

KOSOVO

Heritage at Risk

Brief history of Kosovo

Kosovo is located inland on the Balkan Peninsula in Southeast Europe. Its fertile highland valleys are separated from the Adriatic Sea by the Prokletije Mountain range yet connected via the Drini River. Kosovo's history is deeply intertwined with neighbouring regions. In the 1st century AD, the area was known as Dardania and was part of the Roman province of Moesia. By the Middle Ages the region was part of many empires: Bulgarian, Byzantine, Albania and the Serbian medieval states. It was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in 1455 and derives its name from the Kosovo Plain, where the famous Battle of Kosovo was fought between Serbia and the Ottoman Empire 70 years earlier.¹

The recent past

Until the second half of the 20th century, cultural heritage properties of Kosovo were maintained and protected by locals. In the recent past, these properties have been looked after inadequately; therefore, the loss is enormous. Especially during the 1998–99 War in Kosovo thousands of monuments and sites were burnt and destroyed. Thousands of archaeological and ethnological collections, as well as the entire documentation of Kosovo's cultural heritage institutions are still being kept in Serbia.²

Well-preserved historic urban centres in Gjakova, Vushtrri and Peja have suffered severe devastation.³ Artistic objects and important collections of material culture also perished in the flames as Serbian forces burned down an estimated 70,000 homes, including more than 90 percent of Kosovo's 500 *kullas* – traditional vernacular houses. In addition to that, Islamic sacral art in Kosovo, including art objects as well as illuminated manuscripts, suffered large-scale devastation during the war. A major part of the heritage of Kosovo's 600-year-old Islamic tradition was burned, vandalized or looted as more than 200 mosques were destroyed or seriously damaged by Serbian forces. Furthermore, museum collections in Kosovo have also been despoiled, not by acts of deliberate destruction but by appropriation. By order of the Serbian Ministry of Culture, hundreds of the most valuable archaeological artifacts from three important museum collections in Kosovo – the Museum of Kosovo, the Municipal Museum in Mitrovica and the Regional Archaeological Museum in Prizren – were removed to Belgrade at the beginning of 1999, ostensibly for an exhibition.³ Until now, the official records on the cultural heritage of Kosovo have not been handed over to the authorities of Kosovo.

According to the ICOMOS Heritage at Risk Report elaborated by Dick Sandberg in 2005 regarding the riots of 2004 in Kosovo, a few orthodox buildings were damaged. About 35 churches, chapels and monasteries in 17 locations were damaged.⁴ These



Fig. 1: Mosque in Deçan burnt during the 1998–99 War (© Riedlmayer, 2014)



Fig. 2: The historic centre in Gjakova in 1999 (© Knight, 2018)

damaged buildings were immediately repaired or restored by the Government of Kosovo with international support.⁵

The UNESCO World Heritage List contains four sites, the so-called medieval monuments in Kosovo, which include the Monastery of Decani, the Patriarchate of Peja, the Church of the Virgin of Levisa and Gračanica Monastery. These assets were put on the Tentative List in 2004, then in 2006 were designated and nominated on the basis of criteria ii, iii, iv and vi. The World Heritage sites of Kosovo are owned and managed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, Diocese of Raska.⁶ The UNESCO Convention of 1972 states that World Heritage sites should be managed by the government administration, in this case the Republic of Kosovo administration. In addition to that, conservation works at these sites are carried out by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the Republic of Serbia.⁷

The sites are guarded day and night by either Kosovo police forces or KFOR.

In 2006, these sites were put on the List of World Heritage in Danger in order to allow international support to address the following benchmarks:

- Full and permanent protection of the property under secure and stable political environment;
- Agreed medium-term plan for the restoration of wall paintings (including preventive conservation regime) and conservation and rehabilitation of the property; and
- Implementation of the management plan, and full establishment of buffer zone and boundary including its legal protection (UNESCO WHC, 2007, p. 38).

