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## **MATEIČ MONASTERY: A PLACE OF CULTURAL MEMORY IN URGENT NEED OF CONSERVATION**

**Abstract:** The Church of the Holy Mother of God in Mateič is an architectural gem blending influences from various churches. However, the church has suffered significant damage due to conflicts, and urgent appeals for restoration and preservation have been made. Despite the site's cultural and historical significance, it has been neglected for a long time. The site's restoration is crucial not only for North Macedonia and the region but also for the world's cultural heritage, and its nomination for UNESCO World Heritage status is a vital step in its preservation.

**Keywords:** Church of the Holy Mother of God, Mateič Monastery, cultural heritage, conflict damage, restoration, preservation, neglected site, UNESCO World Heritage site .

The Church of the Holy Mother of God in Mateič Monastery (also known as the Žegligovo Monastery or Matejče Monastery; fig.1, 2) is an important cultural heritage site located in the historical area of Žegligovo, in the Republic of North Macedonia. For centuries, it has been a spiritual and cultural center of the region, bearing witness to the rich history and traditions (fig.3).<sup>1</sup> However, the monastery and its Church of the Holy Mother of God suffered significant damage during the conflicts that occurred in 2001, caused by the Albanian para-

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<sup>1</sup> К. Балабанов – А. Николовски – Д. Корнаков, *Споменици на културата на Македонија*, Скопје 1980, 82 – 83. The name Mateič / Matejče originates from the Serbian word “Mati,” meaning “Mother,” which refers to the Mother of God. М. Јакимовска Тошиќ, Поглед врз историското минато на манастирот “Св. Богородица” – Матејче, *Корени : списание за литература, култура, граѓански прашања и наука* = *Rrënjët : revistë për literaturë, kulturë për çështje e çytetare dhe shkenc* = *Корени : часопис за литература, културу, граѓанска питања и науку* = *Darhia : patrin e literaturaki, kulturaki, dizutne phushiba thaj nauka* = *Zërësinji : fëmildë ti literaturë, kulturë, antribër-ë-bëanatorlor shi shtintsë* = *Kökler : edebujat kultür, vatandaş, haklari ve bilim dergisi* = *Roots : review for literature, culture, civil affairs and science* 2.2, бр.5 (2003), 649-664; Е. Димитрова, *Манастир Матејче*, Скопје 2002; Е. Димитрова, *Црквата Света Богородица – Матејче*, Скопје 2017.



Fig.1. The Church of the Holy Mother of God, Mateič, view from the west, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.1. Богородичина црква, Матеич, изглед са западне стране: фото Јасмина С. Ћирић

military National Liberation Army.<sup>2</sup> Despite the urgent appeals of specialists and public figures for the restoration of this important cultural site, its preservation has been neglected for a long time (figs.4, 5).

On May 3, 2023, exactly twenty-two years will have passed since the devastating damages were caused to the Church of the Holy Mother of God. This has led to concerns among experts and scholars about the state of the site and the urgent need for restoration and preservation.<sup>3</sup>

Administratively located in the Municipality of Lipkovo, the Mateič is a unique area. The surrounding area boasts lush vegetation, spring water, and seemingly untouched nature. However, the sight of ruins visible on the road leading to the monastery somewhat disturbs this idyllic image. Within the mon-

<sup>2</sup> J. D. Kila, *Heritage Under Siege: Military Implementation of Cultural Property Protection Following the 1954 Hague Convention*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2012, 98.

<sup>3</sup> Detailed explanations about the cultural heritage of Eastern Europe are available on the Cultural Heritage Map of Princeton University. J. S. Ćirić, “Endangered Cultural Heritage: Mateič Monastery,” in *Mapping Eastern Europe*, edited by M. A. Rossi and A. I. Sullivan, accessed December 03, 2022, <https://mappingeasterneurope.princeton.edu/item/endangered-cultural-heritage-mateic-monastery.html>.



Fig.2. The Church of the Holy Mother of God, Mateič, view from the south, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.2. Богородичина црква, Матеич, изглед са јужне стране, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

astery complex, the ruins of auxiliary buildings dominate the landscape, followed by a magnificent and imposing church that exudes sublime peace, leaving every visitor in awe. The experience is further enhanced by a deep spiritual silence and a unique, unrepeatable view.

These ‘magnificent ruins which rise alone’ were noticed by Nikolaj Okunjev, a prominent Byzantinist, scholar who wrote one of the most insightful studies about this monastery.<sup>4</sup>

Although founded in the 11th century, as evidenced by inscriptions in Byzantine Greek dating back to the reign of Isaac Comnenus (r. 1057 – 1059), the monastery became known as an imperial endowment dedicated to the Holy Mother of God in the heart of the Nemanjić dynasty’s sacred land. The church of the Mother of God of the Black Mountain (Skopska Crna Gora), which is mentioned in the chrysobull of King Uroš II Milutin issued for the St. George Gorg monastery near Skoplje, is precisely the church referred to. According to

<sup>4</sup> Н. Л. Окуњев, „Стари српски живопис и његови споменици у ближој околини Скопља“, Црква и живот II, 1-2 (1923), 89 – 94



Fig.3. Condition of the Church of the Holy Mother of God, year 1930, photo: Đurđe Bošković

