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Stari (Old) Ras and Sopoćani: Challenges and Opportunities in Managing UNESCO Cultural Heritage

ABSTRACT

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For its numerous medieval monuments, the Raška region in and around modern Novi Pazar in southwestern Serbia was put on UNESCO's list of World Cultural and Natural Heritage sites in 1979 under the name of Stari Ras and Sopoćani. It consists of several components: the Medieval Town of Ras, St. Peter's church in Novi Pazar, the Monastery of Đurđevi Stupovi and the Monastery of Sopoćani. As a living organism, situated in an intensely multi-ethnic area that was and still is on the crossroads of diverse peoples and influences, the Stari Ras and Sopoćani area is very challenging to manage, because the needs of cultural heritage workers and the needs of functioning monastic communities and the expanding city of Novi Pazar have to be reconciled. This paper aims at presenting the monuments that are incorporated into the Stari Ras and Sopoćani heritage site, as well as showing the character of the region and the challenges and opportunities of managing a cultural heritage site in regard to the diverse actual conditions.

Keywords: Stari Ras and Sopoćani, Novi Pazar, UNESCO, multi-ethnic, cultural heritage

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In the Raška region in southwestern Serbia a group of monuments was recognised in 1979 by UNESCO for their exceptional value as Stari (Old) Ras and Sopoćani¹. Geographically speaking, it encompasses

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a wide area with several fortifications, some of the most prominent Serbian medieval churches and monasteries, necropolises, as well as the Ottoman Old Town of Novi Pazar. Although more than 80 sites belong to this region, the main reason for including Stari Ras and Sopoćani on the list of World Cultural and Natural Heritage is the number and importance of those dated to the medieval times, primarily those tied to the foundation of the first Serbian state (Dobričić *et al.* 2016, 79)². Those are the fortress of Ras with its suburbia, the church of St. Peter in Novi Pazar (named also the Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul), the monastery of Đurđevi Stupovi in the vicinity of the same city, and the monastery of Sopoćani near the instead of source it should be spring of the Raška river³. This text is aimed at presenting the outstanding cultural and historical value, treatment and problems, considering that this UNESCO heritage site is located in an intensely multicultural environment which is constantly subject to demographic movements and extension of existing settlements, as well as showing the opportunities that this protected area may have in future managing.

When the Raška region is in question, although it was inhabited in prehistory, its inclusion into an organised state begun with the Romans, which mostly means that smaller or larger fortifications were primarily smaller or larger fortifications that were primarily erected in order to control an important road that was used for the transportation of ore, since from the Roman times until this very day this area is known for its mines. The Christianisation of the Empire brought new faith to the region, which is testified by numerous churches dated mostly to the 6th century. The period of Justinian's restoration of imperial domination was marked by restored and newly erected fortifications (Popović 1999, 291–296 with literature). Due to its central position in many respects, the area was dominated by various peoples through the turmoil of the Early Middle Ages, marked by constant wars between the Byzantines, Bulgarians and Serbs, primarily because it was the border zone between the Serbs and Bulgarians. The Byzantine attempts to regain power over the Balkans resulted in the fact that this area went literally from

² For other sites that are situated within the area in question see a very detailed list in Premović-Aleksić 2014.

³ Except for Stari Ras and Sopoćani, several more very important sites in former Yugoslavia were listed as UNESCO heritage sites, such as Diocletian's Palace in Split, Old Town in Dubrovnik, Natural and Historical Regions of Kotor and Ohrid as well as National Park of Plitvice Lakes. Cf. Kesić Ristić 2015, 94.

