

## MACEDONIA

### Matejce Mission Provisional Report

#### Introduction

Armed conflict in the Republic of Macedonia commenced at the beginning of February 2001; 9 months later, we still have a fragile situation in the country and do not have complete sovereignty of all territory of the Republic of Macedonia. More than 15% of the territory is still not freely accessible.

During this period, Albanian terrorist groups started to fight for the so-called 'more human rights for Macedonian citizens of Albanian origin' and in opposition to the legal forces of the Republic of Macedonia occupied parts of the territory of the country using action that is against international laws.

Many human victims are witness to the unprovoked armed conflict. However, not only human life was and still is in danger – in this tragic event, the cultural heritage of the Republic of Macedonia has been subject to damage and demolition as well. Many elements of this heritage have been used for war purposes, and today remain so used and occupied.

The Macedonian National Committee of ICOMOS has been involved in national and international efforts to prevent further use and damage of cultural heritage in Macedonia for war purposes. The activities undertaken and still planned for the future by ICOMOS Macedonia are the subject of this report.

#### Appeal

After the destruction by terrorist groups of the archaeological sites of Kale Tetovo and the church of St. Atanasie and the occupation of part of the Macedonian territory that contains rich cultural heritage, and particularly after the occupation of the St. Bogorodica Monastery near the village of Matejce, the Minister of Culture, Mrs Ganka Samoilovska-Cvetanova, sent an appeal to the UNESCO Director General concerning the use of cultural heritage in Macedonia for war purposes.

In June 2001, the ICOMOS Macedonia Executive Board decided to initiate a campaign to save cultural heritage endangered by armed conflict. It was proposed to ask the President of ICOMOS, Mr. Michael Petzet, to launch an appeal to save the Monastery at Matejce as one of the most valuable examples of 14<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine architecture and mural paintings – the Monastery was being used as the headquarters, fire place and arsenal of the so-called 'UCK' terrorist group.

#### National and International Contacts

Immediately after the Appeal by Mr. Petzet, an urgent reply was received from the UNESCO Authorities, indicating the possibility of a Mission to Matejce but only after the armed conflict had ceased. The President of ICOMOS Macedonia subsequently sent an urgent message to Mr. Petzet, requesting prompt and vital action to prevent the use and destruction of cultural heritage for war purposes and urging the organisation of an immediate monitoring mission to Matejce Monastery.

Following frequent consultations with Mrs Ganka Samoilovska-Cvetanova, the Minister of Culture, and Mr Jovan Kondijanov, the Acting Director of the State Institute for the protection of cultural Monuments (RZZSK), ICOMOS Macedonia was given approval to use all international contacts and its capacity as an



Cathedral Church of St Atanasie, Lesok village, before destruction

Cathedral Church of St Atanasie, Lesok village, after damage





international NGO in the field of cultural heritage protection to achieve success in the effort to organize a Mission.

Mr. Petzet gave approval for the Mission, and the President of ICOMOS Macedonia, Dr. L. Sumanov, contacted the various heads of missions already established in Macedonia:

- EU Mission: Mr. John Penny (First Counselor to the Head);
- OCSE Mission: Mr. Carlo Ungaro, and Mr. Craig Jenness, successor of Mr. Ungaro;
- EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM): Mr. Jon Roar Strandenes;
- NATO Mission: Mr. Hansjorg Eiff.

ICOMOS Macedonia proposed that a co-ordinating body be immediately established, containing representatives of each of the established Missions, as well as individuals from the Ministry of Culture (Mr. Oliver Sambevski), RZZSK (Mr. Jovan Kondijanov), and ICOMOS Macedonia (Dr. Lazar Sumanov).

The list of Monuments for the urgent Monitoring mission was enlarged and included:

1. Matejce, Kumanovo region:
  - Monastery St. Bogorodica Matejce, near village Matejce;
  - St. Georgi Church, in the village of Matejce.
2. Tetovo region:
  - Arabati Baba Teke, Islamic Monastery of Ottoman architecture, Tetovo;
  - Aladja (Sarena) Mosque, Tetovo;
  - Archaeological site Kale, Tetovo;
  - St. Atanasie Monastery, village Lesok;
  - St. Atanasie Church, near the village Lesok.

Of the two regions, the monitoring mission to Matejce was the most urgent. During July and the beginning of August, Macedonia ICOMOS organised various press conferences, leading to a number of interviews and newspaper articles on Cultural Heritage at Risk. It was proposed that Mr. Leo van Nispen (representing the Blue Shield) visit Macedonia as a member of the expert Monitoring team to visit Matejce Monastery, which was still occupied by an armed terrorist group.

At the time, the situation at Monastery Matejce was monitored only by members of the EU Monitoring Mission (Mr. J. Roar Strandenes) and by Mr. Hansjorg Eiff from the NATO Mission. Their initial report of the state of the Monuments was very short (one phrase) for each, but prepared with no input from cultural heritage professionals.

It was this that led Dr. Sumanov to propose to all Heads of Missions the possibility of establishing special Cultural Heritage Expert teams, units, departments or networks within their organisations as permanent structural bodies. This recommendation was extended to include all countries that have signed the Hague Convention and its 2<sup>nd</sup> Protocol, with the suggestion that such bodies be established in all international contacts in situations of armed conflict – before, during and after such events.