Сл.3. Стање Богородичине црква 1930.године, фото: Ђурђе Бошковић

the biography of Emperor Stefan Uroš V written by Patriarch Pajsije, Emperor Stefan Uroš IV Dušan began constructing the Church of the Assumption in its place, and Empress Jelena and her son Stefan Uroš V completed it around 1357.<sup>5</sup>

The colossal church in Mateič is a characteristic achievement of Serbian and Late Byzantine architecture, evident in its peculiar architectural features. The interior space of the church follows the invigorated idea of an inscribed cross with five domes, marking a significant development in Serbian medieval architecture of the first half of the 14th century. As the last church built in this style, the church in Mateič represents a culmination of the inscribed cross design. The main dome is circular inside and twelve-sided on the outside, boasting a larger diameter than the dome in Visoki Dečani (fig.6, 7). The architectural traditions of Constantinople and Thessaloniki are restored and restructured within the church in Mateič. The protomagister's vision of uniform masonry structure is evident, with bricks serving as supplementary materials except in the upper constructions. Here, the brick ornamentation becomes a symbol of the structure's spiritual significance, elevating the building beyond its utilitarian purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, the church in Mateič is an exceptional example of Late Byzantine architecture, showcasing a harmonious blend of ancient and medieval building

<sup>5</sup> Гласник СУД V, 218 – 219; E. Dimitrova, "On the new dating of the Fresko Ensemble of the Church of the Holy Virgin in Matejč", *Balkanoslavica* 30 / 31 (2002), 95 – 110;

<sup>6</sup> В. Кораћ, *Споменици монументалне српске архитектуре XIV века у Повардарју*, Београд 2003, 219, 239, 247; Ј.С. Ђирић, "Четири српске средњовековне цркве у околини Скопља: архитектура и проблеми очувања културног наслеђа", *Гласник: Службени лист Српске Православне Цркве, Година С, број 6*, Београд, јун 2020, 309- 316.



Fig.4. Interior of the Church of the Holy Mother in Mateič, visible damages, photo: Jasmina Zisovska

Сл.4. Унутрашњост Богородичине цркве у Матеичу, видљива оштећења, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.5. Damages inside of the apse, eastern part of the church, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.5. Оштећења олтарског простора, источни део храма, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

techniques, all serving to elevate its spiritual significance. Its impressive size, unique design, and exquisite brick ornamentation make it a cultural treasure, a testament to the beauty and grandeur of medieval Serbian architecture (fig.8).

The west façade of the Church in Matejče boasts an impressive and striking „exterior“ image, highlighted by the motif of the triumphal arch. The central arch stands out with its width and height, surpassing the side arches on the façade. On either side of the central portal, niches with a captivating geometric ornament made of diagonally crossed bricks adorn the façade, a motif common in the architecture of the time. This ornament finds a parallel in the façade of the church of St. Sophia, where a similar ornament can be found in every other niche.<sup>7</sup> The same ornament can also be seen on the gable surface of the east

<sup>7</sup> V. Korać, „Sveta Sofija u Ohridu. Prostor, struktura, oblici – izvori”, *Zograf* 32 (2008), 29 –35 (with bibliography); J. S. Ćirić, „Writing in Light”: Same as Different at the West Façade of St. Sophia Church in Ohrid, *Srpski jezik, književnost, umetnost* 3, prir. V. Kanački, S. Pajić, Kragujevac 2013, 295–304.





Fig.6. Details of the central dome of Mateič;; photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.6. Детаљ централне куполе, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

facade of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki and at the western façade of the church of the Mother of God Zahumska in Ohrid, as well as on the southeastern side of the apse and the southern façade of the church in Ljuboten.<sup>8</sup>

This type of ornamentation can be traced back to ancient Greek and Roman architecture, where diagonal brickwork was used to create elaborate patterns and designs. The technique continued to be used throughout the Byzantine period and was adopted by medieval Serbian and Byzantine architects, who used it to embellish the exteriors of their churches.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of the Church of the Holy Mother of God in Mateič, the use of this ornamental technique emphasizes the importance of the building and serves as a testament to the skill and creativity of its builders. The church's façade is a testament to the beauty and complexity of medieval architecture of Serbian lands, and it continues to inspire specialists to this day.

The wide altar area of the Church of the Holy Mother of God in Mateič suggests that it was designed to accommodate complex and developed liturgical needs. The interior of the church is dominated by a trivilon, a three-arched passage between the small narthex and the nave, which emphasizes the triumphant

<sup>8</sup> M.L. Rautman, *The Church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki: a Study in Early Palaeologian Architecture*, UMI 8417210, Ann Arbor MI, 1984, 281sq ; B. Kopaň, *Споменици монументалне српске архитектуре XIV в. у Повардарју*, Београд, 2003, 243–258; J. S. Ćirić, “Décryptage du mur : l’Arbre de Vie dans l’architecture byzantine tardive”, *Collection of Works „Spaces of Memory: Art, Architecture and Heritage*, ed. A. Kadijević, Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade 2012, 19 – 31; *eadem*, “Brick Substance at Zaum Church in Ohrid”, *Patrimonium.MK*, Year 6, №11, 2013, 99–109.

