

Dečani (Serbia-Montenegro)

No 724

1. BASIC DATA

State Party: Serbia-Montenegro

Name of property: Dečani Monastery

Location: Autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohija, Dečane municipality

Date received: 30 January 2003

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *monument*.

Brief description:

The Dečani Monastery was built in the mid 14th century for the Serbian King Stefan Dečanski, and it is also his mausoleum. The church represents the last important phase of Byzantine-Romanesque architecture in the Balkan region. Built in marble, it is the largest of all medieval Balkan churches, and is exceptionally rich in well-preserved Byzantine painting and Romanesque sculpture.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The 14th-century Dečani Monastery is situated on the Dečanska Bistrica river gorge, at the foot of the slopes of the Prokletije mountain range, in the western part of the province of Kosovo and Metohija. The monastery is surrounded by a chestnut forest. The layout of the Monastic court is based on the concept common in Serbian medieval architecture since the 12th century. Accordingly, the boundary walls of the Monastery form a circle which encloses all the buildings required for daily life. The principal church (*katholikon*) is in the centre, oriented west to east. The other monastic buildings are positioned along the circular boundary wall, on the west and north sides: Leontije's dormitory, south-west entrance, west entrance, kitchen, refectory, Archimandritia (head of the monastery), Milo's dormitory. Of these other buildings only the tower over the West entrance and the former refectory have partly preserved their original appearance; the others have been changed over time.

The Church is dedicated to the Ascension of Christ. Its plan consists of three sections. Entering from the west, these are:

- a triple-aisled narthex with three bays;
- a five-aisled *naos* combined with a Byzantine cross-in-square plan; the exterior aisles are separated from the central part by parapets, and have separate apses with altars forming chapels (*parekklesions*) dedicated to St. Demetrius and St. Nicholas; a cupola (29 m high) rises above the central bay;

- a three-aisled sanctuary with apses.

The church walls are built with carefully hewn blocks of red-purple and light-yellow marble; there is also some onyx marble. There is ornamental carving on the portals, on the mullioned windows of two or three lights, on the columns in the interior, as well as on the consoles of arcade frieze around the church roofs.

The nearly completely preserved wall paintings of the church have an almost encyclopaedic character. There is an abundance of scenes and figures following Christian history from the moment of Creation to the first centuries of our own era. Practically the entire interior is covered with paintings, programmed according to the functions of the different parts of the church. There are over 1,000 individual depictions of saints and compositions arranged in about twenty cycles. For example, there are liturgical scenes, portraits of bishops, prophets and archangels, and scenes related to Christ in the *bema* (area around the altar). In the *prothesis* (area for preparations for offering Eucharist) there are further liturgical compositions and portraits, as well as a cycle of the Life of the Virgin. The walls of the *diakonikon* (a sort of sacristy behind the *bema*) were never covered with paintings. In the dome, there are depictions of Christ the Pantocrator, Divine Liturgy and the prophets, and under the dome cycles related to Christ and the Virgin. In the *naos*, there are several extensive cycles, e.g. Acts of the Apostles and Last Judgment, as well as on the life of the saints. The original marble floor is preserved, as well as the interior furniture, including the wooden throne, the iconostasis, a sarcophagus and other pieces of church art; the main iconostasis originates from the 14th century. The Dečani treasury is the richest in Serbia, with about 60 exceptional icons from the 14th-17th centuries, as well as old manuscripts and other objects.

To the south, outside the monastery, there is a nature protection area, including an old black pine tree which has been protected as a memorial. There are also the remains of the Church of St. Nicholas, from the same period as Dečani. This church is smaller in size, and has traces of wall paintings. There are some villages around the monastery, which used to be the medieval property of the Dečani monastery. Over the left bank of the river, high up in the landscape, there are three medieval hermitages once used by the monks of the monastery. In the chapel of Belaje, dedicated to the Mother of God, there are still some remains of 14th century paintings.

History

The Dečani monastic church is the endowment and mausoleum of Serbian King Stefan Dečanski. The original founding charter from 1330 has been preserved. The construction lasted 8 years (1327-1335), and the master builder was Fra Vita, a Franciscan from Kotor. Stefan Dečanski died before the construction was completed, and was buried here. Supervision of the construction works was continued by his son Dušan. The church interior was decorated at the same time, including the icons for the main iconostasis and the church furniture. The wooden throne of Hegoumenos was made around 1335, and the carved wooden sarcophagus of King Stefan Dečanski around 1340.