In the initial report (6–7 July 2001) for the Monastery in Matejce, one monitor from EUMM made a colour record of the Church of St. Bogorodica (elevation and interior). These pictures indicated damage to the roof and graffiti of UCK words on the some of the church walls, but not on the fresco paintings. Dr. Sumanov requested that these pictures be provided to UNESCO, ICOMOS, the Ministry of Culture, RZZSK and Macedonia ICOMOS, however we have been told that they are private property and not available for official purposes. However, through Mr. Eiff we have been provided with the photos taken by the NATO Monitors, copies of which have been sent to the ICOMOS secretariat in Paris, to Mr. J.L. Luxen, and to the Ministry of Culture and RZZSK.



Church of St. Bogorodica, Matejce Monastery – burnt iconostasis

Church of St. Bogorodica, Matejce Monastery – graffiti on wall painting





Two disastrous incidents have occurred since the aforementioned events. Following the killing of ten soldiers of the Macedonian Army in a terrorist ambush, the citizens of the City of Prilep reacted to the murder of their countrymen in a riot that resulted in the burning of the Charsi Mosque. The Mosque is a cultural monument from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and an example of Ottoman sacred architecture. Then, on 21 August, terrorists blew up the cathedral Church of the Lesok Monastery. Both events have been condemned by ICOMOS Macedonia and by Macedonian public opinion. One of the results of these events was to put a stop to the progress of the Matejce Monitoring Mission, including the inspection by Mr. Leo van Nispen on behalf of ICOMOS and the Blue Shield. The report prepared by Mr. van Nispen following his visit to Macedonia included among its recommendations that a fact finding mission was still most urgently needed.

### Matejce Mission: Monitoring and Fact-Finding Elements – 19 September 2001

By the beginning of September, the situation had changed and a Mission in Matejce became possible – this was to some extent due to an attempt at ‘good will’ by those who had inflicted the damage on the cultural heritage. There was also a strong indication of intent by the Macedonian Orthodox Church to make a Pilgrim visit to Matejce Monastery on 21 September, the holy day of St. Bogorodica, by the Macedonian citizens of the Christian Orthodox Faith.

Because of the latter decision, a somewhat surprising proposal was presented. Knowing that considerable damage had taken place at the Monastery, including graffiti on the mural paintings, Dr. Sumanov and Mr. Jovan Kondijanov were invited through the Netherlands Embassy authorities (and according to a message from relevant international and national bodies) to engage the efforts of their two organisations in urgent cleaning of the church and the repair of damaged mural paintings, over the three days before the proposed Pilgrim mission. Dr. Sumanov and Mr. Kandijanov responded on behalf of their organisations with a number of proposals, including:

- their readiness to make an expert monitoring/survey mission of the St. Bogorodica Monastery, including international experts, to be used as a base for preparing a prioritised plan for emergency repair and conservation/restoration measures for all structures of the Monastery complex;
- the need for urgent temporary repair of the damaged roof (south-eastern corner) by sheltering it to prevent further damage of the interior (including the valuable 14<sup>th</sup>-century mural paintings) from the approaching rainy season;
- the need to initiate a large-scale Repair/Conservation/Restoration project that met current international conservation standards, accepted in Europe and in Macedonia;
- that garbage be removed from the floor of the church only and that removal of the imported furniture from the interior (tables

and beds used for resting and sleeping) as well as debris caused by the fire, be done by those who caused the damage, as a gesture of good will and to reduce the extent of the damage;

- no-one to be allowed to touch and remove the graffiti from the mural paintings as that would cause even more extensive and non-reparable damage of the valuable 14<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine paintings – this work to be undertaken only by Macedonian and international experts.
- that financial support be provided, not only for the emergency work but also for study and investigation to prepare the conservation and restoration plan for the Monastery complex and for its implementation;
- that the occupiers of the monastery be requested to leave the St. Bogorodica monastery complex, near Matejce village, by their good will.

A Mission by experts was undertaken on 19 September 2001, and for the first time during the armed conflict a cultural monument was visited and monitored by the ‘opposite side’. The Commander of the site said, when he saw the Mission team, that they were making a gesture of ‘good will’ by allowing the Monastery to be monitored.

Unfortunately, the fact-finding mission discovered that more damage had been inflicted on the mural paintings, due to ‘cleaning’ work being undertaken in total contradiction to the earlier recommendations.

Currently, urgent action is being undertaken to repair the damaged roof and mural paintings, planned and executed by the RZZSK. Macedonia ICOMOS is also organising an urgent Regional Workshop: ‘Cultural Heritage at Risk in the Event of Armed Conflicts – the Macedonia Case’. All these activities are financially supported by the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Skopje.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Lessons have been learnt. Damage and destruction is sadly evident. And the future is in a font of us. So what are the urgent actions that need to be taken? We suggest the following:

- assessment of the state of the cultural heritage in the area of conflict;
- planning and design of urgent, mid-term and long-term activities to repair and strengthen the damaged cultural heritage by all those involved in the protection of cultural heritage (both government and non-government organisations);
- dissemination of lessons learnt in the Macedonia case – Cultural Heritage in the Event of Armed Conflicts;
- assessment of the legal, organisational, and educational state of cultural heritage in the Republic of Macedonia (theoretical treatment of the cultural heritage);
- design of a National Disaster Plan to include cultural heritage;
- action for ratification of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Protocol of the Hague convention by the Macedonian Parliament.

Lazar Sumanov  
ICOMOS Macedonia