<sup>9</sup> S. Ćurčić, “Articulation of Church Facades During the First Half of the Fourteenth Century”, *Vizantijska umetnost početkom XIV veka*, ed. S. Petković, Belgrade, 1978, 17–27; G. Velenis, “Building Techniques and External Decoration During the 14th Century in Macedonia”, *L’art de Thessalonique et des pays balquaniques et les courants spirituels au XIVe siècle*, ed. R. Samardžić, Belgrade, 1987, 95–10; S. Ćurčić, “The Role of Late Byzantine Thessaloniki in Church Architecture in the Balkans”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 57 (2003), 65–84; *Idem*, “The Epirote Input in the Architecture of Byzantine Macedonia and of Serbia Around 1300”, *Αφείρομα στον ακαδημικού Παναγιώτη Λ. Βοκοτοπούλου*, Αθήνα, 2015, 127–140.



Fig.7. Central dome of Mateič, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić  
Сл.7. Централна купола Матеича, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.8. The church of the Holy Mother of God, view from the east side, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл. 8. Богородичина црква у Матеичу, изглед са источне стране, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.9. Ktetorial composition, Emperor Stefan Uroš V and Empress consort Jelena, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.9. Кгиторска композиција, цар Стефан Урош V и Царица Јелена, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић





Fig.10. Portrait of Emperor Stefan Uroš IV Dušan, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić  
Сл.10. Портрет Цара Стефана Уроша Душана, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

context of this building. The two strong pillars, which have a circular cross-section, support cubic capitals decorated at the corners with stylized human and animal heads, and bent leaves.<sup>10</sup>

The portals of the Church in Mateič maintain the Byzantine tradition of openings while also reflecting the style popularized during the reign of King Milutin. The significance of the door situated in the central axis of the west facade extends beyond its functional role as an entryway, serving as a unifying element within the spatial totality of the Byzantine church, symbolizing the Logos. The door on the western side embody the concept of *limen*, as crossing this threshold results in a state of liminality for the believer upon entering the sacred precincts of the church. Traversing the doors of a medieval church becomes a visual journey, as the faithful are urged to direct their gaze towards the niches embedded within the wall surfaces. This visual perception engenders a liminal state within the believer, one which is in alignment with the visual stimuli presented by the intricate ornamentation. Upon emerging from the church and returning to the mundane world, the believer's state of being is permanently transformed.<sup>11</sup>

The architectural concept of the church in Mateič was clearly envisioned based on the Prizren endowment of Emperor Dušan, Holy Archangels Monastery (Kosovo and Metohija, Republic of Serbia). The foundation of the church, a three-partite altar space, a nave with a dominant dome and four small domes in the corners were imagined in an identical way. The inclusion of the Prizren narthex in a closed space was a novelty in Mateič. By synthesizing appropriate architectural details from the monastery of Pantocrator in Constantinople, where Emperor Stefan Uroš IV Dušan spent his childhood, the founders showed not only continuation of the tradition but also of the memory of Constantinople. Above the southern portal, an oversized figure of Christ Pantocrator is shown next to the khetorial composition, emphasizing the high courtly atmosphere of the architecture and interior of this church. Mateič's painting also demonstrates a continuation of the painting traditions found in the endowments of King Milutin. The Church of the Mother of God in Mateič and the Church of King Milutin at Staro Nagoričino share not only a visual similarity but also a deeper ideological connection. They were both commissioned by powerful rulers who sought to establish their legitimacy as God's chosen leader of the Serbian State.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> В. Кораћ, *Споменици монументалне српске архитектуре XIV в. у Повардарју*, Београд, 2003, 219, 239.

<sup>11</sup> A. Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, Paris 1909. Applied to the space of a medieval church. cf. G. Gerov, "The iconography of the liminality: the symbolical vertical in the sacred space of the church entrance", *Ierotopija: issledovanie sakral'nyh prostranstv. Materialy meždunarodnogo simpoziuma*, ed. A. M. Lidov, Moskva 2004, 110-111; Idem, "The Narthex as Desert: The Symbolism of the Entrance Space in Orthodox Church Buildings", *Ritual and Art: Byzantine essays for Christopher Walter*, ed. P. Armstrong, London 2006, 144 – 159.

<sup>12</sup> G. Bošković, *Deux églises de Milutin: Staro Nagoricino et Gracanica*, L'art byzantin chez les Slaves. Les Balkans, Premier recueil dédié à la mémoire de Théodore Uspenskij, Paris 1930, 197 – 206; Б. Тодић, *Старо Нагорчино*, Београд 1993, 127-138; Eadem, *The new Constantine in Serbian Medieval Hagiography*, in: XXe Congrès international d'études byzantines, Paris 2001, Préactes III, Communications libres, 254.

