culture of the Balkans] (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Science, 1953), 213–217. Marko Popović, Smiljka Gabelić, Branislav Cvetković, Nebojša Borić, Zdenka Živković, and Miroslav Lazić, *Crkva Svetog Nikole u Staničenju* [The church of St. Nicholas in Staničenje] (Belgrade: Institute of History, 2005), 57–79. Vasilka Gerasimova-Tomova, “Плашеницата на деспота на Яnine IZAOYΣ” [The epitaphion of the despot of Janina IZAOYΣ], in *Sbornik v čest na akademik Dimitr Angelov* [Proceedings in honor of the scholar Dimitr Angelov], ed. Velizar Ivanov Velkov (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Science, 1994), 292–300; Juliana Boycheva, “Плашаница от църквата ‘Въведение Богородичино’ в Blagoevgrad” [Epitaphion from the church “presentation of the blessed Virgin Mary” in Blagoevgrad], *Izvestia na istoričeskia muzei v Blagoevgrad* 2 (2001): 67–72; Juliana Boycheva, “Funkcionalni i ikonografski osobenosti na плашаницата през XIV–XV v. Vizantijski плашаници в България” [Particularities of the function and iconography of Byzantine epitaphion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Byzantine epitaphions in Bulgaria], *Problemi na izkustvoto* 4 (2005): 15–26; Janko Radovanović, “Плашаница skopskog mitropolita Jovana u riznici manastira Hilandara” [Epitaphion of the Skopje Metropolitan Jovan in the treasury of the Hilandar monastery], *Zograf* 31 (2006–2007): 169–185. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

2 Bariša Krekić, *Dubrovnik (Raguse) et le Levant au Moyen Âge* [Dubrovnik (Ragusa) and the Levant in the Middle Ages] (Paris: Mouton & Co, 1961), vol. 5, 5–27.

Europe and Asia.³ Coastal towns located along the Balkan Peninsula undoubtedly benefitted from and contributed to this trade. It is in this geographical context that the Serbian nobleman and despot John Oliver (reigned ca. 1310–1356) governed in the crown’s name a spacious administrative unit east of the Vardar River, which included several strategic strongholds that mediated between domestic and foreign diplomacy and trade. In this paper, we will investigate two portraits of Oliver depicted in Byzantine-Mongol attire in the Lesnovo Monastery, located in the eastern part of the Republic of North Macedonia. These artworks comprise a unique case study that furthers and supports the existing scholarship on Mongol or Mongol-like textiles in Europe as well as the few works on the artistic contribution of the Mongols in the Balkans.



Fig. 1. *Despot John Oliver wearing a blue robe and a red cloud collar with roundels enclosing birds. Wall painting on the naos, Lesnovo Monastery, Serbia, 1342. Public domain.*



Fig. 2. *Despot John Oliver wearing a blue robe and a red cloud collar with roundels enclosing birds. Wall painting on the narthex, Lesnovo Monastery, Serbia, ca. 1349. Public domain.*

3 Matthew Larnach, *All Roads Lead to Constantinople: Exploring the Via Militaris in the Medieval Balkans, 600–1204* (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2016); Florian Riedler and Nenad Stefanov, ed., *The Balkan Route: Historical Transformations from Via Militaris to Autoput* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

John Oliver is depicted on the north wall of the Lesnovo Monastery naos. This image is dated to 1342, the same year that Oliver was invested as a *sebastokrator* (lit. “venerable ruler”). He is also depicted on the north wall of the narthex in an image created approximately seven years later, after he had been appointed despot. In both paintings, Oliver wears a blue overcoat with a large red cloud collar (see Figs. 1 and 2). In the second painting, the overcoat is further decorated with medallions enclosing a double-headed eagle. While eagles and double-headed eagles were widely employed as royal symbols on many European imperial and royal clothes and accessories, the cloud collar was a specifically Turko-Mongol clothing feature. Smiljka Gabelić suggests that the collars worn by Oliver recall those of the Kalmyk Buddhist priests.⁴ The Kalmyk were a branch of the Oirat Mongols, who emerged in China after the fall of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), made Tibetan Buddhism their official religion, and eventually settled in the Lower Volga region around the seventeenth century.

By combining our respective expertise in the fields of Serbian cultural and geographic history and Asian art history, we discuss in this paper how the cloud collar might have reached the Serbian court to be worn by Oliver, as well as its plausible function as an alternative to the popular Byzantine *loros* worn by the emperors and empresses of Byzantium. We argue that the cloud collar functioned as a visual device that reconfirmed Oliver as *sebastokrator* and despot, commander of the southern Serbian borders under the cultural domain of the Mongol Empire in the second half of the fourteenth century. In the first two sections, Vladimir Aleksić discusses the Byzantine-Serbian historical context, during which the Lesnovo Monastery was re-created and decorated with images of Oliver, and investigates the role of southeast Europe in the trans-border trade through which the cloud collars might have been acquired by the Serbian court.⁵ In the last two sections, Mariachiara Gasparini examines the type of cloud collar worn by Oliver in the two portraits in Lesnovo. She discusses the development of the cloud collar in Central Asia and China as a Buddhist accessory bearing cosmological associations at the beginning of the first millennium CE, and its evolution as a male clothing accessory in late antiquity.

In 1292, after a short military conflict, Serbia was briefly subsumed into the Mongol political enterprise as a result of the Mongol’s intense political

4 Smiljka Gabelić, *Manastir Lesnovo: Istorija i slikarstvo* [The monastery of Lesnovo: History and wall-paintings] (Belgrade: Pillars of Culture, 1998), 114n829. See also, Dragica Jovanović, “Buddhist-Lamaist Pagoda in Belgrade 1929–1944,” *Sense* 3 (2003): 159–171.

5 This research was funded by a grant in 2020 from the EU Project MINERVA (Mapping Cultural Heritage. Geosciences Value in Higher Education).

pressure and strong military presence in the lower Danube.⁶ By the beginning of the fourteenth century, however, the Mongol presence in the area had diminished, so that the empire only provided the Balkans with auxiliary troops or mercenary contingents for internal disputes until the second half of the fourteenth century, without further ambitions for territorial expansion.⁷ Nevertheless, despite their weakened political relationship, Serbia continued to absorb Mongol culture through the Kingdom of Hungary, Romanian principalities, and the Bulgarian Empire.⁸

To date, little research has been undertaken on the Mongol’s direct material and visual contributions in the Balkans; scholars have focused mainly on other aspects of transcontinental cultural communication.⁹ By the end of the fourteenth century, as a result of the Turkish military conquest, luxury goods began to arrive in the central Balkan provinces. The few written sources that record the presence of imported goods in Dubrovnik are generally dated to the beginning of the fifteenth century and therefore attribute the phenomenon of “Balkan orientalization” to the Ottomans, who increasingly introduced material objects, social and religious values, and vocabulary from the Asian cultural circle into the everyday life of the local population.¹⁰ It seems likely

6 Aleksandar Uzelac, “‘Kan’ Nogaj, kralj Milutin i srpsko-tatarski sukobi krajem XIII veka” [“Khan” Nogay, King Milutin and Serbian-Tatar conflicts at the end of the thirteenth century], *Vojnoistorijski glasnik* 1 (2009): 9–31; Aleksandar Uzelac, “Tatars and Serbs at the End of the Thirteenth Century,” *Revista de Istorie Militară* 5–6 (2011): 9–20.

7 Aleksandar Uzelac, “Tatarski pohodi u jugoistočnoj Evropi tokom XIII–XIV veka: Zanemareni vojni aspekti” [Tatar campaigns in southeast Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: some neglected military aspects], in *Ruler, State and Church on the Balkans in the Middle Ages*, ed. Nikolay Kanev (Veliko Tarnovo: Faber, 2020), 872–888.

8 Aleksandar Uzelac, *Pod senkom Psa: Tatari i južnoslovenske zemlje u drugoj polovini XIII veka* [Under the shadow of the dog: Tatars and south Slavic lands in the second half of the thirteenth century] (Belgrade: Utopija, 2015); Aleksandar Uzelac, “Zolotaja Orda i Balkany (XIII–XIV veka)” [Golden Horde and the Balkans in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries], in *The Golden Horde in World History*, ed. Rafael Hakimov and Mari Favero (Kazan: Sh.Marjani Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences, 2016), 384–403.