The writer Grigorije Camblak, author of *The Life of Stefan Dečanski*, was the head (*hegoumenos*) of the Monastery at the beginning of the 15th century. Great artistic enthusiasm was brought to life in the monastery during the second half of the 16th century. This is when the painter monk Longin spent here two decades. He created some fifteen icons with depictions of the Great Feast and hermits, but his masterpiece is the icon of Stefan Dečanski with scenes from the life of this sainted king.

At the close of the 17th century, the Turks plundered the monastery, but made no serious damage. During the 19th century, the monastery was restored, and new iconostases were placed on the *parekklesions* (side chapels) of St. Demetrius and St. Nicholas. At present, the property is used for liturgical purposes, as an Orthodox monastery with all the corresponding functions, and as a cultural and historical monument.

Management regime

Legal provision:

The Monastery is owned by the Serbian Orthodox Church, Dečani Monastery Administration.

The property is legally protected from 1947, on the basis of the Protection of Cultural Monuments and Natural Rarities Law ('FPRY Official Acts' N° 81/46), decision on determining immobile cultural properties of exceptional significance ('SR Serbia Official Acts' N° 25/90), and the Cultural Properties Law, ('Official Acts of the Republic of Serbia' N° 71/94).

The natural environment, including the remains of the St. Nicholas church south of the monastery is protected, as well as the ravine of Decanska Bistrica river, including the area of the medieval hermitages and the medieval stone quarry.

Management structure:

This property is managed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, at the level of the Ras-Prizren Eparchy, through the Dečani Monastery Administration. The plans and interventions are supervised by the Republic Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments - Belgrade.

The *Area Plan of the Republic of Serbia*, Belgrade 1996, is a strategic development document to the year 2010, which determines the long-term base for organisation, utilisation and management of the area of the Republic of Serbia.

The *Regional Area Plan for Metohija*, *Special Purpose Districts Area Plan for the Prokletije Tourist District and the Dečani Cultural property District*, are currently in preparation.

On the basis of the above, two plans have been prepared for the monastery and its environment: *Prokletije National Park*, *Scientific and Expert Bases for Protecting the Prokletije Mountain Range on the Territory of the Republic of Serbia as a National Park* and *The Protected Environment of Dečani Monastery*. These plans have been suspended for the time being due to the political situation in Kosovo-Metohija.

The Republic Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments - Belgrade has made the *Plan and Programme*

for the Management, Research, Protection, and Presentation of Dečani Monastery (February 2002), which defines the necessary legal and technical measures for the monastery.

There exists also a strategy for tourism, prepared by the Ministry of Tourism in 1999. In the 1997, visits were organised for groups of people who arrived by bus, and there were about 200 visitors per week. The current political situation, however, does allow visits to be organised except under police escort mainly for representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Resources:

Finances for the conservation and management of the property are provided by the Serbian Government, by the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as from sponsorships and donations.

At the legal and technical level expertise is provided by the Republic Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, but in terms of cultural property management there are no trained experts. An expert team consisting of different professions has been formed to define the general guidelines for a future integrative approach to the protection of Dečani Monastery on the basis of the Plan and Programme for the Management, Research, Protection, and Presentation.

The Monastery is inhabited by the monastic brotherhood, whose number varies from 35 to 40 monks and novices.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

Dečani Monastery holds an exceptional place in the Serbian national consciousness as one of the most magnificent monuments of Serbian culture and history. Because of the dimensions of the church, which by far surpass the size of all the other medieval Balkan churches, the monastery has been popularly named High Dečani (*Visoki Dečani*). The Dečani church represents the largest preserved monument of Byzantine painting, the largest entirety of Romanic sculpture on the Balkans, one of the most complex architectural achievements of the 14th century, and one of the most authentically preserved sacral interiors on the territory under Byzantine cultural and artistic influence.