The inclusion of the genealogical tree of the Komnenean dynasty in the Church of the Holy Mother of God in Mateič reinforces the idea of the Serbian dynasty being a branch of the Byzantine emperors. It serves as a visual representation of the royal family's connection to the Byzantine Empire, emphasizing their legitimacy as rulers of the Serbian land.<sup>13</sup> The founder's composition featuring Empress consort Jelena and Uroš V holding a model of the church, as well as Emperor Dušan, is similarly significant in reinforcing the idea of the royal family's connection to God and the legitimacy of their rule (fig.9, 10). This composition places the rulers at the center of the colossal mausoleum's narrative, reflecting the imperial character, underscoring their role as the ktetors of the church and their commitment to the Orthodox faith.<sup>14</sup>

The Church of the Holy Mother of God holds a special place in cultural memory, not only for its stunning architectural and monumental paintings, but also for its association with a number of medieval composers. One such composer was Isaija Sribin, a renowned hymnographer who created the composition „Polijelej Servikos“ while residing at the monastery.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Vladislav Gramatik oversaw transcription activities at Mateič, compiling a „Collection“ in Mlado Nagoričino from 1456 to 1457, and another in 1479 that remains at Rila Monastery in Bulgaria. Gramatik himself called Mateič his „dwelling (apartment) and residence“ in 1472/1473 and 1479.<sup>16</sup> Despite periodic restoration work,<sup>17</sup> the monastery's fortunes declined over time. Today, the monastery suffers from both environmental factors and political events; it was abandoned by its monks following the church schism of 1967.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Н. Л. Окуњев, *Грађа за историју српске уметности 2. Црква Свете Богородице – Матеич*, Гласник Скопског Научног Друштва VII-VIII, Скопље 1930, 109; С. Радојчић, *Портрети српских владара у средњем веку*, 59; Е. Димитрова, *Манастир Матејче*, Скопје 2002, 185 – 189; eadem, *On the new dating of the fresco ensemble of the church of the Holy Virgin in Matejče*, *Balkanoslavica* 30-31, Prilep 2002, 95-103; eadem, *Ktitorska kompozicija i novo datovanje živopisa u crkvi Svete Bogorodice u Mateiču*, *Zograf* 29, Beograd 2002-2003, 181-190.

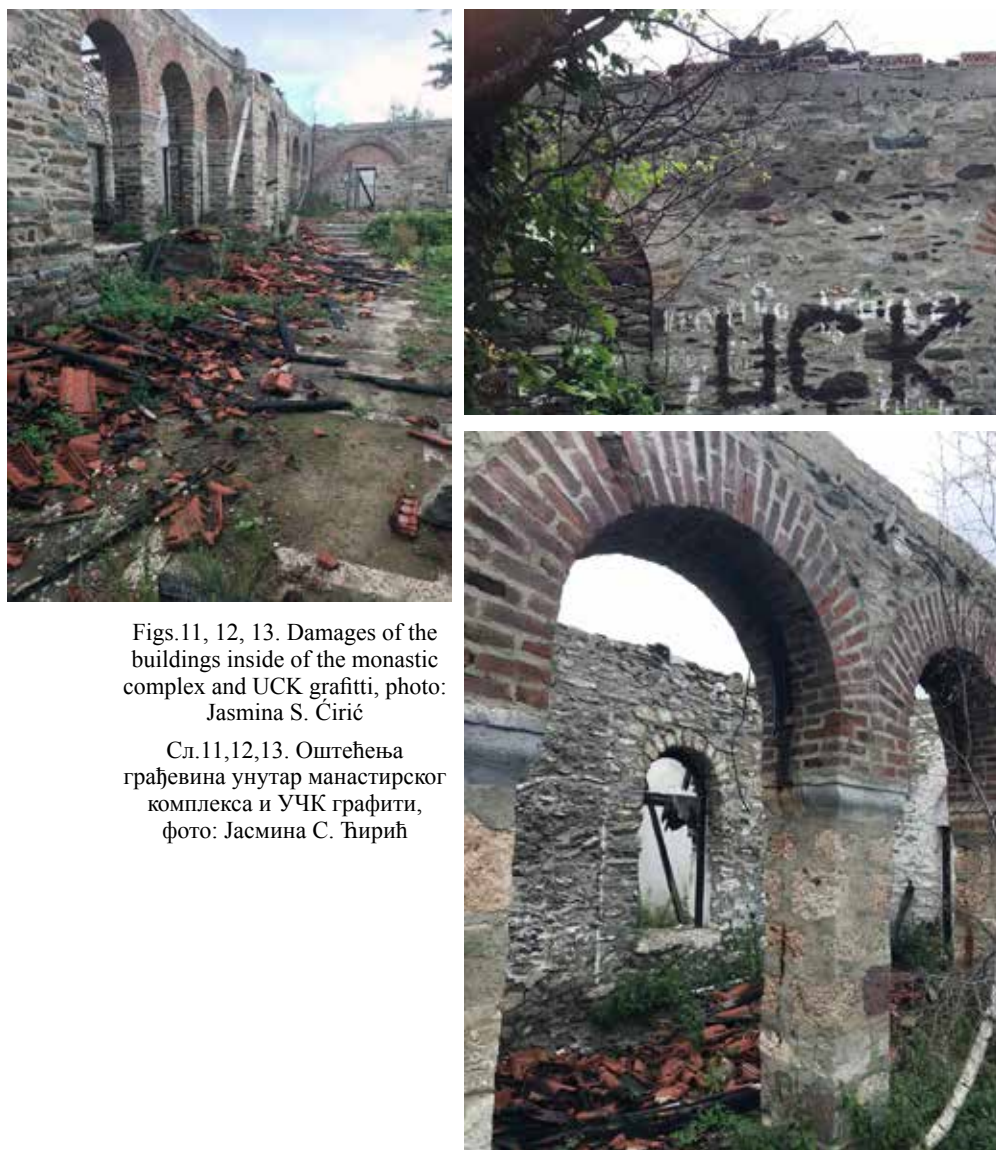
<sup>14</sup> С. Радојчић, *Портрети српских владара у средњем веку*, Скопље 1934, 59; Е. Димитрова, *Манастир Матејче*, Скопје 2002, 185-190; Eadem, *On the New Dating of the Fresco Ensemble of the Church of the Holy Virgin in Matejče*, *Balkanoslavica* 30-31 (2002), 95-103; Е. Димитрова, „О ктиторској композицији и новом датовању фресака у цркви Свете Богородице у Матеичу“, *Зограф* 28 (2003), 181-190; Eadem, *The Church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče*, Skopje 2016, 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> D. H. Touliatos-Banker, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Musical Manuscript Collection of the National Library of Greece: Byzantine Chant and Other Music Repertory Recovered*, Farnham 2010, 125.