9 Central Asian-style bows are visible among coeval fresco paintings in Northern Macedonia’s churches. Mongol military artifacts discovered in Bulgaria also testify to the Mongol presence in the Lower Danube region. Uzelac, “Zolotaja Orda i Balkany,” 395. A mid-fourteenth-century case study from Serbia is included in Tatjana Vuleta, “Strani elementi u odeždi karanskih ktitora: otisak sveta kao simbol, I deo” [Foreign elements of Ktitor attire in Karan: the mark of the world as a symbol of ethnos, part 1], *Patrimonium.mk* 11, no. 16 (2018): 223–242; Tatjana Vuleta, “Strani elementi u odeždi karanskih ktitora—otisak sveta kao simbol, II deo” [Foreign elements of Ktitor attire in Karan—the mark of the world as a symbol of ethnos, part 2], *Patrimonium.mk* 12, no. 17 (2018): 135–162.

10 Verena Han, “La culture matérielle des Balkans au Moyen Âge à travers la documentation des archives de Dubrovnik” [The material culture of the Balkans in the Middle Ages through the documentation of the Dubrovnik Archives], *Balkanica* 3 (1972): 157–193; Dušanka Dinić-Knežević, *Tkanine u privredi srednjovekovnog Dubrovnika* [Fabrics in the economy of medieval Dubrovnik] (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1982), 232. According to conventional views, the

that, as a direct or indirect result of this Eurasian trade, and particularly due to the role of Italian merchants in the Levant and western Asia, the wealthiest individuals of medieval Serbia were able to satisfy their desire for luxury textiles from the end of the Mongol period until the first half of the fifteenth century.¹¹ The import of these textiles decreased due to the advent of Italian silk production in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, which appropriated and combined Eastern patterns with local iconographic elements. As David Jacoby points out, the subsequent export of Eastern-inspired Italian textiles provided “an ‘international’ repertory of silk designs in the region extending from Italy to Central Asia.”¹²

In light of this background, the historical context analyzed in this paper not only fosters new questions regarding the role of medieval Serbia in the exchange of goods and ideas between East and West, but also helps in investigating the significant role (whether direct or filtered) that Mongol culture had on the social fabric of Serbia. The results of our analysis challenge the widespread and largely accepted idea of medieval Serbia as a Western cultural entity founded upon Western cultural and artistic models and filtered exclusively through local Byzantine centers.¹³ In this paper, we present and discuss a unique example of material and visual culture that aims to broaden the scope of both European and Asian studies and helps to reevaluate the role

essence of the modern Balkan nations’ cultural code is deeply ingrained in the Oriental past, imported through the Ottomans’ long-lasting presence. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Studies on medieval Eastern culture, however, remain underrepresented; concerning this bias in regional historiography, see Maria Todorova, *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

11 We have not considered fifteenth-century evidence because it is outside of the timeframe under discussion. It is worth mentioning, however, that workshops producing the finest wool robes run by the commune of Dubrovnik and the semi-independent territorial lord, Stephan Vukčić Kosača (1435–1466), were established at that time. Textiles made of high-quality raw material were even exported overseas. Dinić-Knežević, *Tkanine u privredi srednjovekovnog Dubrovnika*, 87–109.

12 David Jacoby, “Silk Economics and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2001): 197–240; 235–236.

13 Sima Ćirković, “Susreti velikih civilizacija oko 1300: Istok i Zapad u jugoistočnoj Evropi” [Meeting points of great civilizations around 1300: The East and the West in southeast Europe], *Jugoslavenski istorijski časopis* [Yugoslav historical review] 1–2 (1975): 11–18; Sima Ćirković, “La Serbia medievale tra Oriente ed Occidente, le aree omogenee della civiltà rupestre nell’ambiente dell’Impero Bizantino: La Serbia” [Medieval Serbia between East and West, the homogeneous areas of civilization in the Byzantine Empire environment: Serbia], in *Atti del quarto Convegno internazionale di studio sulla civiltà rupestre medioevale nel Mezzogiorno d’Italia*, ed. Cosimo Damiano Fonseca (Galatina: Congedo, 1979), 49–58. Xenophobic narratives were challenged early in critical Serbian historiography; see Sima Ćirković, “‘Srbi i Turci’ Stojana Novakovića” [“‘Serbs and Turks’ by Stojan Novaković.”], in *Srbi i Turci XIV i XV veka: Istorijske studije o prvim borbama sa najezdom turskom pre i posle Boja na Kosovu* [Serbs and Turks in the XIV and XV centuries: Historical studies on the first battles with the Turkish invasion before and after the Battle of Kosovo], ed. Stojan Novaković (Belgrade: Serbian Literary Cooperative, 1960), 5–13.

that the Balkans played in artistic transmission between the East and the West during the late Mongol period.

Commercial trade in fourteenth-century Serbia



Fig. 3. Main location of medieval Serbia and Via Egnatia. By Vladimir Aleksić.

Under the rule of King and (as of 1346) Tsar Stephen Dušan (reigned 1331–1355), the most prominent ruler of the Nemanjd Dynasty (1166–1371), Serbia stretched from the shores of the Lower Danube basin in the north to the coasts of South Adria and the north Ionian Sea in the south. Unlike the northern borders, the southern frontiers repeatedly shifted as a result of Serbian military expansions against the weakened Byzantine Empire during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (see Fig. 3). After 1345–1348, Thessaloniki, a thriving metropolis with tens of thousands of inhabitants and a key junction on many long-distance trade routes, was surrounded by Serbian territories.¹⁴

¹⁴ Radivoj Radić, *Vreme Jovana V Paleologa (1332–1391)* [The time of John V Palaiologos (1332–1391)] (Belgrade: The Institute for Byzantine Studies of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1993), 131n32.

The Serbian Adriatic coastal communes were predominantly inhabited by Roman-Catholics, who were a minority compared to the much larger Serbian Orthodox population. These communes, the distant descendants of the native Romanized habitations of the Balkan Peninsula, were bilingual, proficient in both medieval Italian and Serbian.¹⁵ With regards to maritime business, Serbia was most connected to Italian merchants who had already established contacts among local entrepreneurs.¹⁶ The Genoese and Venetian trade monopoly on the Black Sea (where the central Asian trade routes supervised by the Mongols ended) also impacted the Balkans. Italian merchants often cooperated with local businesspeople and sold them luxury goods, which were eventually traded further inland.¹⁷ Adriatic coastal towns had worked as leading supply channels for the large and diverse import of luxury Italian and western European textiles since the end of the thirteenth century.¹⁸ Despite numerous dramatic political shifts, this trade activity continued to flourish thanks to medieval Serbia's rapid economic growth. Serbia's own high-quality textile market, such as the local silk manufacturing particularly important to the region around Prizren, could not meet the endless demand for high-quality products. In terms of caliber, however, Prizren's artisans did not lag behind their European counterparts; the Venetians began to appreciate their products and imported them to the lagoon up until the last few decades of the fourteenth century.¹⁹

15 Bariša Krekić, "On the Latino-Slavic Cultural Symbiosis in Late Medieval and Renaissance Dalmatia and Dubrovnik," *Viator* 26 (1995): 321–332.

16 Bariša Krekić, *Dubrovnik, Italy and the Balkans in the late Middle Ages* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980); Bariša Krekić, "Mleci i unutrašnjost Balkana u XIV veku" [Venice and the Balkan hinterland in the fourteenth century], *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* vol. 21 (1982): 143–158; Ruža Ćuk, *Srbija i Venecija u XIII i XIV veku* [Serbia and Venice in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries] (Belgrade: Institute of History, 1986); Radmilo Pekić, *Firentinci na Balkanu 1300–1600* [Florentines in the Balkans 1300–1600] (Kosovska Mitrovica: Faculty of Philosophy in Priština, 2012).

17 Virgil Ciocîltan, *The Mongols and the Black Sea Trade in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Zsigmond Pál Pach, "Die Verkehrsrouten des Levantehandels nach Siebenbürgen in der Zeit Sigismunds" [The traffic route of the Levant trade to Transylvania in the time of Sigismund], in *Sigismund von Luxemburg: Kaiser und König in Mitteleuropa 1387–1437*, ed. Josef Macek, Ernő Marosi, and Ferdinand Seibt (Warendorf: Fahlbusch, 1994), 192–199; David Jacoby, "Oriental Silks at the Time of the Mongols: Patterns of Trade and Distribution in the West," in *Oriental Silks in Medieval Europe*, ed. Juliane von Fircks and Regula Schorta (Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung, 2016), 92–123; 95.