one hand to another as a consequence of shifting power. The conflicts that marked the entire 9th and 10th centuries finally ended in the first quarter of the 11th century, namely after Basil II (976–1025) crushed the army of the Bulgarian ruler Samuel (976–1014). In the aftermath, the Byzantine territories on the Balkans were administratively reorganised, and the Ohrid Archbishopric was founded, which appeared to be one of the most important consequences of this victory. The area now listed as Stari Ras and Sopoćani came under the jurisdiction of the Archbishopric as the bishopric of Ras and the influence of the church seat spread primarily through the activity of presbyters of Saint Peter's church (Krsmanović 2012, 23, 29 with sources and literature; Špehar 2017, 34 with literature). The Archbishopric also played an important political role and had a strong impact on the creation of the Nemanjic state, since Adrian (John), the Archbishop of Ohrid and a close relative of Byzantine emperor Manuel I (1143–1180), personally suggested Stefan Nemanja (1168–1199), the youngest son of Zavida, as the most suitable person to be chosen as Great Prince, if the Byzantines wanted to maintain its strong influence over the rising Serbian state (Ferjančić 2000, 32; Kalić 2007, 201–202). Leaving aside all the hypotheses about the precise position of Nemanja's residence, we must emphasise that it undoubtedly was situated somewhere in this area. It is testified by historical written data that Nemanja was baptised according to the Orthodox ritual in the church of St. Peter in Novi Pazar as well as that his first foundation after the ascension to the throne was the monastic church of Đurđevi Stupovi (Stefan Prvovenčani, II, IV; Sveti Sava, I). This information was used by some researchers to positively identify the first seat of his state with the fortress of Ras, situated above the confluence of the river Sebečevska into the Raška (Popović 1999, 303–306).

Stari Ras with Sopoćani is an area of 199 ha in size and almost 10,000 ha of buffer zone, and it includes several very important monuments, fortifications and churches (Fig. 1). Although there are several forts in the area, the largest one, the Fortress of Ras, has a very long history. Inhabited since prehistoric times, it gained its prominence first as a Roman speculum and then as an early Byzantine fortification with a cistern, erected on top of a steep hill. Its strategically important position was recognised in the Early Middle Ages, so it was used again. In the 9th/10th century new palisade walls were built, while in the 11th century it was once more renewed with the same type of fortifications.

Archaeological investigations showed that it was restored as a stone fort and was in use in the 12th/13th centuries, which, along with its position and data from historical sources, was why it was interpreted as the seat of Nemanja's state (Fig. 2) (Popović 1999; Čanak-Medić and Todić 2013, 14–19). In the vicinity of the fortress, a cave monastery of St. Michael is situated (Popović and Popović 1998), as well as the multi-layered site of Trgovište (named also Pazarište), likewise used and inhabited for a long time, from the late antique period marked by sacred buildings and a necropolis, to a medieval settlement founded in the 14th century. The importance of Trgovište lied primarily in the fact that it was a mercantile centre situated on a route that connected the Adriatic shore to the Balkan



Fig. 2. Fortress of Ras – reconstruction by M. Popović (Source: Čirković 1997, Fig. 14)



Fig 3. St. Peter's church with recently added bell tower, 9th/10th century, Novi Pazar (Photo by P. Špehar)

hinterland, which is testified, among others, by the information from the Archives of Dubrovnik that merchants from Dubrovnik had their colony in Trgovište (Kalić 1994, 10; Čanak-Medić and Todić 2013, 20). When the medieval period is in question, archaeological excavations resulted in the discovery of a settlement and several single-nave churches. Although written sources mention the Catholic church of St. Triphon, protector saint of Kotor, who was likewise venerated in nearby Dubrovnik, it seems that it has not yet been discovered since all the excavated churches are of the Eastern type and arranged for East-Christian liturgy (Čanak-Medić and Todić 2013, 22). After Trgovište went into the Ottoman hands, the settlement diminished in importance primarily because Novi Pazar, founded in its close vicinity, took primacy as a new mercantile centre (Premović-Aleksić 2014, 226).

Another prominent early medieval monument in this area is actually the oldest preserved medieval church in modern Serbia, the church of St. Petar on the outskirts of Novi Pazar (Fig. 3). It was erected above a prehistoric tumulus, not far from the confluence of the Deževska and the Raška rivers and dated by the newest research to the late 9th and the beginning of the 10th century. Thanks to the written sources,



Fig. 4. Church of St. George, Monastery of Đurđevi Stupovi, 12th century, view from the west (Photo by O. Špehar)

it was recognised as the place of Nemanja's second baptism (Stefan Prvovenčani, II). Centrally planned as a rotunda with three trapezoidal conchs in the north, west and south and a deep semi-circular apse in the east, as well as a low gallery in the upper zone above the ambulatory, St. Peter's Church still attracts attention of researchers as a multi-layered site continuously in use until this day (Nešković and Nikolić 1987, 13; Popović 2000; Ćurčić 2010, 342–343; Čanak-Medić and Todić 2013, 26–49; Marković 2016a, 147).