<sup>16</sup> Д. М. Калезић, *Енциклопедија православља, т. 2*, Београд 2002, 1186; М. Веселиновић – Хофман, *Историја српске музике: српска музика и европско музичко наслеђе*, Београд 2007, 304.

<sup>17</sup> Ј. Зисовска, *Црквата „Св. Богородица манастир Матејче, Беседа : списание за култура и уметност Год. 15, бр. 42 (1988), 64-72*; Т. Станишева, *Истражувачки работи на фрескоживописот од црквата св. Благовештение Богородично, с. Матејче*, *Културно наследство = Patrimone culturel* 14 – 15 / 1987-1888 (1990), 91-[101].

<sup>18</sup> The following sources provide different insights into the historical and political context of the schism in the Macedonian Orthodox Church: С. Димевски, *Историја на Македонската Православна Црква*, Скопје 1989; П. Пузовић, *Раскол у Српској*



Figs.11, 12, 13. Damages of the buildings inside of the monastic complex and UCK graffiti, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.11,12,13. Оштећења грађевина унутар манастирског комплекса и УЧК графити, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

православној цркви - македонско црквено питање, Београд 1997; J. Zečević Božić, Autokephalieerklärung der Makedonischen Orthodoxen Kirche. Würzburg: 1994; M. Nikolić – D.Dimitrijević, “Macedonian Orthodox Church” (MOC) in Former Yugoslav State. Politics and Religion Journal 7 (2013), 193–215; I. Čairović, “The role of vicar bishop Dositaj (Stojković) at the beginning of the church schism in Macedonia in 1958”, *Istorija 20. veka* 36 (2018), 168–180; D. Šljivić – N. Živković, “Self-Ruled and Self-Consecrated Ecclesiastic Schism as a Nation-Building Instrument in the Orthodox Countries of South Eastern Europe”, *For God and Country: Essays on Religion and Nationalism*, ed. P. C. Mentzel, Basel 2020, 99–105; Д. Д. Валаванидис, Истина о патријарху Герману и питање тзв.



In May 2001, during war conflicts between regular government military police forces in Skopje and paramilitary groups of rebel Albanian extremists, the Church of the Holy Mother of God in Mateič was turned into a terrorist headquarters and arsenal storage site.<sup>19</sup> The endowment of Empress Jelena and Emperor Uroš V was severely damaged, and the residence that had served as a children's resort years earlier was destroyed. The church suffered serious devastation, including damage to the frescoes, broken doors and windows, and a leaking roof. Albanian terrorists also tortured and mistreated a part of the local Orthodox Serbian population from Mateič, which is now ethnically cleansed of the Orthodox population (fig. 11, 12, 13).

Surviving Serbs and Macedonians from the village of Mateič were forced to leave their centuries-old homes and go to „temporary displacement“ in collective centers. Their temporary displacement became permanent, and about 130 houses were abandoned, of which about forty households owned their properties. After lawsuits, the Orthodox population of Mateič received certain compensation, but their homes and entire households with complete property, on which they had been for centuries, were taken away from them. It is estimated that the exiled Serbs and Macedonians were successfully represented before the court by lawyer Siniša Stanković from Kumanovo. The court documentation unequivocally proves the usurpation of property, which has been turned into landfills in the meantime.<sup>20</sup>

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Македонске цркве, Београд 2022.

<sup>19</sup> The Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare (National Liberation Army) occupied the monastery, which they used as both their headquarters and arsenal, while they were operating in the country between 2000 and 2001.

