

The Holy Virgin of Ljeviska, Bogdorica Ljeviska

Territory:
KOSOVO/UNMIK

Name of the organisation
compiling the information:
Institute for the Protection of Cultural
Monuments of Pristina,

Republic institute for Protection of
Monuments, "Mnemosine "Center for
Protection of Natural and Cultural Heritage

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<u>Name and address of building(s) or site:</u>	THE HOLY VIRGIN OF LJEVISKA, BOGDORICA LJEVISKA, Prizren
<u>Inventory reference number(s):</u>	sk 1369 / n.v.352/48
<u>Building type:</u> Church	Historical architectural monument, Orthodox
<u>Main date(s):</u>	1306/1307
<u>Current use(s):</u>	Used to be in regular use and accessible to organised and scheduled visiting tours (until 17 March 2004).

Significance:

The Holy Virgin of Ljeviska is the oldest church of the mediaeval town of Prizren. Also known as St. Premtja, Bogorodica Ljevishka, Xhuma Xhamia, Xhamia Atik and Fet-hije, is one of the most interesting monuments in Pristina and in Kosovo.

Historical data from the time of the Byzantine rule confirms the continuity of life in Prizren. The first document to offer a testimony to this is the charter of the Emperor Basil II, issued in 1019, which defined the jurisdiction of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, mentioning, in this context, Prizren. This is an important source because it gives us the information that at that time Prizren was the seat of the bishopric. Remains of the contemporary cathedral were discovered under the present church, which was restored by the Serbian king Milutin in 1306/1307. The earlier, Byzantine, basilica was also founded on remains of an even older, Early Christian church. However, the history of that church building is even more complex, since one more building stage, dating from the 13th century, can be recognized. It

has been dated back to the times of Stephen Prvovenčani and brought into relation with the church reform conducted by Archbishop Sava I.

The fact that Prizren became one of the most important towns in mediaeval Serbia in the beginning, and one of the capitals of the Empire about the middle of the 14th century, is important for the history of the cathedral of Prizren. The progress of the city lasted less than seven decades. The importance of Prizren diminished after the fall of the Empire. It was occupied by the Turkish army in 1455. The church of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviska was probably deserted either right after the migration under Arsenije Čarnojević, or after the departure of Arsenije [akabenta, in 1737, at the latest. Soon after that, but before 1756, it was turned into a mosque. On that occasion a minaret was built on its belfry, while in the interior of the church an important element supporting the dome was torn down in order to make room for a mihrab. The 14th century frescoes were beaten with hammer and covered with mortar. All the facades of the church were also coated with mortar.

After the liberation of Prizren in 1912, the Holy Virgin of Ljeviska was turned into a Christian church once again. In 1923, the minaret was torn down. However, thorough research and restoration works were undertaken as late as the 1950s (between 1950 and 1953).

Research and restoration works

Important data about the history of Prizren and the church of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviška were recorded by travel-writers and researchers of Serbian history in the 19th century. However, the first scientific researches dealing with it were undertaken as late as the first decades of the 20th century. Miloje Vasić was one of the first scholars to deal with the church. He tried to throw light to the personage of the Prizren bishop Damjan. Numerous researchers recorded inscriptions referring to the bishopric of Prizren that could be found in the church in the old manuscripts. The research conducted by Slobodan Nenadović, undertaken between 1950 and 1953, was a significant contribution to our knowledge about the endowment of king Milutin in Prizren. At the same time, paintings conservators Milan Lađević and Zdenka and Branislav Živković discovered the frescoes in the interior of the church. The narthex to the nave was replaced by a solid wall, while the sanctuary was covered by a calotte. The central apse was also remodelled. Buttresses attached to the pillars - on the side facing the aisles - belong to this building stage. Aisles that were still in use were lower than the central five-domed structure. Together with the restored narthex, they made an ambulatory that encompassed three sides of the central unit. Two-story exonarthex with a high belfry erected in the place of the former portico, contributed to the aesthetic splendour of the building. The ground-floor of the exonarthex was designed as an open porch covered with groin vaults. The first floor houses two side chapels, on the north and the south side, respectively. The bells and the catechumene on the upper floor of the narthex, above the wooden floor construction are accessed from the central section. The catechumene has a biforine window open towards the nave and a wide aperture towards the belfry. The belfry has two floors higher than the exonarthex. The top of the uppermost one is finished in a calotte. Although the present appearance of the church was the result of gradual changes, its facades and their masonry work, despite certain details, look as a harmonious whole. Facades are articulated by sometimes stepped pilasters surmounted by blind arches. They are built in the Byzantine technique with the alternating courses of brick and stone, organized in patterned bond. Various geometric shapes can be seen on the facades. Dogtooth cornices were also made of brick. Terracotta elements can be seen around the arches of the windows, niches and the arches of the cubic bases on which small domes were mounted, on the gables and elsewhere. The inscriptions made in relief, with toned mortar fillings between the letters belong to the same style of decoration.