18 Bariša Krekić, "I mercanti e produttori Toscani di panni di lana a Dubrovnik (Ragusa) nella prima metà del Quattrocento" [Tuscan wool cloth merchants and producers in Dubrovnik in the first half of the fifteenth century], in *Dubrovnik, Italy, and the Balkans*, ed. Bariša Krekić (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980), 707–714.

19 Silk production was a legacy of the Byzantine period (from the beginning of the eleventh to the end of the thirteenth century). Ruža Ćuk, "Izvoz svile iz Dubrovnika u Veneciju u XIV veku" [Export of silk from Dubrovnik to Venice in the fourteenth century], *Istorijski časopis* 28 (1981):

By the middle of the fourteenth century, Dubrovnik had become the wealthiest commercial hub on the east Adriatic coast. After the decline of Venetian merchants in the eastern Adriatic region in 1358, the city increased trade with the northern, western, and central provinces of Serbia and the Bosnian region. During this period, the two Balkan states continued to dynamically develop their mining activities, focusing on precious metals. Intense urbanization followed,²⁰ which contributed towards diversifying the economic relationships between the two areas and expanding the multicultural social environment of the central provinces.²¹ Oliver’s wealth notably originated from the resumption of Roman-era gold and silver metallurgy in the Zletovo region.²²

Individuals from the Byzantine Empire were, occasionally, included in the northern markets of Serbia. Merchants from Dubrovnik also engaged in atypical continental trade activities, reaching south to Thessaloniki during the fourteenth century and the first few decades of the fifteenth century. Interactions between these two commercial belts were irregular, however.²³ The main route

17–23. For a broader view on this topic, see Sima Ćirković, “Importazione di tecnologie dall’Italia ed esportazione di maestranze dalla Serbia” [Import of technologies from Italy and export of workers from Serbia], *Glas—Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts* 154 (2006): 73–83.

20 Sima Ćirković, “The Production of Gold, Silver, and Copper in the Central Parts of the Balkans from the 13th to the 16th Century,” in *Precious Metals in the Age of Expansion: Papers of the XIVth International Congress of the Historical Sciences*, ed. Hermann Kellenbenz (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 41–69; Desanka Kovačević-Kojić, “Les métaux précieux de Serbie et le marché européen (xiv^e–xvi^e siècles)” [Precious metals of Serbia and the European market (fourteenth–sixteenth centuries)], *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 41 (2004): 191–203.

21 Regarding the Balkan multicultural shift and demographic pluralism, see Katarina Mitrović, “Katolička parohija u Rudniku” [Catholic parish in Rudnik], in *Rudnik i Venčac sa okolinom u srednjem veku i ranoj moderni*, ed. Siniša Mišić, Dejan Radičević, and Marko Šuica (Belgrade: Arandelovac, 2018), 85–98.

22 As explained by eyewitness John VI Kantakouzenos, Oliver was the wealthiest Serbian nobleman. Franjo Barišić and Božidar Ferjančić, “Jovan Kantakuzin,” in *Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije VI* [Byzantine sources for the history of the peoples of Yugoslavia VI], ed. Franjo Barišić and Božidar Ferjančić (Belgrade: The Institute for Byzantine Studies of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1986), 297–577; 409n155; Mihailo Popović, “Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten bei der Nutzung südosteuropäischer Bergwerke von der Spätantike bis zur osmanischen Zeit am Beispiel der historischen Landschaft Makedonien” [Continuities and discontinuities in the use of southeast European mines from late antiquity to the Ottoman period using the historical landscape of Macedonia as an example], in *Das osmanische Europa. Methoden und Perspektiven der Frühneuezeitforschung zu Südosteuropa* [Ottoman Europe: Methods and perspectives of research on early modern southeast Europe], ed. Andreas Helmedach (Leipzig: Eudora Verlag, 2014), 175–189.

23 Bariša Krekić, “Kurirski saobraćaj Dubrovnika sa Carigradom i Solunom u prvoj polovini XIV veka” [The courier service of Ragusa with Constantinople and Thessaloniki in the first half of the fourteenth century], *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 1 (1952): 113–120; Vladimir Aleksić, *Naslednici Mrnjavčevića i teritorije pod njihovom vlašću (1371–1395)* [Successors of the Mrnjavčević family and territories under their power (1371–1395)] (PhD diss., University of Belgrade, 2013), 599–600.

between Štip, Strumica, and Petrič was a northern extension of the famous Via Egnatia, an important trade and exchange route between Dyrrachium (Durrës on the Ionian Sea in the Republic of Albania) and Constantinople.²⁴ Many foreign luxury goods arrived from the Levant and the East through this route. An official complaint issued in 1373 by the Government of Dubrovnik to Despot John Dragaš (reigned 1371–1378), who succeeded Oliver's domains, confirms this trade activity. The complaint describes citizens from the Adriatic commune coming from Thessaloniki on their way to the mining city of Novo Brdo, which, at the time, was under the control of another independent ruler.²⁵

When considering the dynamics involved in the acquisition of luxury foreign goods, something that involved members of the Serbian nobility, it is crucial to consider the different modes of exchange and production. Gift exchanges were an essential part of diplomatic protocol and a way to advertise the court to foreign rulers. Such gifts were highly valued, even in non-secular environments. The *Vita of King Dragutin* (ruled 1276–1282, died in 1316) describes the “beautiful gifts, which were presented to him [King Dragutin] from other realms,” and which were re-gifted to the prominent Serbian monk Danilo II, the later Archbishop of the Serbian Church (1324–1337), during his visit to the king's court at the beginning of the fourteenth century.²⁶ Although we can only speculate about the origin and nature of these gifts, which may have included garments, the geographic position of the king's court in Derbe on the southern rim of the Pannonian Plain, where the Mongols were still influential, suggests an Eastern, or at least Levantine, provenance. Luxury foreign goods were not always capable of reaching their destination, however; an envoy of King Stephen Dušan, sent to arrange the marriage between King Dušan's daughter and one of Orhan Ghazi's sons (ruled 1326–1362; the second Emir of the Ottoman Turks in 1351), was attacked on his way back to Serbia, and the engagement gifts were stolen near the Island of Rhodos.²⁷

24 Mihailo St. Popović and Markus Breier, “Tracing Byzantine Routes: Medieval Road Networks in the Historical Region of Macedonia and Their Reconstruction by Least-Cost Paths,” in *16th International Conference on “Cultural Heritage and New Technologies,” Vienna 2011*, ed. Wolfgang Börner, Susanne Uhlirz, and Lotte Dollhofer (Vienna: Museen der Stadt Wien—Stadtarchäologie, 2012), 464–475.

25 Jorjo Tadić, ed., *Pisma i uputstva dubrovačke republike* [Letters and instructions of the Republic of Dubrovnik] (Belgrade: Serbian Royal Academy, 1935), 462–463; Krekić, *Dubrovnik (Raguse) et le Levant*, 213–214nn306–307, 216n321.

26 Regarding monk Danilo II, see Vojislav J. Đurić, ed., *Arhiepiskop Danilo II i njegovo doba: međunarodni naučni skup povodom 650 godina od smrti, decembar 1987* [Archbishop Danilo II and his era: International scientific conference on the 650th anniversary of his death, December 1987] (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1991); Christofer Walter, “The Significance of the Portrait of Danilo II as Donor in his Church of the Bogorodica, Peć,” in Đurić, *Arhiepiskop Danilo II i njegovo doba*, 355–359; and Fig. 1.

27 Barišić and Ferjančić, “Jovan Kantakuzin,” 278–280.

Other written documents indicate that needlework and similar crafts were performed by women at the courts of rulers and noblemen. The *Vita of Saint Helen* details how young girls from presumably noble families were summoned by Queen Helen (died 1314) to her palace to be trained in the arts of weaving and embroidering. Such skills would significantly raise the girls’ chances of finding suitable husbands.²⁸ The array of domestic and foreign historical sources thus suggest that members of the Serbian elite and the emerging domestic urban middle class had a range of options to satisfy their craving for luxury textiles. Extraordinary efforts were made to produce luxury textiles that could compete with contemporary imported manufacturers and could thus adequately function as gifts for foreign courts.