<sup>20</sup> The journalist M. Stančić published the article: M. Stančić, *Срби и Македонци тужили Македонију*, *Новости*, 15.01.2004 / M. Stančić, *Serbs and Macedonians have sued Macedonia*, *Novosti* for January 15th 2004. In the article it is said that: “the trial initiated by expelled Serbs and Macedonians from the villages of Matejce and Opae against the Republic of North Macedonia for compensation for material and non-material damage, fear and trauma began at the Kumanovo District Court after several delays. The trauma still persists, as even now, after three years since the end of the armed conflict in the country, hundreds of displaced persons have no real guarantees for returning to their centuries-old homes. In the process called „displaced against the state“, as claimed by the representative of the expelled Orthodox Christians, Kumanovo lawyer Siniša Stanković, 110 lawsuits have been activated so far, in processes led by 11 judges of the mentioned court. Since they were under attack by terrorist gangs, i.e. Albanian paramilitary formations, Serbs and Macedonians from the villages of Matejce, Ropaljce, Opae... left their centuries-old homes on the orders of the then state leadership and took refuge in collective reception centers in Kumanovo and its surroundings. They now demand compensation from the same state for all they have lost and for the suffering they endure, without any hope for a solution that would lead to their safe return. “Those of us who think and strive to return to our properties, on which our houses, stables, and other property were completely destroyed, have no security guarantees from the state for our lives, under constant threats from local and newly arrived Albanians that our heads are not safe on our shoulders if we decide to return. In such circumstances, we have decided to seek our endangered rights to life and lost property, violated health, in court, especially since the state has not been able to fulfill a single alternative demand for us”, says Miroslav Mladenović, a representative of the Committee of displaced Serbs and Macedonians from Matejče.“

<https://www.novosti.rs/%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8/%D0>



Fig. 14. The fresco of St. Apostle Peter with sprayed graffiti, „Diego Armando Maradona; Kupa Uefa,“, photo: Joris D. Kila

Сл.14. Фреска ветог Апостола Петра са оштећењима и исписаним графитом „Диего Армандо Марадона: Купа Уефа“, фото : Јорис Д. Кила

On the eve of Vidovdan in 2001, His Holiness Serbian Patriarch Mr. Pavle sent a letter to Kofi Annan, then UN Secretary General, and Koiciru Matsuri, UNESCO Secretary General, on the occasion of the destruction of Serbian monasteries in Kosovo and Metohija and Skopska Crna Gora.

His Holiness Patriarch Pavle expressed concern about the safety of the Mateič Monastery, situated in the village of the same name, which he claimed was at great risk from Albanian terrorists. He feared that during the conflict between the Macedonian army and terrorist forces, the Orthodox shrine would be mined or bombed.<sup>21</sup> George Robertson, then Secretary General of NATO,

<https://www.icomos.org/public/risk/2001/mace2001.htm>; accessed November 20nd, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Matejce Mission Provisional Report, available at: <https://www.icomos.org/public/risk/2001/mace2001.htm> ; accessed November 20nd, 2022.

„We asked the office of UNESCO in Sarajevo to come and make a new monitoring of the monument. We plan to go and see the church next week. Generally speaking, everyone shows a good will to protect the monument – the local government and the mayor of Lipkovo. Last year we asked OSCE to secure us while we closed the church openings. After the changing of the Constitution and after the Legislation for amnesty we asked for a police unit to be stationed in the monastery, so that the experts can make conservation. Officially, there is no one there, but it is a public secret that the place is not secure by day,

Fig. 15. A sprayed double-headed eagle with the UÇK abbreviation, photo: ICOMOS / Joris D. Kila

Сл.15. Оштећења спрејом од албанских терориста, двоглави орао са скраћеницом УЧК, фото: ИКОМОС / Јорис Д. Кила



acknowledged the cultural and religious importance of the monuments in Kosovo, but there was no such responsibility in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The village of Mateič was destroyed during heavy fighting, with the Orthodox Church remaining undamaged on the outside but with its internal inventory set on fire.<sup>22</sup> Albanian terrorists and extremists destroyed the centuries-old presence and traces of the Orthodox culture in Mateič using dynamite, bombs, mines, tanks, and other weapons. The Macedonian Minister of Culture appealed to the UNESCO Secretary-General regarding the problems of cultural heritage during the conflict, and the ICOMOS Executive Board in Macedonia launched a campaign to save the cultural heritage threatened by armed conflict.<sup>23</sup> The restoration of the suspected damage was financially supported by the Dutch Embassy in Skopje, with the staff of the EU Monitoring Mission also joining in. It was recommended that Macedonian and international experts should undertake treatments.<sup>24</sup> The mission revealed numerous devastations,

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and not to speak how insecure it could be at night“ stated Jovan Kondijanov, at that time the manager of the Institute for protection of the cultural monuments. Statement is published online in the article for Dnevnik, 11.04.2002: Even After the Ending of the Military Clashes a New Vandal Attack on the Church Protected by UNESCO – Dug and Ruined the Frescos in the Monastery in Matejce; <https://archive.ph/8eWlz#selection-527.1-527.20> accessed November 21st, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Online article „Generalni sekretar NATO-a odgovorio Patrijarhu Pavlu: Selo porušeno a crkva u Matejču neoštećena: <http://arhiva.glas-javnosti.rs/arhiva/2001/08/12/srpski/D01081105.shtml>; accessed November 21st, 2022.; check also J. S. Ćirić, “Endangered Cultural Heritage: Mateič Monastery,” *Mapping Eastern Europe*, eds. M. A. Rossi and A. I. Sullivan, accessed December 03, 2022: <https://mappingeasterneurope.princeton.edu/item/endangered-cultural-heritage-mateic-monastery.html>

<sup>23</sup> D. Bumbaru, *Heritage at Risk: ICOMOS World Report 2001/2002 on Monuments and Sites in Danger*, K. G. Saur 2001, 133-135.