Several more churches were protected within the same area. One of them is the church dedicated to St. George of Đurđevi Stupovi, erected immediately after Stefan Nemanja defeated his three older brothers around 1168 and ascended the Serbian throne. The church is built on the high platform between the Deževa and the Raška rivers and dated to 1170/1171 by the fragmentarily preserved inscription above the western entrance (Fig. 4) (Čanak-Medić and Bošković 1986, 55). It is a single-nave church with a tripartite presbytery and two lateral vestibules. Above the central part of the naos is a dome with the inner



Fig. 5. Chapel of king Dragutin, donor portraits, 13th century, Monastery of Đurđevi Stupovi (Photo by O. Špehar)

side of drum enlivened with colonettes. The western part of the church played the role of the narthex, and was flanked with two tall towers of square ground plan. Unlike the older St. Peter's Church, the one dedicated to St. George was built under the strong influence of western architecture, even supposedly by western builders (Ćurčić 2010, 495; Marković 2016b, 171). Wall paintings are only fragmentarily preserved, some of them removed from their original place to the National Museum in Belgrade, because the church stood roofless for a long time. Within the complex there is another sacral building, the funerary chapel of the founder's great-grandson, king Dragutin (1276–1282). It was created in 1282/83 by transforming the entry tower of the fortification into a chapel adorned with monumental frescoes of exquisite quality that are an important source for researchers, not only for their artistic but also for their historical value (Fig. 5). At the same time, a new refectory



Fig. 6. Church of the Holy Trinity, 13th century, Sopoćani monastery, view from the north (Photo by O. Špehar)

and dormitory were erected and the church narthex was covered with frescoes (Nešković 1984, 3–10; Čanak-Medić and Bošković 1986, 54–76; Čanak-Medić and Todić 2013, 56–80).

The most prominent place in the UNESCO protected area of Stari Ras and Sopoćani belongs to the church of the Holy Trinity in the Sopoćani monastery (Fig. 6). Founded by Uroš I (1243–1276), Nemanja's grandson and the youngest son of the first crowned Serbian king Stefan (1217–1228), it also became the founder's resting place. Although resembling a three-aisled basilica on the exterior, this single-nave church with a tripartite presbytery, lateral choirs and chapels, as well as the exonarthex (added later) surmounted by a centrally positioned high tower, was primarily accentuated as an important monument of World Cultural and Natural Heritage because of its well-preserved wall paintings, which undoubtedly belong among masterpieces of European painting of the 13th century. One of the most valuable is the historical scene of the Death of Anna Dandolo, the granddaughter of the Venetian doge Enrico (1192–1205), and the mother of the church



Fig. 7. Death of Anna Dandolo, fresco on the north wall of the narthex in the church of the Holy Trinity, 13th century, Sopoćani monastery (Photo by P. Špehar)

founder (Fig. 7) (Đurić 1963; Čanak-Medić and Todić 2013, 118–179; Komatina 2014 with sources and older literature; Todić 2016, 223–227). Archaeological research unearthed several medieval monastic buildings within the monastery complex, such as the refectory west of the church (Kandić 1984, 7–16).

Except for the above-mentioned medieval monuments, which are accentuated as the most prominent in the zone nominated for the World Cultural and Natural Heritage list, the area in question is likewise important because of the preserved monuments dated to the period of Ottoman domination (15th–19th centuries). The most valuable ones are concentrated in and around the Old Bazaar in Novi Pazar: the Ottoman fortress, the mosques of Altun alem and Kurt-Čelebi, the inn (han) of Amir-aga, the bath (hammam), the Jewish house, the old school, the Old Archdiocese seat etc. Those are all architectural monuments representative of the multi-ethnic community that inhabits this part of modern Serbia (Nešković *et al.* 1988, 7–12; Ćurčić 2010, 781; Premović-Aleksić 2013). Novi Pazar was founded by Isa-beg Isaković and it was first mentioned in 1461, in one document from Dubrovnik (Premović-Aleksić 2014, 269). Because of its strategically important position it quickly grew into one of the largest towns in this part of the Balkans, taking over, as we already said, the function of a mercantile

centre from the medieval settlement in Trgovište. As a typical oriental town, it had a bazaar in the centre, surrounded by inhabited quarters (mahalas) with numerous shops, mosques, inns, hammams etc. One of the oldest buildings in the Old Town is Isa-beg's hammam (bath), named after its founder and mentioned in the sources as early as in 1489 (Fig. 8) (Premović-Aleksić 2013, 23). Throughout its history, Novi Pazar was a place of intensive migrations, often destroyed and rebuilt, but until this day it has kept its position of an important trade-centre situated on a crossroads of peoples and influences.