The rise of Despot John Oliver

John Oliver’s portraits in the Lesnovo Monastery exemplify the use of luxury goods as symbols of prestige and power. The two overcoats and the two long cloud collars depicted in the paintings make a clear statement about Oliver’s high rank. The paintings appear even more striking if we consider their position in decorating a site used to perform public functions. Political self-promotion as conveyed through the visual arts in religious spaces was an inseparable part of political propaganda in medieval Serbia, and continued into the Ottoman period. Church wall paintings served as a powerful instrument of ideological propaganda, depicting patrons, visualizing current royal ideology, or providing narratives for specific personages.²⁹ Generally these wall paintings would depict monarchs and their courts, but they would also occasionally feature Serbian noblemen, illustrating the significant role that noblemen occupied in the wider socio-political context. Paintings such as these were intended to realistically portray the figures of their subjects and their bodily and spiritual features as well as their clothing, all of which conveyed ideological and political sensitivities.³⁰ These criteria also applied to Oliver’s family portraits

28 Archbishop Danilo II, *Životi kraljeva i arhiepiskopa srpskih* [Lives of Serbian kings and archbishops], ed. and trans. Lazar Mirković (Belgrade: Serbian Literary Cooperative, 1935), 54.

29 Regarding ruler ideology in medieval Serbia, see Boško Bojović, *Kraljevstvo i svetlost: Politička filozofija srednjovekovne Srbije* [Kingdom and light: The political philosophy of medieval Serbia] (Belgrade: Official Gazette of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 1999); Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić, “Patterns of Martyrial Sanctity in the Royal Ideology of Medieval Serbia: Continuity and Change,” *Balkanica* 37 (2006): 69–79; Miljana Matić, “Odevanje i identitet: Predstave kitora mirjana u srpskom slikarstvu XVI i XVII veka” [Dressing and identity: Representations of lay Ktitors in Serbian painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries], *Zbornik Muzeja primenjene umetnosti* 15 (2019): 19–27.

30 Ivan M. Đorđević, *Zidno slikarstvo srpske vlastele u doba Nemanjića* [The wall paintings of the Serbian nobility of the Nemanide Era] (Belgrade: Faculty of Philosophy of Belgrade, 1994); Bojana Stevanović, “Srpsko srednjovekovno slikarstvo kao izvor za lunulaste naušnice” [Serbian medieval

in the Church of Saint Sophia in the city of Ohrid, which were presumably created between 1347–1350.³¹

Oliver had a lavish new church erected in Lesnovo as a testament to his importance. The church was constructed on the eleventh-century gravesite of hermit Saint Gabriel of Lesnovo, a choice of location that was certainly deliberate because it was regularly visited by pilgrims from distant provinces. The martial side of Oliver's personality is reflected in the church's dual dedication, the second being to the Holy Archangel Michael.³² Judging by the long inscription adjacent to his portrait on the north wall of the naos, the painting was intended to underline the difficult journey that Oliver underwent to reach such a high-ranking status in Serbia. The two honorific titles included in the inscription of the naos, *sebastokrator* and Despot, were drawn from the late Byzantine period, where they were initially assigned exclusively to family members of the crowned head, again confirming Oliver's accomplishments at the Serbian court. Bordering political units adopted the Byzantine model of sovereignty established in Constantinople, meaning that it was not unusual to encounter dignitaries carrying these titles in southern Slavic countries.³³ Previous scholarship has addressed Oliver's rise and his achievement of these prestigious titles. Recently, it has been suggested that Oliver was most likely invested as *sebastokrator* by John Cantacuzenus (ca. 1292–1383), who had proclaimed himself the Byzantine Emperor, at the end of 1342 or in the beginning of the following year. With this title he acquired the right to wear blue textiles, as is seen in both portraits in Lesnovo.³⁴ It is recorded that,

painting as inspiration for lunular earrings], *Zbornik za likovne umetnosti Matice srpske* 47 (2019): 13–34.

31 Cvetan Grozdanov, "Prilozi za proučavanje na sv. Sofija Ohridska vo XIV vek" [Contributions to the study of the Basilica of St. Sophia of Ohrid in the fourteenth century], in *Živopisot na Ohridskata arhiepiskopija. Studii*, ed. Cvetan Grozdanov (Skopje: Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2007), 101–106. For the third portrait of Oliver as a Despot in Lesnovo, in the illustration of the Psalm (148:11), see Gabelić, *Manastir Lesnovo*, 185–186.

32 Gabelić, *Manastir Lesnovo*, 23–38; Đorđević, *Zidno slikarstvo srpske vlastele u doba Nemanjića*, 56–58, 153–157; Ivan M. Đorđević, "O vlasteoskim spomenicima u istočnim oblastima srpske srednjovekovne države" [On the noblemen's churches in eastern parts of the Serbian medieval state], in *Studije srpske srednjovekovne umetnosti*, ed. Dragan Vojvodić and Miodrag Marković (Belgrade: Institute for Textbook Publishing, 2008), 465–470.

33 Božidar Ferjančić, *Despoti u Vizantiji i južnoslovenskim zemljama* [Despots in Byzantium and the south Slavic countries] (Belgrade: Special Edition—Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1960); Božidar Ferjančić, "Sevastokratori i kesari u srpskom carstvu" [Sebastokrators and Caesars in the Serbian Empire], *Zbornik Filozofskog fakulteta u Beogradu* 11, no. 1 (1970): 255–269.

34 An extended literature overview concerning John Oliver is available in Branislav Todić, "Natpis uz Jovana Olivera u naosu Lesnova: Prilog hronologiji lesnovskih fresaka" [The inscription next to John Oliver in the naos of Lesnovo: A contribution to the chronology of Lesnovo frescoes], *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 38 (1999): 373–384; and Srđan Pirivatrić, "Vizantijske titule Jovana

immediately upon his arrival in Serbia in the summer of 1342, Cantacuzenus presented Oliver with “items decorated with precious stones”³⁵ to thank him for the cordial reception. Cantacuzenus allegedly planned on forging an alliance through marriage between his youngest son Manuel and Oliver’s daughter. Due to the sudden collapse of their alliance in the middle of the following year, however, this plan never came to fruition, thus diminishing the importance of the Serbian nobleman in international affairs.³⁶

A few years later, in 1346 or 1347, Stephen Dušan bestowed Oliver with the most prestigious royal title of Despot.³⁷ Srđan Pirivatrić suggests that this later title, which he carried until his death, was initially conceived of by the Queen Mother Anne Palaiologos as part of a political agreement between Serbia and Constantinople in August 1343.³⁸ Due to a lack of available sources, this stage of Oliver’s life is mainly pieced together through the fresco painting in the narthex. It seems likely that both portraits in Lesnovo aimed to send a clear message to a potential audience aware of the custom of bestowing robes and accessories, a diplomatic practice in both the Byzantine and Mongol empires.³⁹ As Thomas T. Allsen points out with respect to the Mongols, “the distribution of garments had an effect of displaying the majesty and power of the ruler and at the same time encouraged loyalty to and a very personal identification with the reigning qaghan [ruler].”⁴⁰ It is thus possible that Oliver’s robes and cloud collars were bestowed upon him alongside the Byzantine titles of *sebastokrator* and Despot. Visual representations of power in the region rarely departed from accepted Byzantine-Slavic iconographic composition to create portraits such as those of Oliver in Lesnovo, which

Olivera: Prilog istraživanju problema njihovog porekla i hronologije” [The Byzantine titles of John Oliver: A contribution to the issues of their origin and chronology], *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 50 (2013): 713–724; 719.

35 Barišić and Ferjančić, “Jovan Kantakuzin,” 233.

36 Barišić and Ferjančić, “Jovan Kantakuzin,” 233n39, 407n151, 440–447.

37 Todić, “Natpis uz Jovana Olivera u naosu Lesnova,” 382–383.

38 Pirivatrić, “Vizantijske titule Jovana Olivera.”

39 “The Treatise on Honorable Titles,” attributed to Pseudo-Kodin, is a significant historical source that describes the Byzantine court dignitaries’ insignia from the time of the Palaeologus. See Jean Verpeaux, ed., *Pseudo-Kodinos, Traité des offices* [Pseudo-Kodin, treaty of offices] (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1966); Gabelić, *Manastir Lesnovo*, 115–116, 170, 185–186; Todić, “Natpis uz Jovana Olivera u naosu Lesnova,” 375; Popović et al., *Crkva Svetog Nikole u Staničenju*, 62–68. Regarding the bestowing of clothing in Turko-Mongol cultures, see Thomas T. Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 46–47, 56–57, 79–80; and Jonathan K. Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 150, 160.