The inscription of Dečani Monastery in the World Heritage List is proposed on the basis of the criteria ii, iii, iv and vi:

Criterion iv: Dečani represents an exceptional example of medieval architecture and sculpture on the territory of the Byzantine spiritual sphere, i.e. an original combination of the traditional Byzantine church with contemporary Romanic-Gothic architecture of the West, the largest preserved Serbian and Southern Slav monument; the monastery of Dečani is unique among Orthodox monasteries in the Balkan peninsula, an East Christian temple built and decorated by the Catholic craftsmen from the Dalmatian coast region.

Criterion iii: the Dečani paintings are the largest preserved fresco entirety of the Byzantine world, the largest source of data concerning Byzantine iconography, and an exceptional witness to the diverse style trends in Byzantine art during the middle of the 14th century; remarkable series

of mural paintings are of outstanding artistic quality, done by numerous painters of different knowledge and origin (from Greece, Serbia, Adriatic coast), who worked for almost 15 years and covered the area of about 4,000 square meters.

Criterion ii: during four centuries following their creation, the Dečani wall paintings exerted an exceptionally great influence on painters who decorated the walls of numerous churches in medieval Serbia, especially after the restoration of the Peć Patriarchate in 1557 on the territory of the former state; the role of the Dečani frescoes in the development of the Orthodox art of the Balkan peninsula during the period of Ottoman domination was decisive and it is unavoidable in research of the post-Byzantine monuments.

Criterion vi: Dečani Monastery is closely connected to protagonists and events of the greatest importance for medieval history of the Balkan Peninsula, especially of the 14th century and the changes that took part with the organization and the borders of the countries whose territories occupied the Balkans, such as Byzantium, Serbia, Bulgaria etc.

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

The property was first presented in 1994, and was assessed favourably by ICOMOS, who recommended inscription on the basis of criteria ii and iv. An expert mission visited the site in February 1995. ICOMOS, however, raised two issues that needed to be taken care of: 1) the formulation of a viable management plan; 2) the definition of a realistic buffer zone. Now these conditions have been fulfilled. However, the 1995 Bureau decided not to examine the nomination, for reasons independent of the quality of the nomination or of the property.

Another ICOMOS expert mission visited the site in September 2003.

Conservation

Conservation history:

The monastery has not had any major damages in its history, but it has been subject to decay due to ageing processes. There have been repair and restoration works from 1935 to 1941, in 1952, from 1956 to 1964, and in 1984, which have included strengthening the foundations and putting concrete trusses at the roof level, filling out the cracks with cement, re-pointing the masonry, and cleaning and restoring the façade. There have also been works on the roofs. The medieval refectory was destroyed by fire in 1949; it was rebuilt and the monastic treasure was exhibited there in 1987. In 1994, the *naos* and the altar zone of the church were cleaned, and water management was improved. From 1995 to 1997, the church façades were subject to conservation treatment. Now earlier cement mortar fillings were removed and the surfaces were cleaned using modern methods. Some lost sculptural details were re-carved in marble taken from the old quarry.

The paintings have been made using a *fresco* technique. However there have been various types of damages, eg

caused by water penetration and structural movements, that restorers have tried to repair in the past. In fact, during the above mentioned structural works, there have also been conservation treatments to the wall paintings.

State of conservation:

The general structural condition of the church is satisfactory. However, the condition of the external sculptures is critical. There are damages particularly in the marble onyx caused by environmental agents and ageing processes. Some individual sculptures are in poor state, and there are new cracks in some large sculptures. Some of the side buildings are in poor condition, eg the dormitories.

In 2001, during a detailed inspection, the specialists of the Institute found out that parts of the mural paintings are detached and risk falling off.

It is noted that there has been hardly any archaeological work in the Monastery. The Serbian Institute is currently planning a programme of systematic soundings in the area.

Management:

The monastery is currently used by some 35-40 monks and novices, who also take care of the site on a daily basis. The Serbian Institute in Belgrade has prepared a management system with relevant plans. The current political situation in the area and lack of resources do not allow for a full implementation of the required conservation works, but works are programmed according to these plans. There is collaboration also with the Italian Central Restoration Institute regarding the conservation of the mural paintings.

The core zone covers the area of the monastery (ca 1.8 ha). The buffer zone covers a fairly large landscape area on both sides of the river, some 3 km long and 1.5 km wide (ca 111 ha), which is considered reasonable.

