REPORT
ON THE STATE OF CONSERVATION OF
MEDIEVAL MONUMENTS IN KOSOVO (SERBIA)
INSCRIBED ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST IN DANGER

MEDIEVAL MONUMENTS IN KOSOVO, Serbia (C 724)
The Dečani Monastery
The Patriarchate of Peć Monastery
The Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviša
The Gračanica Monastery

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INTRODUCTION

The property “Medieval Monuments in Kosovo (Serbia)“ (C724) was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in 2004.

In 2006, at 30th session of The World Heritage Committee decided that the site of the Dečani Monastery will be extended by adding three groups of churches, the Patriarchate of Peć Monastery, Gračanica Monastery and the Church of the Virgin of Ljeviša (Decision 30 COM 8B.53).

The property “Medieval Monuments in Kosovo (Serbia)”, mainly dating from the 13th and 14th centuries, was at same session placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2006 due to difficulties in its management and conservation stemming from the region's political instability (Decision 30 COM 8B.54). The Committee requested that the State Party (Serbia) work with UNESCO programmes, with the United Nations Mission to Kosovo (UNMIK) and with the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government in Priština in caring for the site.

According to the Decision 30 COM 8B.54 (2006) the following threats to the site were detected:

- Lack of legal status of the property;
- Lack of legislative protection of buffer zones;
- Lack of implementation of the Management Plan and of active management;
- Difficulties to monitor the property due to political instability, post-conflict situation (visits under the Kosovo Stabilization Force / United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (KFOR / UNMIK) escort and lack of guards and security);
- Unsatisfactory state of conservation and maintenance of the property.
SIGNIFICANCE

The Dečani Monastery, the Patriarchate of Peć Monastery, Gračanica Monastery and the Church of the Virgin of Ljeviša reflect the high points of the Byzantine-Romanesque and Serbian medieval ecclesiastical culture, with its distinct style of wall painting, which developed in the wider region of the Balkans between the 13th and 17th centuries.

The Dečani Monastery was built in the mid-14th century for the Serbian king Stefan Dečanski and 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.

The Patriarchate of Peć Monastery is a group of four domed churches featuring series of wall paintings. All the churches display an extensive series of wall paintings but the 13th-century frescoes of the Church of Holy Apostles are painted in a unique, monumental style.

Early 14th-century frescoes in the church of the Holy Virgin of Ljevisa represent the appearance of the new so-called Palaiologian Renaissance style, combining the influences of the eastern Orthodox Byzantine and the Western Romanesque traditions. The style played a decisive role in subsequent Balkan art.

Gračanica Monastery was one of the last monumental endowments of Serbian King Milutin (1282-1321). The main church of Theotokos with the plan, spatial arrangement, decorative wall treatment and wall paintings together have made it an emblematic structure for Balkan architecture of the 14th century reflecting the spirit of the Byzantine tradition but slight modified by western influence.
The Dečani Monastery

In the Dečani Monastery, no new conservation works were carried out in 2019. During the year, constant monitoring was conducted for buildings in the monastery, wall painting in the main church and mobile church mobiliary, as well as other movable artistic material which is kept in the monastery, and no negative phenomena that may affect the conservation status were observed.

In addition to constant threats and limited freedom of movement of the monastery fraternity, it is extremely worrying that the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government in Priština haven’t given up from the construction of the main road Dečani – Plav in the protected (buffer) zone of the monastery. Namely, the so-called deputy minister of infrastructure in Priština in June 2019 announced the finalization of the project in 2020, including the part of the road that passes through the monastery’s protected zone, as work on other sections is ongoing. We remind that the Minister of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia wrote to the Director-General of UNESCO in June 2018, and the passage of the route through the protected area of a monument included on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger has been repeatedly condemned by EU and OSCE officials in Pristina. Another confirmation that further works on building this road initiated in May 2018 were not abandoned is the fact that the terrain has not been restored to its original state.