40 Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire*, 56–57.

was unique for its inclusion of the Mongol cloud collars. The textiles that were accessible—and predominantly of Western origin—likely prevented the development of a novel iconography of power, and instead aided the preservation of the already familiar and accepted Byzantine clothing imagery. In the sequence of Byzantine rulers depicted in the narthex, dated to 1349, Oliver and Dušan are both shown in typical Byzantine attire.⁴¹ The two portraits of Oliver under discussion in this paper, however, suggest that Serbian society was familiar with the cloud collar as a symbol of power used by the Mongols across their khanates, from China to Armenia. Alongside the gradual transformation of the Serbian Kingdom into the Empire of the Serbs and Greeks in 1343/1346, the Serbian territorial expansion since the outbreak of civil war in Byzantium in 1342 fostered the Tsar's new ideology and, consequently, promoted the introduction of new elements into royal and imperial costume, as demonstrated by the new way to wear the Byzantine *loros* discussed below.⁴²

Development and use of the cloud collar in Asia

The cloud collar, *yunjian* 雲肩 in Chinese (lit. “cloud shoulder”), that is visible in both portraits of John Oliver in Lesnovo is a unique clothing accessory rarely found in the West.⁴³ The cloud collar was used in Buddhist rites in Central Asia dating back at least to early in the Common Era, and carried a cosmological meaning that was initially related to the visualization of the Buddha (in the form of a sculpture or a painted representation) as a *cakravartin* (universal ruler).⁴⁴ Eventually, it became an essential feature of the so-called “bejeweled Buddha.”⁴⁵ In Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, however, the collar

41 Smilja Marjanović-Dušanić, *Vladarske insignije i državna simbolika u Srbiji od XIII do XIV veka* [Rulers' insignia and state symbolism in Serbia from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century] (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1994).

42 Ljubomir Maksimović, “Challenging the Idea of World Empire: The Case of Serbia,” in *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies: London, 21–26 August 2006*, ed. Anthony Bryer and Elizabeth Jeffreys (Aldershot: Ashgate 2016), vol. 2, 3–4.

43 A fragment dated to the Timurid period (1370–1507) is held in the David Collection in Copenhagen (#42/1999).

44 Paul Mus and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy discussed this figure as specifically portrayed in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Paul Mus, “Études indiennes et indochinoises” [Indian and Indochinese studies], *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 28, no. 1 (1928): 147–278; 155–158, 170–174; Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, “The Buddha's *cūdā*, Hair, *uṣṇīṣa*, and Crown,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 60, no. 4 (1928): 815–841; 819, 822, 835–838.

45 Dorothy C. Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks as Agents of Cultural and Artistic Transmission: The International Buddhist Art Style in East Asia, ca. 645–770* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2018), 57–94.

seems to be seen with a *maṇḍala* (meaning “circle” in Sanskrit; a geometric representation of the cosmos and a tool for meditation), as discussed below.⁴⁶ It was only during the Mongol period that the cloud collar spread across Eurasia, with rare prior instances of male robes with collars from the modern Xinjiang Province, China, datable to the tenth–eleventh centuries, and from Dagestan, Northern Caucasus, attributed to the Seljuq period (1081–1307). The collar was used as both a male and female clothing accessory and as a decorative element on tents, rugs, vases, and metalworks, as Yuka Kadoi has extensively analyzed.⁴⁷ After the fall of the Yuan dynasty, its use in China as a clothing accessory for men declined, but it continued to be employed as a decorative ornament on Ming vases (1368–1644), as a fashionable accessory for women until the end of the Qing period (1636–1912), and by Tibetan Buddhist priests. While acknowledging this possible Buddhist link, the potential origin of Oliver’s collars in Lesnovo should rather be investigated in the Mongol Ilkhanate.

Mongol textiles and Mongol-like textiles, especially those produced in Italy, have been of great interest to textile historians, but extensive research on the cloud collar is still lacking. Schuyler Cammann’s 1951 study remains a valuable source of information regarding its development, and more contemporary works by Kadoi, Allsen, and Eiren Shea have discussed its distinctive use as a mark of Mongol hierarchical inclusion.⁴⁸ Since Tibetan Buddhism was the official religion of the Yuan, we might speculate that the cloud collar was seen as a *maṇḍala*. More specifically, the four-lobed cloud collar could be an adaptation of the Kālacakra *maṇḍala* (the wheel of time), a flat representation of a five-story building where a central deity, generally Vairocana, the Cosmological Buddha, resides.⁴⁹ The four-lobed

46 Deborah Klimburg-Salter, *The Kingdom of Bāmiyān: Buddhist Art and Culture of the Hindu Kush* (Naples: Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale,” 1989), 109.

47 Alfred Salmony dated some of the pieces, such as the tympanum in Fig. 3, to the eleventh century. Alfred Salmony, “Daghestan Sculptures,” *Ars Islamica* 10 (1943): 153–163; 159. Later, Richard Ettinghausen re-dated the same piece to between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and confirmed the Seljuq style. Richard Ettinghausen, “The Flowering of Seljuq Art,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* (1970): 113–131; 128; Yuka Kadoi, “Cloud Patterns: the Exchange of Ideas between China and Iran under the Mongols,” *Oriental Art* 48, no. 2 (2002): 25–36; Yuka Kadoi, “Beyond the Mandarin Square: Garment Badges in Ilkhanid Painting,” *Hali* 138 (2005): 42–47; Yuka Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie: The Art of Mongol Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

48 Shuyler Cammann, “The Symbolism of the Cloud Collar Motif,” *The Art Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (1951): 1–9; Kadoi, “Cloud Patterns”; Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire*; Eiren L. Shea, *Mongol Court Dress, Identity Formation, and Global Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

49 This *maṇḍala*, in turn, recalls the well-known cosmological Chinese “TLV” bronze mirror of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). Each graphic element has a specific meaning: The circular shape of the mirror is the cosmos, the square at the center is China (also known as “the Middle Kingdom”), the

pattern, however, as already suggested by Cammann, seems to derive from the so-called Chinese “TLV” mirror that began to appear in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE) in the first century CE, and that represents “an idealized map of the universe.”⁵⁰ A remarkable example dated to the Yuan period is the large Vajrabhairava *maṇḍala* (“Overcoming Death *Maṇḍala*”) *kesi* (silk tapestry) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which depicts Yuan patrons at the bottom (see Fig. 4). This association between the *maṇḍala* and cloud collar is further indicated by the statues of the main temple’s assembly hall of Tabo Monastery, located in Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India, and built in the eleventh century as a Vajradhātu *maṇḍala* (“Diamond Realm *Maṇḍala*”). Vairocana is generally seen as the transformation of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, who is crowned by the Buddhas of ten directions. The representation of the Vajradhātu *maṇḍala*, however, as explained in the *Vajraśekhara sūtra*, contains the Bodhisattva Sarvārthasiddhi who is given the name Vajradhātu and became Mahāvairocana.⁵¹ In esoteric Buddhism, initiates are consecrated to Buddhahood during an *abhiṣeka* ceremony that provides them access to the *maṇḍala*. In this regard, statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas continue to be decorated with large modern collars.⁵² This ceremony can be traced back to the ancient *pañcavārsika*, which is discussed below.⁵³

Recent publications on Buddhist art have shed new light on the collar, suggesting an early Buddhist use originating in Central Asia rather than China.⁵⁴ Images of so-called “bejeweled Buddhas” from seventh-century Tepe Sardar, Fondukistan, and Bamiyan, Afghanistan, or from eighth-century Kashmir, for instance, are portrayed with a large, long, four-lobe cape decorated with pearls and jewels, reminiscent of those worn by Oliver (see Fig. 5).⁵⁵ The collar also

T is the four gates, and the L is the four seas marking the end of the world. All are enclosed in four Vs, which create an imaginary cross.

50 Cammann, “The Symbolism of the Cloud Collar Motif,” 1.

51 Michelle Wang, *Maṇḍalas in the Making: The Visual Culture of Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 63–66.

52 Wang, *Maṇḍalas in the Making*, 66.

53 Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, *Tabo: A Lamp for the Kingdom: Early Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Art in the Western Himalaya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 91–108; 93, Fig. 54.