Recognised as an area with a continuous life, culture and art, the spatial cultural and historic complex of Stari Ras and Sopoćani, that merges together all that was created by human hands as well as the natural surroundings (Kesić Ristić 2015, 94), came under the scrutiny of researchers and conservators immediately after WWII, and was proclaimed a national heritage site from the moment when the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of People's Republic of Serbia was established in 1947⁴. The efforts of experts during the 1960s and 1970s were primarily aimed at establishing the original appearance of all the monuments, mainly those erected during the Middle Ages. Since in 1972 UNESCO adopted the Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage, ratified in 1974 by former Yugoslavia⁵, it opened the possibility for monuments in this part of the world to be placed on UNESCO's list (Kesić Ristić 2015, 93–95). In 1976 UNESCO adopted another very important document, *Recommendation on historical landscapes*, which declared that each space and its surroundings should be investigated in totality, as a coherent unit that embraces human activities as well as buildings, spatial organisation and surroundings. In other words, that recommendation legislated the term *cultural landscape* and made it possible to protect it. A year later, in 1977, the whole area of Stari Ras and Sopoćani was recognised by the Institute for Heritage Protection of Yugoslavia as the spatial cultural and historical site, one of the four types of immovable heritage sites.

⁴ The ruins of the old town of Ras with its surroundings were put under the protection of the State by decree of the Institute for Protection and Scientific Research of Cultural Heritage of People's Republic of Serbia, no. 140, August 27th 1947. The Sopoćani Monastery was put under protection by decree no. 153, of August 26th 1947. The ruins of Đurđevi Stupovi near Novi Pazar were put under protection by decree no. 152 of the same date, and St. Peter's church by decree no. 2253 of December 18th 1948.

⁵ Službeni list SFRJ, 56/1974.

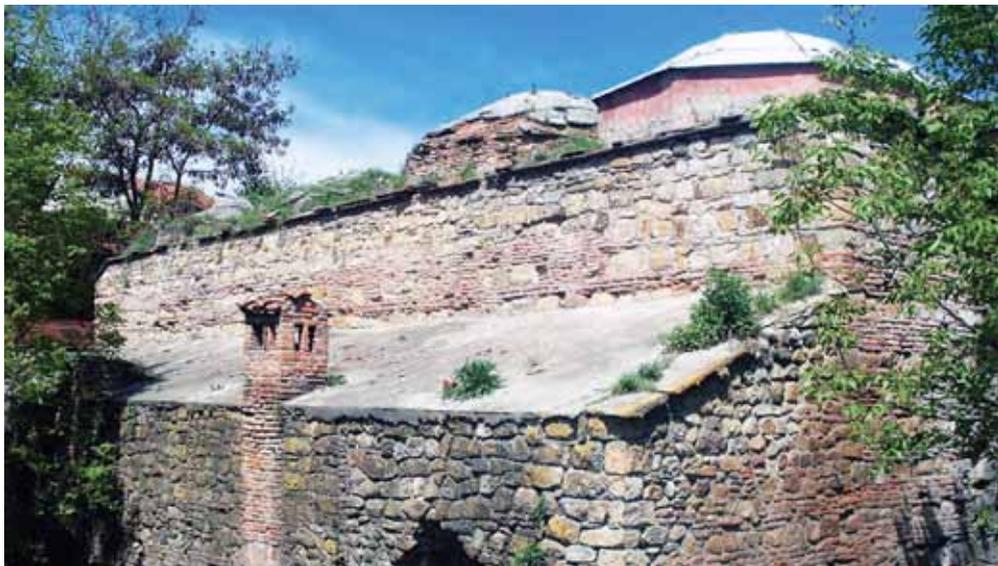


Fig. 8. Isa-beg's hammam, 15th century, Novi Pazar (Source: Premović-Aleksić 2013, 21)