These World Heritage sites are not actively managed by the Serbian Orthodox Church although it is officially in charge; management plans don't exist.⁸ On the other hand, Kosovar institutions are not allowed to monitor these World Heritage sites in their territory, as they have been outside their area of responsibility since 1999.⁹

World Heritage sites in Kosovo are also protected by the Kosovo Status Package.¹⁰ Annex IV on Religious and Cultural Heritage states clearly the rights and preservation that Kosovo should give to all effective protective zones (buffer zones surrounding the perimeter of the protected heritage property) (Figs. 1 and 2).¹¹

Legal protection of cultural heritage

It was not until after the Second World War that cultural heritage management as a state-organised activity was established in Kosovo. In the second half of the 20th century when Kosovo was part of the Yugoslavian state, cultural heritage was redefined and managed according to the standards set by the political regimes.¹² As in many Southeastern European countries, the protection system of cultural heritage in Kosovo does not fulfill the requirements of international recommendations and guidelines. This is a result of over half a century of political instrumentalisation and its subjective treatment by the former communist regime dominated by Serbian experts and politicians. Despite the efforts to improve the situation during the transition period, the cultural heritage sector remains quite complex and fragile in the context of the new general developments.¹³

There are 1567 cultural heritage assets included in the temporary protection list selected by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. These assets are part of the List of Cultural Heritage under Temporary Protection and include monuments and sites of archaeological and architectural heritage, architectural conservation areas, movable objects, cultural landscapes and intangible heritage. Since 2011, this List has been extended every year by the Ministry of Culture. In 2017, the Ministry started to include architectural heritage buildings of the 20th century. Only 23 cultural heritage buildings have been designated under the permanent protection, selected from thousands of heritage assets on the temporary protection list.

The Kosovo's authorities have started to pay attention to preservation through the application of preventive conservation or repair / restoration, the reinforcement of laws, the establishment of the proper documentation and inventory system, and the modernisation of the administration and education system.¹⁴ However, the process is very slow to effectively protect and preserve cultural heritage assets in Kosovo.



Fig. 3: An abandoned neighbourhood in Elez Han – designated cultural heritage asset (© Cultural Heritage without Borders, 2017)



Fig. 4: Novobrdó Fortress, 2019 (unpublished photo by Atdhe Mulla taken for CHwB Kosovo, 2019)



Fig. 5: The collapse of walls after interventions (photo C. Jäger Klein, 2019)

Current condition and risks

In general terms, the cultural heritage assets in Kosovo are in a precarious and vulnerable situation resulting from the dire consequences of the armed conflicts of 1998–99, natural aging processes, and decay greatly exacerbated by environmental pollution, significant long-term neglect and a chronic lack of heritage policies, strategies, proper inventories, conservation plans, and funds for preservation and rehabilitation, in accordance with international principles and standards.

The crucial problems to be addressed are:

- Identifying conservation areas (perimeter, protective zones, protected areas) in spatial plans of architectural and archaeological heritage;
- Controlling (both legal and illegal) buildings in urban and rural areas which affect the setting and context of cultural heritage sites and landscapes;
- Reviewing the current list of protected heritage assets. Based on the recent findings there are listed buildings that unfortunately don't exist anymore;
- Establishing monitoring departments that will assess buildings consistently and identify the risk factors that may endanger heritage assets;
- Increasing the professional capacities in Disaster and Risk Management (DRM), respectively in monitoring and implementing preventive measures;
- Establishing a taskforce of trained architects and craftsmen that will intervene with temporary preventive measures in order to prevent the loss of heritage assets;
- Increasing the cooperation between institutions on the central and local levels in order to increase the efficiency in managing possible risks;
- Prioritising funds for emergency interventions based on the assessment of needs;
- Establishing connections with owners of heritage assets to inform them about their role, train them to monitor their properties, where and how to report the damage and risk they notice, and to possibly intervene with simple measures;
- Subsidising or rewarding owners who regularly maintain their cultural heritage assets;
- Working closely with local and national NGOs to increase the knowledge about the risk to cultural heritage and to raise awareness of each stakeholder's role by organising campaigns, debates and public lectures.

A lack of basic information about cultural heritage assets with legal protection status is also a crucial problem, which also points out the need for each monument to be identified and monitored. Mapping cultural assets strengthens the base of information that can be used to inform local and central authorities in future planning and decision-making. With regard to this, Cultural Heritage without Borders Kosovo, a former Swedish NGO, now a local NGO, has developed the project "Mapping of Cultural Heritage Sites in Kosovo", which identified on the map 870 cultural heritage monuments of architectural and archaeological categories by gathering relevant data. During the field research conducted, among other collected information, special attention was paid to the assessment of the condition of monuments. The physical condition of assets has been classified into six categories, including: good, fair, poor, very bad, partially ruined, and completely ruined. This classification was

based on the condition assessment of cultural heritage assets from Historic England.

In order to categorise an asset, an assessment was conducted to evaluate the type of damage to the elements of the asset/structure, including wall structure, roofs (covering, chimney, gutters and downpipes), doors and windows, and the interior, where access was possible. As a result, when different damage aspects of an asset were combined, it was possible to come to a clear evaluation of the physical condition of the monument and consequently list it under one of the six above-mentioned categories. This information was gathered in order to develop the Heritage at Risk Register, which is an online digital platform consisting of a list of assets classified in the three assessment categories very bad, partially ruined, or completely ruined. Relevant institutions working with cultural heritage are responsible for creating and monitoring the Heritage at Risk list, as well as for prioritising their investments based on the condition of these assets.