54 Rebecca L. Twist, “Images of the Crowned Buddha along the Silk Road: Iconography and Ideology,” *Humanities* 7, no. 4 (2018): 92, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7040092>; Wang, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks as Agents of Cultural and Artistic Transmission*, 77–89; Claudine Bautze-Picron, *The Jewelled Buddha From India to Burma: New Considerations* (New Delhi: Sanctum Books, 2010).

55 Examples are those worn by bejeweled Buddhas painted on two silk scrolls from Dunhuang Cave 17. Wang, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, 83–84. A giant bejeweled Buddha from Tapa Sardar is discussed in Maurizio Taddei, “The Jewelled Buddha and the *Mahiṣāsura*.” Religion and Political Ideology

appears in use as a laymale accessory in a few *praṇidhi* (vow) scenes from the later Bezeklik Uighur Buddhist caves (see Fig. 6).⁵⁶



Fig. 4. Vajrabhairava mandala. Silk tapestry, Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), China; 1330–1332. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1992.54). Public domain.

in Pre-Muslim Afghanistan,” *South Asian Archaeology* (1989): 457–464. The graphic reconstruction of this Buddha was published in Anna Filigenzi and Roberta Giunta, “The Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan,” in *Keeping History Alive: Safeguarding Cultural Heritage in Post-Conflict Afghanistan*, ed. Brendan Cassar and Sara Noshadi (Paris: UNESCO, 2015), 80–91; 85, Fig. 10.

56 In this case, the collar, which is also seen around the waist of a donor, is short and does not cover the chest in full. It is possible that the winged-sleeved costume of the Tocharian knights depicted in the Kizil caves are related to the cloud collar. Results of a study on this topic are forthcoming.



Fig. 5. Crowned Buddha from Fondukistan (Afghanistan). Sculpture, seventh century. Musée Guimet, Paris. Photo: Ismoon.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ "Afghanistan, Standing Buddha, Ghorband Valley, Fondukistan Monastery, 7th century," Wikimedia Foundation, accessed May 10, 2021, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Afghanistan_Standing_Buddha_Ghorband_Valley_Fondukistan_Monastery_7th_century.jpg.

Fig. 6. *Pranidhi scene* (standing donor wearing a cloud collar on the right and a kneeling donor on the left wearing a cloud collar as overskirt) from Bezeklik Cave 9, Xinjiang Province, China. Wall painting, tenth–eleventh century.⁵⁸



The origin of the bejeweled Buddha is still widely debated. Nevertheless, the use of the lobed cape has been associated with the royal *pañcavārṣika*, during which the ruler offered his belongings (among these the cape, crown, and jewelry) to a Buddha sculpture that would then be seen as a *cakravartin*, the universal ruler.⁵⁹ Early statues of princely donors and bejeweled Buddhas from Afghanistan and Pakistan (the Gandhāra Kingdom) confirm this practice.⁶⁰ Specific evidence of the cloud collar and its related cosmological meaning first appears in Chinese textual sources in the Jin Dynasty (1115–1260), which was established by the Jurchens from northeast China who were later defeated by the Mongols. The *History of the Jin Dynasty* mentions an edict forbidding

58 “Bezeklik caves, Pranidhi scene 14, temple 9,” Wikimedia Foundation, accessed May 10, 2021, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bezeklik_caves,_Pranidhi_scene_14,_temple_9.JPG.

59 The bejeweled Buddha seems to be derived from Bodhgayā, India. Taddei, “The Bejewelled Buddha and the Mahiṣāsūramardīnī,” 457; Wang, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, 80–81.

60 Taddei, “The Bejewelled Buddha and the Mahiṣāsūramardīnī,” 458, Figs. 55.1 and 55.2; and Twist, “Images of the Crowned Buddha along the Silk Road,” 3, Fig. 1.

ordinary people to wear cloud collars and robes featuring symbols of the sun and moon.⁶¹ This attire, which only the emperor could wear as the rightful recipient of the “mandate of heaven” and “central gate” of the cosmos (the collar), recalls the cape with the sun and moon worn in some of the earlier Central Asian images of bejeweled Buddhas and donors discussed above.⁶² Although there is scant pictorial and material evidence for the early Mongol period, it is likely that the collar remained in use in the thirteenth century but first became popular a century later through the Persian Ilkhanate; as Kadoi notes, there is an evident presence of Buddhist elements in Ilkhanid art.⁶³ As a multi-religious society, the Ilkhanate absorbed and combined East Asian elements dating back to seventh–eighth-century Buddhist art. *Kitā’ ī* (Chinese) themes and motifs, such as clouds, dragons, and phoenixes, were often transmitted through Chinese and Central Asian textiles.⁶⁴ They appeared first in illustrated manuscripts from the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia, which cooperated with the Mongols for fifty-eight years in the second half of the thirteenth century, and, a century later, in illustrated manuscripts of the Ilkhanate, such as the multiple copies of the Persian epic poem *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), written by Ferdowsi (935–1019) between the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh centuries. These themes increased notably in frequency during the late Mongol period.⁶⁵

Among the earliest Mongol cloud collars that remain today are both embroidered and detachable examples, as well as those woven directly in the textiles tailored for the robes. An example that confirms the extensive use of this accessory is a large coat fastened with strings on one side (known as a *bianxian* 辮線), possibly belonging to a member of the military elite, which was excavated from one of the burial sites of Buxiin Xušuu, Mongolia (see

61 Camman, “The Symbolism of the Cloud Collar Motif,” 5n22.

62 Sun and Moon are the first of twelve symbols of Chinese sovereignty placed on imperial robes, as mentioned in the *Shiji* [Records of the Great Historians] by Sima Qian (145–86 BCE); Shea, *Mongol Court Dress*, 58, Fig. 2.8.

63 Kadoi, “Cloud Patterns,” 25.

64 Comparable examples are a silk panel with phoenixes and flowers from China, and a blue and turquoise stone paste tile with a similar motif from Takht-e Soleyman, Iran. Both date to the fourteenth century and are now held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1988.82 and 12.49.4 respectively).

65 Matthew P. Canepa, “Preface: Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interaction Among Ancient and Early Medieval Visual Culture,” *Ars Orientalis* 38 (2010): 7–29; 16–18; Yuka Kadoi, “Buddhism in Iran under the Mongols: An Art Historical Analysis,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth Conference of the European Society for Central Asian Studies*, ed. Tomasz Gacek and Jadwiga Pstrusińska (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 203–206; 208; Yuka Kadoi, “Textiles in the Great Mongol Shahnama: A New Approach to Ilkhanid Dress,” in *Dressing the Part: Textiles as Propaganda in the Middle Ages*, ed. Kate Dimitrova and Margaret Goehring (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 153–213.

Fig. 7).⁶⁶ Technical analysis sources this coat to eastern Persian or central Asian territories. The type of golden cloth from which the coat is made is listed as one of the *nasīj* textiles, which was initially presented to the Mongols by the Uighur peoples in Turfan in the thirteenth century.⁶⁷



66 Ildikó Oka, “Mongol Clothing in the Yuan Period,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 68, no. 4 (2015): 385–414; 387.

67 Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire*, 22–23, 29, 38. Anne E. Wardwell, “Panni Tartarici: Eastern Islamic Silks Woven with Gold and Silver (13th and 14th centuries),” in *Islamic Art: An Annual Dedicated to the Art and Culture of the Muslim World. Vol. 3, 1988–89*, ed. Ernst J. Grube and Eleanor G. Sims (Genoa: Bruschetti Foundation for Islamic and Asian Art, 1988), 95–173; Mariachiara Gasparini, *Transcending Patterns: Silk Road Cultural and Artistic Interactions through Central Asian Textile Images* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2019), 94–95, 120–124, 132–136. In this regard, it is possible that the *nasīj* or a similar lampas structure was also used for the cloud collars depicted in the Uighur Buddhist caves in Bezeklik mentioned above.

68 In Ildikó Oka, “Mongol Clothing in the Yuan Period,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 68, no. 4 (2015): 385–414; 388, Plate 1.