Finally, as we already said, in 1979 this complex entered the list of World Cultural and Natural Heritage sites, primarily as the core of the first Serbian medieval state. Since that moment on, the most visible consequence has been the change in the methodological approach to research of those monuments (Sekulić 1985, 251–271). A national programme was adopted for the years 1984–1990 that purported the research, protection, spatial regulation, revitalisation and management of this area. It was the first long term programme in the history of the protection of cultural heritage in Serbia. The programme also purported a special fund for all the necessary activities, and the participation of all relevant scientific and cultural institutions as well as the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia during the entire period. Such an approach enabled strict control over the spending of funds, a continuity of the financing and works, as well as the promotion of those immovable heritage sites and monuments, through valuable popular and scientific publications. The idea was also to adopt various categories for the monuments in this spatial cultural and historical area, as well as adequate regimes for the protection and usage of each category (Nešković 2011, 145–150; Kesić Ristić 2015, 97). This was very important for the living monasteries and the growing city of Novi Pazar. One must bear in



Fig. 9. Living monastic community, Sopoćani monastery, view through the exonarthex (Photo by O. Špehar)

mind that the Sopoćani monastery was and still is a living community (Fig. 9), and that the monastic life in Đurđevi Stupovi has lately been renewed (Debljović Ristić 2011, 165–169). Unfortunately, adequate legal regulations were not adopted because the 1990s were marked by the disintegration of Yugoslavia, civil wars and economic collapse, followed by the termination of funding for research projects and conservation. As a consequence, organised heritage protection gradually ceased to exist. Out of all these institutions, only the Republic Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Cultural Heritage, as the leader of the project, continued to perform adequate actions as much as possible.

In the last decade of the 20th century new centres of power were established, based primarily on wealth or political interests, which resulted in the fact that the local community, instead of being the bearer of protection of its own heritage, became overwhelmed by this burden, seeing cultural heritage as a constraining factor in its development. The

reason for this was the fact that it was expected of the local community to finance all the necessary works on historical monuments of lesser importance. On the other hand, the local community was more interested in achieving positive economic results through diverse projects implemented in the area under its jurisdiction, which were opposed to the opinion of experts and often to the expected treatment of an area listed as a World Cultural and Natural Heritage site (Kesić Ristić 2015, 99). Therefore, in 2003 the local government of Novi Pazar decided to put aside the decision that proclaimed the area of Stari Ras and Sopoćani a cultural heritage site (Nešković 2011, 150, footnote 36). Numerous new buildings were illegally erected, at odds with the adopted urbanistic plans and without any necessary documents, although they were built in the protected area. This also means that no licence was asked nor gained from the Republic Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Cultural Heritage or any other cultural institution as the legal bearer of the protection process. Such activities and said local decisions go in the direction of annulling the existence of the buffer zones that merged all said monuments into one coherent spatial unit, which would result in extracting individual monuments as cultural sites without taking into account the fact that this entire area is historically and logically one entity (Dobričić *et al.* 2016, 80). Another quite absurd problem is that in the early 2000s it was actually concluded by the UNESCO mission sent in order to make an overview of what had been done in the previous decade of war and sanctions, that the city of Novi Pazar itself is not included on the World Cultural and Natural Heritage list. The solution to the problem could be to recognise the material as well as immaterial values of Novi Pazar, primarily for the cultural diversity of its inhabitants and its monuments, but this idea has not reached its legal conclusion yet (Kesić Ristić 2015, 101–106).

Besides these legal problems, there is also the problem of building within the monastic enclosures and in the vicinity of St. Peter's church. It mostly concerns the crucial issue of revitalisation of medieval sites, because monastic buildings should be restored according to the principles of protection of cultural heritage, but they are still used by the existing and ever-growing monastic communities (Debljović Ristić 2011, 166; 2016, 110). The most explicit example is the one of the monastic community of Đurđevi Stupovi, which was restored at the end of the 1990s on the initiative of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The restoration

