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Cultural Heritage and Political Influences in favor and Falsification of Religious Monuments in Mitrovica

Mitrovica İlçesindeki Dini Anıtların Lehinde ve Tahrifatında Kültürel Miras ve Siyasi Etkiler

Abstract

Monuments of Cultural Heritage in Kosovo together with a large number of religious monuments of Christian as well as Islamic worship were posed to political influences and had to change the identity for which they are called upon.

The issue which this paper will address is that of Boletini Church in Mitrovica (Sokolica Monastery).

The church in question served as a sanctuary (synagogue) of the accountants of Boletini family who owned the Millstone mine. This sanctuary, which later is converted into an Orthodox church, belongs to the nineteenth century and in 1956 is declared a women's monastery.

The history of religions teaches us that most of the monasteries had their own properties and population who protected the monastery, performed rituals, and paid taxes to the monastery.

Sokolica Monastery is not found in any of the medieval sources as allegedly being from XIII-XIV centuries. At the same time, there is no population identified with this monastery and the monastery did not have even a yard of its own. All the surrounding property was occupied by Serbian regime during the time when Kosovo was occupied by Serbia.

All the monastery properties were properties of Isa Boletini's family that were unjustly taken by the Serbian regime during the reconquest, while after the war ended in 1999, this act was also assisted by the Kosovo institutions for their own political interests and individual benefits.

Keywords: History, Heritage, Culture, Monument, Property.

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Cultural heritage and political influences in favor and falsification of religious monuments

Forgery, politicization, and adaptation of religious objects are very serious crimes against world civilization that dates many years back. Historical arguments today let us know how often, during human history, civilizations around every corner of the world have been destroyed or adapted by new foreign settlers.

Within this setting, objects (like different buildings or temples) were also burnt or ruined, as this practice was more emphasized in older times, whereas since the Middle Ages onwards significant temples and buildings have faced forgery, namely, their alteration by new rulers.

There have been many forgeries of religious objects, but the most apparent are the forgeries of buildings in the city of Jerusalem (before and after the crusades), then the forgery of the wonderful Alhambra mosque in Cordoba, Spain, and the attempted forgery of Hagia Sophia church in Constantinople etc.

As an integral part of the world and Europe, the region of Kosovo is not an exception from this practice given that this region is located at the junction of roads linking the West with the East, and thus it was necessarily exposed to numerous external interferences and such interventions caused destruction and forgery of religious objects.

There are numerous cases when Latin rite churches were converted into Orthodox churches, as is the case of Gračanica monastery, and many churches were also converted into mosques during Ottoman rule.¹

In Kosova region, forgery and politicization of religious objects go through several stages, depending on political developments, wars, and change of rulers. The first most obvious stage evidenced also by different foreign researchers is that from the 11th-14th centuries, a period when the state of Rasha ruled the region of Kosova.

To carry out political influence over the local Arbër (Albanian) population, the state apparatus planned the conversion of many Latin rite churches into Orthodox churches as to increase as much as possible the conversion of the population into Orthodox. Such churches apparent even to this day are the churches in Banjska, Trepça, Novobërda, Janjeva, Gračanica, Peja, Gjakova, Prizren, etc. However, kings of Rasha built new churches to indicate the connection between church and state.²

The second stage is the Ottoman period from the 15th century when according to data we encounter churches converted into mosques, but nevertheless large churches and monasteries were not altered.

The third stage is the period that includes the formation of the Serbian state from the Congress of Berlin in the late 19th century, where innumerable mosques were destroyed, especially in Sanxhak of Nish.

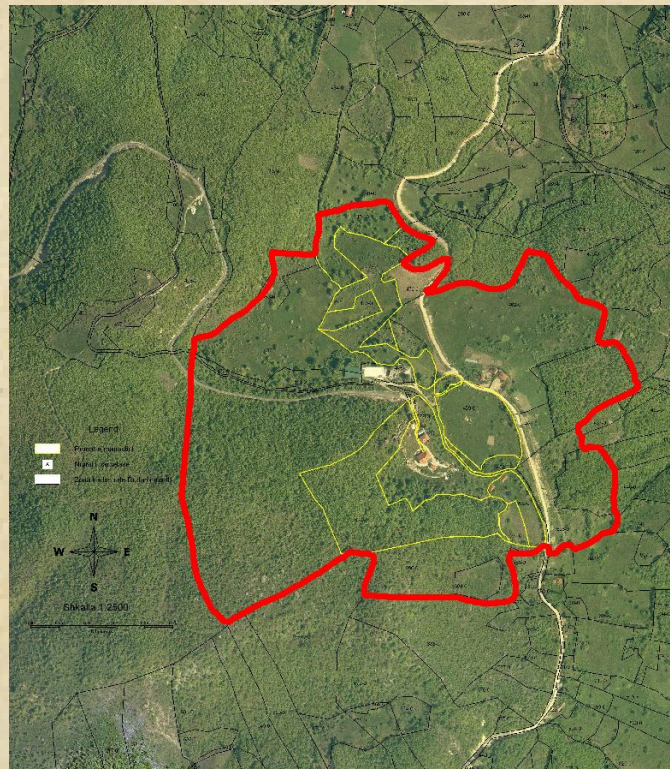
1 Jahja Drançolli, Monumentet e kultit katolik gjatë mesjetës në Kosovë, Konferenca Ipeshkvnore e Shqipërisë, Krishtërimi ndër Shqiptar, Simpozium Ndërkombëtar, Tiranë, 16 - 19 Nëntor 1999, Shkodër, 2000, pp. 145, 151.