The collar on the coat from Buxiin Xušuu recalls the type worn by the personages carved in Dagestan (see Fig. 8). The collar sported by the rider from Dagestan has short sleeves that reveal the long sleeves of the shirt beneath, similar to the type portrayed in Ilkhanid illustrated manuscripts and that worn by Oliver in Lesnovo.⁶⁹ From the sources so far analyzed, it seems thus likely that the cloud collar as an accessory for men should be ascribed to Turko-Mongol populations (i.e., Uighurs, Jurchens, Seljuqs), all of whom shared this custom around the tenth and eleventh centuries. The transmission of the *bianxian* and the cloud collar is also confirmed by the representations of both in the comprehensive work *Shilin guangji* 事林廣記, compiled during the Southern Song period (1127–1279) by Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚 and also depicted in a coeval Dunhuang cave.⁷⁰



Fig. 8. Tympanum with a horse rider wearing a coat with a cloud collar. Stone relief from Dagestan, Caucasus, twelfth–thirteenth century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (38.96). Public Domain.

69 The Mongols also used a kind of coat with arm slits, where the sleeves could be fastened on the back to transform the garment into a short-sleeved robe.

70 This work, which was expanded during the Yuan (1279–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) periods, shows images of Mongol costumes. Tonkō Bunbutsu Kenkyūjo 敦煌文物研究所, ed., *Chūgoku sekkutsu: Tonkō Bakkōkutsu* 中国石窟敦煌莫高窟 [Chinese caves: Dunhuang Mogao caves] vol. 1 (Tokyo: Heibonsha 平凡社, 1982), 162.

The cloud collars of John Oliver in Lesnovo: Between East and West

The cloud collar was created in different lengths and shapes, was embroidered or woven, and was sometimes detachable. It eventually became part of Mongol clothing traditions and was used to bestow titles, pay clients, and give rewards. Although the paintings in Lesnovo provide two unique examples of cloud collars and blue short-sleeved overcoats similar to Ilkhanid types, which might be attributed to the Mongols in the Balkans or the neighboring countries, one should also attempt to locate the specific textile iconography of Oliver’s clothing in the West.⁷¹ The combination of Eastern and Western textiles in royal and religious courts during the Middle Ages was not unusual. The famous Eagle Dalmatic of the Holy Roman Empire’s coronation regalia, now in Vienna, for instance, was made between 1330 and 1340 with a red Chinese damask, featuring a cloud pattern embellished with embroidered medallions enclosing an eagle, and with a large border at the edges with half-bust royal figures, a pattern combination seen in the second portrait of Oliver as Despot.⁷² Chinese textiles with cloud patterns reached Mamluk and European courts during the Mongol period. Produced for export and intended as diplomatic gifts, many of these textiles, which featured clouds and Chinese characters, or Arabic inscriptions associated with power, were woven by artisans of different backgrounds between central Asia and China.⁷³

Likewise, Oliver’s cloud collars may have been acquired as diplomatic gifts from Mongol territories. The textiles, however, show roundels enclosing a bird on the shoulders, a fashion that dates to the fourth century. Coptic robes from Egypt often show roundels on the shoulders, cuffs, and hems, called *segmentae*, associated with long stripes, called *clavi*. Roundels are sometimes also seen on the sleeves under the imperial Byzantine clothing known as *loros*, which crossed the waist and the shoulders of the emperor. The *loros*, a transformation of the Roman *trabea triumphalis* (a purple cloth embroidered in gold, initially used by the consuls), appeared around the sixth century under Justinian I (482–565) and was interpreted as the “winding sheet of Christ,” meaning Christ’s burial shroud.⁷⁴ The first pictorial evidence of the *loros*

71 The use of blue textiles and coats among the Mongols is briefly discussed in Yuka Kadoi, “The Blue Road: Art and Hue in Persian Dress Culture,” in *The Blue Road: Mastercrafts from Persia*, ed. Yuka Kadoi (Hong Kong: Liang Yi Museum, 2018), 11–16.

72 “Adlerdalmatika,” Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Weltliche Schatzkammer (WS XIII 15), accessed May 8, 2021, <https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/100439/>.

73 Helen Persson, “Chinese Silks in Mamluk Egypt,” in *Global Textile Encounters*, ed. Marie-Louise Nosch, Zhao Feng, and Lotika Varadarajan (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), 107–118.

74 Philip Grierson, *Byzantine Coins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 98.

appears at the end of the seventh century on a Justinian II coin (669–711). By the tenth century, the *loros* had acquired a mystical meaning and was worn on Easter Sunday.⁷⁵ In this period, the Byzantine emperor began to be frequently depicted wearing a *loros* and being crowned directly by Christ, as seen on an ivory plaque from Constantinople in 954 showing Constantine VII's coronation (905/9–959).⁷⁶ This practice was similar to, but an inverted version of, the Buddhist *pañcavārsika*, in which the ruler crowned the Buddha statue, making the Buddha a *cakravartin*. Initially, the *loros* was crossed on the chest of the emperor, but in the modified version (which is usually seen on empresses), the *loros* crossed the body vertically on the front, wrapping around the neck like a large round collar and then encircling the waist.⁷⁷ Stephen Dušan is portrayed with the female variation in the Visoki Dečani Monastery (on the left side, see Fig. 9).⁷⁸ Despite his important role at the Serbian court, Oliver could not wear the *loros*, and perhaps chose the cloud collar as a replacement in order to communicate his power and prestige as the person in charge of the borders and in contact with foreign cultures.

The textile from which Oliver's collars are made loosely recalls the liturgical vestments of Pope Boniface VIII (1230–1303) in Anagni, Italy. These vestments are made of a red *samitum* (generally identified as a weft-faced twill) embroidered in golden *opus ciprense* (Cyprus work) with sequences of roundels framing various zoomorphic figures, including the previously mentioned double-headed eagle, which became the symbol of the Nemanjic family in Serbia (see Fig. 10). It is possible that the papal vestments were produced in Rome or Sicily following old Eastern prototypes that differed

75 Maria G. Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images: Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography (11th–15th Centuries)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 23–24.

76 Pushkin Museum, Moscow (unknown inv. #).

77 George P. Galavaris, "The Symbolism of the Imperial Costume as Displayed on Byzantine Coins," *Museum Notes (American Numismatic Society)* 8 (1958): 99–117; 105–107. See also Bente Küllerich, "Attire and Personal Appearance in Byzantium," in *Byzantine Culture: Papers from the Conference "Byzantine Days of Istanbul,"* ed. Dean Sakel (Ankara: Turku Tarim Kurumu, 2014), 439–452.

78 In wall paintings, Dušan is depicted in various Byzantine attires. It has been suggested that the *loros* was sometimes crossed over the ruler's chest to symbolize his sacralization or recent military victories, as discussed in Cvetan Grozdanov and Dimitar Čornakov, "Istorijski portreti u Pološkom (I)" [Historical portraits in Pološko (I)], *Zograf* 14 (1983): 60–67; 61; and in Cvetan Grozdanov and Dimitar Čornakov, "Istorijski portreti u Pološkom (II)" [Historical portraits in Pološko (II)], *Zograf* 15 (1984): 85–93; 89. There are also cases of King Vukašin (1365–1371) and King Marko (1371–1395) of Serbia depicted with the "female" crossed *loros*; see Nada Nošpal Nikuljska, "Za kitorskata kompozicija i natpisot vo Markoviot manastir-selo Sušica, Skopsko" [On the donor's portrait and inscription in Markov Monastery in the village Sušica near Skopje], *Glasnik Instituta za nacionalna istorija* 15, no. 2 (1971): 225–238; 229; and Aleksić, *Naslednici Mrnjavčevića i teritorije pod njegovom vlašću (1371–1395)*, 357–358.

from works done in the Byzantine style or with Byzantine textiles, which in Papal inventories are referred to as *de opera Romanie* and *de panno de Romania*.⁷⁹ Other wall paintings confirm the circulation of such textiles in the Balkans. Similar types of red weavings with golden or white roundels are depicted in the coeval Markov’s Monastery in Sušica, North Macedonia, built between 1345 and 1377.⁸⁰



Fig. 9. Stephen Dečanski (1322–1331) and Stephen Dušan (1331–1355) wearing a “female” loros. Wall painting. Fourteenth century. Visoki Dečani monastery, Kosovo. Public domain.

79 Gasparini has found this terminology in sources from the Vatican Archive and discusses it in *Transcending Patterns*, 132–133, 141–143. See also Jacoby, “Silk Economics,” and David Jacoby, “Oriental Silks Go West: A Declining Trade in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Islamic Artifacts in the Mediterranean World*, ed. Catarina Schmidt Arcangeli and Gerhard Wolf (Venice: Marsilio, 2010), 71–88. For a detailed study of the Anagni Treasury, see “I doni tessili di Papa Bonifacio VIII alla Cattedrale di Anagni” [Textile gifts by Pope Boniface VIII to the Anagni Cathedral], *Bibliotheca Hertziana*, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://galerie.biblherztz.it/it/anagni/>.