<sup>24</sup> The initial report on the state of the Mateič Monastery, which was conducted on July 6-7, 2001, included photographic evidence provided by EU Monitoring Mission. The photos showed that

including damages to frescoes, such as the Virgin Mary with Christ and the fresco of St. Apostle Peter with sprayed graffiti, „Dgego Armando Maradona; Kupa Uefa,“ and a sprayed double-headed eagle with the UÇK abbreviation inside (figs. 14, 15).<sup>25</sup> This sort of iconoclasm and damaging the world cultural heritage raises questions about how armed conflicts and intentional damage to Serbian medieval churches built in endangered zones should be interpreted.<sup>26</sup>

In 2001, the Mateič Monastery in the Republic of Northern Macedonia was reported as being in great danger, with the risk of being bombed or mined in the confrontation between the Macedonian army and terrorist forces. The monastery was considered a treasure and a significant Orthodox landmark, but was under threat from Albanian terrorists belonging to the National Liberation Army, who had destroyed the centuries-old presence and traces of the Orthodox people in Mateic. They had used dynamite, bombs, mines, tanks, and various weapons, acting against the Orthodox cultural heritage that is a part of the European and world heritage.

Despite the partial preservation of frescoes by the National Conservation Center of the Republic of North Macedonia, the Mateič Monastery remains the most endangered of all medieval churches in the Republic of Northern Macedonia. The destruction of lodgings, bell towers, auxiliary monastery rooms, children's resort facilities, kitchen, dining room, and playground are evidence of the rich spiritual and social life that once took place here (figs. 11, 12, 13).

Over time, the condition of the Monastery of the Holy Mother of God in Mateič deteriorated further. The church has been deprived of its status as the House of Salvation, but it still defies time and remains a significant Orthodox holy place. Every September 21, a small number of believers come to celebrate

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the church's roof had been damaged and UCK graffiti was present on some of the mural paintings, though not on the fresco paintings. The report advised against any attempts to touch or remove the graffiti on the mural paintings, as doing so could cause further extensive and irreparable damage to the 14th-century Byzantine murals. The report also recommended that only Macedonian and international experts should be involved in any restoration efforts. However, it was later discovered that the frescos had indeed suffered damage. In September 2001, a fact-finding mission was conducted by experts from the Republic's Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, while members of the UCK were still occupying the site. J.D. Kila, "Iconoclasm in the Orthodox Monastery of Matejce in Macedonia: The Creative Use of Damaged Cultural Property", *Heritage and Identity Issues in Cultural Heritage Protection*, ed. J.D. Kila, J.A. Zeidler, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2012, 98.

<sup>25</sup> Upon closer examination of the graffiti in Matejce, the team observed that some murals had been sprayed with green paint while others had been drawn on with black ink. Tiny fragments lying on the floor were collected as samples from parts of the mural-free wall, and from the wall surface covered with green paint and black ink. The readily available spray can paints are based on two types of binding agents, acrylics, and alkyd. Laboratory tests showed that the green graffiti was likely done with acrylic paint, which was easily removable with acetone and wadding. However, removing the black marker ink used on the painting of St. Peter was a more challenging task due to the direct dissolution of color pigments in the basic acetone liquid, which could cause chromatographic reactions that separate the color pigments. Alcohol was not effective in removing the ink, but ethyl acetate and acetone did the job, although using a gel instead of a liquid was deemed the best option to prevent damage to additional layers during cleaning. J.D. Kila, *op.cit.*, 100–102.

<sup>26</sup> J.D. Kila, *op.cit.*, 25, 102.



the holiday of this Orthodox site despite the broken doors and windows, destroyed frescoes, excavated floor, and moisture due to the leaking roof. Despite the challenges, the church of the Holy Mother of God remains a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the region and the world.<sup>27</sup>

At the end of 2021, the Serbian Cultural Center „SPONA“ from Skoplje published an appeal and request for support for the restoration of the Church of the Holy Mother of God in Matejče, as well as an initiative to nominate the Matejče Monastery for UNESCO's list of endangered world cultural heritage. SPONA highlighted that the need for revitalization had been officially established following additional drastic damage that occurred during 2001, and emphasized the importance of restoring the entire monastery complex.<sup>28</sup> In 2022, the Minister of Culture of the Republic of North Macedonia announced that one million Macedonian denars had been allocated from the funds intended for immovable cultural heritage for preventive interventions in architecture and painting of the church in Matejč. This is a crucial step towards restoring the dignity of this sacred area, a masterpiece of God-inspired work of its founders, and an important cultural heritage site for all humanity. However, the restoration of this cultural heritage site is still a hot spot, and much work needs to be done to ensure its proper preservation.

It is important to note that the preservation of cultural heritage during times of war and conflict is of great importance and is addressed in various international laws and regulations, including the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed

<sup>27</sup> “In the interior of the sanctuaries on the slopes of the Skopje Crna Gora Mountain, the endowments of Emperor Dušan, Queen Jelena, and their son Uroš, dating back to the mid-14th century, the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) vandalized the altar. They even dug on the floor of the altar, trying to find hidden treasure, horrendously „taking pictures“ of the frescoes... Partial restoration of the basic damage was carried out several years ago and that was the end of it. Today, the sanctuary is empty, eerily deserted, without any divine services, and the people visit it only once a year, on the feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God.” Stated professor Viktor Lilčić Adams. Statement was published in the article of M. Stančić, „Serbian sanctuaries without names and protectors“, Novosti November 8th 2015th; <https://www.novosti.rs/%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8/%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B0/%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B6%D0%B5.409.html:575711-%D0%A1%D1%80%D0%BF%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%9A%D0%B5-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B7-%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0> accessed January 12th 2023th.