2 Ibid.

The fourth stage is the period when S. Millosheviç became in charge of Yugoslavia, and the conversions that had started earlier now became official, not that the aforementioned had religious devotion, but because the policy was determined by Serbian Academy of Sciences in Belgrade.

Boletini Church is in the framework of forgeries of Christian religious monuments in Kosova, first by being converted into a Slavic Orthodox church, and later into a monastery (by the Serbo-Slavic occupation), which has now been officially called a 13th-14th century monastery by Kosova Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport.

The map³ presented in this paper derives from the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosova Status Settlement, February 2, 2007, in which we notice the security in the surrounding area of Sokolica monastery, which alone covers more area than the entire Boletini village put together. This area includes also the complex of Isa Boletini's towers, whose properties were unjustly taken and joined the monastery property.



Zonë e mbrojtur rreth kishës Boletini is located 6-7 km north of Mitrovica. The highest point of the village is called Sokolica.⁴

Sokolica mountain range is on three sides of Ibër river, and it is connected with Shala (of Bajgora PH) only on the eastern side⁵.

3 Kosovo Cadastral Agency

4 Tafil Boletini, Pranë Isa Boletinit, Kujtime 1, (1892-1916), përgatitur nga Marenglen Verli, Tetovë, 1996, p. 17.

5 Tafil Boletini, Kujtime, Pranë Isa Boletinit (1892-1916) & Përballë sfidave të kohës (1916-1963), përgatitur nga Marenglen Verli, Tiranë, 2011, p. 23.

At the border of Boletini and Zhazha villages, in a place called Petkovica, entering Zhazha on the right side of the road, are the graves of Jews.⁶ The history of Boletini church begins exactly with the Boletini Jews. After Artana's economy dropped off, a considerable number of the community moved to Prishtina, Mitrovica, and other Kosova towns.

Isa Boletini's family had a company which dealt with the processing of stones for mills. The activist of Albanian issue Isa Boletini had brought in his properties some Jewish families, who are reportedly known throughout the Mediterranean, to assist in running the company. A Jewish family which dealt with the assist managing of the company moved very close to Isa Boletini's house, a place called Guri i tupanit (Eng. the Drum's Stone), while other families were not very far from this family. They mainly dealt with working the land and preserving the cattle of Isa Boletini's family. They were allowed to use a neglected small cult object for Jewish community.⁷ Other researchers think that this cult object was formerly a small Catholic chapel owned by the Boletini family before converting into Muslim, or any small cult object built to meet the conditions of the Jewish community brought in this village, and by no means was it a Serbian church built in the 14th century, as propagated by daily politics and perfidious Serbian science.⁸

After the occupation of Kosova, the Jewish community became assimilated into Serbian Jews. Avrami's family, whose house was at Guri i tupanit, suffered the same fate. Their worship object was converted into a small Orthodox chapel, which not only was expanded with the confiscation of Isa Boletini's properties in 1953,⁹ but it was also modified by changing the entry and attaching another part to it – a part that was almost as large as the chapel itself. Those who have visited the chapel or analyzed the pictures released on the internet can easily conclude that the object once was much smaller. After this period, major investments were made; the history of this small chapel was falsified and it was named Sokolica monastery.

Speaking of his ancestors, Tafil Boletini quotes: "Seeking for a place to live, they liked Sokolica mountains, 6-7 km north of Mitrovica (which at the time did not exist) close to Shala",¹⁰ which means that Boletini village was founded by the ancestors of Isa Boletini, and the church could not have existed since there was no worshipper or surrounding houses in the village.

The first interventions were performed in church whereas later began the construction of its accompanying objects. Until the 1990s there have not been any significant development, but after the war ended in 1999 onwards exceptional investments have been made by the internationals, Serbians, and Albanians from the Government of Kosova.

6 Qazim Namani, *Hebrejt në Kosovë*, Vjetar, Agency of *State Archives of Kosova*, XXXVII-XXXVIII, Prishtinë, 2007, pp. 98, 111; Qazim Namani, *Migrimet e para hebreje në Gadishullin Ballkanik*, material në dorshkrim, p. 8.