80 Cvetan Grozdanov, “Iz ikonografije Markovog manastira” [On the iconography of the frescoes of the Marko Monastery], *Zograf* 11 (1980): 83–93.



Fig. 10. *Papal Cape embroidered in opus cyprensi. Treasury of Anagni, Italy, from the end of the thirteenth to the beginning of the fourteenth century.* © Immagini di Ricerca – Bibliotheca Hertziana.⁸¹

A variety of luxury textiles are depicted in the *Akathistos Hymn of the Virgin* scene, with a scene that includes personages wearing luxury patterned robes and conical hats (see Figs. 11 and 12). This type of hat, which is often seen in fourteenth-century Eurasian paintings, is arguably another Mongol clothing accessory. In the renowned *Martyrdom of the Franciscans* by the Italian painter Ambrogio Lorenzetti, in the church of St. Francis in Siena, the Mongols are portrayed with the same type of conical hat and the typical *bianxian* coat (see Fig. 12).⁸² Comparable images appear in illustrated manuscripts and textiles from the Ilkhanate, such as the enthronement scenes on a loose folio of a copy of the *Shahnama* in the Sackler Gallery in Washington D.C. (see Fig. 13), and on a *kesi* medallion in the David Collection in Copenhagen, both dated to the first half of the fourteenth century and including representations of cloud collars (as seen on the man kneeling in front of the ruler in Fig. 14 and worn by the ruler in Fig. 15).

The Mongols were present in Italy in the fourteenth century as a result of their Eurasian expansion, which, as explained earlier, included the Balkans. In 1338, Pope Benedict XII (1285–1342) ensured the arrival of a Mongol

81 “I doni tessili di Papa Bonifacio VIII alla Cattedrale di Anagni” [Textile gifts by Pope Boniface VIII to the Anagni Cathedral], Bibliotheca Hertziana, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://galerie.bibliothek.it/it/anagni/>.

82 See Suzanne Maureen Burke and Ambrogio Lorenzetti, “‘The Martyrdom of the Franciscans’ by Ambrogio Lorenzetti,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 65, no. 4 (2002): 460–492; 475; and Roxann Prazniak, “Siena on the Silk Road: Ambrogio Lorenzetti and the Mongol Global Century, 1250–1350,” *Journal of World History* 21, no. 2 (June 2010): 177–217.

delegation through the Kingdom of Naples, which, at the time, lay in the hands of Tuscan and Genoese merchants.⁸³ Not surprisingly, images of the Mongols, Asian textiles, and other art objects and commodities, which all circulated among Eurasian sacred and royal courts, began to be included in various contexts and were reproduced with local materials. It was only in the fourteenth century, however, that these textiles began to appear in the visual arts, recorded in Western inventories as *nacchi* and *nachetti*, as transliterations of the Mongol *nasij*, meaning “golden cloths.” Other Asian textiles, however, were already recorded a century earlier, first appearing under the name “Tartar cloths” in a Hungarian list of grants dated to 1264.⁸⁴ Tartar cloths differed from the “Tars,” which referred to those textiles specifically produced in Cilician Armenia that were later confused with Turkish cloths.⁸⁵ Given the established trade routes in the Balkans and interactions with both the Mongols and Italian merchants from the Levant, as well as the lack of any examples of the cloud collar in west Europe, it is likely that the use of the cloud collar as an elite male accessory at the Serbian court was rather acquired from the Ilkhanate or perhaps the Khanate of the Golden Horde. It is nevertheless possible, however, that the collars worn by John Oliver in Lesnovo were created *in loco* with one of the imported “Tartar” or “Tars” textiles (either as originals or copies produced in Italy), and possibly embroidered in *opus cyprense* in Thessaloniki, or by the young women at the Serbian royal court trained in the art of needlework.

On the older of the two portraits, roundels are seen strewn across the collar and on Oliver’s shoulders in a somewhat disorganized composition. On the second portrait, however, two beaded roundels enclosing a double-headed eagle are symmetrically placed on the collar at the Despot’s shoulders. These two roundels recall the Coptic *segmentae* and the sun and moon of the bejeweled Buddha or the Jin imperial robe previously mentioned, which as cosmic symbols suggested the universal centrality of the ruler. Although it seems unlikely that Oliver knew about the Buddhist implication of the cloud collar, it is probable that he understood it as an elite accessory that, along with the two roundels on the shoulders, communicated his highest stature at the Serbian court as *sebastokrator* and Despot, and, most importantly, as the person in charge of the Byzantine borders.

83 Prazniak, “Siena on the Silk Road,” 185; Jacoby, “Oriental Silks at the Time of the Mongols,” 106. Some of these textiles are represented mainly in fourteenth-century Italian paintings. See Lisa Monnas, *Merchants, Princes and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings 1300–1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 67–95.

84 Jacoby, “Oriental Silks at the Time of the Mongols,” 95.

85 Jacoby, “Oriental Silks at the Time of the Mongols,” 100–101.

Fig. 11. Detail of a red textile in Akathistos Hymn of the Virgin. Wall painting. Fourteenth century. Marko's Monastery, North Macedonia. Public domain.



Fig. 12. Detail of three "Mongol men" in Akathistos Hymn of the Virgin. Wall painting. Fourteenth century. Marko's Monastery, North Macedonia. Public domain.



Fig. 13. Detail of a detached folio from the *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*). Fourteenth century. Ilkhanid Persia (Iran). Sackler Gallery, Washington D.C. (S1986.107). Public domain.



Fig. 14. Martyrdom of the Franciscans. Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Wall painting. 1324–1325. St. Francis Basilica Church, Siena.

Conclusion

The two unusual portraits of Despot John Oliver in the Lesnovo Monastery, a site that likely also served as his mausoleum, until now have not been discussed in previous scholarship on the Mongol cloud collars. These images provide visual historical evidence for the Mongol presence in the Balkans. Between 1342 and 1346–1347, John Oliver acquired two important Byzantine titles, *sebastokrator* and Despot, granting him the right to wear blue textiles and to decorate his clothes with insignia that communicated his high rank. Due to a lack of historical and material evidence, it is not possible to determine the exact circumstances that contributed to the acquisition of these two cloud collars. Nonetheless, through an historical and iconographic analysis, it seems likely that Serbia's geographic position in the context of trade between the Mediterranean and the Ilkhanate permitted the acquisition of a specific textile iconography that combined Byzantine and Mongol elements into a unique and temporary form of Serbian political propaganda. The clothing worn by Oliver in the two portraits in the Lesnovo Monastery is unique in many regards. It represents an example *in toto* of the use and adaptation of a Turko-Mongol costume that crossed territorial borders and reached the secular Byzantine and otherwise religious context of the Balkans. Not enough information is available to definitively describe the provenance and symbolism of his clothing. Nonetheless, a transcultural and interdisciplinary approach incorporating the study and comparison of different sources and materials suggests that the Mongol cloud collar was acquired through Buddhist practices that began in Central Asia at the beginning of the Common Era. The *pañcavārsika* ceremony laid the foundations for the development of the bejeweled Buddha image across the Himalaya to China, and the later *abhiṣeka* ceremony, as practiced in Vajrayāna Buddhism (to which the Mongol-Yuan converted), provided access to the *maṇḍala*. Once it reached Ilkhanid territories, however, the collar lost its original religious meaning and became a fashionable accessory used by the upper classes. Due to the Mongol political expansion and its connection with the Balkans, it is likely that the cloud collar in the southern Slavic context served as a possible alternative to the local and well-known Byzantine *loros*, which could only be worn by the emperor and empress. Through the Mongol's Eurasian expansion in the late medieval period, the cloud collar briefly featured in the local Byzantine-Serbian fashion.⁸⁶ While the presence of the Mongols is visible in many Balkan wall paintings as well as depictions of Mongol or Mongol-inspired textiles, the cloud collar remains a unique clothing element that symbolizes the rise of Despot John Oliver, a figure in charge of the borders with the Byzantine Empire and with access to foreign luxury goods.

86 Prazniak, "Siena on the Silk Road," 215–216.



Fig. 15. Medallion with enthronement scene. Keshi (silk tapestry). Fourteenth century. Ilkhanid Persia (Iran or Iraq). © The David Collection, Copenhagen (30/1995).