As it was recorded in an inscription on the south transverse arch in the exonarthex, the 14th century remodelling of the church was entrusted to the masters Nicholas and Astrapas. When the works were begun, bishop Damjan was the head of the Bishopric of Prizren. However, the greatest part of the campaign was carried out owing to the efforts of his successor, bishop Sava III. Both of them are mentioned together with king Milutin, in the inscription on the outer wall of the altar apse.

The interior of the church used to be covered with frescoes in its entirety. Only ca. 2000 m² is preserved. The earliest preserved frescoes are dated in the 3rd decade of the 13th century: these are the parts of the scenes of the Miracles of Christ and Virgin Eleousa with Christ the Sustainer. The iconographic and morphological features indicate that these paintings are the work of a local Balkan workshop keeping to tradition of the Comnene style. Scholars relate them to the frescoes in the church of St Nicholas in Studenica. Interest in narration, as opposed to monumentality and pompous tone preferred in the court workshops, was the distinctive feature of these paintings. All the other preserved frescoes are the work of a group of painters, led by master Astrapa. They are painted in the period between 1307 and 1313. Despite the fact that during Ottoman rule the church was turned into a mosque and that numerous frescoes were completely destroyed or picked in order to provide better adhesion between the wall and the new coat of mortar, almost a third of the entire fresco decoration dating from the time of king Milutin, uncovered during the conservation campaign between 1950 and 1953, has been preserved. The exquisite quality of paintings and their extraordinary iconography make this remaining part an important source for the study of the Serbian mediaeval painting. After several decades of research in the iconology of these frescoes, crowned by the abovementioned monograph by Draga Panić and Gordana Babić, fresco decoration of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviška is highly valued. A group of painters led by Astrapa managed to create an extraordinary assemblage of frescoes, in which the qualities of the best monumental painting of the 13th century meet with the tendencies induced by the court workshops in the 14th century. The iconography of these frescoes indicates that the painters and their advisers were familiar with theology. The harmony and sense of the whole were not affected by the fact that differences in skill and approach could come into relief.

Categories of significance:

Of outstanding international importance

#Categories of ownership or interest:

One of the most important and highly respected Christian temples in the Kosovo region. Widely known as a church of extraordinary artistic value.

Documentation and bibliographic references:

Technical documentation, description and photographic records were prepared by the Institute for Protection of Monuments of Pristina, over different periods of time. The documentation is available at the Institute. Assessment reports on the existing situation have been prepared by UNESCO and by the Council of Europe / European Commission.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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2. S. Nenadović, Bogorodica Ljeviška, Beograd 1963.
3. D. Panić, G. Babić, Bogorodica Ljeviška. Beograd, 1988.
4. M. Ivanović, Crkveni spomenici XIII-XX veka, Zadužbine Kosova, Prizren - Beograd 1987, 71-88.
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Condition:

Very bad - structural failure and instability; loss of roof covering; major internal deterioration; major fire or disaster affecting most of the building.

Roof more than 30% damage, with significant damage to walls, but can be repaired.

Risk:

Immediate risk of further rapid deterioration or loss of fabric,

Condition risk:

Immediate risk of further rapid deterioration or loss of fabric; no solution agreed

Technical assessment and costing:

Technical assessments have not yet been carried out.

Ownership:

Serbian Orthodox Church

Occupation:

The Church was in regular use until 17 March 2004 when it was evacuated and demolished.

Management:

The Serbian Orthodox Church, Diocese of Raska and Prizren.

Summary:

High priority. It is a major historical and religious monument and Orthodox Church in Prizren, under very high risk of being demolished, and further rapid deterioration. The wall paintings have been particularly endangered by fire.

Sign. and date:

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Fikret Tikvesh, ida

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Prizren

11.03.2004

updated May 2004