7 Ibid. p. 7.

8 Ibid., pp. 7, 8.

9 Ibid. p. 8.

10 Tafil Boletini, *Kujtime*, op. cit., p. 22.



Fig. 1. Church building built in two construction phases (where the arrow is) photo author

The construction of the church began with the roof division. On the left side, where the other part of the church was built, you can see a door added (this is obvious also if seen from the back).



Fig. 2. The church from the back, the point where the arrow points is the meeting of the new building from the old one. photo author

At the back of the church, where the second stage of construction took place, there are some forgery traces remained despite the care that these traces disappear entirely.

We encounter traces of forgery in every part of the church, especially in the lintel above the inner entrance door where the real entrance was situated (i.e., the entrance of the church in the past).

The church's entrance was west and as a second element to enter the church were two steps. All religious buildings except for the mosque were in a lower level. This practice was followed during the Ottoman rule in Kosova, while objects of worship before Ottoman period did not have this element.

Sokolica monastery is situated on the rugged slopes of Sokolica mountain, 10 km east of Zveçan, near Mitrovica. Sokolica monastery is dedicated to the Holy Virgin. Near the church of the monastery is a source of healing water. The church is made of carved stones, with a semi-circular apse and a shallow arc. Interior facade has recently been completed with images of people and animals.

All the buildings of the church are of the 20th-21st centuries. Conservation and restoration of the monastery complex, including the church, were carried out from 1995 to 1996.¹¹



Fig. 3. Another element of church forgery, photo author

In 1956, Boletini Church was announced a women's monastery. Today, the area around Sokolica monastery is inhabited only by pure ethnic Albanian population. The last "Serbian" family who moved out from there in 1967¹² had Avrami as its head of the family.¹³ Avrami as a name is found everywhere in the Mediterranean region but not in the Slavic region meaning that Avrami was a Serbian assimilated

11 www.panacomp.net/srbija?mesto=srbija_sokolica

12 Ibid.

13 The name "Avram" itself makes us suspect in Serbians (more in Serbian Jews since the name cannot be found anywhere in the Slavic countries).



Fig. 3. Blessed Virgin with Christ, photo author
 Jew who lived in Boletini.

The sculpture of the Holy Virgin with Christ on her lap (Alb. “Zonja e bekuar dhe krishti”) made in marble is thought to be of the 14th century, which according to abbess Makaria came from Banjska monastery to be saved from Turks destruction. But, as we know, Banjska monastery has never been destroyed by the Turks, and the sculpture did not belong to the monastery because, if it did, the first action that would have occurred after the invasion of Kosova from Serbia would be the return of the sculpture to where it came from.

The truth of the ownership of the sculpture lies in Trepça’s Sase church. After the destruction of Sase church in Trepça, a Serbian from Boletini village took the sculpture using a wooden cart, and en route to Boletini he damaged the sculpture by dropping it from the cart; Both the face of the Holy Virgin and that of the Christ were damaged. This sculpture remained for a long time in a small cave underneath the rocks before entering the church. The reason why the sculpture remained outside the church was that it belonged to a Catholic church and was not part of the Orthodox rite.¹⁴



Fig. 5. The interior of the Boletin church “fresco”, photo author



Fig 6. The interior of the Boletin church “fresco”, photo author

The church has two windows in the front side which are turret shaped. It also has two windows east: the window of the apse and the one above it, while at the back and west it has no windows at all. The church ceiling is vaulted throughout the segment.

To justify the invasion of Kosovo, since the 19th century, Serbian historiography along with Serbian anthropological school of Jovan Cvijiq, made a lot of speculation on the issue of adaption of monuments of Christian worship. In this regard were also included state districts of the communist Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Such speculation and manipulation intensified especially after 1981s until

today.¹⁵

Since our historiography led by the politics of the day silenced this issue up to now, Serbian speculative reports mentioned above found supporters also in the world. Facing such speculation, recently a part of our prominent scholars, such as: Gapsër Gjini, Skënder Rizaj, Zef Mirdita, Shan Zefi, Jahja Drançolli, Fejaz Drançolli, and others, began to break down Serbian historiography on the issue of Christian worship monuments using their objective results.¹⁶

In none of the works that deal with the medieval period, let's say with Zveçan castle, or subsequent memorials as Banjska monastery, is mentioned Sokolica monastery or church; therefore, this absence in documents and early papers means that it did not belong to the 14th century but to a later period.

Conclusion

In a few words, all forgeries or alternations occurred during a long period of time in this region, are apparent to everyone's eye, regarding the objects that still exist to this day, of course. Today, we encounter such objects in almost every settlement in Kosova.

However, this paper will focus only on those that are particularly politicized by Serbia, as is the case with the Boletini Church (women's monastery 1956).

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15 Jahja Drançolli, Monumentet e kultit, op. cit., p. 145.

16 Ibid.