

## Destruction of Serbian Cultural Patrimony in Kosovo: A World-Wide Precedent?\*

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The continuing pattern of deliberate destruction of Serbian cultural monuments in Kosovo requires some reflection on the nature of the problem itself and on the absence of any normal recourse resulting from the sad events. As the list of damaged or obliterated monuments continues to grow, a “statistical syndrome,” intent on counting and recording the victimized monuments, has emerged as the only viable means of dealing with such unabashed vandalism. These lists, duly compiled and documented by various institutions and groups in Yugoslavia, reach a limited number of professional organizations in the West, where they are either received with reserved consternation or, more commonly, remain quietly ignored.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the basic task of monitoring the growing number of acts of vandalism, different, albeit related, issues have begun to surface. These range from elementary concerns regarding the professional conservation of cultural monuments to broad philosophical issues pertaining to the concept of ownership of cultural patrimony in general. In this context, Kosovo emerges not

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<sup>1</sup> Among the available records of the destruction in Kosovo are *Serbian Markers in Kosovo and Metohija*, a map by Ljubiša Gvoić, pinpointing and listing the 1000 recorded historical monuments and sites, as well as identifying all monuments damaged or destroyed in 1999, published by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia (Belgrade, 1999); a CD ROM “Yugoslav Cultural Heritage, March–August 1999,” with verbal and visual information on the damaged and destroyed historical monuments, also produced by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia (Belgrade, 1999); *Crucified Kosovo. Destroyed and Desecrated Serbian Orthodox Churches in Kosovo and Metohija* (June–October 1999), 2nd ed., published by “The Voice of Kosovo and Metohija” of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Raška and Prizren (1999), with a large number of daunting color photographs. Updated material from the same source is available on the Internet ([www.decani.yunet.com/destruction.htm](http://www.decani.yunet.com/destruction.htm)). An interdisciplinary professional group entitled *Mnemosina* has established a database *Mediateka* in the Department of Art History, University of Belgrade, available on the Internet (<http://mediateka.f.bg.ac.yu/files/heritage.htm>).

only as a crucial political and military precedent with world-wide implications, but also as a critical precedent in dealing with the subject of cultural patrimony as envisioned by the strategists of the New World Order. The established international agreements and conventions appear to be facing tacit suppression as they are in the process of being replaced by some unspecified new rules, yet to be revealed. Presently, we find ourselves in a gray area: Kosovo has become a grand laboratory in which various experiments are being aggressively tested, among them those pertaining to the future meaning and preservation of cultural patrimony.

Generally speaking, professionals, and not only professionals, concerned with issues related to cultural patrimony, should consider the latest developments with the greatest interest and concern. It is not only the cultural patrimony of the Serbs, a small “rogue” nation in the backwaters of the distant Balkans, that is at stake, but also the fundamental principles pertaining to the definition and the protection of cultural heritage in the broadest sense. To illustrate these points I will refer to two dramatic examples that will facilitate the outlining of the larger problem.

The Church of the Dormition at Gračanica Monastery, better known as simply Gračanica, is one of the most important and best preserved monuments of Serbian and, by extension, of Late Byzantine architecture and art.<sup>2</sup> Located next to the village of the same name, Gračanica suffered indirect damage from the intensive NATO bombing in the area during the military intervention of March–June 1999. Several bomb explosions in the vicinity, one of which occurred within the monastic enclosure itself, have caused what was initially reported as “superficial damage.” Indeed, the church is still standing and its priceless frescoes appear to be entirely intact. Its appearance, however encouraging at first glance, is in fact utterly deceiving. Defying the general KFOR prohibition of free movement in the area of Kosovo, and risking his own life in the process, a member of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in Belgrade recently visited Gračanica and made the first professional assessment of the damage suffered by the monument. One can glean clearly from his report that the nature of the injury, far from being superficial, gives us cause for most serious alarm. A preliminary examination of

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<sup>2</sup> S. Ćurčić, *Gračanica, King Milutin's Church and Its Place in Late Byzantine Architecture* (University Park and London, 1979); also idem, *Gračanica. Istorija i arhitektura*, published in Serbian as a two-volume monograph along with B. Todić, *Gračanica. Slikarstvo* (Belgrade and Priština, 1988). Other relevant literature in English that may be cited includes G. Subotić, *Art of Kosovo. The Sacred Land* (New York, 1998) and B. Todić, *Serbian Medieval Painting. The Age of King Milutin* (Belgrade, 1999).

the frescoes, up to the level of 2.25 m from the floor, indicates that large areas of fresco mortar have become physically detached from the walls.<sup>3</sup> These areas include, among others, the historical portraits of the donor, King Milutin, depicted with a model of the church in his hands, as well as the portraits of Archbishop Sava III and Patriarchs Jefrem, and Joanikije. The nature of damage, as described in this report, is extremely serious. Physically separated, as they are, from the walls of the church, the Gračanica frescoes could collapse as a result of a natural tremor, or as a result of the uncontrolled growth of fungi within the cavities should these not be injected with fresh mortar. It should be remembered that this preliminary inspection of the condition of the frescoes did not take into account the frescoes on the higher areas of the walls, vaults, and domes, where the possibility of such damage is even greater. As the opportunity of conducting any thorough inspection of the condition of the monument as a whole, let alone its urgent conservation, is impossible under the present circumstances, we must draw the daunting conclusion that Gračanica has been doomed to a slow but inevitable death.

