STEFAN NEMANJA
(1166−1196)

"Nemanja unified the scattered pieces of his homeland and breathed new life into them."

(Hagiography of St Simeon, Stefan Prvovenčani)

*Stefan Nemanja,
founder of the Nemanjić dynasty,
fresco in monastery
Bogorodica Ljeviška*

According to medieval writers, the rule of Stefan Nemanja was unprecedented. Everything that happened before him seems to be veiled in darkness, overshadowed by his political brilliance and energy. Nemanja united the Serbian lands, freed the country from Byzantine domination and founded institutions that would make his creation stable and long-lasting.

Owing to the achievements of Stefan Nemanja and his successors, almost six previous centuries of Serbian presence and statehood in the Balkans seem to be completely forgotten. As the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty, Stefan Nemanja heralded a new beginning in Serbian history that can be compared only with the cultural and political emancipation of the Serbs in the 19th century.
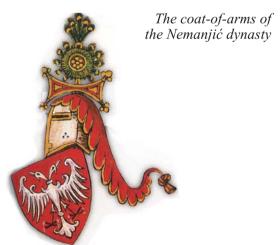
The old town of Ras, the seat of Nemanja's state

Stefan Nemanja descended from an older Serbian ruling house as the youngest of four brothers. He was born around 1113 in Duklja (present-day Montenegro) and baptised in the Roman Catholic rite. When

his parents moved to Ras (south Serbia), they had him baptised again, this time in the Eastern, Orthodox rite.

Nemanja's political rise began around 1163 when Byzantine emperor Manuel I Comnenus bestowed upon him the title of župan (regional ruler) and southern parts of the country. Nemanja thus gained political precedence over his brothers, and began to strengthen his rule in Raška (medieval Serbia).

When his brothers mutinied against him, Nemanja managed to gather supporters, subdue the brothers, and establish a firm rule in the country. To further strengthen his position, he proclaimed himself grand župan in 1166. All this helped Nemanja to become the indisputable leader of the Serbian lands, and to embark on liberating the country from Byzantine dominance.

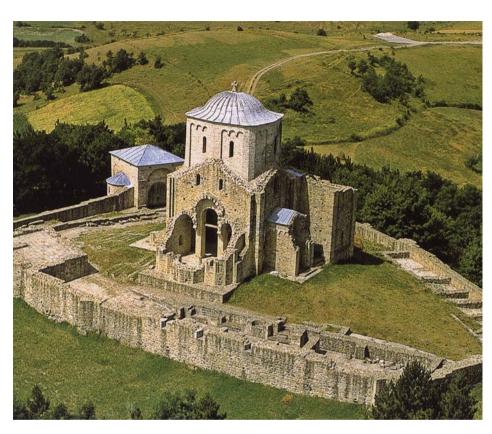*The coat-of-arms of the Nemanjić dynasty*

In 1171, Stefan Nemanja sided with the Venetian Republic and the Kingdom of Hungary in a war against Byzantium. However, after a change on the Hungarian throne and the collapse of the anti-Byzantine coalition, Nemanja remained without allies. To avoid direct conflict with the Byzantine army, he came before Manuel I and begged forgiveness.

It was only after the death of emperor Manuel I Comnenus that the Serbian župan dared to attack Byzantium once again. Nemanja took advantage of the long period of crisis that befell the empire, and extended his authority to the South and Great Morava, into the territory of Kosovo, Hvosno and the Adriatic region.

By end-1189, Nemanja liberated Skopje and Prizren and conquered Sofia. Aiming to attack Byzantium, the Serbian župan tried to take advantage of the planned transit of crusaders through Serbia. At the

Monastery Đurđevi Stupovi
(Pillars of St George),
founded by Stefan Nemanja,
Ras, southern Serbia, 12th century

Nemanja's cross and
signature on
the Hilandar Charter

outset of the Third Crusade in 1189, Nemanja met with Holy Roman Emperor Friedrich I Barbarossa in Niš, and proposed to him to abandon the Holy War and strike at Byzantium instead. In return, Nemanja offered to become a German vassal.

Stefan Nemanja,
fresco in Studenica

As Barbarossa was not ready to accept his plan, the grand župan was left to his own resources. In late 1190, the new Byzantine emperor Isaac Angelos II gathered a strong army and inflicted a defeat on Nemanja's troops. Nevertheless, Nemanja managed to preserve the majority of his lands.

Eventually, the Byzantine emperor recognised Serbia's borders and endorsed Stefan Nemanja as the country's rightful grand župan. Amicable relations between Serbia and Byzantium were further strengthened by a dynastic marriage – Nemanja's second-born son Stefan married Byzantine princess Eudocia and obtained the title of sebastokrator, the third in rank after emperor and despot.

Aware of the importance of changes in organisation of the country, Nemanja wrote in the Hilandar Charter (1198) the following: "The merciful God made the Greeks emperors and the Hungarians kings, and He made me grand župan. By His infinite mercy and benevolence, God gave our great grandfathers and our grandfathers to rule these Serbian lands".

As grand župan, Stefan Nemanja was deeply devoted to Orthodox Christianity, but he also showed great tolerance to numerous Catholics who lived in maritime Serbian towns. Furthermore, he eradicated the Bogomil heresy in the country and created the conditions for religious homogenisation of the Serbian people.

The oldest Serbian
coat-of-arms;
double-headed eagle
of the Nemanjić
dynasty

Monastery Studenica

The "great lavra" Studenica was established in 1196 by Stefan Nemanja, the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty. The largest and richest of Serbian monasteries, Studenica enshrines priceless 13th and 14th Byzantine painting, a valuable treasury, and has a distinctive architectural concept.

Besides Saint Simeon (Stefan Nemanja), four more saints – holy members of the Nemanjić dynasty are buried in Studenica. Originally designed to serve as a mausoleum of the Nemanjić rulers, Studenica enjoyed generous support of almost all Serbian medieval kings.

The Virgin's Church is the biggest and most important building of the monastery complex. Its architecture does not stem from one source only. The plan, space and structure are Byzantine, whilst the conception of outer shapes and architectural details are of Roman origin. Such masterful blending of eastern and western influences endows Studenica with originality and freshness unknown at the time.

The monastery's oldest frescoes are considered the culmination of 13th century Byzantine painting. St Sava devised the program of compositions on Studenica's walls, aiding talented painters from Constantinople to realise their full artistic potential and mastery.

In 1986, owing to its artistic and cultural value, Studenica was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.