<sup>28</sup> By nominating the Monastery of Matejče, the Republic of North Macedonia would expand its list of UNESCO sites (..) and it would expand the national list of cultural heritage to the UNESCO list of world cultural heritage.

The Monastery of Matejče (Matejč) is under state protection by Decision No. 37 of February 10, 1953 (issued by the Central Institute for Protection of Cultural Monuments and Natural Rarities in Macedonia - Skopje). <http://srbi.org.mk/apel-i-molba-za-podrsku-obnovi-manastira-uspenja-presvete-bogorodice-u-mateicu-i-inicijativa-za-kandidaturu-manastira-mateic-na-listu-unesko-a-ugrozene-svetske-kulturne-bastine/> accessed November 1st 2023.

Conflict. Unfortunately, these regulations could not be applied during the conflicts that occurred in the Republic of North Macedonia, resulting in damage to important cultural sites such as the church of the Holy Mother of God in Mateič. Despite the numerous appeals of specialists and public figures for the urgent restoration of the site, the preservation has been neglected for a long time.<sup>29</sup>

Advocating for the proper restoration and preservation of cultural heritage sites is essential to protect them from the ravages of war and conflict. The Church of the Holy Mother of God in Mateič is the last preserved imperial endowment of the Nemanjić dynasty, with walls and parts of monumental paintings that attest to the rich cultural heritage of the region and the world. Its restoration is not only important for the specialists and the people of North Macedonia but for all of humanity. Its nomination for UNESCO World Heritage status is a vital step in its preservation.

The disappearance of the church and the devastation of its frescoes would be a tragic loss, eliminating a cultural heritage that should be preserved for posterity. Therefore, it is imperative to prioritize the preservation of cultural heritage and to provide specific evidence of its importance to inspire others to join in this effort.

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*MONASTÈRE DE MATEIČ: UN LIEU DE MÉMOIRE  
 CULTURELLE EN URGENCE DE CONSERVATION*

L'église de la Sainte Mère de Dieu à Mateič présente un concept architectural unique, mélangeant des influences de Staro Nagoričino, Dečani et de l'église des Saints Archanges à Prizren. Malgré sa signification culturelle et historique, l'église de la Sainte Mère de Dieu à Mateič a subi des dommages importants dus aux conflits qui ont eu lieu en 2001. Des appels urgents pour la restauration et la préservation ont été lancés par des spécialistes et des personnalités publiques, mais le site a été négligé pendant longtemps. À l'approche du vingt-deuxième anniversaire des dommages, les préoccupations concernant l'état du site et la nécessité de sa restauration et de sa préservation ont augmenté. Le monastère de Mateič est dédié à Dieu depuis huit siècles et bénéficie d'une végétation luxuriante, d'eau de source et d'une nature apparemment intacte. L'église et les bâtiments auxiliaires ont été laissés en ruines, avec l'église de l'Assomption comme seule structure intacte. La restauration de ce site est cruciale non seulement pour la Macédoine du Nord, mais aussi pour le patrimoine culturel mondial, et sa nomination en tant que site du patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO est une étape vitale dans sa préservation.

<sup>29</sup> "The monastery is protected under law, but after its destruction in 2001 its state gets worse and worse with each passing year. This year the sleeping quarters were burnt down. The new minister Irena Stefanoska determined that the monastery will be one of her priorities" stated Jasmina Zisovska art historian and advisor for International Cooperation from the National Museum Kumanovo. Statement was published online in the article *Culture Ministry declares it will protect what's left of the devastated Matejce monastery*: <https://english.republika.mk/news/culture/culture-ministry-declares-it-will-protect-whats-left-of-the-devastated-matejce-monastery/> Accessed January 13th 2023.

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*МАНАСТИР МАТЕИЧ: МЕСТО КУЛТУРНОГ СЕЋАЊА И ПОТРЕБА  
ЗА ХИТНОМ КОНЗЕРВАЦИЈОМ*

Богородичина црква у Матеичу представља јединствени архитектонски склоп, синтезу цркве у Старом Нагоричину, Дечана и цркве Светих Архангела у Призрену. Упркос њеном културном и историјском значају, Богородичина црква у Матеичу као и целокупан манастирски комплекс претрпели су значајна оштећења у конфликтима који су се десили 2001. године. Стручна јавност упутила је бројна упозорења у вези са неопходношћу рестаурације и одржавањем овог места, међутим, чињенице показују да је ово културно добро предмет занемаривања. Док се приближава двадесет и друга годишњица од оштећења, појачане су и бриге о стању храма и потреби за њеном рестаурацијом и континуираним одржавањем. Док су околни објекти остали у рушевинама, Богородичина црква је једина непоштено оштећена структура. Обнова овог места је од виталног значаја не само за Северну Македонију и регион, већ од значаја за светско културно наслеђе, а његова номинација за статус УНЕСКО-вог светског наслеђа представља корак од прворазредног значаја у његовом одржавању.