The fate of the Church of the Virgin Hodegetria, in the village of Mušutište, has been far more decisive. This historical monument, dated 1314–15 by an inscription carved on a lintel above the church portal and thus roughly contemporary to the church at Gračanica, was first desecrated between June 15 and 20, 1999, only to be completely destroyed by professionally planted explosives in early July 1999. Both acts occurred after the arrival of German troops within the United Nations-sponsored KFOR forces, and following the evacuation of the local Serbian population from the area.<sup>4</sup> The loss of the church at Mušutište is the loss of a major historical monument. This essentially well-preserved medieval church was notable for its Byzantine (and more specifically Thessalonikian) architectural characteristics, as well as for its frescoes, but it had not yet been adequately studied.<sup>5</sup> In the large heap of rubble, recorded on the photographs of the destroyed church,\* one can recognize various architectural elements and even bits of its fresco decoration.

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<sup>3</sup> M. Omčikus, “Posle NATO bombardovanja: Da li su srednjovekovne crkve prepuštene tihom umiranju?” (“After the NATO Bombing: Are Medieval Churches Doomed to Die a Slow Death?”), an article to be published in the *Glasnik Društva konzervatora Srbije*. I am grateful to the author for his willingness to put the text of his article at my disposal before its formal publication.

<sup>4</sup> *Crucified Kosovo* (see note 1), 13–14.

<sup>5</sup> For architecture cf. Ćurčić, *Gračanica, King Milutin’s Church* (see note 2), 112; for frescoes cf. Todić, *Serbian Medieval Painting* (see note 2), 340, citing older literature on the subject.

\* Editor’s note: For the picture of the destroyed Church of the Virgin Hodegetria in Mušutište, see *Serbian Studies* 13, no. 2 (1999), color plates nos. 8 and 9.

Ruins of a monument such as this, under normal circumstances, would themselves be protected and subject to study. Careful conservation efforts, if properly engaged, could reconstruct a great deal, even from a heap of rubble. One only need be reminded of the painstaking restoration of the Constantinian frescoes under the Cathedral of Trier, discovered inadvertently following the Allied bombing of Trier in 1945. This course of action, unfortunately, is not likely to happen at Mušutište. In fact, we may sadly anticipate the continuation of the process of destruction through the removal and dispersal of the debris, and the ultimate loss of any traces of the monument, as has, indeed, happened at other locations. The eventual fate of the inscription, carved on the portal lintel, recording the name of the donor (one Jovan Dragoslav and his family) and the construction date (1314–15), gives us particular reason for concern. While this piece must have survived the explosion, even if in fragments, its preservation is essential, for it belongs to a relatively small number of medieval inscriptions of this type that have survived into the modern era. The possible loss of this inscription would signal an even more significant dimension of terrorist activity aimed at the complete eradication of Serbian historical memory in the area. Its ultimate destiny is in the hands of the KFOR authorities operating under the aegis of the United Nations, an organization that has assumed full responsibility for the protection of *all* cultural heritage in the region.

Mušutište and Gračanica, unfortunately, are not the only structures that have suffered in the manner described. A number of other medieval monuments have all been destroyed with the use of explosive charges:<sup>6</sup> the monastic Church of the Holy Trinity, also at Mušutište (fourteenth century and later); the monastic Church of St. Mark at Koriša (1467); the monastic Church of the Dormition of the Virgin at Šarenik, Gornje Nerodimlje (end of the fourteenth century); the monastic Church of the Holy Archangel at Gornje Nerodimlje (the fourteenth century and later); the monastic Church of the Presentation of the Virgin at Dolac (the fourteenth century and 1620). All of the aforementioned destruction has occurred since the arrival of the KFOR forces in Kosovo in June 1999. Other major monuments—the complex of four churches of the Serbian patriarchate at Peć (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) and the monastic Church of Christ the Pantocrator at Dečani (1335–55) being the most prominent among them—suffered “collateral damage” comparable to that described in the case of Gračanica during the NATO bombings of March–June 1999.

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<sup>6</sup> *Crucified Kosovo* (as in note 1), 11–12 and 15–20.

Both forms of destruction affecting the key monuments—the “delayed-action” variety and outright demolition—have occurred without any possibility for recourse on the part of experts from various state and regional institutes for the preservation of cultural monuments, whose services had been devoted to maintaining these monuments for decades. In fact, it is essentially unknown that the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has rejected any form of collaboration from the responsible agencies in Belgrade. On July 12, 1999, in the midst of the worst terrorist activities described above, Mr. Colin Kaiser, a delegate of UNESCO for Kosovo, openly rejected any possibility of professional collaboration with the experts from Belgrade.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Dr. Bernard Kouchner, special representative of the UN Secretary General for Kosovo, known as the founder of the organization *Doctors Without Borders*, has engaged experts of a new group referred to as *Patrimoine sans frontiere*, presumably with the aim of replacing the banned preservation and conservation experts from Belgrade.<sup>8</sup> Neither the composition nor the qualifications of this mysterious group have yet been revealed. Meanwhile, the destructive processes described above continue unabated.