Risk analysis:

The current political situation can be seen as a risk factor. On the other hand, the region is not subject to any major development. In fact, the basic risks are related to ageing processes and decay caused by environmental agents. There is a possibility of earthquakes in this region, but the main risk is their potential impact on the mural paintings.

Authenticity and integrity

The church itself and the mural paintings are exceptionally well preserved in their integrity. The main church has been preserved even with the interior, the furniture and art works. Some of the side buildings have been damaged and rebuilt in the past. The setting of the monastery has been maintained in its original condition. The overall authenticity and integrity of the site are high.

Comparative evaluation

Dečani Monastery follows the prototype of the so-called Ras School, developed in Serbia in the 12th century. The architecture is distinguished by the particular mixture of Eastern Orthodox and Western Romanesque features. The principal church is exceptional in having preserved the integrity of its original architecture with the interiors, the impressive cycle of mural paintings, furniture and church

art. The church represents the final and most important development of this school, in the 14th century. The paintings are a particularly important feature, which contains some 1,000 portraits and a valuable record of the life in the 14th century. It therefore defers from the closest comparison, the Studenica Monastery (WH List 1986, criteria: i, ii, iv, vi), which represents an earlier, 12th-century example. Dečani also defers from the other Balkan monastic churches in terms of its architecture, the methods of construction, and particularly for its outstanding series of mural paintings and well-preserved interiors.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

Dečani Monastery is considered one of the most important monuments of Serbian culture and history. The main characteristics of the ensemble relate to a prototype attributed to the so-called Ras School, a style formed in Serbia in the 12th century. It is also one of the most valued examples of the so-called 'Palaeologan renaissance' in Byzantine painting. The plan and spatial arrangement of the church are Orthodox, while the exterior appearance is based on Romanesque tradition. Dečani Monastery is referred to the example of Studenica Monastery (founded in the 12th century), and it represents the final and greatest achievement of this school. Dečani is also considered the largest of medieval Balkan churches, preserving its architecture in the original form. The church has the most impressive series of Byzantine mural paintings of the 14th century, which have been preserved in their integrity. In terms of Romanesque sculpture the church represents an outstanding achievement and also its sacral interior and the original church furniture and art are exceptional in terms of authenticity and integrity.

Evaluation of criteria:

Criterion ii is referred to the influences that the monastery had on the development of Orthodox art in the Balkan region in the post-Byzantine period, i.e. during the Ottoman rule, from the 15th to the 18th centuries. The church and its paintings are the result of influences from the Eastern Orthodox and Western Romanesque art and architecture. It is also an exceptional synthesis of the artistic trends of the 14th century due to the large number of painters who worked here for 15 years, coming from Greece, the Adriatic coast and Serbia.

Criterion iv is referred to Dečani as an exceptionally significant example of medieval Byzantine-Romanesque architecture, complete with its interiors, paintings and sculpture. It is the largest preserved Serbian-Southern Slav monument. It is exceptional, representing an Orthodox construction but being built by Catholic craftsmen from the Dalmatian coastal region. The 12th-century architecture and the 13th-century frescoes of Studenica represent the beginning of a new, monumental style in Byzantine painting, while the 14th-century Dečani represents one of the most exquisite examples of the so-called 'Palaeologan Renaissance' in the medieval Orthodox world. The value of Dečani is in that it offers the most complete panorama of the iconographic repertoire and of the stylistic movements of Byzantine painting the 14th century.

Criterion iii is referred to the mural paintings as a source of information re Byzantine iconography and as an exceptional witness to the diverse styles and trends in Byzantine art in the 14th century. While this is true, ICOMOS considers that these aspects are already covered in the criteria ii and iv.

Criterion vi is referred to the political context as it developed in the Balkans in the 14th century. ICOMOS does not consider this criterion to be relevant in this case.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation with respect to inscription

That the property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of ***criteria ii and iv***:

Criterion ii: Dečani Monastery represents an exceptional synthesis of Byzantine and Western medieval traditions. The monastery and particularly its paintings also exercised an important influence on the development of art and architecture during the Ottoman period.

Criterion iv: Dečani Monastery represents an outstanding example of the last phase of the development of the Serbian-Slav architecture. The construction has integrated Eastern Byzantine and Western medieval traditions.

ICOMOS, March 2004