as well as the revival of this monastery built by Stefan Nemanja, the founder of the Serbian medieval dynasty, was understood as the revival of the entire nation after the civil wars (Nešković 2011, 154). Therefore, the original idea to present the complex as a devastated monument was replaced by the implementation of authentic materials and architectural forms as much as possible, in order to enable the performance of liturgy and other necessary rites, as well as the life of community members (Debljović Ristić 2011, 168). During the process of monastery restoration, an advisory mission of the ICOMOS was included in 2004, as purported by the obligations towards UNESCO. Unfortunately, the advice of the ICOMOS was not the decisive factor during the process of resolving the issue of restoration, so another mission was sent on the initiative of the Republic Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Cultural Heritage in 2009. In their report, special attention was paid to the problem of the scope of interventions that can be made in this cultural heritage site because it is on UNESCO's list. The question was whether after all the interventions the monument could keep those values that made it become part of the protected heritage site in the first place (Nešković 2011, 156). The opposite situation is illustrated by St. Peter's church in Novi Pazar. Namely, in the 1990s the Church prelates expressed the necessity to build a bell tower as well as a parochial dwelling-place, in order to intensify the religious life in the parish. Since all the plans were prepared in cooperation with the experts from the Republic Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Cultural Heritage, it is a positive example of the treatment of a still functioning protected monument (Nešković 2016, 97–98, 105).

Because some parts of the area of Stari Ras and Sopoćani are densely populated, and bearing in mind the needs of the community as well as the status of the protected site, in 2012 *The Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose Area of the Spatial Cultural and Historical Unit of Stari Ras and Sopoćani* was drawn up in order to determine the spatial relationships between building activities on the one hand and the cultural and historical heritage status on the other hand, as well as to establish the long-term basis for the protection and sustainable development of the area. That plan defined the protection zones in three regimes according to the degree of protection: degree I of protection is a zone of cultural heritage in which the protected monument is situated, degree II are the immediate surroundings of the monument, and degree III is the

surrounding landscape where low-rise buildings can be built, but it also implies the existence of large green and open spaces (Dobričić *et al.* 2016, 80). One must again have in mind that almost all historical monuments within this area are living organisms until this day. The church buildings within the monastic enclosures and the monastic way of life in general, simply have to be observed through the concept of the inseparability of material and immaterial heritage. The attitude of the Orthodox Church towards the values of medieval buildings, although also aimed at their revival, often differs from the attitude of the experts in charge of protection, preservation and revitalisation of sacral buildings and heritage in general. Still, the reintegration of the monastery complexes by re-establishing life and rites within them has clearly showed the positive effects regarding maintenance, use and sustainability of said complexes. This can primarily be seen in the Đurđevi Stupovi monastery that was abandoned in the late 17th century and stood unprotected for three centuries. As a consequence, new needs of monastic communities are expressed, the fulfilling of which is not always in accordance with the principle of preserving the integrity and authenticity of medieval monuments. Demands for better comfort, more accommodation capacity, accepting tourists etc. bring forward the necessity for compromises, most of them in discordance with the demands of UNESCO. Continuity of the traditional way of functioning for those monuments has its good and potentially bad consequences. The latter could be overcome by incorporating all the parameters within the very process of their protection, because the fact that a monument gained its place on UNESCO's list does not mean the end of the process of its protection. On the contrary, it means that it is recognised as a place of a physical embodiment of cultural value and marks only the beginning of a continuous process that, besides historical and cultural values, has to include tourist and commercial necessities (Chhabra 2010, 1–2). In managing cultural heritage like Stari Ras and Sopoćani, a real balance must be established between the past, the present and the future, in accordance with their values as protectors of historical material heritage and the values of the living communities that actively protect the immaterial heritage of Serbia (Debljović Ristić 2011, 161–176). One of the possibilities is the establishment of scientific centres that would connect experts from various disciplines considering research, protection and management. Such centres would enable those

monuments to continue their life not only as monastic but as scholarly centres as well, which was one of their main functions during the Middle Ages. Likewise, different workshops could be organised more often, accompanied by more intensive media coverage and promotion. Nowadays they are mostly restricted to workshops for artists, but it is very important to present cultural heritage to young people whose education is primarily tied to those disciplines that could enable them to further protect and manage that same heritage. Such actions should lean on the idea that more and more people wish, or should be drawn to wish, to “peek into the past”, which is a potential springboard for further development of heritage tourism. The economic prospect of this tourist field is enormous and yet its full potential remains untapped. By including members of the local community as well as members of the monastic community, who have a better insight into all the problems with which a living organism of cultural monument deals every day, it would be a beneficial opportunity for all sides involved (Chhabra 2010, 14–16). All said opportunities are still very hypothetical, but should be seriously considered, along with better legal actions, as the paths along which the future process of protection and management of Stari Ras and Sopoćani should be moving.

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