Among the 870 assets which have undergone assessment of their physical condition as part of the wider project Mapping of Cultural Heritage Sites in Kosovo, in total 139 assets are listed in the Heritage at Risk Register. Therefore, this means that 17.2% of the designated assets in Kosovo are at risk of being demolished due to their bad physical condition (Fig. 3).

The degradation of Novobrdo Fortress

The significance of the site

Novobrdo Fortress, a designated monument protected by the Ministry of Culture in Kosovo, stands on a 1100-metre-high hill of the Kopaonik Mountains. The fortress is a monument of great cultural, historical, archaeological and architectural significance. Its historical value derives from the fact that it is the biggest fortress from the Illyrian period, 4th–3rd centuries BC. Based on the outstanding quality of the ceramic and metal findings and the Cyclopean ashlar, it is assumed that at this very site the Illyrian city of Damastion may have existed which was well-known for producing silver coins.

Novobrdo is the best-preserved historic mining town in Kosovo and in the region. It provides exceptional testimony to the area's international importance for the mining of lead, silver and gold in continuity, since prehistory. Its landscape forms a multi-layered heritage site which has significant and important industrial, historic, archaeological, architectural, and ecological attributes. The terrain is rough and characterised by rock, mining places and semi-natural grasslands. Overall, the location powerfully reflects the distinctive culture that had developed in the lead, silver and gold mining system of Kosovo and provides a complete picture of the patronage and the social structure of the community. The medieval town of Novobrdo was erected on the top of the hill, in a dominant position of a very picturesque landscape. There has been cultural stratification since Roman times and extensive parts of the fortification architecture belong to the late Byzantine and Ottoman periods. According to Roman coins and tiles found at this site, some objects could belong to the Roman period.¹⁵

Current condition and recent developments

Starting in 2014, conservation activities were undertaken at the fortress. The intervention was managed by UNESCO and financed by the European Union. Currently, the new reconstructed structure has partially collapsed and there are other structures that are about to collapse. The Ministry of Culture has closed the site to visitors because it is considered a threat to them.

The current condition of the castle is very poor and unacceptable. It can be observed that the structure has many damages, such as constructive cracks and masonry erosion. Therefore, the safety of the structure and the people visiting it is of high concern (Figs. 4 and 5).

Conclusion

Since 2001, there have been various international initiatives and projects aiming to restore the damages in cultural heritage sites that were caused by conflicts. The destruction at historic sites caused by the riots of March 2004 was mostly repaired.

However, cultural heritage sites in Kosovo are in a degraded state, mainly because of a lack of maintenance, awareness, and improper management. Significant numbers of heritage sites are at risk of being completely ruined. The primary legislation on the cultural heritage of Kosovo has been completed. However, there

is still a lot of work to be done in the secondary legislation as well as in the enforcement of existing laws.

The fragile institutions are heavily suffering due to the lack of human capacities. They have failed to create a monitoring mechanism that would provide data of the current condition of heritage sites. The local communities are almost ignored in the decision-making process. This situation has resulted in investments in the field of cultural heritage not being based on the actual needs.

The Kosovo institutions need to be reformed in order to be efficient in the protection of cultural heritage. In addition, there is a need to reform the education system so that young generations are capable of understanding every aspect of cultural heritage preservation, including the legislative and technical aspects. In general, there is insufficient education provided in management, professional and technical trainings in the various fields of cultural heritage preservation and management, sustainable tourism development, restoration techniques, and promotion.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Haliti, Thaçi & Eppich, 2016, p. 426.
- ² Hoxha & Thaçi, 2012, p. 1.
- ³ Riedlmayer, 2000.
- ⁴ Sandberg, 2005.
- ⁵ RIC, CoE, 2009.
- ⁶ MCYS, 2009, pp. 77–79.
- ⁷ Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia, 2018.
- ⁸ ICOMOS, 2006, pp. 242 f.
- ⁹ MCYS, 2009.
- ¹⁰ Ahtisaari Package, 2007.
- ¹¹ UNOSEK, 2007.
- ¹² Herscher, 2010.
- ¹³ MCYS, 2016, p. 21.
- ¹⁴ Hoxha & Thaçi, 2012, p. 19.
- ¹⁵ MCYS, 2007.