For the reason of its constant physical endangerment, the property is still secured by KFOR forces on a daily basis.
1. Construction works on the road Decani – Plav through the Dečani monastery buffer zone, May 2018

2. KFOR Control Station on the road leading to the Dečani Monastery
The Patriarchate of Peć Monastery

In 2019, specifically in July and August, the construction of drainage channels for the discharge of atmospheric precipitation from the roofs of the churches was carried out in the monastery complex of the Patriarchate of Peć. The canals were laid from the west, northeast and south sides of the complex until the southwest entrance to St. Nicholas Church, totaling 124.80 meters. As in the previous period noticed during the monitoring, the spraying of the lower parts of the outer walls of the churches was stated, and due to the increasing abundance - especially of spring and summer rains, it was concluded that it was necessary to build a drainage system. The project documentation was drafted in the Serbian Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in 2018, which, after the project received all the necessary permits, supervised the execution of the works.

Constant monitoring was conducted for the state of wall painting, monastery objects and movable artistic material which is kept in the monastery. Monitoring will continue in the future. The preparation of project documentation for the rehabilitation of the Holy Apostles church roof that was started last year is still ongoing.

For the reason of its constant physical endangerment, the property is still secured by the local police forces on a daily basis.

3. Drainage system around the churches of the Patriarchate of Peć, August 2019.
The Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren

No new conservation works were carried out in the church of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren in 2019. According to a survey from July 2017, the experts of Serbian Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments started the production of project documentation for the necessary conservation interventions in the future, since the conditions in the church are not satisfactory, that there is capillary moisture in the walls that threatens wall painting, as well as that the atmospheric water drainage system does not function in full scope. As a result, work on repairing the roof structure and its lead roof, which damaged the fallen bell, repairing the bell, minor interventions on the façade and repairing the fence around the church, is planned for the following year. Competent institutions of the Republic of Serbia are ready for full cooperation with the UNESCO’s World Heritage Center, regarding future conservation and rehabilitation works in the church.

The Serbian Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments prepares project documentation for the conservation of the remaining wall painting that was damaged in 2004 March pogrom when the church was set on fire.

Due to the lack of freedom of movement of the non-Albanian population the church is still not open to visitors daily. Thus, there is neither regular worship nor gathering during church festivities and Sunday services.

For the reason of its constant physical endangerment, the property is still secured by the local police forces on a daily basis.

4. Southern look of the Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren
5. Western look of the Church of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviša in Prizren

6. The consequences of the church burning in March 2004
The Gračanica Monastery

In the Gračanica Monastery, during the year, constant monitoring was conducted for buildings in the monastery, wall painting in the main church and mobile church mobiliary, as well as other movable artistic material which is kept in the monastery and no negative phenomena that may affect the conservation status were observed. The monitoring was done by the Serbian Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments.

For the reason of its constant physical endangerment, the property is still secured by the local police forces on a daily basis.
Final conclusions

It is extremely worrying that the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government in Priština haven’t given up from the construction of the main road Dečani – Plav in the protected (buffer) zone of the Dečani monastery. Although there is no new damage to the properties and their integrity in the reporting period has been maintained, the general state of the Serbian churches and monasteries in the province of Kosovo and Metohija is far from a satisfactory level.

The local authorities still impose numerous administrative and technical barriers for priestly and monastic communities (such as restrictions on water and electricity or lack of maintenance of infrastructure facilities) which make their survival on these properties - living testimonies of the Serbian and world spiritual heritage – rather difficult. These holy places of great importance for the Serbian people and strongly associated with its identity and history are still inaccessible to the great majority of believers as there is still no secured freedom of movement for Serbs. Thus, their religious rights are also seriously undermined. A telling example of the mistreatment of Serbian cultural and religious heritage in the Province is the rejection of the Dečani mayor to fulfil the decision of Constitutional Court from 2016 and return more than 24 hectares (59 acres) of land in the possession of the Dečani monastery.

There is no progress in the communication of church and monastery communities with local administrations and populations. Also, the values and significance of these monuments are still being misinterpreted, in conflict with confirmed historical facts, and even contrary to the decision of the World Heritage Committee to list these properties on the World Heritage List. The established matrix of this distortion of historical facts is the negation of any connection for these monuments with the Serbian people and the Serbian Orthodox Church.