The systematic destruction of Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo has generally been concealed as an issue in the western media. When the subject arises, as occasionally happens, it is defended as an “understandable by-product of the processes of revenge for the Serbian misdeeds against the Albanian population before and during the NATO intervention.” Thus, summarily, the great cultural crime being perpetuated is dismissed as an issue, and the process is allowed tacitly to continue. Current events ought to be troubling enough, and their implications ought to weigh heavily on the consciousness of all nations and organizations in any way involved in Kosovo. Yet, the problem seems to have even larger and more sinister dimensions with a history that long predates the current Kosovo crisis. For the sake of brevity, I will highlight but two more indicative aspects of the emerging outline of a larger, apparently carefully planned and coordinated scheme.

The first of these issues concerns the remarkable fact that not a single one of the main Serbian monuments in Kosovo appears on the UNESCO’s list of the World Cultural Heritage. The phenomenon is surprising, for at least four of these monuments—Gračanica, Dečani, and Peć, along with the Church of

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<sup>7</sup> Letter dated 16 September 1999, addressed to Mr. Bernard Kouchner, by Dr. Irina Subotić, on behalf of the *Mnemosina* group of experts in Belgrade.

<sup>8</sup> D. Bulatović and A. Milosavljević, “Heritage and War. Cynicism and Necessity,” as yet unpublished paper dated 23 November 1999. I am grateful to D. Bulatović for putting the text of this paper at my disposal.

the Virgin Ljeviška in Prizren—figure prominently in most general books on Byzantine art and architecture. Their absence from the list had some, albeit awkward, justification in the context of former Yugoslavia. Its six republics were allowed the quota of nine monuments and nature parks to be included in the “World Heritage” listing, and those nine had to be “fairly” divided among the six republics with the resulting exclusion of a number of outstanding historical monuments.<sup>9</sup> The subsequent disintegration of Yugoslavia has altered this situation, but its remaining constituents, Serbia and Montenegro, now find themselves politically isolated and boycotted on the world scene. The unfortunate victims of this complex situation appear to be the Kosovo monuments. One of them—the monastic church of Dečani—has been a candidate for the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list since 1995. With all of the formalities, including the written opinions of recognized world experts duly submitted, the case—theoretically at least—is still pending. Should one make any links between this attitude on the part of the UNESCO, and the readiness of its representative, Mr. Colin Kaiser, to exclude summarily the Belgrade preservation-conservation experts from participation in the work in Kosovo, or would such an assessment merely reflect a form of the well-known “Serbian paranoia” regarding such matters?

The second aspect I would like to comment on concerns the emergence of a new historiographical trend regarding Kosovo and the Albanians, whose aims reveal ambitions that should more than just raise the eyebrows of the few concerned Serbs.<sup>10</sup> Cerabegu’s book unfortunately rides the crest of a wave of popular historical revisionism that has played a powerful role in the western propaganda orchestrated in direct relationship to the crises in the Balkans within the last decade.<sup>11</sup>

One is led to the uneasy conclusion that the writers of historical revisionism and the perpetrators of the physical destruction of cultural patrimony could be and, in fact, are partners in the same business. Their ultimate goal is

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<sup>9</sup> *World Heritage in Yugoslavia. UNESCO Natural and Cultural Treasures* (Ljubljana, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> M. Cerabegu, *Distortionism in Historiography. 19th Century Falsifications. A Contribution to the Historical Geography of Kosova* (New York, 1996), overflowing with preposterous ascertations and fabrications that defy any reasonable scholarly debate.

<sup>11</sup> Here we need only refer to the two bestseller (!) works by N. Malcolm, *A Short History of Bosnia* (New York, 1994) and *A Short History of Kosovo* (New York, 1998), each published within a year preceding the NATO military interventions in the respective regional crises. The disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, in general, has resulted in a mass production of books on the subject. The volume of what has been published in the past five years or so by far exceeds everything ever written on Yugoslavia itself during the fifty years of its post-World War Two existence.

the elimination of any and all forms of Serbian historical memory in Kosovo. Given the current course of developments in Kosovo, the perimeters of the New World Order pertaining to matters of national cultures and their patrimony hereby begin to emerge in a new, disconcerting fashion. Will the destruction of the Serbian churches in Kosovo lead toward the emergence of a new, world-wide code on the meaning and function of historical patrimony? Are various distinguished world organizations already on the course toward complying with the so-far unpublicized aims that seem to have already been somehow predetermined? Where do the preachers for the present preservation conventions stand on these matters? Will someone speak up?

Figure 1.