

## **KOSOVO: PROTECTION OF ORTHODOX HERITAGE IN DOUBT**

by Geraldine Fagan and Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 26. November 2001

"This place is more important than we all are, we don't deserve such things," assistant to Abbot Teodosije, Fr Sava Janjic, commented while gazing up at Decani Monastery's hundreds of fourteenth-century frescos on 26 October. Although church representatives recently interviewed by Keston News Service in Yugoslavia insist that swift official protection by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) is essential for the preservation of such sites, a UNESCO representative told Keston on 22 November that no application for protection under the World Heritage Convention had been received.

The majority of pre-sixteenth-century cultural monuments in Kosovo are Orthodox - and although the Serbian Orthodox Church reports that 33 pre-sixteenth-century churches were seriously damaged or destroyed by Albanian extremists after the arrival of NATO troops in June 1999, some 70 remain intact. According to Mirjana Menkovic of the Mnemosyne Centre for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Kosovo and Metohia, the five most important such sites are the thirteenth-century Pec Patriarchate, fourteenth-century Decani Monastery, Gracanica Monastery and the Church of the Mother of God in Ljeviska, Prizren, and the village of Velika Hoca (Hoce e Madhe in Albanian), where four of the 13 churches date from the fourteenth century. She believes they are undoubtedly on a par with Studenica Monastery in Serbia, which was included on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1988.

None of those cited by Menkovic, however, is currently on UNESCO's list, and a May 2001 report aiming "to define schedules for UNESCO interventions, for protection and restoration of the cultural heritage" of the province includes Orthodox sites in just two of its ten proposed restoration/rehabilitation projects. Speaking to Keston on 24 October in Belgrade, Menkovic called this report "shameless", while Fr Sava thought that it indicated UNESCO to be "an organisation working under political influence".

In the report, a copy of which has been obtained by Keston, its author, architectural adviser Carlo Blasi, informs UNESCO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colin Kaiser, that he has visited "all main sites and monuments" in Kosovo (some 40 are on his list), among them just six Orthodox sites - the five cited by Menkovic and the "nice" eighteenth-century Church of St George in Prizren. The two restoration/rehabilitation projects involving Orthodox sites propose allocation of 500,000 deutschmarks (225,000 US dollars or 160,000 UK pounds) to Decani Monastery and a total of 150,000 deutschmarks (68,000 US dollars or 48,000 UK pounds) to four churches in the village of Velika Hoca (it is not specified which out of St John, St Nicholas, St Luke, St Stephen and St Triphan). By contrast, four of the nine mosques visited by Blasi (ranging from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries) are proposed allocation of individual restoration projects. Gracanica, Pec Patriarchate and the Church of the Mother of God in Ljeviska are absent from the project list, as are dozens of other early medieval Orthodox sites.

Although purportedly a scientific document, the report is frequently unscholarly in its evaluations. As "project background and justification" for the restoration of Sinan Pasha Mosque (built 1615, although this detail is not cited) for example, the following

is offered: "[The mosque] is situated on a rocky hill in the centre of the city and it is certainly one of the most evocative monuments in Kosovo. It is entirely made of cut stone. Steep and evocative stairs lead to the entrance. The external portico does not exist anymore, it probably collapsed long [sic] time ago. The mosque needs a complete restoration."

Blasi's report also appears inconsistent. It argues that "places and monuments to which UNESCO intervention now seems inappropriate were not included, such as buildings completely destroyed and ones already under restoration." Decani's mosque, however - given in the report as being eighteenth-century but by "Serbian Barbarities Against Islamic Monuments in Kosova", a 2000 publication produced by Kosovo's Islamic community, as being built in 1851 - is proposed allocation of 500,000 deutschmarks for restoration. According to "Serbian Barbarities", "the mosque was burnt completely in 1998. Only its ruins have remained." Accompanying photographs confirm that burnt and ruined walls are all that is left of the main building.

While the report argues that restoration of this mosque is important "because of the monument's historical importance and religious reasons," no explanation is given for the non-inclusion of other sites of historical and religious importance, many of which are more ancient and/or in a condition not excluded by the report as ineligible for funding.

Interviewed by Keston on 16 November, Andreas Szolgyemi, adviser to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on religious issues in Kosovo and now in Hungary approaching the end of a mandatory six months' sabbatical, said that he had contacted UNESCO about protection of religious sites in spring 2000, but "they were very, very uninterested".

Speaking to Keston by telephone from Paris on 22 November, Horst Goedicke, the chairman of UNESCO's Intersectoral Working Group on south-east Europe, said that he was not aware of the report by Carlo Blasi, who, he stressed, was not a UNESCO staff member. A UNESCO fact-finding mission would visit Kosovo within the next three months, said Goedicke, commenting that "the burning issue there is the Orthodox churches".

Regarding the possibility of protection of such sites, Goedicke explained that UNESCO itself does not propose their inclusion on the organisation's World Heritage List: "The initiative to put sites on the World Heritage List must emanate from the national government on whose territory the site is located." The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) would not be the body to do this, he said, since it would involve an "extensive interpretation" of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 of June 1999, which gave them executive mandate in Kosovo following the civil war. Rather, he said, it was the responsibility of the Yugoslav government, but UNESCO had to date not received any such request from them. The only other possibility, he said, would be if Kosovo's newly-elected leader Ibrahim Rugova "took it upon himself - but that's wishful thinking." (END)